

Interpretation

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If we want to understand liberty, is it wise to turn to Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty and to the priority he accords to the former? To answer that question may be the best reason to read Berlin today. Liberty and liberalism, along with "value pluralism," are the concepts with which he is most closely associated.

We need not waste time considering whether Berlin was not a philosopher because he abandoned the analytic philosophy with which he was involved in the 1930s for the history of philosophy. Most readers of this journal will probably agree that it is possible to philosophize while writing about important figures in the history of philosophy. Johnny Lyons agrees and takes it as his main purpose in *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* to argue for the depth of Berlin's thought. Lyons taught political theory at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, before beginning work in corporate communications; but separation from academia has not prevented him from producing a densely argued book.

Lyons begins where most people first encounter Berlin: his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" of 1958. He tells or reminds us that while Berlin is famous for advocating negative liberty, or freedom from interference, he also maintains that positive liberty, or freedom to do something, "respond[s] to real and legitimate human needs and ideals" (4). Lyons also emphasizes Berlin's pluralism of values, which claims that "genuine human values and ends conflict in principle" (5). Thus Berlin is simultaneously sympathetic with and critical of the Enlightenment—especially critical of the belief that human reason can produce a coherent set of principles that will solve all problems.

According to Lyons, Berlin's understanding of philosophy begins with the analytic or positivist classification of inquiry into three types: empirical, analytic, and neither (31). But whereas positivists consider the last type to be the realm of emotion, Berlin rejects the fact/value dichotomy and finds the last type to be philosophy's true home, with the resulting possibility of nonscientific knowledge (34, 45–46, 54). Decisive for him is the influence of Kant's claim that certain categories and concepts are fundamental to human experience. For Berlin, however, as opposed to Kant, those categories and concepts include, but are not limited to, freedom, happiness, good, bad, right, wrong, choice, and truth; and they are factual, not a priori (43–44). Some categories and concepts are more stable than others; thus the influence of history is fundamental to all human understanding (48–49). Vico's influence on Berlin figures heavily here, leading to the conclusion that "there are no eternally and universally true answers to the so-called perennial questions of human life" (60). Perhaps Berlin's historicism is not dogmatic because it is factual, thereby subject to revision. Does Berlin see any universal, timeless element in human nature? There is evidence on both sides of that question, causing Lyons to remark that philosophical consistency may be overrated (50, 83–86, 93). The humanistic nature of most of Berlin's categories and concepts leads Lyons to argue that Berlin "never really tackles, let alone seeks to reconcile, the deeply problematic duality of our understanding of the external world and that of the human world" (83).

In his study of Machiavelli, Berlin focuses on the latter's heightening of a conflict between classical and Christian ethics, by means of which Machiavelli paves the way for the recognition of a plurality of ultimate values and eventually for religious toleration (67, 76). Machiavelli's signal achievement, according to Berlin, is unintentional (68, 74–75). As Lyons admits, Berlin leaves himself open to the charge of unhistorically appropriating Machiavelli for his own purposes, of allowing his "preconceived pluralist and liberal agenda" to override his laudable goal of seeking relevant wisdom from past thinkers (77, 91; the quotation is from latter).

Berlin's defense of liberalism is "at once ethical *and* epistemological: it combines the epistemological or meta-ethical claim that our values and conceptions of the good are substantively and not just pragmatically in conflict with each other with the moral claim that a more civil and tolerant society is one that coheres with and respects the rich plurality of our values and ways of life" (100). But, according to Lyons, the historical aspect of our categories and concepts raises the question whether that defense "operates ultimately at

the level of rhetoric or reason, of ideology or truth” (108). If all moral values are incommensurable, as Berlin maintains, why should we give priority to liberty and liberalism (117)? Lyons unreasonably considers this question “a small and relatively unserious matter” and refers to those who consider it serious as “logic-choppers” (118). But he faults Berlin for “making the rash and misleading statement that pluralism *entails* negative liberty near the end of “Two Concepts of Liberty”” (119n2).

Lyons dismisses Richard Rorty’s objection to the principle that we should assent only to claims that can be rationally justified to everyone, in favor of Berlin’s outlook that reason can communicate across cultures (a “weak form of universalism” [129]). Thus Berlin seeks transhistorical truths although his historicism tells him they will not be found. We may affirm our commitment to liberalism today even if we must admit that it may vanish tomorrow.

Lyons next defends Berlin against Ronald Dworkin’s argument that value pluralism is not the default philosophical position, that a case needs to be made in its behalf. Lyons wants to retain the tenet that value pluralism has moral objectivity while criticizing Dworkin for underestimating the importance of history to philosophy (148, 154–55). Dworkin’s reply—which Lyons does not fully appreciate because he too readily accepts Berlin’s semi-Kantian categories and concepts—might be that he need not subscribe to Berlin’s built-in historicism in the fundamental categories and concepts. At any rate, the fact that value pluralism is recognizable only in “Western modernity” does not detract from its moral objectivity, according to Lyons (169).

Turning to Berlin’s understanding of freedom, Lyons begins with free will, which Berlin sees as fundamental to human experience and must be insisted on to the fullest extent despite what philosophy and science say in favor of determinism and the weakened notion of free will that may be compatible with it (177–78). Berlin’s notion of free will entails that I am “the ultimate source of my beliefs and actions” (183). Lyons provides a long discussion of academic philosophers on the matter before nobly praising Berlin’s treatment for being “deliberately superficial in the sense that it stays on the phenomenological surface where human beings actually live and breathe their freedom and avoids the putatively deep reasoning that philosophers are perpetually prone to when it comes to this topic” (198).

Yet Lyons does not find the possibility of the truth of determinism easy to dismiss (200, 205). Nevertheless, he asks: Why should we respect the authority of a philosophy that leads us toward determinism (213)? Since there will

always be “competing interests and priorities of society and philosophy,” why should philosophy have the upper hand (215)? Lyons prudently rejects a philosophy that finds ultimate guidance in science (221). But he and Berlin do so at the cost of accepting a built-in historicism.

Berlin is known for his anticommunism, but Lyons finds the key to his defense of freedom in his romanticism, the essence of which is “sincerity” (230). Lyons discusses three purportedly romantic thinkers: Johann Hamann, Johann Herder, and, oddly enough, Kant, for his “moral philosophy” (236). Berlin and Lyons achieve this classification only by emphasizing the importance of individual will for Kant and downplaying the role of reason in forming the moral law. Just as Machiavelli unintentionally produced value pluralism, so romanticism unwittingly led to liberalism and toleration.¹ Berlin focuses on Rousseau, who, Lyons says, maintains that “there is no real conflict between man and the state”—as if Rousseau did not say in *On the Social Contract* that the ineliminable existence of private wills made his project bound to degenerate (245). Thus when Lyons writes of Rousseau as providing “the emergence of the idea of the real self as a crucial part of this idea of freedom,” he ignores the self that Rousseau tries to create by an education according to nature in *Emile*.

Again, however, the crucial figure for Berlin, according to Lyons, is Kant, in three respects: his view of human nature as divided into phenomenal and noumenal selves; the principle that a human life has value independently of its influence on anyone or anything; and the principle that individuals are ends in themselves (246). The apparent result, Lyons holds, is that Berlin is “willing to champion the claim that freedom is intrinsically valuable since it is good to be free” (247). Berlin—especially in his essay “The Idea of Freedom” (based on lectures given in 1952)—sees negative liberty as more than an instrumental good. Does Berlin abandon the intrinsic justification of liberty in that essay for an instrumental one in “Two Concepts of Liberty”? Lyons wavers before answering that question affirmatively (248) and then telling us not to worry too much about “the excessive abstractions and remoteness of philosophical debate,” of which that question is an example (251). Lyons’s book is full of abstractions, words ending in “-ism,” so his insouciance appears to be situational.

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 170.

Even if Berlin does regard liberty as intrinsically valuable, the key point is that it is a notion of negative, not positive, liberty that he is primarily defending in both essays. He may suspect that individuals are not truly free merely when they are free from restraint, but he does not much allow for that possibility. One way to address the adequacy of Berlin's understanding is by asking whether Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* would be so highly respected if Tocqueville saw liberty as Berlin did. Tocqueville combines a hostility to overbearing government with an insistence that free democratic citizens should govern themselves. His striking notion of individualism impresses the thought on readers that conceiving of liberty primarily as being left alone by government is likely to lead to democratic despotism, the opposite of what is intended. But Tocqueville, in Lyons's book, falls into the category of "political theorists with an interest in philosophy" along with Cicero and Machiavelli, as separate from the apparently higher category of "philosophers with an interest in politics," which includes Plato, Hobbes, Karl Popper, and Berlin himself (3). If Tocqueville's insight into liberal democracy exceeds Berlin's, something is wrong with that classification.