Introduction

Bernard Williams

Isaiah Berlin is most widely known for his writings in political theory and the history of ideas, but he worked first in general philosophy, and contributed to the discussion of those issues in the theory of knowledge and the theory of meaning which preoccupied the more radical among the young philosophers at Oxford in the late 1930s. The medium was in good part personal discussion, particularly within a group including Stuart Hampshire, the late A. J. Ayer, the late J. L. Austin, and others.[1] In this selection from Berlin's more purely philosophical writings, the three papers which represent that earliest period of his concerns (only one of them written actually pre-war) involve the reader in a double displacement from what those philosophical conversations must have been like. The transition from dialectic to document is one thing – something that many philosophers of many schools have found problematical. Another thing is the transition from Berlin in person to Berlin in print.

It has been said that the kind of philosophical activity engaged in then by Berlin and his friends, like the 'linguistic philosophy' of the 40s and 50s which it helped to form, was essentially conversational and resisted publication. So far as the real point of the activity was concerned, as opposed to a certain manner, this has probably been exaggerated. Among 'analytical' or 'linguistic' philosophers, only Wittgenstein had an understanding of the nature of philosophy which (like that of Socrates) meant that something essential to the subject itself was lost in the transition to print. Nothing that Austin (for one) believed about the subject would have precluded him from writing a textbook, even, and Ayer has not declined to do so. The present

[1] See Berlin's own account, 'Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy', in Sir Isaiah Berlin and others, *Essays on J. L. Austin* (Oxford, 1973), included in a later volume of the present selection, *Personal Impressions* (see p. vii above, note 1), and also Ayer's autobiography, *Part of my Life* (London, 1977), p. 160.

papers can, and surely do, preserve the point of those philosophical enquiries.

The second transition, however, from Berlin in discussion to Berlin in print, involves losses which are clear and determinate, even if they are hard to describe. The decorum of a journal article must attenuate that sense, which Berlin uniquely conveys, that no abstract or analytical point exists out of all connection with historical, personal, thought: that every thought belongs, not just somewhere, but to someone, and is at home in a context of other thoughts, a context which is not purely formally prescribed. Thoughts are present to Berlin not just, or primarily, as systematic possibilities, but as historically and psychologically actual, and as something to be known and understood in these concrete terms. This is one thing, besides a courteous nature, that makes Berlin a less than ruthless controversialist – a highly developed sensibility for what it is to be the other party, to see the world in that different way.

The agenda of philosophy for the group to which Berlin belonged before the war was set, in some part, by logical positivism. They were concerned with the conditions of sentences having a meaning, and with the connections between meaning and verification, where verification was construed in terms of sense-perception. Positivism both regarded natural science as the paradigm of knowledge, and took a strictly empiricist view of science, seeing scientific theory in operationalist terms as a mere compendium and generator of actual and possible observations. This set of ideas does not leave very much room for the historical imagination, nor for insight. It is hardly surprising that Berlin was never a positivist. But, seriously interested in philosophy at a time when philosophy's most pressing questions came from a positivist direction, he produced work which did not merely reject positivism programmatically, but argued its issues in its own kind of terms. Two essays in the present book are of this kind: 'Verification', and 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements'. Both express a deep resistance to the operationalist ideas of positivism, which held that the meaning of our statements about reality is given directly by our procedures for finding out about it. Against this general conception, Berlin affirms that our understanding of reality already includes the conception of it as existing independently of us and our understanding; so that our reflection on what we mean when we characterise that reality cannot accommodate the positivist idea that truths about reality should be equivalent to truths about us.

This unacceptably idealist equivalence, as Berlin detects it to be, gets no better (as the positivists hoped) if categorical truths about reality are treated as equivalent to hypothetical truths about us (or about other possible observers). This was the manoeuvre of phenomenalism, which was *par excellence* the positivist theory of the external world. Phenomenalism tried to analyse all statements about the material world into statements about actual or possible experiences. Statements about observed objects were, under analysis, at least partly categorical: they recorded the actual observations. Statements about unobserved objects, on the other hand, were, when analysed, entirely hypothetical. But this conjunction of claims, as Berlin points out, cannot possibly be correct: the difference between what happens to be observed and what remains unobserved cannot possibly issue in a difference of *logical form*.

So, more generally, when Berlin takes up the question of a proposition's referring to an object presently unobserved, his line of argument can be seen as striking at the mixture of epistemology and logic which has marked the empiricist tradition. (The eventual consequences of rejecting the empiricist's epistemological notions of reference are radical, and are at the present time a major preoccupation of the philosophy of language.) One further thing that particularly comes across from Berlin's opposition to verificationism is a powerful sense (not shared by all philosophers) of the reality of the past, something which his metaphysical opinions join the whole body of his work in affirming.

Berlin did not accept positivism's view of meaning and knowledge, nor – above all – its view of philosophy itself as having the modest roles, up to its final retirement, of secretary to science and obituarist of metaphysics. His historical sense made him sceptical even of the more generous conception of philosophy held by post-positivist linguistic philosophy, which gave it the open-ended task of carefully and imaginatively charting the uses and implications of ordinary language, and diagnosing in those terms the origins of philosophical perplexity. Berlin claims, in 'The Purpose of Philosophy' and again in 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', a larger task for it, in terms of an account, more perhaps in the spirit of Collingwood than of any analytical philosopher, of various models or presuppositions which men have brought to their experience, and which have helped, indeed, to form that experience. The understanding of these models, and the self-understanding of our own, are offered as one task of philosophy, and they imply others: for if the story of these various models gives a

correct account of the constitution of human experience in different eras and cultural situations, then there are genuine questions about the objectivity of what is, at any given time or place, regarded as knowledge. The questions are not new, and have been explicit and pressing since (at the latest) Hegel. Linguistic philosophy had not much to say about questions of that sort and turned to other things; but the questions did not go away, or even change very much while neglected.

They can be pressed, in fact, even against natural science. Berlin has not himself done so, and indeed the one thing in these two essays that bears something of a positivist stamp is the account of science implied by his division between questions that are determinately answerable and those that are not, and the division, again, of the answerable questions into the empirical and the formal. But the activity of paradigms and models which Berlin invokes outside these domesticated areas can be detected in the development of natural science itself, as many present philosophers of science insist. Some of these philosophers, significantly, are committed to believing about scientific theories that they cannot properly be understood except in terms of their history – something which Berlin himself believes about anything that he finds really interesting.

Berlin himself has applied his concern with the role of models and presuppositions rather to the human sciences, insisting also, in 'The Concept of Scientific History' and elsewhere, on the peculiarity of those sciences in having a subject-matter which is of the same nature as the investigator. This feature of them, in Berlin's view, both permits and requires from the investigator a special insightful kind of understanding, not applicable to any other kind of subject-matter. This is of course the capacity which he salutes in those – Vico and Herder first among them – who have insisted that past ages, remote cultures, saw the world through different eyes from us and that an effort of identification is needed if their view is to be in any way recaptured. It is also a capacity which Berlin himself notably displays. It applies not only to understanding across time, but also to the very different outlooks, structures of understanding and preconception, which different kinds of thinkers can bring to the world in the same period.

These various structures or models, whether across time or contemporary, inevitably raise problems of relativism: whether there is any basis on which one such view can be seen as better, more adequate, in any absolute sense, than another. Berlin offers, so far as I know,

no general theoretical critique of relativism, but he is certainly resistant to it – and he has a special reason to be so, in so far as his own account of human action and its intelligibility itself implies the falsehood of some ideologies and models of life which have been influential in the past and still remain so. In '"From Hope and Fear Set Free"' Berlin examines metaphysical questions about human freedom (questions which come before those issues of social and political freedom which he has discussed elsewhere), in connection with a very interesting and searching question, whether knowledge always liberates. He wants to stress the vast effect there would be on ordinary notions of action, purpose, praise, blame, regret, and so forth, if we really believed in a deterministic theory to the effect that our actions are the strict causal product of earlier states of affairs, stretching indefinitely back. The 'reconciling' hypothesis of self-determination, that we are free if among the causes of our action is our own choice, even though that choice itself be caused, Berlin joins Epicurus in finding not good enough, a form of 'semi-slavery'. Berlin does not himself argue directly against determinism, nor is his denial of the reconciling strategy, his insistence that the conceptual and moral costs of believing in determinism would be enormous, intended as an argument *in terrorem* against accepting determinism. But the principle of self-determination he sees as definitely mistaken, and the images of liberation that go with it, to that extent flawed: absolutely flawed, not merely relatively to another set of presuppositions. Indeed one suspects that he not only hopes but believes that determinism is false, and that the whole loaf of anti-determinist freedom which the libertarian craves is actually available.

In the account that he gives of philosophy, more than one sort of question is excluded from the realm of the determinately answerable. Among them are questions of value; and the fact that they should be so excluded, and that they should be, in that context, partly assimilated to questions of philosophy, are both facts characteristic of Berlin's outlook. That questions of value should be partly assimilated to questions of philosophy reminds us of the broad scope that Berlin gives philosophy. It also warns us that the reason why value questions are in his view ultimately contestable is not that they are 'subjective', or that their answers are merely expressions of opposed attitudes. Indeed, to read Berlin's discussions of conflicts between values in the context of a debate about subjectivism is to mislocate them and to miss their special force. The debate about subjectivism is characteristically concerned with conflicts of values between persons or societies ('Who is

right?'). What above all concerns Berlin, on the other hand, is the tension between conflicting values in *one* consciousness.

Again and again, in these essays and elsewhere, Berlin warns us against the deep error of supposing that all goods, all virtues, all ideals are compatible, and that what is desirable can ultimately be united into a harmonious whole without loss. This is not the platitude that in an imperfect world not all the things we recognise as good are in practice compatible. It is rather that we have no coherent conception of a world without loss, that goods conflict by their very nature, and that there can be no incontestable scheme for harmonising them. There can, of course, be errors or limitations in thinking about values, whether in the particular case or in a more systematic way. For one thing, there can be the errors of omission and simplification, of succumbing to the illusion that one value can override all others and restructure everything. For Berlin, this is certainly a cardinal error, and it is in a special sense an absolute one – for it offends against something that is absolutely true about values. Yet the historical picture which Berlin also offers, the account of the different models of man and the world deployed at different times and in different societies, tells us also that it is the case – indeed, *must* be the case, in that Hegelian sense of 'must' which Berlin has so helpfully refused to dismiss – that not all values can be equally present to all outlooks. Moreover, intense consciousness of the plurality of values and of their conflict is itself a historical phenomenon, a feature of some ages (for instance, ours) rather than others. One thing, indeed, which can give us an insight into the point or claim of a certain value, its possible hold on our sentiments, is sympathetic understanding of a society which respected it with less pluralistic competition than it receives in ours.

The pluralism of values that Berlin advances is not *just* an application to ethics and political theory of the general anti-reductionist, anti-simplifying attitude in philosophy which he advances in the essay 'Logical Translation' (an essay which expresses very clearly some of the concerns of Oxford philosophy at that time). That general attitude appropriately gives way in the face of the demands of explanatory theory: it is obvious, indeed, that it has to give way in the face of theory, and the question in philosophy is how far explanation requires theory – a question to which present practice gives a much more positive answer than did the Oxford philosophy of the 50s. But the question in ethics, whether we should abandon the claims of some value which has force with us – abandon, for instance, considerations of loyalty or justice in

the interests of general utility or benevolence – can hardly be a matter of *explanatory* theory. Philosophers have insisted, and still insist, that we encounter here the demands of another kind of theory, moral theory, which aims to systematise and simplify our moral opinions. But they rarely even try to answer a real question: what authority are theoretical tidiness or simplicity supposed to have against the force of concerns which one actually finds important? That question has no obvious answer, even after one has conceded considerable power (more, perhaps, than Berlin himself would concede) to philosophical theory in general.

It may be that there are no, or few, purely theoretical pressures to reduce the conflicts in our value-system. Berlin will say that there is a pressure to *not* reducing them, towards remaining conscious of these conflicts and not trying to eliminate them on more than a piecemeal basis: that pressure is the respect for truth. To deny the conflicts, indeed to try to resolve them systematically and once for all, would be to offend against something absolutely true about values. But then how are we to take the fact, already mentioned, that a high level of such conflict, and the consciousness of that, is a mark of some forms of life and some societies rather than others? Among the forms of life that support that kind of consciousness, a prominent position is needless to say occupied by the liberal society; and Berlin deploys the pluralism of values in defence of liberalism.

His defence of the liberal society is supported by the pluralism of values, I think, in more than one way. There is the obvious point that if there are many and competing genuine values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More, to this extent, must mean better. The point has strength even if we grant the important qualification that not all values *can* be pluralistically combined, and that some become very pale in too much pluralistic company. There are logical, psychological and sociological limits on what range of values an individual can seriously respect in one life, or one society respect in the lives of various of its citizens. (This is one thing that is being said by people who deny that liberal equality, for instance, is real equality – a point raised by the form that Berlin gives to equality in his discussion of it as one value among others.)

But there is a different kind of consideration, that the consciousness of the plurality of competing values is itself a good, as constituting knowledge of an absolute and fundamental truth. This is a good which,

in the name of honesty, or truthfulness, or courage, may be urged against someone who recommends simplification of our values not, perhaps, as a theoretical necessity, but as a practical improvement. Here Berlin – *in the last analysis*, as thinkers of a rather different tendency put it – finds value in knowledge and true understanding themselves, and regards it as itself an argument for the liberal society that that society expresses more than any other does a true understanding of the pluralistic nature of values.

But what is that true understanding? What truth is it that is known to someone who recognises the ultimate plurality of values? In philosophical abstraction, it will be *that there are such values*, and, put in that blank way, it can be taken to speak for an objective order of values which some forms of consciousness (notably the liberal form) are better than others at recognising. But that way of putting it is very blank indeed. It is more characteristic of Berlin's outlook, and more illuminating in itself, to say that one who properly recognises the plurality of values is one who understands the deep and creative role that these various values can play in human life. In that perspective, the correctness of the liberal consciousness is better expressed, not so much in terms of truth – that it recognises the values which indeed there are – but in terms of truthfulness. It is prepared to try to build a life round the recognition that these different values do each have a real and intelligible human significance, and are not just errors, misdirections or poor expressions of human nature. To try to build life in any other way would now be an evasion, of something which by now we understand to be true. What we understand is a truth about human nature as it has been revealed – revealed in the only way in which it could be revealed, historically. The truthfulness that is required is a truthfulness to that historical experience of human nature.

We can see, then, that in Berlin's central conception of values and, connectedly, of humanity, there is an implicit appeal, once more, to historical understanding. We can perhaps see, too, how the development of his thought from general theory of knowledge to the history of ideas and the philosophy of history was not merely a change of interest; and that his complex sense of history is as deeply involved in his philosophy, even in its more abstract applications, as it is, very evidently, in his other writings, and in his life.

BERNARD WILLIAMS