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The Most Outstanding Liberal of the Twentieth Century

Recollections of Isaiah Berlin

Hidekazu Kawai

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[25] It is a great pleasure to study in a foreign country under the supervision of a great teacher, but it is also a great pleasure to have the honour of meeting him when he comes to Japan. The English philosopher Isaiah Berlin has given me both these joys.

It is quite easy for me to say that I have been able to experience both these joys, because I was not formally his student, nor was I a fellow philosopher, and I always interacted with him at a certain distance. I know several researchers who were supervised by him at Oxford University, and they say that Berlin was a good teacher who gave his time generously to debate with his students, and inspired them to discover wonderful perspectives and ideas that they were not even aware of, like gemstones in the rough. Unfortunately, I did not receive any such guidance. On the other

hand, I heard that he would excommunicate students, and would ‘turn his massive back’¹ on them if he found them unpromising.

I also heard that when a Japanese scholar majoring in the history of Russian thought proposed to Berlin that he should study the Russian Narodnik thinker Chernyshevsky, he was turned down on the grounds that Chernyshevsky was a Bolshevnik. Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, admired Chernyshevsky along with Marx and Engels, and his book *What Is to Be Done?*, which is said to have laid out the basis of Leninism, borrowed its title from Chernyshevsky’s work. Lenin sympathised wholeheartedly with Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary utilitarianism, in which what is useful for the Revolution is good and what is no use for it is bad. This position – that everything is justified for the sake of the Revolution – seemed to elicit a pre-theoretical, almost physiological [26] antipathy in Berlin.

I remember him saying during a discussion, ‘I’m a philosopher, and philosophy is all I am interested in.’ I am a political scientist who teaches British politics and comparative politics, and I suppose he said this because our conversation often drifted into history and politics. However, it is not true that he had no interest in history and politics. Quite the contrary. According to him, there are two kinds of human knowledge: formal knowledge that has nothing to do with experience, such as mathematics and logic (and, he added, astrology and the rules of chess); and empirical knowledge that is generated by induction from the results of observation and experiment. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a classification cabinet that stores away for future reference issues that have been impossible to attribute to either of these two categories since ancient times, such as the meaning of life, death,

¹ Bernard Crick, ‘The Most Intellectual of Academics’ (obituary of Berlin), *Guardian*, 7 November 1997, 20; reprinted with additions as ‘On Isaiah Berlin’ in Crick’s *Crossing Borders: Political Essays* (London, 2001: Continuum), 163–73. Page references for quotations are to the 2001 version (hereafter ‘Crick’). A Japanese translation by Hidekazu Kawai appears in ‘Mourning Isaiah Berlin’, *Misuzu* 40 no. 2 (no. 443) (February 1998), 42–52.

and human morality. In this sense, history and politics are adjacent to and partly fused with philosophy, since they are always accompanied by things that cannot be explained by empirical knowledge alone.² So when he said, ‘Philosophy is all I am interested in’, he was trying to return to the origin of philosophy, but in doing so he was also expanding his interest to include history, politics, and everything related to human beings.

Berlin first became a university researcher as a philosopher, and then expanded his field of study to include political theory and the history of political thought: he handled all of these subjects with great skill. He was an excellent lecturer and speaker, a master of round-table discussions, and a brilliant writer, especially of essays. However, I believe that he was basically a philosopher, as described above. I was reminded of this when I was talking to him about everyday topics.

Mastering philosophy

Isaiah Berlin was born on 6 June 1909 in Riga, Livonia, then part of Imperial Russia. He was an only son,³ and because of an accident during childbirth, his left hand was crippled. As a result, he never learned to play a musical instrument (he did try the clarinet). His father was a wealthy Jewish timber merchant, but his parents were not of the Jewish faith,⁴ and he remained agnostic throughout his life. I remember that he told me he attended the same synagogue in London as Leonard Shapiro, another Russian-born Jew and a scholar of Soviet history, but unfortunately other topics prevented me from pinpointing his relationship with Judaism more precisely. However, his paternal grandparents were Chabad Hasidim, that is, they belonged to the most orthodox sect of Judaism. He grew up speaking Russian and German at home.

² ‘The Purpose of Philosophy’, *Selected Works of Berlin* (Tokyo, 1983–92: Iwanami Shoten), vol. 2 (hereafter SWB2).

³ A sister had died at birth in 1907.

⁴ His mother was brought up as a pious Jew, and returned to her faith after emigration to England.

When the Germans invaded Livonia in the First World War, in 1915, the family moved to the hills of Andreapol', and then in 1916 to Petrograd, where the seven- and eight-year-old Berlin witnessed the two Russian Revolutions of 1917. The Jews living in Russia, along with the Russian liberal bourgeoisie, enthusiastically welcomed the first, February, Revolution, but it did not last long. His family knew little about the second, October, Revolution, and talked of the new government of Lenin and Trotsky not lasting long either. He shared many memories of the Revolution, but also said that seeing a policeman being dragged away by a mob and struggling, his face deathly pale, gave him 'a lifelong horror of physical violence'.⁵ The house where he lived was confiscated by the Bolshevik housing commissioner, and the family was forced to live in one room (he also said that the maid kept the housing commissioner quiet) [27], but they were not persecuted. His father continued to work for the new government, supplying railway sleepers, but after four years he gave up and the family moved to England.

He inherited from his father the belief that the British could do no wrong, as his father was a fervently pro-British man. His parents spoke English at home. Berlin went on to learn English at St Paul's School⁶ in London (which, unlike other public schools, was not a boarding school: his father was 'against the brutal system'), but he never forgot Russian, thanks to his reading of Tolstoy and other Russian classics. At this school, he learned Latin and Greek and read the classics, just like all public-school students at that time. At the same time, he learned French.

He then went on to study philosophy at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He was more familiar with foreign languages than his fellow Oxford students, read more widely in European literature, and became famous for narrating anecdotes in which he would vividly bring to life Russian, German and French thinkers of the past and present as if they were his friends and acquaintances. In

⁵ CIB 4.

⁶ And before that at Arundel House School in Surbiton.

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1932 he was elected a Fellow of All Souls College, which was famous for being a community exclusively composed of high-level graduate scholars: to be elected a Fellow of the College was an honour that anyone in the Oxford world, which was known for its self-esteem, could aspire to.

Around 1936 or 1937, Berlin, along with J. L. Austin, the most feared philosopher in Oxford at the time, held weekly debates in his room. They were among those who set the trend for what would become known as Oxford Philosophy. Here is an example of the kind of philosophy he discussed, in words reminiscent of G. E. Moore:

if a child asked me “Where is the image in the mirror?” It would be little use to invite it to look inside the mirror, which it would find to consist of solid glass; or on the surface of the mirror, for the image is certainly not on its surface in the sense in which a postage stamp stuck on it might be; or behind the mirror (which is where the image looks as if it were), for if you look behind the mirror you will find no image there – and so on.⁷

These words are sometimes quoted as an example of British philosophers’ obsession with the insignificant, but the few young philosophers who gathered at the meeting continued to debate fervently, trying to clarify knowledge and the use of words precisely.

As Berlin himself recalled in his postwar essay, ‘J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy’,⁸ the participants were content to discuss freely and persuade their esteemed colleagues, and had no desire to publish their results. In this sense, they were terribly self-centered and even arrogant. The meetings continued until 1939, when the Second World War broke out, but it seems that Berlin himself was beginning to think that he had discussed philosophy enough, and it was no longer for him.

⁷ CC2 3. (For the acronyms used here to refer to Berlin’s works see <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/abbrevs.html>.)

⁸ SWB2.

The development of a sense of reality

Although quite a few British intellectuals in the late 1930s joined the Communist Party because they believed that the only options for European politics were Marxism and Fascism, and that they had to choose one of them, it was in the atmosphere of that era that Berlin wrote his first book, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939). It was ‘almost the first remotely objective account of what Marx had said back then, who he was, why he said it, his Hegelian roots and Jewish background’.⁹

[28] It was a book that talked only ‘about Marx, and ignored Marxism and the international Communist movement’¹⁰ of the time. His refutation of determinism was very clear and to the point. It seems that in this work he was trying to draw out the interesting points made by Marx that were often overlooked by those who were obsessed with principles and movements.

When the Second World War began in 1939, many intellectuals were mobilised for wartime service, but Berlin was sent to the British Embassy in Washington.¹¹ He wrote a weekly report on public opinion in America, which was at the time hesitant about entering the war. His reports eventually became the favorite reading of Prime Minister Churchill. The story that Churchill became convinced that the US would enter the war after reading the reports, and that Britain would win if it did, spread among his students in later years, but Berlin said that this is ‘a pure legend’ (needless to say, it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that finally brought the US into the war).

After the war, at the end of 1945, he went to work for a few months at the British Embassy in Moscow because of his language skills. Half in secret, he met Boris Pasternak, author of *Doctor*

⁹ Crick 165.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ After a period working in New York (1940–2).

Zhivago, and Anna Akhmatova, a great female poet, and later wrote an account of Russian writers and poets under Stalin.¹²

Through these wartime experiences, he came into contact with reality outside the university and applied the analytical skills he had developed in philosophy to that reality. His recollections of Churchill, Roosevelt, Weizmann (the founder of the State of Israel), Einstein the scientist, Namier the historian and Austin the philosopher, to name but a few, are a delight to read, with their brilliant insights and complex but powerfully flowing sentences.

For example, his essay on Einstein,¹³ who disliked the narrow-mindedness of nationalism, is a totally objective account of Einstein's views on science and politics, especially on his support for the establishment of the State of Israel. In a discussion with me, Berlin reproduced this conversation, with impressive recall,, using direct speech and conjuring it up photographically. After the war, when Berlin visited Einstein in his study at Princeton, Einstein was barefoot, without shoes or socks. The conversation did not take off, and after half an hour Berlin asked him, 'Mr Einstein, are you unhappy with your conversation with me?' The answer was 'Yes.' 'Do you want to stop talking?' Again 'Yes.' It seems that Einstein was very 'unhappy' to hear that the atomic bomb he had helped to develop was being used against Japan, and that the Soviet Union was also developing it. Having experienced these conversations with Berlin, I could not help feeling that the printed text had lost some of the sparkle of the conversation.

Then, in 1956, Berlin married. Lady (Aline) Berlin is a very beautiful and wealthy woman, born of Russian and French parents (I heard that she had once won the French women's golf championship). She is still in good health, but they never had any children.

Building a pluralist theory

¹² 'Conversations with Russian Poets', SWB2.

¹³ 'Einstein and Israel', SWB2.

Berlin was elected to the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory in 1957, following the death of Professor G. D. H. Cole, a well-known socialist. His inaugural lecture, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’,¹⁴ made him simultaneously famous on both sides of the Atlantic, and he came to be regarded as the most outstanding liberal theorist of the twentieth century, and an interpreter of British liberalism. At the same time, he ‘re-read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and plunged deeply into the Russian novelists, poets and social thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century’.¹⁵ The famous *The Hedgehog and the Fox*¹⁶ was first published as a journal article in 1951. In addition, he published a series of articles that sharply analysed hitherto unnoticed thinkers in Europe as well as in Russia, [29] and also hitherto ignored aspects of well-known thinkers.

I don’t have the space to go into his many articles, but his basic position is called pluralism. As the saying goes, ‘Man does not live by bread alone’; man lives by pursuing various values simultaneously, but the main independent values – such as freedom and equality, justice and tolerance, knowledge and happiness, planning and spontaneity, etc. – are in principle irreconcilable and must therefore be opposed to one another if each is promoted to the extreme. This is the view called pluralism. Furthermore, the freedom of the wolf and the freedom of the sheep are incompatible.

The lecture on ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ that I mentioned earlier reveals the opposing aspects of freedom: negative freedom, in the sense of having a space free from the interference of power, and positive freedom, in the sense of participating in the exercise

¹⁴ In *Jiyuron* [*The Theory of Liberty*, Japanese translation of *Four Essays on Liberty* and ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’] (Tokyo, 1971: Misuzu Shobō). The translation of ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, by Keizō Ikimatsu, first appeared in *Rekishi no hitsuzensei* (Tokyo, 1966: Misuzu Shobō) with his translations of ‘Historical Inevitability’ and ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’

¹⁵ Crick 166.

¹⁶ Translated into Japanese by Hidekazu Kawai as *Harinezumi to kitsune* (Tokyo, 1973: Chūōkōron-sha); reprinted in the series Iwanami Bunko (Tokyo, 1997: Iwanami Shoten).

of power and securing some other value from it. He showed that when freedom is suppressed in the name of freedom (for example, under Communism), it is often positive freedom that is abused. Incidentally, when I first went to Oxford in 1962, this paper was not well received by the so-called progressive students. There was always a suspicion that poverty and ignorance might greatly limit negative liberties, rendering them virtually meaningless, and a suspicion about what position Professor Berlin would take on social welfare policy, for example.

If various fundamental values are irreconcilable, then one must choose some values and abandon others. This choice is painful. The practical goal of pluralism was to create a system in which humans could, at best, minimise suffering and avoid extreme situations in which basic moral values had to be sacrificed (not a very inspiring idea, Berlin used to add).¹⁷

According to Berlin, philosophers from Plato onward have believed in value monism, according to which all other values constitute a harmonious system under some supreme value. Particularly after the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, when optimism arose that human power and planning could transform human beings and society in the name of reason and progress, an ideal society (or utopia) based on this monism and the inevitable progression of history towards that ideal society were conceived. Needless to say, Berlin was directly opposed to this view of values, society and history.

From this standpoint, he reviewed with fresh eyes a variety of issues that the Enlightenment ignored or repudiated, such as individuality neglected in the name of reason, especially nationalism as a demand for national individuality – and ideological movements such as historicism, which had been overlooked in favour of a single line of progress, and romanticism, which seeks to free the imagination from reason. He published essays about many thinkers. Although he often mentioned reactionary thinkers who opposed the Enlightenment, Berlin did not take an anti-

¹⁷ CTH2 18–20.

Enlightenment position. He was a liberal in the sense that he sought conditions under which freedom could survive the attacks of reactionary thinkers. For example, he placed Machiavelli, who is often regarded as a worshipper of power, in the history of liberalism because he paradoxically opened an opportunity for freedom when he discovered the duality of ethics by preaching that those in power should not hesitate to exercise power decisively, sometimes against Christian ethics.

The country that his family adopted, England, enjoyed a stable liberal regime, won two world wars while experiencing a serious economic crisis and the collapse of the empire, and (like the United States) tended to regard excessive enthusiasm for ideas as a sign of moral disorder. There, the question of freedom was resolved into one of institutional guarantees, [30] with little attention paid to the ideological and philosophical conditions of being free. Berlin's contribution to scholarship was to carry on the tradition of British liberalism, but to combine it with an interest in continental European thought (and an interest in the effects of thought on practice). He was a great thinker in that sense.

Visiting the Ise shrine

As his reputation as a scholar grew, so did the honours he received: he was elected a member of the British Academy in 1957, knighted the same year (in response to my blunt question 'Why did you accept it?', he replied, 'To please my mother.'). He was President of the Academy from 1974 to 1978. It was as President that he was invited to Japan by the Japan Foundation in April 1977. He founded Wolfson College with a donation from the businessman Sir Isaac Wolfson¹⁸ and became its first president in 1966. He also joined the board of directors of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 'tolerantly suppressing his dislike of Wagner but not his excessive enthusiasm for early rather than late Verdi'.¹⁹

¹⁸ And one from the Ford Foundation.

¹⁹ Crick 167.

As for myself, when I first came to Oxford in 1962, I attended only one lecture, on ‘The Birth of Romanticism’. Every word he uttered was extremely lucid, but the pace of delivery was so fast that I had to do my best to follow the plot. It was not until I returned to Japan that I translated ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’ for Chūōkōron-sha, and during my second visit to England in 1973–4, I was able to meet Berlin at All Souls as a colleague, so to speak. Although Berlin did not drink (he explained that it was not because of his religion, but because he was physiologically uncomfortable with it), it was a great intellectual luxury to listen to his table talk while sipping the college’s fine wine. Young Fellows including me used secretly to fight for a chair to be able to hear him. As the result of the relationship thus built, I was asked to accompany Sir Isaiah and Lady Berlin on their trip to Kyoto and Osaka and the Shima Peninsular in the west of Japan in 1977. Later, under the guidance of Professor Kan’ichi Fukuda, I supervised the publication in Japanese of *Selected Works of Berlin* by Iwanami Shōten and translated some of his works.

Berlin gave two lectures in Tokyo, one on utopian thought and the other on nationalism, and in Kyoto lectured on Romanticism. He did not like to be interrupted by translators, so in the case of utopian thought Professor Fukuda had the difficult task of summarising the content in about twenty minutes after Berlin’s talk. I was impressed by his brilliant intellectual bravery. At Dōshisha University in Kyoto, Berlin talked about the world of Romanticism, using Hofmannsthal as an example. When he stopped briefly, he said ‘Of course I’ve exaggerated’, and a deep sigh of relief issued from the audience. Then he continued, ‘Exaggeration is necessary to pierce through the crust created by the normal way of looking at things.’²⁰ Ripples of laughter spread in the hall. The audience, who had been drawn into the world of Romanticism by Berlin’s unhurried talk, and had flinched before

²⁰ Cf. Berlin’s contribution to *Conversations with Henry Brandon* (London, 1966: Andre Deutsch), 22: ‘if they hadn’t exaggerated I don’t think they would have broken through the crust of complacent acceptance of existing conventions’.

the excessively deep gulf between that movement and the real world, seemed to come back to itself with a break and the word ‘exaggeration’. For me, this was the first and only time in my life that I have ever seen an audience so deeply absorbed by a philosophical talk. I am sure that those who attended these lectures felt the depth of his philosophy more than just seeing him and hearing his voice.

It is hard to write down all the memories I have of our time together on this trip. In retrospect, all of his obiter dicta came from his depth of insight and his [31] unforced (and, if I may say so without being misunderstood, childlike) sensitivity. When I visited him and his wife at their hotel on the day they arrived in Tokyo, the first thing he said to me, even before a greeting, perhaps inspired by his air travel, was that ‘There was no thought that recognised the merits of the enemy before the eighteenth century.’ I replied that there had been a genre of military tales in Japan since the eleventh century in which enemies were often praised by saying, ‘He is my enemy, but he fights well.’ Needless to say, Berlin’s idea is an example of pluralism.

This was when he visited the Ise Shrine, dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu, a mythological figure believed to be the foundress of Japan. As it was a visit by the President of the British Academy, we were allowed to ‘worship’ deep inside the Inner Shrine on the condition that we would observe the traditional rituals. Berlin uttered the frightening words, ‘I will worship any god except the Christian God’,²¹ and he and his wife imitated me by performing two bows, two hand-claps, and one bow. When Berlin spotted a group of people without ties and with their shirt collars spread wide, watching us, he said, ‘That’s the uniform of the Israeli Labor Party members’, and walked up to them and spoke to them. I couldn’t understand a word of what they were saying in Hebrew, but the Israeli tourist ladies seemed to be trying to find out why

²¹ Perhaps because of the anti-Semitism of Christians involved in the Holocaust.

the foreigners had proceeded so far into the shrine. ‘They think I’m mad,’ was Berlin’s explanation to me.

Berlin was not familiar with the Asian world (he had briefly visited India and Iran), and his conversation with Professor Kōjirō Yoshikawa, a leading scholar of Chinese civilisation at Kyoto University, was not very lively. Instead, Berlin presented his ‘pearl oyster theory’, which he came up with when he saw pearl oysters growing in Shima near Ise. He observed that when foreign substances are inserted into pearl oysters to encourage them to produce good pearls, only one in a thousand oysters produces good pearls; so what would happen if other oysters decided to quit the competition? Perhaps he was thinking of the competitive society of Japan. At the same table, the topic of Mrs. Thatcher, who had been elected leader of the Conservative Party two years earlier, came up, and Berlin said, ‘She will ignore everything except her own beliefs, and she will not become prime minister’ – a prediction that was clearly false.

I could not keep up with Berlin’s comparison of the rhythms of Gregorian chant with those of the Noh hayashi that we watched in Kyoto, or the comparison of Italian opera with the Ningyō Jōruri Japanese puppet theatre that we saw in Osaka . On the topic of music: after we had returned to Tokyo, Professor Masao Maruyama invited Berlin to a Yasukibushi²² show at Mokubakan Theatre in Asakusa. A group of young girls danced and sang in the role of peasants’ daughters planting rice seedlings in a paddy field, while a male comedian played a village fool chasing loaches (a fish like an eel, though much smaller) with a bamboo scoop. Professor Maruyama told me later that he had intended to give Berlin a glimpse of popular culture, but in the interval Berlin started talking about Herder. The two of them had a deep knowledge of and passion for music, and if they had known of each other’s common interest, a wonderful theoretical discussion of music would have occurred between them. It is a real pity that this didn’t happen. On the occasion of Berlin’s death, the British political scientist Bernard

²² Folk song of Yasugi, Shimane prefecture.

Crick wrote a very interesting article, in which he said, ‘He is called a historian of ideas, but he showed little interest in either the prehistory of the ideas he discussed [or] the sociology of knowledge’;²³ in this respect he was quite different from Masao Maruyama.

When I heard of Isaiah Berlin’s death on 5 November 1997, at the age of eighty-eight, I sent a letter of condolence to his widow saying, ‘Your husband’s death is a personal loss to me and my wife, as well as to Sir Isaiah’s many friends in Japan.’ Shortly afterwards, I received a reply from Lady Berlin, who wrote that ‘I won’t forget the happy days we spent together in Japan.’ In February 2003, when I met Aline on my third visit to Oxford, her first memory of Japan was of the Ise Shrine.

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²³ Crick 170.