

CURRENT BOOKS

A Philosopher with a Difference

ISAIAH BERLIN

By John Gray. Princeton Univ. Press. 183 pp. \$19.95

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of the Yiddish theater whose marquee proclaimed, "Tonight / *King Lear* / Translated and Much Improved." Isaiah Berlin, English intellectual par excellence, who came to England at the age of 11, who dearly loves and is much beloved by his adopted country, but who still thinks of himself three-quarters of a century later as a Russian Jew ("That is how I was born and that is who I will be to the end of my life"), would appreciate that story. He might even appreciate being translated and improved, as it were, by John Gray—appreciate the motive, at least, of an admirer who can think of no better way to pay homage to Berlin than to make of him the very model of an English academic philosopher.

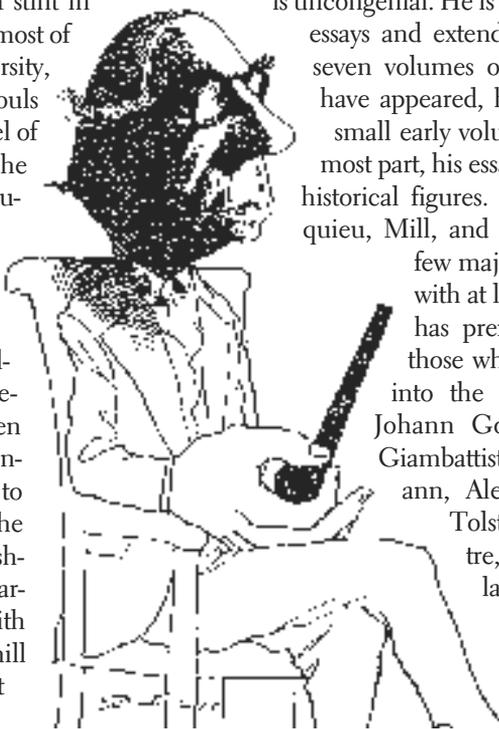
As Berlin is an Englishman with a difference, so is he an academic with a difference. Except for his wartime service in America and a brief stint in Moscow, he has spent most of his life at Oxford University, much of it at All Souls College, the very citadel of British academia. But he is hardly the typical insular professor. His friends and acquaintances include almost every public figure and intellectual of any consequence in half a dozen countries. (When Winston Churchill asked to meet Berlin, then at the British embassy in Washington, an underling arranged a meeting with Irving Berlin; Churchill soon repaired that error.) And Berlin's

interests and knowledge range well beyond the academy, into politics, literature, music, art, and whatever else appeals to his ever-curious, ever-engaged mind.

So too is Berlin a philosopher with a difference. Indeed, he insists that he is not a philosopher, that he abandoned that calling early in his career, when he found the prevailing mode of analytic philosophy too attenuated, too removed from reality. Instead, he describes himself as a historian of ideas (an intellectual historian, as he would be called in America). And it is in that role that he has made his distinctive contribution to scholarship.

It is ironic, therefore, to find Berlin's work subjected to a systematic philosophical analysis by Gray (a political theorist at Oxford), when Berlin himself has eschewed just such an analysis—not, obviously, because he is incapable of it, but because it is uncongenial. He is a prolific writer, but of essays and extended essays, not books; seven volumes of his collected essays have appeared, his only book being a small early volume on Marx. For the most part, his essays focus on particular historical figures. Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Mill, and Marx are among the few major figures he has dealt with at length. For the rest, he has preferred to write about those who have never made it into the philosophical canon: Johann Gottfried von Herder, Giambattista Vico, Johann Hamann, Aleksandr Herzen, Leo Tolstoy, Joseph de Maistre, Georges Sorel, Nikolai Bakunin.

Moreover, Berlin's essays read less like articles in philosophical journals



than like the conversation for which he is renowned—erudite, spirited, expansive, with names, ideas, and allusions tumbling out almost breathlessly. “I’ve never written much,” he recently told an interviewer. “I learned to dictate to secretaries while at the embassy in Washington.” Dictated or not, his essays resemble his conversation—just as his conversation has all the fluency and complexity of a well-wrought essay.

What Berlin’s essays do not have, however, is the unified, systematic, comprehensive character that Gray tries to derive from them. The opening paragraph of Gray’s book announces its theme: “The central claim of this book is that all of Berlin’s work is animated by a single idea of enormous subversive force. This is the idea, which I call values-pluralism, that ultimate human values are objective but irreducibly diverse, that they are conflicting and often uncombinable, and that sometimes when they come into conflict with one another they are incommensurable; that is, they are not comparable by any rational measure.” Gray baptizes Berlin’s philosophy “agonistic pluralism,” and the political outlook associated with it, “agonistic liberalism” (from the Greek word *agon*, meaning competition or rivalry).

That pluralism is one of the principal ideas in Berlin’s work is indisputable. That it is the “single idea” animating all his work is not. Indeed, the very notion of a single idea is incongruous, for it goes against the grain of that very pluralism. Berlin might be speaking of himself when he praises Montesquieu for not being “obsessed by some single principle, seeking to order and explain everything in terms of some central moral or metaphysical category.” He also commends Montesquieu for doing what he himself has so successfully done: “His virtuosity reaches its highest peak, he is most himself, when he tries to convey a culture or an outlook or a system of values different from his own and from that of the majority of his readers.”

Gray’s interpretation of Berlin depends, he says, on “several strategic omissions.” He has not made use of Berlin’s unpublished writings, early philosophical papers, Russian studies, or wartime dispatches; nor has he attended to his friendships, personality,

or conversation. Instead he has chosen to focus on Berlin’s “political thought, and on the moral theory, and the conception of philosophy, that it expresses and embodies,” believing this to be his most enduring intellectual achievement and his great contribution to liberalism.

It is an impoverished political thought, however, that cannot accommodate Berlin’s essays on the Russians, which are among his most passionate and stimulating writings. For example, his essay on Herzen and Bakunin elucidates, even better than his essay on Mill, Berlin’s own views of liberty. It was after reading Herzen’s diary, which expressed so tragically both Herzen’s zeal for revolution and his respect for the individual freedom and dignity that were imperiled by revolution, that Berlin declared Herzen to be “my hero for the rest of my life.”

Another conspicuous omission is the *A* maxim that Berlin has made famous. His essay on Tolstoy opens with a quotation from the Greek poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” “The Hedgehog and the Fox” is one of Berlin’s best-known essays, and scores of commentators have joined him in assigning intellectual and cultural figures to one or the other category. Plato, Dante, Hegel, and Dostoevsky are Berlin’s prime specimens of the hedgehog; Aristotle, Erasmus, Shakespeare, and Goethe, of the fox. Tolstoy is ambiguous, for he “was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog.”

Berlin himself is a fox who believes in being a fox. He has learned many things from the varied thinkers he has studied, and he has acquired an abiding distrust of any form of monism. It is this distinctive play of mind that Gray tries to fit into the framework of academic philosophy by such awkward contrivances as “agonistic pluralism” and “agonistic liberalism.” In doing so, he is in danger of creating a Berlin who, like Tolstoy, is by nature a fox but believes in being a hedgehog.

What makes Berlin an unregenerate fox is his rejection not only of such obvious monistic philosophies as Platonism and Hegelianism but also of the Enlighten-

ment, for it too posits universal values. It views the good life as based upon reason and human nature, and it conceives of history as progressing in accord with some purpose, or *telos*, with perfectibility as its end.

For Berlin, unlike the *philosophes*, one's values are not necessarily rational, or universal, or compatible with the values of others, or even compatible with one's other values; nor are they always conducive to one's own good, let alone the good of society or the progress of humanity.

Berlin insists that his idea of pluralism is not relativistic. Values are objective, he says, because they can be understood and appreciated even by individuals and cultures that do not share them. And they can be understood and appreciated by them because "fully rational people" have certain values "in common," and "what makes men human is what is common to them." For Gray, this "objective pluralism" redeems Berlin from both the familiar moderate kind of relativism and the radical relativism of postmodernism.

Yet this denial of relativism is not entirely persuasive, for it presupposes precisely the common values and full rationality that Berlin elsewhere questions. Still less satisfactory is Gray's attempt to reconcile Berlin's critique of the Enlightenment with his commitment to "Enlightenment values of toleration, liberty and human emancipation from ignorance and oppression." This duality in Berlin is reflected in his essay on Mill, with its spirited defense of "negative" as against "positive" liberty, and in his writings on the "Counter-Enlightenment," which suggest the inadequacies of just this idea of liberty.

These essays on the "Counter-Enlightenment" (the term is Berlin's) may be his major contribution to intellectual history, for he resurrects thinkers—Vico, Herder, Hamann, de Maistre—who have been neglected by the dominant school of liberal philosophy. These thinkers differed profoundly among themselves, but they shared a pluralistic view of society and history that made them sympathetic to nationalism rather than universalism, romanticism rather than rationalism, and,

in some cases, authoritarianism rather than liberalism.

Berlin is fascinated by all of them even while being wary of some of them. Even in Joseph de Maistre (1754?–1821), the least congenial of them, he finds insights into human character, society, nationality, and language that make both conventional liberals and conservatives seem vacuous and naive. De Maistre, Berlin concludes, is neither a theocratic reactionary nor a modern authoritarian but an "ultra-modern" totalitarian and protofascist. This judgment may be excessive, given de Maistre's reverence for religion and his contempt for militarism. But it is interesting that Berlin could suspend that judgment long enough to appreciate those qualities of de Maistre that, if not totalitarian, are surely illiberal.

Gray agonizes over the dilemma of reconciling Berlin's sensitivity to (and, often, sympathy with) the Counter-Enlightenment with his commitment to the liberalism that is so much a product of the Enlightenment, and then of reconciling pluralism itself with liberalism. Does freedom, the primary value of liberalism, have any "privileged" status in a world of differing, discordant, and transient values? Does liberalism have any claim on reason, if reason itself has no universal validity? Is liberalism, Gray asks, "ideally the best for all human beings, or is [it] to be regarded as one form of life among many, with no foundation in human nature or the history of the species as a whole?"

It is a compelling question, worthy of the efforts of the many academic philosophers Gray invokes to help resolve it. He himself, abetted by Richard Rorty, finally concludes that liberalism has no universal validity—that pluralism, in effect, trumps liberalism. But that is Gray's own resolution, not that of Berlin, who can be quoted on both sides of the issue, sometimes suggesting that there is a radical disjunction between pluralism and liberalism, sometimes that the two are reconcilable.

If Berlin is not helpful in answering the question, it is because it is not his question; it is Gray's. The title of the most recent volume of Berlin's essays, *The Crooked Timber*

of *Humanity*, is a quotation from Kant: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.” Berlin takes this as an admonition against rationalism, dogmatism, and utopianism. But it also applies to philosophy, and not only Kantian philosophy but the philosophical enterprise itself, which is always engaged in trying to straighten out “the crooked timber of humanity.” This quotation, together with

that from Archilochus, should put us on guard against any attempt to “translate and improve” Berlin. We should be content to read and appreciate him as the fox he is, and not try to make of him any sort of hedgehog.

> GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB’S most recent book, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, has just been issued in paperback by Vintage.

Victory Under Scrutiny

WHY THE ALLIES WON

By Richard Overy. W. W. Norton. 416 pp. \$29.95

by Charles Townshend

Did the Allies win World War II, or did Germany and Japan lose it? That is the question animating Richard Overy’s striking reconsideration of the Allied war effort. Overy, a professor of modern history at King’s College, London, confronts the conventional wisdom that the war’s outcome was practically inevitable. In his view, too many people, including respected historians, succumb to the temptation to let “the figures speak for themselves.” Accordingly, they conclude that the Allied preponderance in population and industrial production doomed the Axis powers to defeat. Overy finds this assumption crude even at the material level, since more is not necessarily better. Further, he holds that it disguises the real story: that the Allies could not sit back and wait, that they had to reinvent their war-fighting skills in order to achieve victory over enemies who were astonishingly tough, especially the Germans.

In seeking a more sophisticated explanation of the war’s outcome, Overy has set himself a daunting task. Not least, it calls for mastery of a phenomenal mass of detail. The key clashes of this global conflict were not just dramatic encounters such as the Battle of Midway and the landing at Omaha Beach, but prolonged struggles of attrition: in the middle of the Atlantic, in the skies over the Ruhr and

Berlin, amid the ruins of Stalingrad. Moreover, this was a “total war,” in which the beliefs and actions of entire peoples weighed in the balance. To dissect and scrutinize such a vast conflict requires all the skills demonstrated in Overy’s earlier studies: *The Air War* (1980) and *The Nazi Economic Recovery* (1982). The result may not be flawless, but few other historians could even attempt it.

Giving some credence to the traditional idea of the “decisive battle,” Overy offers terse, vivid accounts of five crucial campaigns—the Pacific war from the Coral Sea to Midway, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Allied strategic bombing campaign, the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk, and the Normandy invasion—that are as good as any available. Then he shifts focus to four structural dimensions—economic strength, military technology, decision making, and (more awkwardly) morality—making it clear that the Allies won all the decisive battles, achieved awesome economic preponderance, chose better weapons, made fewer strategic mistakes, and had right on their side. Yet even so, Overy asks, could it all still have gone wrong?

At the heart of his reply is a lucid discussion of war economies and technology. Here the numbers speak eloquently—but not of a simple gap in crude resources,