

DEAR ISAIAH

Henry Hardy

The inaugural address at the Barcelona session of the conference on ‘Isaiah Berlin: A Liberal in Perspective’, 29 January 2008, held to mark the tenth anniversary of Berlin’s death.

I FIRST met Isaiah Berlin in 1972. He was then President of Wolfson College at Oxford University, and I came to the College as a graduate student in philosophy. Berlin was never my supervisor, but he was immensely present and available, and used to sit in the Common Room after lunch, sometimes until dinner, talking to those of us who were interested. Unfortunately I cannot remember many specific details of these remarkable conversations – often largely monologues – and regret not keeping a diary in which I might have recorded them. But two years later, with Berlin’s deeply sceptical approval, I began work on an edition of his essays and lectures that has occupied me almost ever since. The first volume was *Russian Thinkers*, published in 1978 (and in a new edition this month), and the most recent, perhaps the last, was the fifteenth, published twenty-eight years later, in 2006 – *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. How this project started and developed is a story for another occasion. What is important for my present purpose is that Berlin was not good at sticking to the point in conversation – a very attractive quality unless one wanted to make practical progress – so that I almost always wrote him a letter when I wanted to do business.

The first letter I wrote to him (the first surviving letter, at least) is dated 16 February 1975. It begins: ‘I fear the time has come to ask you some questions.’ How many hundreds of questions did I ask him between then and his death more than twenty years later, in 1997? However many it was, it was not enough. Since his death I have often thought of questions I ought to have put to him while

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he was alive, since he alone knew the answers – but it is too late, so there is no use repining. However, even as things are, his replies to the questions I did ask are a gold-mine. He was an exceptionally scrupulous correspondent, and usually replied point by point to my many enquiries. I had not re-read his letters to me straight through until I was invited to speak here today, and I am grateful for the stimulus to do so. There is so much more in them than I remembered: more matter, and more evidence of his generous personality.

To start with, our discussions were largely bibliographical and editorial, and do not, on the whole, provide appetising fare for general consumption, though there are some interesting passages which might one day be made public. Here I shall mention only two or three short remarks.

On one of several occasions when I reported errors in his footnotes, he wrote: ‘I am not at all surprised that my footnotes are inaccurate. I am wildly unscholarly [...]. Yet I long for accuracy, even pedantry.’¹ From me he certainly got the latter, as well as relentless persistence, not only about references. I repeatedly pressed him to let me include more essays in the collections, and he repeatedly resisted. He was too modest, and I was too eager. In his own words:

just as my extreme resistance to producing texts with rapid efficiency is part of my temperament [...], so your inclinations to the opposite are equally unalterable: in neither case are we compelled by the demands of the external world. [...] “Fear shame” is the motto on a large stone fragment of some fallen pilaster lying about in the All Souls portico – it must have been part of the coat of arms of some forgotten Fellow – I think it is probably the governing motto of my life.²

¹ 13 November 1975. Compare this in a letter of 5 February 1989: ‘Dear me. You will surely by now not be surprised by my total inaccuracy, vagueness and tremendous distortions of quotations into what I probably regard as a better formulation.’ And in the same letter: ‘surely you must know by now that I never annotate anything I read, never mark passages, never do anything that serious scholars do – it’s a grave fault, I admit, but I am too old to mend now.’ And on 13 March 1989: ‘Nobody is more inaccurate than I: my quotations are caricatures, sometimes positive improvements (in my view) – but never mind, accuracy is all.’

² 31 January 1979.

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At one stage the volume that became *Concepts and Categories* was almost killed off because Berlin thought some of its contents not worth resuscitating, but it was rescued at the last minute by the intervention of Bernard Williams. There are frequent misunderstandings, contradictions, changes of mind and delays. He writes: ‘make no haste! I am all in favour of procrastination. The whole prospect fills me with alarm.’³ Meanwhile letter follows lengthy letter on arcane points of translation and referencing. One long letter from Berlin announces: ‘Let me be brief (a quality characteristic of neither of us).’⁴ When *Russian Thinkers* finally appeared, most reviews were highly favourable. An exception was that by Rebecca West, about whom Berlin wrote: ‘her views are worthless & don’t annoy me – it is like being kicked by a superannuated old cow’.⁵ But no amount of acclaim shook Berlin’s scepticism about the value of his work, and the same battles had to be fought again and again as volume succeeded volume.

In 1990 I left my job at Oxford University Press and began full-time work at Wolfson College on Berlin’s unpublished writings. This move was stimulated by Berlin’s appointment of me in a new Will as one of his literary executors. When he asked me if I would be willing to act in this capacity I asked to inspect his papers, and was so amazed at what I found that I said I wanted to start work at once, while he was still alive to help me. Soon afterwards, a significant change occurs in our correspondence. My close work on his texts re-opened for me questions about his thought that had long preoccupied me, and I began to ask these questions in my letters. They are what the members of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia called ‘accursed questions’, fundamental moral questions that all serious-minded people confront. At one point Berlin wrote that I was asking difficult questions ‘to which I do not know of any firm answer. I’ll do my best to reply to you, but it is all, as you will see, painfully tentative.’⁶ I am astonished today at the patience and thoroughness with which he did reply, and it seems to me that, taken together, his answers constitute an important supplement to his published work, clarifying it at certain crucial points, and preventing natural misinterpretations at others.

³ 31 January 1977.

⁴ 2 November 1979.

⁵ Undated note (early 1978?).

⁶ 2 April 1991.

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As in the case of some of his published work, what he says is not always clear or consistent, and sympathetic reconstruction is sometimes needed to make sense of it. Sometimes, too, it is necessary to complete his account by adding elements that he did not provide. While interpretation and addition should of course not be confused, I believe that there is a coherent vision of human life underlying all that he said, and that it is possible to tease this out without departing from the spirit of his own words, even if some of his statements have to be set aside because they do not fit with other, better, statements made at other times. He does not always use terms consistently, or define them clearly enough, and we need to refine his remarks in these respects if we are not to be distracted into semantic disputes – what he referred to as ‘words about words’ as opposed to ‘words about things’, one of the most important distinctions, he believed, that philosophers should make and be guided by.

I do not have time to tell you about everything that his letters contain: simply to read them out would take many hours. But I can offer you a few samples that may perhaps whet the appetite, and start me on the road to a fuller account.

It may help to group these samples under some headings, even though there is considerable overlap between the topics in question. Here are the ten headings I shall use :

- Religious belief
- The overlap between moralities (the ‘common core’)
- The nature of moral universals
- The limits of empathy (the ‘human horizon’)
- Core or horizon?
- Varieties of pluralism
- Understanding versus condemnation
- Evil
- The limits of toleration
- Universalism

I shall now briefly summarise some of Berlin’s central beliefs, as I understand them, under these headings, illustrating them, or problems they raise, from our letters. Some of my questions he never answered to my full satisfaction. We returned to them again and

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again, and so I have organised the extracts thematically rather than chronologically.

Religious belief

First of all, as I said in Madrid, Berlin was a thoroughgoing empiricist. He did not believe in any kind of metaphysical entities or guarantees. He looked at the world and reported what he saw, without resort to any sort of transcendental explanation. Most dramatically, he said he did not understand what the word ‘God’ meant, and so was neither theist, nor atheist, nor agnostic, since all three positions imply an understanding of the question at issue, ‘Does God exist?’ He wrote:

I am neither an agnostic nor an atheist – my difficulty is that, for me, God is either an old man with a beard, in which I do not believe, or else something I do not understand – a spiritual presence, the timeless creator of the world [...], a transcendent being – I simply do not know what is meant. I am like a tone-deaf person who realises that other people can be moved by music; I respect this phenomenon but I have no idea what it is they experience. I am like a child faced with trigonometry. Since I don’t know what ‘God’ means, I cannot be described as either denying or doubting him.⁷

⁷ 15 November 1991. He restated this position at greater length in a letter of 10 February 1992: ‘To me, [God] is either an old man with a beard, as Michelangelo paints him, and in that I cannot believe any more than a very, very great many other people of even a mildly sophisticated kind; or I don’t know what is meant – the idea of a transcendent spiritual person, or a divine force which rules the world, or someone who created all things and directs the course of them, etc., means absolutely nothing to me. With my rigid, I fear, empiricism, I can attach no meaning to it. So it’s no good saying I’m an atheist – [atheists] know what the word ‘God’ means and just deny his existence – nor an agnostic, who is not sure whether he exists or not. I am well beyond these things, I simply don’t know what is meant. I am like a tone-deaf person who realises that other people listen to music with pleasure or even total absorption – I have no idea what the experience is. On the other hand, I understand what are called religious feelings, up to a point, as expressed, let us say, in the cantatas or oratorios of Bach, or the masses of Mozart or Beethoven or Bruckner, and I have a certain empathy with that – the feelings, but not their object. Moreover, I go to synagogue – say four times a year at most – partly for sentimental reasons, to say a prayer for my parents when their anniversary falls, as they would have liked me to; partly because I like the hymns. Also, I like to identify myself with the Jewish community – I like to feel a member of a community which has existed continuously for three thousand years. But I perfectly understand the

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Although this position is not directly linked to Berlin's moral and political views, it illustrates his empiricism and underwrites his anti-clericalism and his refusal of all theodicies, literal or metaphorical. I replied: 'Your description of your position on God is most welcome, if only because it almost exactly coincides with my own. I have long believed that we need an extra word: "agnostic" means one who doesn't know; "atheist" means one who doesn't believe; but there is no word for one who doesn't understand.'

The overlap between moralities (the 'common core')

Berlin believed that all mankind has certain needs and values in common – what he and I sometimes called a 'common core', which unites people of different times, places and cultures, and is part of what makes them human. He wrote: 'I think I do believe in some minimal identical content to all human moral outlooks.'⁸ Some commentators have suggested that this applies only to the Western culture with which Berlin was familiar, but it seemed to me to be important that it applies to all parts of the world, at all times. I wrote to Berlin:

I have always assumed that, though your examples have naturally most often been Western ones, your canvas is [...] the whole of humanity. [...] One of the attractive features of what you have to say is that it offers some guidance as to how one should think about the behaviour and intellectual claims of, for instance, Islam, or Chinese Communism, or the current behaviour of those in power in Sudan – not to mention more exotic cultural manifestations of the kind studied by social anthropologists.⁹

If Berlin's observations are limited to the Western tradition, I asked, 'do not the discussion of the nature and extent of the common human core, and of the associated limits of tolerance and acceptable variety, become far less interesting, to put it at its lowest?'¹⁰ Berlin replied:

feelings of those of my Jewish friends who don't want to feel any of this, and never go.'

⁸ 22 November 1991.

⁹ 25 March 1991.

¹⁰ ibid.

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You ask if [my generalisations] apply to the non-Western world – in my opinion, they do. Japanese culture, for example, which seems to me remoter than any other I have ever encountered, and its values, which differ sharply from our own, nevertheless is a culture of human beings [...] Missionaries correctly assumed that they could try to convert Trobriand Islanders or, for all I know, African pygmies, in spite of the vast chasm which lay between the forms of life. They could only do this by appealing to something which in the end the others understood – in some cases allowed themselves to be persuaded by, in other cases not, but in both cases in some degree intelligible. [...] differences between nations, cultures, different ages of human life, have been exaggerated: we do not, surely, entirely misunderstand Plato, though we don't know what Athens looked like – was it like Beirut, or like an African kraal? – even though [Quentin] Skinner would have us believe that, unless we do know such things, we don't really understand what thinkers mean. If this is so, then there is a pretty wide common ground between human beings as such, upon which one can build. It must be possible to preach to Muslim bigots, or Communist fanatics, in terms of values which they have in common with the preacher – they may reject, they may argue, they may murder and torture, but they have to construct special hypotheses in order to account for the fact that the preacher is mistaken, and explain the cause or root of the mistake, which entails some degree of common understanding. [...] This I firmly believe, and this applies to the whole of mankind.¹¹

The nature of moral universals

One may agree that there is a moral core, but disagree about its contents. In particular, how substantive, or ‘thick’, are moral universals? When John Gray’s book on Berlin’s thought appeared, I wrote to Berlin: ‘sometimes he speaks as if we have only certain basic categories in common [...], sometimes as if there are certain definite norms which can be said to be, so to speak, anthropologically universal. I favour the second, broader account, if only because it seems to me necessary if relativism is to be resisted.’ Berlin replied:

I agree with you, even if I may have been vague or inconsistent on the subject – ‘basic categories in common’ is not enough, that simply means that everybody means something not dissimilar by ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc. But if there is no common ground, no acceptance of

¹¹ 2 April 1991.

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particular values recognised as such by a sufficient number of people over a sufficiently long time, then you are right, the danger of relativism rears its hideous head.¹²

Elsewhere he gave examples: ‘no murder, otherwise society couldn’t go on; no lying, otherwise nobody could believe anyone else’.¹³ And of course there are many others which he mentioned at other times.

One might note here that the criterion for moral universality seems to be widespread agreement, not contribution to human well-being. The two criteria do not necessarily produce the same results, and attention to the second in preference to the first is one of the sources of moral progress. As I put it in a letter written after a conversation with Berlin:

It [...] seemed to follow from what you said that among the ends that men sanely pursue are ends that they would do better not to pursue: i.e. [...] ends [...] which are bad. [...] There have been times when there has been general acceptance of practices – e.g. slavery – later regarded as wrong. If general opinion can so change, it cannot be a standard of rightness?¹⁴

But on this occasion Berlin did not reply.

The limits of empathy (the ‘human horizon’)

Berlin believed that human values are not infinite in number, nor arbitrary in content, but are contained within, restricted by, what he called the ‘human horizon’, a limit set by the characteristics that most members of our species share. No individual or culture pursues all of the values within the human horizon. As Berlin has put it in print: ‘There is a finite variety of values and attitudes, some of which one society, some another, have made their own.’¹⁵ So what the human horizon circumscribes is not the values we all pursue – those are the ones within the common core – but the values that make sense to us all because of our humanity. We can empathise with the pursuit of values that we have not made our own, so long as they fall within the horizon, because we can

¹² 3 May 1993.

¹³ 2 April 1991.

¹⁴ 22 February 1995.

¹⁵ *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, 1990), 79.

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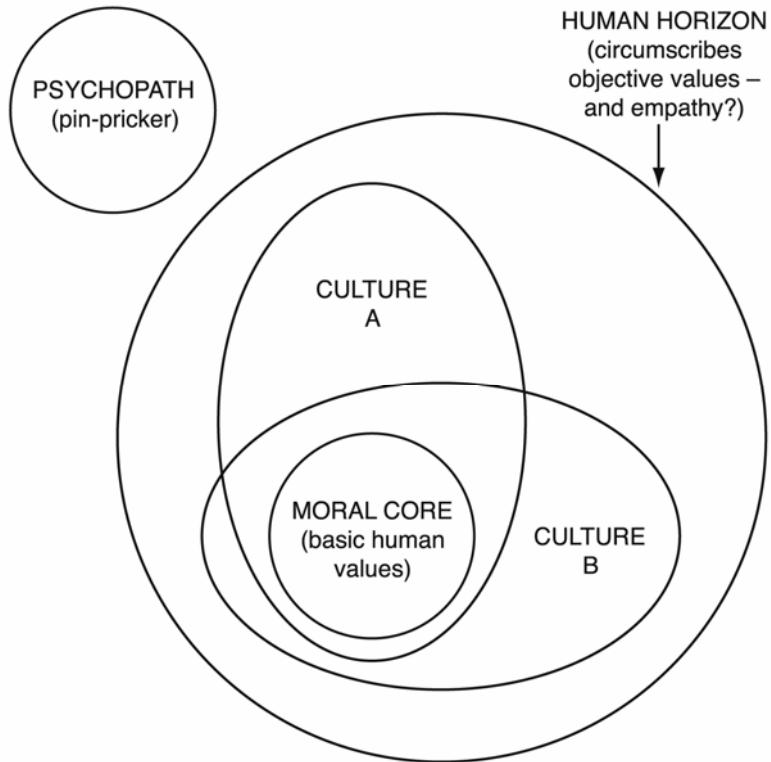
imagine what it would be like to be so situated that these values appealed to us.

Core or horizon?

Berlin's use of the metaphors of core and horizon was sometimes confused in his letters to me. I have already written a short article on this issue, jointly with George Crowder, in a book on Berlin's thought entitled *The One and the Many*. Sometimes Berlin presents the two metaphors as different accounts of the same phenomenon. But this is a problematic view, if only because the metaphors illuminate different aspects of our predicament. To posit a core of shared values is to imply a periphery of unshared values – values which, on Berlin's account, we can nevertheless understand. But to posit a horizon within which all comprehensible values fall leaves open the question of whether the values within it can be divided into those we all share and those we don't. We must not conflate the sharing of common values with the understanding of unshared values, even if both have their roots in the same human nature. In addition, if the common core is the basis of cross-cultural criticism, this gives us a further reason to distinguish core and horizon.

In order not to get bogged down in merely semantic discussions here, one simply has to make a decision, for the purposes of exposition, about how one will describe the landscape of human values. In my view we need both metaphors, which jointly generate a picture that neither can provide on its own. Here is a diagram I used in *The One and the Many*. I call the values within the horizon 'objective', following Berlin's usage, to mark the fact that they are part of our shared observable world, underwritten by human nature, not just the untethered product of the arbitrary, subjective whims of individuals, or of cultures whose beliefs and practices are impenetrably alien to us. And the psychopathic 'pin-pricker' is Berlin's example of someone whose attitudes put him beyond the human horizon, in the province of madness: he likes pushing pins into resilient surfaces, and sees no difference between choosing human flesh or tennis balls for this purpose.

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When I showed Berlin this diagram, he accepted it as a correct account of his views. Let me quote a passage which gives it further support:

Certainly the common core is not the same as the human horizon [...]. The common horizon is entirely to do with intelligibility – you are right. Whereas the common core is central human values [...] – a great many places, a great many periods, etc. [...] That is the only alternative, for me, to objective morality – Kant, Mill, the Churches etc., which I do not accept.¹⁶

In other words, there is such a thing as human nature, and this has three consequences: (1) it generates shared values; (2) it sets limits to what is recognisably human; (3) it enables us to understand, to empathise with, other human beings, however remote they may be from us in time or space or conviction. People do understand one another, even across great divides, and this is a rebuttal of

¹⁶ 5 July 1993.

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relativism, which in its extreme form maintains that there is no common ground between us that enables us to communicate with or identify with others. The common ground that does exist need not lead to agreement, but it does prevent blank incomprehension of the inner life and motivations of others, the incomprehension that we experience with regard to other species, or an alleged divinity, or the material world.

Varieties of pluralism

Crucially, as you all know, Berlin believed that ultimate human values – values we pursue for their own sakes rather than as a means to some higher end – are plural. This means not just that there are many of them, but that they are irreducibly distinct, that is, cannot be interpreted as versions of other values, still less translated into the terms of a single master value such as utility. Moreover, our values are not all compatible: they can come into conflict, and when they do, it is sometimes impossible to measure one against another in the abstract on a common scale in order to resolve our dilemma. When we cannot have both, do we prefer freedom or equality? Happiness or efficiency? Justice or mercy? It depends on the circumstances.

Berlin calls this view ‘pluralism’, but his answers to my questions, as well as some of his published work, show that he also used this word in other senses, and it is vital to keep these senses distinct if we are not to get confused. Let us use the term ‘value pluralism’ for this theory of the nature of human values. When we speak of our capacity to understand values we do not share, values that fall within the human horizon but are not part of our own constellation of values, we need another term, say ‘value empathy’. This is related to value pluralism, because if values were not plural in Berlin’s sense, value empathy would not occur, at any rate in the same form: instead, our values would all boil down to the same thing (‘value monism’), or we should live in private universes of value, incomprehensible to outsiders (‘value relativism’). Value pluralism and value empathy are also related in another way: unless the plural values were generated by a shared human nature, value empathy would not be possible, and we should again be in the grip of relativism. Berlin’s pluralism, that is, has two equally crucial components: how the different values are related, and why we find these values intelligible. It is these components, neither of which

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logically entails the other, that he does not always keep as distinct as I should like.

A third distinct idea is that other cultures may be as valid as our own. We cannot sensibly call this ‘multiculturalism’, which is either a descriptive term, pointing to the reality of cultural variety, or a normative term, applauding this variety. A better label is ‘cultural pluralism’. But immediately we need to distinguish this from a fourth view, namely that all cultures are valid, perhaps equally so. If this were the case, we should never be able to criticise other cultures. But this is something we must be free to do, and able to do with good reason. We might call an uncritical stance towards other cultures ‘cultural relativism’. This stance is incompatible with the existence of a common moral core, which provides the leverage we need to form judgements of those who flout it in one way or another.

Understanding versus condemnation

Making and defending judgements of others, whether individuals or cultures, can be intensely difficult. A central question raised by Berlin’s work in this connection has always puzzled me: ‘How is it possible for a cultural pluralist to understand but also to condemn?’ As I once put it to him: ‘I am [...] experiencing [...] difficulty in understanding the reasons why, according to you, we might be disposed to reject or resist values [or] outlooks which we nevertheless empathetically understand (and so do not regard as mad).’¹⁷ Here is one of his answers to a question about this:

[W]hat about life in societies which hack off limbs for theft or send people to torture and death? I maintain the somewhat uncomfortable, but to me nevertheless fairly clear, notion that, while pluralism entails that I can understand other cultures (because they are human and because with a sufficient degree of imaginative empathy I can enter into them at times – at least, I think I can, though this may be an illusion), I remain wedded to my own, and am prepared to fight, or exterminate if extreme cases arise, forms of life which I understand but abhor. Pluralism is the remedy against relativism, not against intolerance of what I regard as evil. [...] I understand why the Nazis believed what they believed – at least, the genuine ones among them – namely that Jews, or gypsies, were subhuman, and termites who undermined the only societies worth preserving – their own – and therefore had to be exterminated.

¹⁷ 25 September 1996.

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This in the end is an empirical error (though it sounds tame to call it that) – there are no sub-humans, there are no gammas, Jews [...] don't undermine, nor does anyone else [...]. But if you really believe that they do, then of course you do what the Nazis did and it is not insane. People too easily said they were mad, i.e. unintelligible. It is sane but founded on a colossal delusion, which had to be exterminated, very likely by force – as, indeed, it more or less was. ‘Understanding’ [...] does not preclude a violent ‘battle against’. I defend my – our – form of life against the enemy. The fact that I understand the enemy does not make me more tolerant towards him, but the fact that I do understand him precludes relativism.¹⁸

Evil

This reply raises a question about evil, not so much as a category in which we place behaviour we abhor, which he does explicitly accept, but as an explanation of the source of such behaviour. I am not alone in finding Berlin uncomfortably reluctant to recognise the widespread existence of sheer malevolence, as opposed to the misguidedness on which he tends to concentrate. Here is what I said when I first raised this with him:

Do you believe in evil? I don't mean as an objective entity of any kind, but as an explanation for certain unacceptable actions, individual or collective. Your view that the Holocaust was to some extent based on an empirical error about the nature of Jews makes me wonder whether evil isn't so to speak a hypothesis of last resort for you. Am I wrong to detect in your writings a preference for believing that men are mistaken rather than that they are bad? When confronted with someone like Saddam Hussein – or indeed any one of a mass of ‘ordinary’ criminals, murderers etc. – it seems more natural simply to say that we are concerned with a nasty piece of work. Do you regard such an explanation as a cop-out?¹⁹

Berlin replied that he did believe in evil, that it wasn't quite a hypothesis of last resort, that he did not prefer error to evil as an explanation, and that Saddam Hussein was indeed evil.²⁰ Nevertheless, I do think his writings contain the difficulty I have pointed to, though he would of course be absolutely right to say that one should maximise understanding before deciding to condemn.

¹⁸ 2 April 1991.

¹⁹ 28 January 1991.

²⁰ MS annotation on my letter.

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The limits of toleration

So we can condemn evil even when we understand its origin. But how do we draw the line between the tolerable and the intolerable? Is it a case of 'I will tolerate anything but intolerance'? When I put this to Berlin, he replied:

Your formula is the well-known – and in my opinion correct – one, that democracies should tolerate all doctrines save those which threaten to subvert democracy; liberalism should tolerate everything except what will put an end to liberal thought and action; etc. All that is true, and I do accept that. But it does not go far enough. I do not wish to say that I tolerate, and do not wish to suppress, the opinions of those who think it all right to torture children to amuse themselves, or preach or practise other enormities – even racial or national hatreds – even if my presumably tolerant society is not actually endangered by it in a serious degree. [...] do I want to imprison David Irving or the National Front? Not imprison, perhaps, because that is not needed, [but] I would not in the least mind a degree of censorship which would not permit certain things to be published – much as the Race Relations legislation does. And yet society is not in serious danger, it is not the kind of intolerance which might subvert the foundations of our liberal society. On the other hand, I can't say that I wish to suppress all intolerance, as such.

In another passage he adds a reference to the need for a dominant cultural tradition:

one is entitled to suppress [...] or in some cases, where it is possible, to dissuade, people from committing crimes, acts subversive of, or too disturbing to, a given society, whatever their religious beliefs. The British were right to suppress suttee in India, and other forms of physical interference. They were also right to suppress thuggee. I am quite happy to say that, no matter how pluralist a society is, it is entitled to resist, indeed, make illegal, any form of terrorism – IRA, Shamir, or whatever. [...] I [also] believe there is such a thing as a dominant culture in every society, and that that society has the right to preserve that dominant culture and prevent it from being too far eroded by religious or ethnic persuasions which are not compatible with it. This is a typical clash of incompatible values, but I can only say what I myself believe – namely, that a degree of solidarity and peace is something that every society is fully entitled to [...] and therefore [...] religious practices which go against accepted morality (encourage murder, or various forms of oppression of certain human beings – infidels, women, blacks, whites etc.)

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can be legitimately resisted in a pluralist liberal society. Indeed, a liberal (pluralist) society is one in which such practices ought to be excluded. But of course, a wide variety of practices which do not threaten the moral foundations of the dominant culture should be freely permitted, even if not positively encouraged.²¹

Universalism

This brings me to the last topic, which has long been central for me, though less so for Berlin. I refer to the relationship between cultural pluralism and universalism. By ‘universalism’ I mean here not the view that there are universal values, already discussed as the ‘common core’, but the position of those who believe that a single creed or ideology applies to all mankind, as opposed to ‘particularism’, which sees such visions of life as localised – historically, geographically or culturally. Here is my first formulation of my question:

I have often wondered how far the tolerant attitude to different priorities which is one of the consequences of your pluralism should be extended to creeds of a universalist kind – pan-Islam, old-style Communism, many varieties of religion (including Christianity?), etc. [...] If pluralism is true, then no form of monism will do? On the other hand, do you not accept religious belief in others, without restricting this acceptance to faiths that themselves espouse or accept pluralism? Many faiths, one suspects, would be denatured if their universalist aspirations were pruned away. So much the worse for the faiths; but is it really consistent for a pluralist to hold that they are acceptable manifestations of human variety? [...] Universalism isn’t totalitarianism, though it’s often one of its largest foundation-stones. It is, however, inconsistent with pluralism, is it not? [...] for example, it is an essential ingredient in Christianity that its teachings are true for all men, at all times [...] One can I suppose continue to tolerate it so long as it does no harm, but should one accept it as one of the legitimate options open to those who wish their beliefs to be in accord with reality?²²

Berlin writes:

You ask about universalist doctrines, e.g. Christianity. Of course I am not prepared to exterminate it, or even argue against it particularly vehemently – pluralism does not entail intolerance of non-pluralism,

²¹ 17 April 1991.

²² 25 March 1991.

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only, as you yourself say, the kind which does too much harm – harm towards what I regard as the minimum set of values which makes life worth living for me and mine – i.e. the culture in which I live, the nation, society etc. of which I see myself as a member.²³

And again:

All [universalist] believers [...] are presumably at some point intolerant of what they regard as falsehood or perversion – but far be it from me to say that a check ought to be put on the preaching or practice of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism or whatever. [...].

These remarks are about political toleration, but what I wanted to know about was the appropriate *intellectual* attitude of pluralists to universalists. Of course pluralists should not want to censor religious believers, but should they assert that they are mistaken? One of Berlin's most insistent pluralist claims was that no single account of what human beings should be and do could claim priority. This is because any such universalist approach to life privileges one constellation of values at the expense of others whose claims may be no weaker than those of the privileged option. It seemed to me to follow from this that a pluralist is bound to reject, intellectually, all universalist creeds and ideologies, not to mention the intolerance they can spawn. Berlin strongly argued just such a case against political universalism, but for some reason he was reluctant to accept the same consequences in the religious arena. Part of the explanation for this may be a failure to keep the question of political toleration distinct from that of rational assent, but I suspect there was a deeper source of reluctance that I should find it hard to identify, though it may have had something to do with his strong sense of rootedness in the Jewish tradition. He certainly agreed that the religious imperative was universalising: 'Can Christianity and other universalist religions retain their integrity if they drop their universalism? Certainly not. You are perfectly right. A non-universalist Christianity and a non-universalist Judaism are equally absurd.' He also agreed that it is reasonable for pluralists to challenge universalists: 'Of course one has the right to be an "evangelist" for the abandonment of universalist beliefs: it is certainly legitimate, and in my opinion

²³ 2 April 1991.

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desirable, but that is only *my* opinion – I recognise the need to tolerate those who reject this as desirable, provided ... etc.’²⁴

Conclusion

Berlin is sometimes accused of saying too little about specific moral questions in his published work. The position is rather different in his letters, as I hope my extracts have made clear. I hope too that it may one day be possible to bake his disparate replies to my questions into a coherent statement, as far as possible in his own words, of the moral and political vision that lay behind the enormously various body of work that he published. Until this cake is available, the present tray of buns is perhaps better than nothing. Preparing it has reminded me that the author of a forthcoming Russian book on Berlin and Anna Akhmatova recently asked me to write a paragraph for her saying what my opinion was of Berlin as a man and a scholar. I took a very deep breath before complying, but here is most of what I wrote:

At the very end of Plato’s *Phaedo* the eponymous young narrator records the death of his friend and teacher Socrates, and then delivers this moving final judgement: ‘of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best’. These words came unbidden to my mind when Isaiah Berlin died, exactly ten years ago as I write. They expressed my feelings at the time very powerfully. They remind me of the verdict of the satirist John Wells, who told me that Berlin was ‘the best human being I have known’. His words reassured me in my own assessment of this remarkable man.

The world in which Berlin lived and moved and had his being was the academic world of scholarship. Scholarship can be defined in a number of ways, and, in accordance with one’s choice of definition, Berlin was either an inadequate scholar or a consummate one. He was not good at accuracy. This was to some extent a characteristic of his generation, though even by the standards of his time he fell short. His facts were not always entirely reliable, his quotations often approximate, his references erroneous, confused, incomplete, or completely absent. This is one reason why he needed a pedantic editor such as myself, to tidy up after him.

But in a deeper and more important sense he showed what scholarship at its best could be. I do not wish to say that accuracy doesn’t matter. It does. But I should willingly exchange the kind of mundane accuracy of which I am capable for Berlin’s uncanny accuracy

²⁴ 17 April 1991.

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in seeing to the heart of a person, a group, an issue, a whole field of enquiry, and recreating his perception for his readers in prose simultaneously rich and clear. [...]

The best kind of scholarship enables the humanity of the scholar to speak more fully to his readers; it does not confine him to the narrow field of the verifiable and quantifiable. Berlin had an unusually intelligent and responsive humanity, and he used it in the service of scholarship. He had a genius for reading both books and people, and extracting their essence. Most of us could read everything he read, and more, and still have nothing important to say. He always had something to say, and even when it was mistaken it was interesting and revealing. There is no kind of scholar, no kind of man, that I more admire.

To this I would now add what Berlin wrote to Chaim Weizmann in 1948, expressing as he did so exactly my own feelings as Berlin's editor: 'My association with you has been in all my life the thing in which I felt more pride and moral satisfaction than anything else whatever – not to speak of the personal pleasure and the sense of justification for one's existence which it provided and provides.'²⁵

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²⁵ 16 September 1948.