

REPLY TO TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

Henry Hardy

In the course of remarks made on 30 October 2018 at the launch in Wolfson College, Oxford, of my book *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* Timothy Garton Ash posed five questions which there wasn't time to answer. I promised to try answering them in writing. I paraphrase the questions in my own words.

Question 1

What is the evidence for IB having met Akhmatova not twice, as he reports in 'Meetings with Russian Thinkers', but five times?

The view that there were more meetings goes right back to the time they occurred, and IB was aware of it. He wrote to me on 2 November 1979:

I gather that there is a vast myth about Akhmatova in Russia, into which I enter, and many versions of why and when I saw her, and how often, and what she said, etc.; so that whatever I write is likely to be controverted by someone. I shall have to be careful in declaring that memory may play one false but that in this case I do not think it has.

The fullest account of the case for multiple meetings is given in a Russian book by three authors from Fountain House, where IB met Akhmatova in 1945–6, and which now houses a museum dedicated to her.¹ For those who don't read Russian, there is a useful English summary of the book by Josephine von Zitzewitz, 'That's How It Was: New Theories about Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin, Her "Guest from the Future"'.² The main source for the account the Russian scholars construct is a contemporary 'résumé' by the head of the Leningrad branch of the Ministry of State Security, in which reports by friends of Akhmatova who

¹ L. Kopylov, T. Pozdnyakova and N. Popova, '*I eto bylo tak*': *Anna Akhmatova i Isaiya Berlin* [*That's How It Was*': *Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin*] (St Petersburg, 2009; 2nd ed., 2013).

² 'Commentary', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 September 2011, 14–15.

spied for the state are cited, referring to three meetings.³ Other witnesses and other circumstantial evidence are also appealed to. There is in particular the cycle of five poems Akhmatova wrote about their meetings, *Cinque* – five poems, five meetings, the authors suggest.

In her foreword to the third edition of *Personal Impressions* (the collection of Berlin's essays in which 'Meetings' appears) Hermione Lee condenses the case for the prosecution still further:

New information in a 2009 book by three Russian writers, *That's How It Was*, appeared to cast doubts on Berlin's story. The authors said that Berlin saw two academic ladies at the Fountain House, both KGB spies; that there were five meetings between him and Akhmatova, not two (hence the title, *Cinque*, of the poem-series); that Berlin must have known Rakhlin the bookshop-owner and known where to find Akhmatova before he went to Leningrad; that the visit might have been prearranged; and that Randolph Churchill could not possibly have got into the courtyard of the building. Perhaps Berlin changed the facts to 'deflect attention from the rationale behind his trip' to Leningrad: if not exactly a spy, he was collecting and analysing details about the Soviet Union for the British Embassy.⁴ Or he may have been trying to protect Akhmatova from reprisals. (Or, as Henry Hardy has noted, he may have been trying to protect his own relatives in the USSR.)⁵

In my own book I observed:

In 2009 a Russian book appeared, written by researchers at the Anna Akhmatova Museum (in Akhmatova's former apartment) in St Petersburg's Fountain House, in which it is argued that, in addition to the two visits Berlin writes about (15–16 November 1945 and 5 January 1946), he made two further visits, lasting, like the first one, into the early hours, on 17–18 and either 18–19 or 19–20 November, and also a daytime visit on 2 January: that is, five meetings in all, counting the interrupted first meeting as one. Berlin never referred to any such additional meetings, but the circumstantial evidence cited for them is cumulatively not unpersuasive. Despite claims that he had visited more often, he never gave any sign of doubt on this point. We shall probably never know for sure what really happened.

³ An English translation of this résumé can be read in György Dalos, *The Guest from the Future: Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin*, trans. Anthony Wood (London, 1998), 211–13.

⁴ Von Zitzewitz, 15.

⁵ See http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/writings_on_ib/hhonib/tlsaa&ib.pdf.

Question 2

Why would it be wrong to say that IB completely lacked courage?

Here I think we must distinguish personal courage from intellectual courage. The former he did not markedly possess, perhaps inheriting his father's 'timorous, rabbity nature',⁶ as he described it; the latter he did not lack. As he observed himself, he *could* be personally courageous when circumstances demanded it. For example, it took courage for a British Foreign Office employee (as he then was) to leak news of a forthcoming Anglo-American declaration on Palestine to highly placed Jews in the US in 1943, in order to scotch the plan (which he succeeded in doing). And it took courage to ask Isaac Wolfson and the Ford Foundation for funding to found Wolfson College. Maybe it also took courage to woo Aline Halban in the teeth of her husband's opposition: who can tell? But when it came to publishing his own work, he was less bold. As my book relates, he had to be dragged backwards into the limelight, and no amount of public acclaim made the task easier as time went on.

But it was different with the *content* of his works. In his 1995 interviews with Michael Ignatieff he refers to 'these subversive writings which everybody attacks', and this picture is restated frequently. He saw his writings as unorthodox ('against the current') and under attack from the cognoscenti, and himself as embattled and defiant. He also had no problem defying the methodological precepts of the Cambridge School of intellectual history, and, more generally, was resigned to being in a minority of one (as he saw it) on a number of central intellectual issues. It may be that the anticipation of attacks was one factor in his reluctance to publish, but once he *had* published, he did not yield to voices of dissent.

⁶ IB to Jean Floud, 27 August 1969: 'I *wish* I had not inherited my father's timorous, rabbity nature! I can be brave, but oh after what appalling super-human struggles with cowardice!' (L4 287).

Question 3

Why is there no IB school of the history of ideas, even in Oxford?

There is no single answer here. One answer is that he had an abhorrence of creating disciples. He wanted people to think for themselves, not to parrot his own opinions. Besides, his views emphasised freedom in all its forms, including freedom of debate, and a school armed with articles of faith and rules of procedure would have been deeply antipathetic to his sensibility. Another answer is that his astonishing capacity for inhabiting the viewpoint of those whose outlook differed deeply from his own was largely unmatched among his contemporaries, and could not reasonably be required of his students. How could there be a Berlinian school when Berlinian skills were in such short supply?

Question 4

How do we reconcile liberalism and pluralism, avoiding both the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of monist liberalism?

This is a topic for a whole book, but it is possible to sketch the outlines of a reply. Pluralism states that there are many outlooks, cultures, comprehensive value-structures, that are compatible with the minimal universal requirements imposed by our shared human nature. This common nucleus eliminates relativism, which is the view that ‘anything goes’, that there are no objective restrictions on the values or cultures that we can rationally subscribe to. And the plurality that remains after universal requirements are met is enough to rebut any monist tendencies implicit in liberalism. Indeed, there is a conceptual link between liberalism and pluralism, given that it makes no sense to emphasise the freedom to choose unless there are choices to be made. If there is only one right answer, there is no place for freedom. And, conversely, the fact that choices are inevitable is what justifies liberalism. As IB writes:

it seems to me that the belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realised is demonstrably false. If, as I believe, the ends of men are many,

and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom as Acton conceived of it – as an end in itself, and not as a temporary need, arising out of our confused notions and irrational and disordered lives, a predicament which a panacea could one day put right. (L 214)

That leaves us with the logical paradox that an insistence on liberalism can itself be monistic in character. No challenge is permitted, as it were, to the view that the permanent possibility of challenge is essential. Such an objection strikes me as perverse in spirit, even if it cannot be faulted in logic, just like the complaint that IB is erinaceous in his vulpinity. A monistic anti-monism is the last monism to which a pluralist should object, though when this takes the form of the attempt to impose liberal democracy in parts of the world whose traditions are inimical to it, it can get out of hand. It should be remembered that, although IB insisted on freedom of choice as a basic, definitive characteristic of human beings (a factual claim), he always added that political liberty was only one value among many, to be overridden by more pressing demands when necessary. Perhaps this is enough to draw the teeth of the complaint that liberalism is monistic.

Question 5

Is IB's answer to the previous question less a matter of argument and more a matter of his manner of being?

It is certainly true that IB displays to an exemplary degree the truth that pluralism is a matter of temperament and sensibility as much as of theoretical conviction. But a pluralist personality of his kind is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of holding pluralist theoretical views, though it helps greatly in that direction. So we must still *argue* for pluralism and against monism, and this makes it important to find the chinks in IB's defences and try to plug them more satisfactorily than he managed to.

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*Arms and motto of Francis Knyvett Leighton, Warden of All Souls
1858–81, shown on a hatchment displayed in the College cloister*