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PREFACE TO THE FRENCH EDITION OF  
*THE SENSE OF REALITY*

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*Gil Delannoi*

1

*The History of Ideas*

Berlin believed in the power of books. Like Voltaire he thought that ideas governed the world as much as the world governed ideas. This belief in no way denied that other factors were at work, but only that ideas came first and played a determining role. Only crude material historicism, he would say, could deny the power of ideas and claim that ideas were nothing but disguised interests. Economic issues and social class were not the universal keys to reality. Moreover, the utopian aspect of contemporary revolutionary ideals as well as their quasi-religious mode illustrated, however unintentionally, the power of ideas over the world. It was by virtue of being active, willed ideals that they had transformed the world, succeeded or failed, fascinated or disillusioned – not by some impersonal structural process.

Like Plato – and even more like Aristotle – Berlin based his ideas on the postulate of a loosely structured community of instinct, feeling and language. ‘If we had nothing in common,’ Socrates said to Calicles, ‘it would be difficult to have someone else understand what we experiences ourselves.’ This community lays the foundation of the history of ideas, which in no way obviates taking historical evolution, cultural differences, and the nuances of language into account.

The power of ideas and a community of the mind were the foundations of the history of ideas as Berlin understood and practiced it. This form of history calls on the art of reading and commenting, on a fanciful roving imagination, on ceaseless never-

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ending research, and above all on openness of mind. It means being constantly available, entering into a wide variety of beliefs, adopting the most diverse points of view, while remaining aware of historical and human groundings. It means grasping issues from the inside, seeing them as did those being studied. But it also means understanding that ideas have lives of their own, that they shake free of their authors and contexts. Before passing judgment one must understand, and this requires intellectual outreach. If there is reason to condemn, the condemnation will be all the more telling and pertinent when based on a thorough understanding. Finally, when it comes time to settle on an angle of approach, alternative perspectives will have been experimented, weighed, and sometimes partially incorporated.

This openness of mind has a decided advantage; it produces critical and intellectual work of the highest quality. On the other hand, as far as exercising ideological influence is concerned, it suffers from the handicap of refusing to simplify, to exaggerate. In the short run, at least, it does not captivate, does not entice, does not promise miracles. Whereas in the sphere of contemporary ideology, truth and the need to believe have too often been confused, pointing to the guilty has too often taken the place of explicating wrongdoing, a passion to destroy has too often been merged with the imperatives of progress.

Recognition of the diversity of the world, its complexity and even its incoherence, is of greater importance today than ever; unfortunately, it is far from having been achieved. That is why the history of ideas must contribute, in its modest way, to overcoming this obstacle. Here lies its greatest potential contribution: not only knowledge of ideas but awareness of our own ideas, self-knowledge, including knowledge of our conflicting aspirations and our inconsistencies. Inconsistencies lose some of their poisonous effect when they are recognized as such. They can even turn out to be productive. The Enlightenment and Romanticism have left us with a dual and often incoherent inheritance. For Berlin nothing is foreordained, nothing lost for ever or won once and for all. There always exists a chance we can agree on words and facts, before interpreting and making use of them in a diversity of ways. That is what intellectual honesty consists of, nothing more and nothing less. We can communicate with our 'fellow-men' across time and space, but this process, which is endless for humanity, is entirely

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new for each generation. Every era brings with it new problems, new insights and new blind spots.

2

*Reality*

Historical reality consists of historical facts, clusters of events that take place within frameworks defined by physical and biological laws. To which ideologies then affix emotions, myths, mistruths, aspirations, ideals, interests and responses of all kinds. There is thus a permanent interaction: on one hand viewpoints are built on events, on the other these viewpoints influence the interpretation and understanding of events. These viewpoints differ according to the individual, the group, the era, the setting, the language etc...

Berlin described himself as a man of the Enlightenment for he attempted to make sense of this confused tangle, to render it comprehensible through human reasoning. Yet – and in this respect he is closer to the early Enlightenment philosophers than to certain of their successors – he rejected the myth of global, permanent progress. Likewise he rejected the idea of attaining a unifying rationalization that would encompass both humanity and truth. Pluralism is not simply an idea, it is first of all a human reality. It matters little at this stage whether we like it or not, pluralism is inescapable. Having said as much, the philosopher then adds that, were the hypothesis of a total harmony of human values to be realized, were truth to be unique and utterly coherent, then any form of opposition would constitute a crime, authority would win over liberty. Does this hypothetical ideal of unity really constitute, as has so long been claimed, a cause worthy of the name, a prospect full of promise? The advocates of the Enlightenment (or more generally the monists since the time of Plato) believed so, but they failed in practice, and were most probably unrealistic and authoritarian from the start. They were too attached to the goal of coherence at the cost of liberty, too wedded to a dream of perfection, at the expense of true humanity.

The Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment, in that it redirected attention to the existence of diversity, to feeling, desire, human will and independence, was in Berlin's eyes fully justified. He adhered to it; he argued for the heterogeneity of cultures and expressed a certain sympathy for moderate nationalism. What was to be the outcome of our double inheritance? Would it be possible to overcome its fragility, its incoherences? On one hand the

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pessimistic hypothesis: our failures accumulate, with the result that the scientific dogmatism of the Enlightenment and the passionate irrationality of Romanticism merge, each tendency strengthening the worst aspects of the other. This danger looms before us, imminent and threatening: counterfeit rationality parading as rationality, limitless unreason in the guise of liberty. It is this conjunction and this drifting astray that threaten us and not the original precepts and the reciprocal criticisms to which they legitimately gave rise. For it is essential to stick to rationality, even when it is a question of identifying that which escapes rationality. And is equally essential to be open to existence, to what is alive, to the plurality and even the fragility of the human.

On the other hand the optimistic vision consists simply of believing that it is possible to break the deadlock, to overcome these incoherences and assemble the minimal prerequisites for such an opening up. The first of these prerequisites is called a sense of reality, without which error and oppression are inevitable.

#### 3

##### *Realism*

On reading Berlin we can identify at least three essential components of a sense of the realities: distinguishing between different types of knowledge, abandoning the myths of reconciliation, recognizing that politics is an art.

To avoid mistaking one species of knowledge for another has become all the more necessary in that modern societies are conceived, inspired and to a certain extent directed by experts, technicians and specialists. Saint-Simon was right to insist on the crucial role played by scientists, organizers, and builders; the shortcoming inherent to this society of engineers is, precisely, the overevaluation of rationality. First because experts think that everything can be rationalized as with techniques of production. And then, by analogy, that it is finally human history in its entirety that can be reduced to a unique process of rationalization. Yet neither of these two conclusions rests on a firm basis of fact or on demonstrated results.

Today's science does not provide any more answers than did yesterday's theology. Believing in its omnipotence leads to error, first in regard to the true nature of scientific research, but even more so as a source of pseudo-scientific moral and political deviations. Ventures in morality, politics, or art cannot be con-

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tained, dissected and mastered by scientific or technical methods. When the attempt is made then reality and practice come apart, and the world does not lend itself to rationalization as expected. All that is human, all that belongs to the realm of human feeling and imagination, is accessible more through intuition than deduction. The world is not a subject of study like the physical world but a time and space continuum in which cause and effect, intention and consequence, brute force and ideas, wagers and surprises, calculations and improvisations are inextricably linked.

From which stems the second point: not only is there no science of history in the way there exist physical sciences, but to understand to any extent the sense of history one has to abandon the myths of a reconciliation that would be harmonious, monist and messianic. A myth is serviceable only if it is recognized for what it is, a narrative that opens a perspective which one then decides whether to trust or not, a narrative that points to one path among many possible paths, a reasonable promise but nothing more. Such a narrative is useless and dangerous if it plots out a single path that is inevitable, predictable down to the last detail, leading to an ultimate, definitive goal. Progress, democracy and autonomy have, as myths characterized by a degree of lucidity, no doubt proved necessary and beneficial, but the reduction of history to a sole myth, considered as an inexorable law, is without fail illusory and dangerous.

Berlin was opposed to the myth of a universal history, unequivocal and harmonious. He saw just how fascinating and misleading these grandiose myths were precisely because the narratives they proposed promised to reconcile morality and destiny, idealism and the determinism, liberty and necessity in a single mold so as to render them indistinguishable. Such superb coherence was not only artificial; it oppressed and massacred. These myths, once their adepts came into power, spread domination, violence, and purification.

One essential point: the idea of the perfect society is an issue that is ill-framed from the start. The will to turn it at all costs into a reality breeds fanaticism; this perfect society, heartless by the very zeal of its partisans and unworkable in practice, is *unthinkable*. The reconciliation of all human values is impossible. You cannot have everything at the same moment. Choice is constantly necessary. A perfect society no more exists than a perfect human life. Each choice eliminates another alternative. Every advance on one level

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is matched by a retreat on another, however slight. No absolute system provides a way to take stock of all levels of existence and harmonize them. For a society, as for an individual, the necessity of choice always leaves behind an aftertaste of bitterness and dissatisfaction. To live is to act. To act is to set goals, to choose, accept, reject, follow up, resist, escape – come out for or against a certain way of life.

This is why politics, within its own sphere, is only partially rational. Its most human side is a form of art, an art that is neither one of technique nor of aesthetics, but an art of evaluation and decision. No abstract criteria, no technical recipe can dictate how to analyze the specifics of a historical situation, how to understand, judge, anticipate and then decide, how to execute, measure the consequences, react and so on. Every act is a wager left more or less to chance. To excel in this task, one must, according to Berlin, possess the capacity to grasp and analyze human passions, one must make use of the gift that writers such as Tolstoy or Proust developed to the highest point, and in addition possess the temperament of a man of action, of a strong-willed being. This most demanding art requires Machiavellian virtuosity along with a commonplace sense of morality. At its apogee it marks the capacity to size men up and put them to work in the interests of a decent and dignified life. Political talent has aspects to it that are thankless and unpleasant but nonetheless vital. Politics cannot exist as a natural science any more than ethics.

#### 4

##### *Prudence*

Practical wisdom in some cases, political prudence in others – clear-sightedness and lucidity in all cases – such are the components of a sense of reality. For Berlin these components go together with a pluralistic conception of life, a subtlety of mind, a familiarity with ideologies, and an effort to remain intellectually honest.

It is above all the plurality of values, ideas, and cultures that compels plurality of choice. Every being comes up against the finitude of life. One cannot have everything at the same time; it is not possible to benefit simultaneously from the advantages of youth and old age, a sedentary life and travel, action and contemplation, detachment and participation, solitude and the multitude, independence and community etc. To recognize that

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one cannot have everything is the first step to realism and the beginnings of wisdom.

Secondly, by granting its rightful place – and nothing but its rightful place – to the *esprit de géométrie*, one rehabilitates the *esprit de finesse*. As a philosopher of prudence, Aristotle insisted on precision when precision was possible, but approximation whenever the latter was preferable. In both cases it was the most rigorous approach that was to be adopted. The mathematical approach is not universally valid, Aristotle maintained, and poetry is more humanely profound than history. Berlin belongs to this school within the occidental tradition. For him as well, philosophy, literature, theater, and the arts were the irreplaceable teachers of feeling and judgment. Leaving the issue of realism aside, what was at stake was the allurements of life, the depth and diversity of ways of being.

If this intellectual prudence is rooted in the history of ideas it is because this history reveals the extent to which men are in the grip of ideologies and how difficult it is for them to think for themselves. In political terms, the liberals – to whom Berlin felt close – once they become sure of themselves and dogmatic, were no longer liberals in Berlin's eyes. To 'think freely' means that one can think differently. Liberty that leads to uniformity is nothing but hypocrisy. Although he argued for the influence of ideas in history, Berlin had no illusions as to their power for good. 'Our thoughts are ours,' said Shakespeare, 'their ends none of our own'.<sup>1</sup> The history of ideas teems with ideas that are misunderstood or misused. This is a basic truth constantly borne out by their history. One no more controls the consequences of ideas than the consequences of acts. Even gauging to what extent an idea has been betrayed is hazardous. Ideas can escape their creators and then destroy them. Words of peace turn into words of war, reason into will for power. These reversals are not inevitable, but to ignore them or underrate them is fatal.

The sense of nuance that goes with intellectual honesty is part and parcel of a proper handling of ideas. In the beginning exaggeration and simplification register ideological victories. All the more reason to be wary of such infatuations and hold out against them. Hence Berlin's praise for Tagore, who steadfastly refused to appeal to the rancor of his compatriots, putting the

<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, III. ii. 223.

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respect for truth above the desire to seduce. One can always manage to be heard without distorting facts or crushing people. The roots of fanaticism should be dissected and the fanatics shown to be wrong. The true intellectual is he/she who, rather than dominate the minds of others, helps them to think freely and rigorously.

5

*Positive Liberty and Negative Liberty*

It is the distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty by which Berlin left an imprint on political philosophy. In the tradition of Locke, Constant, Mill and Tocqueville, he came to understand that the idea of independence, of self-realization, of struggling to be one's own master, had taken the form of two concepts of liberty that could be at odds with each other and diverge to the point that each became the other's victim. Negative liberty results from the clearing of an open space. It answers to the question : What are the boundaries within which I am not to be governed? Positive liberty stems from the definition of authority. It answers to the question : Who is to govern, how and why?

Berlin rightly concluded that these two liberties, taken as absolutes, were incompatible and that their diverging claims could not entirely be satisfied. At the time he was writing, the brunt of his critique was directed at Marxism, against the priority given to positive liberty to the detriment of negative liberty. He insisted that no form of liberty worthy of the name could exclude negative liberty entirely. It is the plurality of values, he concluded, that makes of negative liberty an ideal more human than the positive ideal of self-mastery, decreed in the name of social classes, nations or the human race, and enforced by authoritarian systems. Unfortunately, liberation does not mean liberty unless it includes a measure of negative liberty.

This defense of negative liberty should not have us forget the premises on which this fundamental conceptual distinction was based. Berlin recognized the essential worth of each of the two concepts. Negative liberty means possibility of choice, including the possibility of not choosing. Positive liberty means capacity to achieve. Liberty always includes the two aspects. Take an illustration even simpler than those proposed by Berlin. Negative liberty: I am free to play tennis, to play football or not to play at all. Positive liberty: I have a racket and a ball.

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What good is it to have a choice if I don't have the means to put my choice into effect? This explains why negative liberty implies positive liberty in order to be effective. On the other hand, what does liberty consist of when I have the means without having the choice, or when the choice is forced on me? Positive liberty, if it is positive only, is positive but is no longer free. Positive liberty requires the negative to be truly itself. We can thus grasp how this cardinal distinction accounts for the two sides of the same phenomenon. This dichotomy, while it may subsequently become a source of dissension in ideological confrontations, asserts as point of departure the necessity of the simultaneous presence of the two aspects of liberty.

The fiasco of communism consisted of suppressing choice in the name of spreading equality of means, while proving itself incapable in the end of providing those means. Yet, even in the most favorable of cases, to distribute massively in an authoritarian manner would have had little relation to liberty. Turning to the other alternative: in an economy of interior and exterior competition, the liberty granted the poor consists of minimal means and freedom from brutal ideological coercion. In Berlin's terms positive liberty in this case suffers from the social domination of negative liberty. Liberty reserved to the strongest does not deserve to be called liberty. Neither does leveling down, submission or terror produce true equality.

Each of these two liberties taken separately does not provide true liberty. To say that my negative liberty stops where that of others begins is an indispensable starting point, but does not suffice in itself. Moreover, the dimension of choice belongs to each of the concepts. The possibility of choice is an integral part of negative liberty, but it is also present in positive liberty, for – to take an unlikely example – were all material means to be put at my disposal, I would lack the time, the capacity, the strength, the patience etc.. Once again we are brought back to finitude and plurality.

## 6

### *Translating*

At the close of the essay on Tagore Berlin quotes Robert Frost's dictum: poetry is what disappears in the course of translation. The formula is telling, but should be weighed against Czeslaw Milosz's remark: translation is the act of poetry par excellence.

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Should we conclude then that, in comparison, translations of prose are less problematic? No doubt, yet such translations are not as problem-free as might at first appear. A mistaken translation of a concept has innumerable consequences. Translation has its own constraints. ‘Liberté’ will serve as a translation of ‘freedom’ (more matter-of-fact and natural, opposed to all forms of restraint) as well as of ‘liberty’ (more political and institutionalized, opposed to domination and authority) with no possibility of marking the distinction. Be it said in passing that Berlin himself does not always distinguish between the two.

Berlin’s style is by no means bland or exempt from rhetorical flourishes. Paradoxically, these chapters are both conversational and highly elaborated; reading them today, they appear to belong to a past in which one tended to speak as one wrote. The translation had to do justice to the cadences of sentences full of enumerations, interpolations, and qualifications.

These qualifications are introduced by certain terms (such as ‘perhaps’, ‘it would seem’, ‘probably’) or by the way whole sentences are turned. These partial retractions, dear in the past to Guichardin and Montaigne, are so numerous and rapid in English that it was at times necessary to skip some of them. They stem in every case from the concern to be as precise as possible within the approximate, as precautionary as possible in generalizing, and above all from an attitude of reserve. They are not fortuitous, but attempts to avoid the tyranny of language and tone.

The style, spacious and rhythmical, is sometimes repetitive, allusive, dense. It is a labyrinth where one can sometimes lose one’s way, even if Berlin is never obscure by pretentiousness or negligence. He knows how to mix grandeur, nobility, irony, critical acumen and common sense. The very diversity of the subjects of his essays can lead to repetitions that are also opportunities to reformulate assertions. There is a voice behind these texts. The text often abandons the professor’s lectern to revel in the pleasure of a conversation, or take refuge in closely woven argument.

To translate ‘the sense of reality’ by ‘le sens de la réalité’ would have been somewhat obscure in French. ‘Sens du réel’ ran the risk of misleading, of suggesting kinship with the natural sciences. ‘Réalisme’ was reductive and doubtless too political. ‘*Le sens des réalités*’ seemed to be the best compromise, provided it were situated as part of a constellation consisting of a realistic turn of

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mind, keen sensitivity, the art of the possible, and the capacity to go to the heart of things.

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