

A Humanist's Conversation with the 20th Century

(Isaiah Berlin, 1909–1997)

On 6 June 2009, Wolfson College, Oxford held a day of celebrations to mark the centenary of the birth of Isaiah Berlin, the eminent philosopher who had played such an important part in its foundation. As part of the occasion, Dr James H. Billington, the Librarian of Congress, delivered the British Academy's Isaiah Berlin lecture, and provided his listeners with some personal reflections on the great man himself.

READING THE WRITINGS of and about Isaiah Berlin, I find myself drawn into reliving the experience of what we so valued in this uniquely wonderful man: listening to him talk.



Figure 1. Sir Isaiah Berlin, *President of the British Academy* (1974–78), and his wife Aline, in 1974. Photo: Alice Kelikian.

Underlying almost everything he said was a pervasive humanism in the fullest sense of the word. He loved to talk about how people living and dead both reflected and affected consequential aspects of the human experience. Isaiah did not merely describe, he recreated and led us into the thought world of revolutionary young Hegelians in his early work on Marx and then of the reactionary ultramontanist, Joseph de Maistre, in his famed essay on Tolstoy.

Isaiah himself was neither revolutionary nor reactionary. What he did, and continued to do, in a variety of lectures, conversations, and writings was to widen the range of thinkers with whom the analytical and empirical British philosophical tradition needed to converse. He was a respected, even beloved, participant in the professional internal dialogue within that

tradition. I remember how something Isaiah had written about the very different tradition of phenomenology precipitated a lively and lengthy late evening conversation at Oxford in the early 1950s, with all sides citing Berlin as their authority.

As a brilliant student of the classics – both ancient and modern – he had an historically proven basis for beginning his capacious, humanistic conversation with the modern and postmodern world. He used the magic and momentum of speech to bring the thoughts of many largely-forgotten seminal figures from continental Europe across the channel and the Atlantic.

Circles

I have suggested elsewhere how Isaiah's interests and influence radiated out in concentric circles from Headington and Oxford, to all of Britain, much of Western Europe and on to the continent-wide eastern and western frontiers of European civilisation in Russia and the United States.

He could converse with all of that world in all of its major languages. And his voice radiated out in what could be described as another set of concentric circles, that was oral rather than cartographic. At the innermost circle was Isaiah speaking one-on-one, something I had the enormous privilege of experiencing when he was my doctoral thesis adviser from 1950 to 1953 and on a number of occasions thereafter. Somewhat broader was the second circle of his friends, colleagues, and admirers with whom he shared his wit and wisdom as generously as he did in one-on-one settings.

The next two even wider concentric circles were those in which he publicly engaged his broadening popular audience. First were his Oxford lectures, in which he invited thinking people into trains of thought that he developed as he spoke. Then came the

widest circle of all, when he reached out to people of all kinds on radio to affirm and reinforce the values and decencies of the civilisation that he not only enriched but exemplified.

Philosophy, history, and the 20th century

His friend Bernard Williams commended him for practising 'a form of philosophy that did not ignore history'. He examined a host of European thinkers from the 17th to the 19th centuries in the relative tranquility of Oxford where he worked, relating them to both the horrors and the hopes of the tumultuous 20th century. He eloquently defended freedom of the individual against authoritarianisms of all kinds, and against deceptive modern appeals to sacrifice freedom now in order to achieve some remote future goal. Sustaining and expanding human creativity seemed to depend for him more on the real conditions of freedom than on the formal structure of government.

He was concerned with what Michael Ignatieff called the 'human horizon without which societies could scarcely survive' – a horizon Isaiah found in Britain's 'civilized sense of human reality'.

Isaiah said his decision to move beyond the technical philosophy in which he had excelled into broader concerns came during a long, lonely wartime flight in a darkened airplane across the Atlantic.

In the early post-war years, Isaiah saw on the human horizon a real danger emerging in Stalin's USSR to the survival of the freedom he deeply cherished in Britain. He had experienced first hand the Soviet system at its birth, seeing a revolutionary mob lynch a helpless man in St. Petersburg – and then watching from abroad how Stalin expanded power and repressed freedom.

In the fall of 1945, shortly after allied forces had brought an end to German Nazism, he wrote an extraordinary memorandum to the British Foreign Office suggesting that a very different kind of force would also ultimately bring an end to Soviet Communism. The Cold War had not yet begun then, and the Western world still has not fully grasped – even now, 18 years after the collapse of the USSR – what he had to say.

Isaiah separated the Russian from the Soviet elements, and concluded in his 1945 memorandum:

The principal hope of a new flowering of the liberated Russian genius lies in the still unexhausted vitality, the omnivorous curiosity, the astonishingly undiminished moral and intellectual appetite of this most imaginative and least narrow of peoples, which in the long – perhaps very long – run, and despite the appalling damage done to it by the chains which bind it at present, still shows greater promise of gigantic achievement in the use of its vast material resources, and, by the same token, *pari passu*, in the arts and sciences, than any other contemporary society.

Those steeped in Russian culture and with a humanistic perspective like Berlin saw more clearly than behaviourist social scientists that internal moral forces within the Russian people themselves could ultimately prevail against the unprecedented power and manipulative genius of the Stalinist state.

Inspirational teacher

I first met Isaiah Berlin through a student's transcription of his spoken words. He had given a series of lectures on the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia at Harvard in the early post-war years. I read the extensive notes in a single sitting and shortly thereafter was dazzled by his magisterial article in *Foreign Affairs*: 'Political Ideas in the 20th century'. I knew well before graduating from Princeton that this was a voice I wanted to hear and learn from. And, when I was fortunate enough to get to Oxford, I had the added good fortune of having him as my doctoral supervisor during the last days of Stalin and one of the most creative periods of Isaiah's remarkable life.

I deliberately chose as my thesis topic Nicholas Mikhailovsky, the leading radical journalist in Russia in the late 19th century,

who came closest to continuing the anti-authoritarian and westernising tradition of Alexander Herzen, for whom Isaiah had a special affection. It was a happy choice in that it enabled me to hear Isaiah's searching commentary on almost all the important thinkers and enduring issues that Mikhailovsky had to deal with, including the first group in human history to proudly call themselves terrorists, the earliest Russian Marxists, and a flood of largely forgotten figures in both Russia and the West, who offered alternative theories of history and human development. But my choice of thesis topic was otherwise an unhappy one in that Mikhailovsky's writings were interminably verbose and irredeemably boring. Here again Isaiah came to my rescue, probably without realising it, since it was more by his example than by prescription.

I had first become interested in Russia as a schoolboy and taken Russian lessons as a result of reading *War and Peace* with a Russian dictionary while Hitler was repeating Napoleon's mistakes about Russia during World War II. When I first met him, Isaiah was talking about Tolstoy as he prepared *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, translating Turgenev's *First Love*, and speaking in the limpid, pre-revolutionary language of high Russian culture rather than the cliché-ridden polemics of popular journalism. Slogging on with my work on Mikhailovsky, I concurrently found myself reading almost all of Turgenev, more of

Tolstoy, Chekhov and others who wrote in clear Russian and in the realist tradition like Isaiah himself.

Isaiah was a perceptive and precise critic of the written word and a very conscientious thesis supervisor. I will never forget the time I discovered him in the dingy downstairs entryway of my walk-up digs on the outskirts of Oxford, writing me an apologetic note that he would not be able to see me that day because of a sudden need to go to London. I later found out it had something to do with the royal family. But even so (and with the motor running in a waiting limousine) he stopped for a minute or so to convey the essence of the comments on my writing that he had planned to make at our scheduled meeting.

I was, figuratively speaking, soon to hear his voice again in an unexpected way towards the end of my subsequent time in the American army. I had for a time the responsibility for providing high government officials with non-classified think pieces about the Soviet Union, and I found among the very best several personal letters written by Isaiah to American friends. They had the unmistakable flavour of having been dictated from an uncommonly rich speaking voice, and they represented the most penetrating description of the inner dynamics of Stalinism that I have ever heard then or since. I do not remember the dates and have never been able to recover them, but some of the analysis that I remember

was already suggested in 'Generalissimo Stalin and the Art of Government', an article that he published in 1952 in *Foreign Affairs* under the pseudonym O. Utis.

Humanist

In his later years he was less focused on Russia and more on the humanistic enterprise in general. He was also intent on creating and animating for his beloved Oxford the innovative new college, Wolfson.



Figure 2. Isaiah Berlin 'topping out' the new Wolfson College buildings, December 1972. Photo: Shepherd Building Group Ltd.

Out of his continuing conversation with the waning 20th century emerged a set of core values that he articulated with humour and nuanced reasoning. He became for a widening number of admirers a role model for what a humanist can and should be in our often dehumanised and intellectually fragmented world.

He was first and foremost a friend of freedom through which alone humanity could survive and creativity thrive. He stressed the negative concept of freedom *from* outside oppression, but he also recognised the continuing human search for some positive ideal of freedom *for* some higher purpose. Ever the realist, he saw that there were often conflicts between equally noble, but inherently irreconcilable values between societies, and even within individual leaders. He had a deep scepticism about what might be called the unintended consequences of human engineering, exemplified in his favourite citation from Kant that 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.'

However, he opposed vigorously the powerful currents in modern thinking that suggest that impersonal forces basically control the human experience. He argued against historical determinism, distinguished pluralism from relativism, and gave us colourful but balanced portraits of a wide variety of active thinkers and leaders who made indisputably positive contributions in the ongoing struggle to understand and improve the human condition.

Isaiah saw weaknesses as well as strengths in almost everyone; and wrote about them with originality and humour. He tells us how he grew to like the critic Edmund Wilson even more after Wilson visited him in bad humour and insulted almost everyone he met. Isaiah generally liked Americans, but described Hollywood after visiting it in the 1940s as an 'accumulation of European decay in a series of rock pools'. He added that 'the only agreeable thought is that, since all these people are accumulated there, they cannot also be somewhere else, which is a great source of relief.'

Some of the happiest expressions on Isaiah's face came when I happened to see him holding a book. He did not just read them, he conversed with books, with authors and with librarians like John Simmons, who found him Russian books even when they were misplaced or miscatalogued.

When I created a major international prize for lifetime achievement in the study of humanity within the world's largest and most multi-lingual collection of books, the Library of Congress, I had in mind the example of Isaiah. He is, alas, no longer with us: this rich and ranging modern Jewish sensibility, this perpetuator of the best in Russian culture, this sunny son of Britain, this generous friend and tutor of so many Americans.

He represented the kind of humanist needed in our gloomy time. Harold Macmillan asked rhetorically at the dedication of Wolfson College: 'If you happened to be in a mood of melancholy or frustration, who would you rather see come into your room than Isaiah Berlin?'

Epilogue

At the end of his evocative memoir of his only two return trips to Russia (in the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s), he focused on the two great poets that he had seen the most of and whom he most admired, Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak.

Here, as in his moving epilogue in the same volume about his Jewish forebears in Eastern Europe, Isaiah speaks with heartfelt humility about those who suffered in the 20th century. At the very end, he says of these two great poets:

My meetings and conversations with Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova, my realization of the conditions, hardly describable, under which they lived and worked, and the treatment to which they were subjected, and the fact that I was allowed to enter into a personal relationship with them both, indeed friendship with them both, affected me profoundly and permanently changed my outlook. When I see their names in print, or hear them mentioned, I remember vividly the expressions on their faces, their gestures and their words. When I read their writings, I can, to this day, hear the sounds of their voices.

This is the way we remember Isaiah Berlin. If Helen of Troy had the face that launched a thousand ships, Isaiah of Oxford had a voice that launched a thousand thoughts. His conversation with the 20th century has – and will continue to have in both style and substance – growing importance for a humanistic dialogue with the 21st.

Figure 3. *Isaiah Berlin, Isaac Wolfson and Harold Macmillan at the opening of the new Wolfson College buildings, November 1974. Photo: The Times.*

