

Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Humanism

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In this dissertation I trace Isaiah Berlin's efforts to find a "less internally contradictory" and "less pervertible" concept of liberty. I argue that Berlin's political philosophy is grounded in a resolve to treat persons as individuals and as capable of choice, a position I call liberal humanism. These two commitments, liberalism and humanism, are ontological: liberalism posits that choice is both desirable and possible for human beings; humanism affirms that the individual person is the fundamental unit of politics, or the entity to which one might ascribe choice, agency, and freedom, and that attempts to divide individuals into sub-personal entities or to aggregate them into super-personal ones are dangerous paths towards dehumanization. Each of the four chapters of this dissertation traces a transformation of the choosing self that leads to equivocation and contradiction, producing situations in which persons are metaphorically "free" while literally unfree. Ultimately, I portray Berlin as a deeply anti-metaphysical thinker, a skeptical anti-idealist who, in the spirit of his hero, the Russian writer Alexander Herzen, sought to avoid the sacrifice of human beings on the altars of abstraction.

First (Choice and not Renunciation), I argue that Berlin treated liberty as a conceptual family, a loose cluster of related meanings involving the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice. Berlin contrasts choice with renunciation, the erroneous equation of freedom with the relinquishment of desire. Renunciation is a defensive strategy that promises an inner or metaphorical "freedom" despite captivity or oppression; in truth it is a form of sour grapes that ends in self-annihilation.

Second (Agency and not Inevitability), freedom must be possible if choice is to matter. In “Historical Inevitability,” Berlin denounces historians who reify “impersonal forces” — nations, classes, cultures, etc. — and cast these abstractions, and not persons, as the agents of history. If freedom exists, on the other hand, then history can have no direction, no purpose, no end; progress is never guaranteed but is the precarious fruit of tireless work by human hands. Berlin offers, I argue, a liberal philosophy of history that re-centers persons as agents and reaffirms the importance of responsibility as an ethical ideal.

Third (Subjects and not Objects), Berlin reveals how technocratic paternalism involves the ontological transformation of persons. By dividing the self into sub-components and claiming to act in the interest of a person’s inner or “true” self, paternalists prioritize a hypothetical self over the actual self; overly reductive social science dehumanizes, treating humans not as conscious subjects but as inert objects to be “nudged” or manipulated. As a result, in technocracy, all genuine political problems collapse into technical problems about finding means to achieve assumed ends.

Fourth (The Individual and not the Collective), individuals are not to be subsumed into super-personal entities. This holism, most conspicuous in nationalism but also present in democratic and republican theory, facilitates the violation of persons in the name of collective abstractions. Liberalism, rightly understood, is not about a collective *totum* or “The People” but a *compositum* made up of many individuals. I turn to Berlin’s oft-overlooked critique of negative liberty, that “liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs,” and principles from the preceding chapters to develop a liberal humanist theory of pluralism and multiculturalism. Achieving the equal liberty of persons will necessarily require laws that constrain dominating groups (wolves) to ensure liberty for individuals (lambs).

Dedication

In memory of my mother, Sandra “Sandy” J. Spisiak (1958-2007), a woman who, when faced with a cancer diagnosis, had the courage and strength to continue a doctorate.

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Acknowledgements

τὰ τῶν φίλων κοινὰ

Amicorum communia omnia

Friends have all things in common

This maxim, dating back to antiquity, is often attributed to Pythagoras. It appears in Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Cicero, Terence, Menander; it is echoed in the New Testament; it re-emerges during the Renaissance with Thomas More and the “Prince of the Humanists,” Erasmus, who set it as the first entry in his *Adagia* or collection of Greek and Latin sayings. The adage is usually understood as promoting the sharing of goods or the communal ownership of property. Most of the writers listed above used it in this sense. On this point, however, even the princely Erasmus was not imaginative enough, for such an interpretation tells only half of the story.

It may be the case that friends, because they are friends, share with one another. However, a second interpretation is possible, one that reverses the direction of causation: those who share a “common” become, and remain, friends. Moreover, the “common” or the “things” shared are not just physical objects but values, goals, ideas, purposes, a past and a future, a vision of the good life, a life lived together “in common.” On this second interpretation, friends are friends precisely because they both participate in a third thing, something mutual held “in common” between them.

I am grateful to have many friends in this second sense, people who have supported me throughout my life and while writing this dissertation.

I am grateful to professors Michael Gillespie, Jack Knight, Jed Atkins, and Geneviève Rousselière for serving on my dissertation committee; I continue to benefit from the example they set, their scholarship, their suggestions. I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Michael Gillespie, for his patience throughout the dissertation process.

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Finally, I wish to express my loving gratitude to my family, and most especially to my parents, Dan and Beth Spisiak, for their unfailing support over many years.

Introduction: The Altar of Abstraction

... l'on immole à l'être abstrait les êtres réels; l'on offre au peuple en masse l'holocauste du peuple en détail.

... real beings are sacrificed to an abstraction; individual people are offered up in a holocaust to people as a collectivity.

— Benjamin Constant, *De l'esprit de conquête*¹

There could hardly be a more fitting encapsulation of one of the central principles of Isaiah Berlin's political philosophy than this line from Benjamin Constant, which Berlin chose as an epigraph for the introduction to the 1969 collection *Four Essays on Liberty*.² While the two men belonged to distinct cultures and centuries, both lived through revolution and war, witnessing firsthand the terrible power of ideas in the hands of those who would stop at nothing in the ruthless pursuit of an ideal. In Constant's time, the French Revolution, which began with the loftiest notions of Enlightenment reason and the rights of man, culminated in terror and imperial despotism; similarly, Berlin witnessed how political ideologies that promised sublimation into a *volke*, the end of class struggle, or a future of universal brotherhood instead led to war and destruction, gulags and concentration camps, horror and death. These revolutions, these "great ideological storms that have altered the lives of virtually all mankind," did not spring out of nowhere but "began with ideas in people's heads."³ Ideas matter, Berlin insisted, for "the philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilization."⁴

¹ Part 1, Chapter 13, "De l'uniformité" in Benjamin Constant, *Écrits Politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet, Collection Folio Essais; 307 (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 169.

² Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

³ Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 1.

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 167.

The human mind can create and manipulate abstract ideas, and this ability is immensely useful because it facilitates the comprehension of complex phenomena and engagement with the world. Language and writing depend upon mutually intelligible symbols that refer to objects and classes of objects, and science, the great achievement of the modern age, would not be possible without abstraction, especially in the form of mathematics. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates calls this faculty for abstraction *dialectic*, a process that involves the combining and separating of abstract entities or forms. The dialectician is adept at *synopsis* in the etymological sense of “seeing together” (σύν “together, whole” and ὄψις “sight, vision”), capable of bringing “into a single form things which have been previously scattered in all directions” while at the same time having a keen eye that can “cut up a composition, form by form according to its natural joints.”⁵ The human mind is, in essence, a generator and manipulator of abstract forms, and this process of conceptual manipulation, *dialectic*, requires acute perception of identity and difference, of how the one can be many and the many can be one.

Yet this capacity for abstraction can go awry. Socrates describes *dialectic* in the *Phaedrus* not for its own sake but in a political context as it relates to rhetoric and persuasion. He argues that those who lack dialectical skill — those without a keen eye for conceptual similarities and differences — are easily led astray by language, which necessarily deals in abstraction. This danger is heightened in cases where the definitions of words are imprecise or disputed: words such as “iron” or “silver” admit of a greater consensus and are therefore less likely to lead to equivocation, ambiguity, or deception than contested words such as

⁵ *Phaedrus* 265d-266c, 270c. Translations are from *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully, Focus Philosophical Library (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003).

“just” or “good.”⁶ Other words and their associated forms, such as Chimeras, Centaurs, Gorgons, or other “imagined oddities,” exist only as constructions of the human mind, corresponding to nothing in the physical world.⁷

It is by exploiting the apparent similarities or dissimilarities of things and the inescapable imprecision of language that a rhetorician may lead — or mislead — an audience. Sophistry often proceeds by equivocations, and a rhetorician can argue two or more sides of a case by taking multiple meanings of a disputed word (in the case of the *Phaedrus*, “love”) and abusing each accordingly.⁸ But this rhetorical slipperiness can have an unintended side-effect: the rhetorician who is not sufficiently skilled in *dialectic* is liable to lose sight of his own slights of hand and succumb to his own duplicity. Ultimately, Socrates argues that if rhetoric is to be an art it must be practiced by those skilled in *dialectic*: “if one intends to deceive someone else and not be deceived himself, he must discern accurately the similarities and dissimilarities of things.”⁹ Rhetoric without *dialectic* is a recipe not only for deception but also for self-deception.

It is this latent rhetorical and political danger associated with conceptual abstraction, depicted over two millennia ago by Plato, that Berlin wished to highlight in the epigraph for *Four Essays on Liberty*. It is by treating impersonal entities as agents and ends, rather than human beings, that “real beings are sacrificed to an abstraction,” and it is through a denial of multiplicity and heterogeneity in favor of an overly reductive unity that “individual people

⁶ *Phaedrus* 263a.

⁷ *Phaedrus* 230d-e. Plato subtly suggests throughout the dialogue that the gods are forms of this sort as well, the creations of poets and philosophers such as Plato himself, e.g., through this pun on his own name at 246d: “Although we can neither see nor conceive of a god sufficiently, we fashion (*plattomen*) him nonetheless as an immortal creature of some sort with a body and a soul, the two joined together for eternity.”

⁸ This is, of course, the very drama that occurs in the speeches of the first half of the *Phaedrus*. 261d, 265e-266b.

⁹ *Phaedrus* 262a.

are offered up in a holocaust to people as a collectivity.” The two halves of the epigraph each trace a distinct ontological error. The first is existential, involving an erroneous notion of what does or does not exist: it is a mistake to sacrifice a “real being” or entity that has objective existence (such as a person) in the name of an “abstraction,” an entity with only mind-dependent or subjective existence (such as a Chimera). The second half of the epigraph depicts an error about composition, about the “parts” and “whole” of the fundamental entities involved: it is through an oversimplifying holism that the parts or individuals are wantonly offered up in the name of the abstract whole or collectivity.

Like Constant and the Platonic Socrates, Berlin advised his readers to be skeptical about general ideas, for generality often breeds a nebulousness that is ripe for rhetorical abuse.¹⁰ The epigraph is drawn from a chapter, “On Uniformity,” in which Constant highlights both errors, about existence and composition, in the passage immediately preceding the lines already quoted:

We are always hearing about the great empire, of the whole nation, abstract notions that have no reality. The great empire is nothing independently of its provinces. The whole nation is nothing separated from the parts that compose it. It is in defending the rights of these parts that one defends the rights of the whole nation; since the nation itself is divided into each of those parts.¹¹

Constant is blunt on this point: common political concepts, such as the nation or the empire, are in fact “abstract notions that have no reality,” the modern equivalents of Chimeras or Gorgons. To this list of large but vacuous concepts, one might add others: The People, or

¹⁰ Plato is generally considered an advocate of metaphysical realism, the position that the forms or other abstract objects have objective or mind-independent existence. However, given that the dialogues (e.g., *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*) also include criticism of the theory of forms, this common portrait is overly simplistic.

¹¹ Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, trans. Biancamaria Fontana, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77.

The Greater Good, or The General Will, or Progress, or Utility, or The Happiness of Future Generations, or The Coming Utopia, or Tradition, or History, or other monstrously large ideas of this sort, the kind invoked by those who, as Berlin quipped, “like Carlyle, feel that abstract nouns deserve capital letters.”¹² Vast but amorphous ideas such as these are common stock in political theory, and they appear so immense that it becomes tempting to sacrifice individuals in their name. Yet these same ideas turn out to be, upon closer inspection, mere shadows and hollow idols.

Two Concepts of Anti-Idealism

It is this anti-idealism, I will argue, that gives Berlin’s liberalism its distinct character. However, the word “idealism” is among the imprecise, closer to “love” than to “iron”. Of its many meanings, there are two primary ones that, in dialectical fashion, ought to be disentangled.

An idealist in the first or ethical sense is someone who holds fast to an ideal no matter the consequence. Berlin was born in 1909 in Riga, then a part of the Russian Empire. As a boy of seven in Petrograd in 1917, Berlin witnessed two revolutions, the social democratic February Revolution and the Bolshevik October Revolution. During the former, Isaiah and his governess, out on a walk, saw a policeman who was loyal to the old tsarist regime being dragged away by a mob in the street, likely to his death.¹³ The Berlin family fled Bolshevism and anti-Semitism by emigrating to England in 1921, but this early encounter with revolution and political violence would leave a lasting impression on Isaiah: his earliest

¹² Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 100.

¹³ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 24.

surviving written work, composed when he was twelve years of age, is a revenge story surrounding Commissar Uritsky, a ruthless officer who viewed all persons as either pawns to obey his commands or obstacles in need of removal, a murderer whose personal motto was that mantra of utopians everywhere: “The Purpose Justifies the Ways.”¹⁴

Throughout his life Berlin would stridently reject this starry-eyed consequentialism of political visionaries and revolutionaries. In addition to Uritsky’s motto, there is second adage that amounts to a variation on the same theme: “to make an omelette a few eggs must be broken.” If the ends appear good enough, if the “omelette” or utopia will be as magnificent as envisioned, if the purpose indeed justifies the ways, then, as the logic goes, “there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken.”¹⁵ This second adage, invoked by the Stalinist regime, is the pinnacle of euphemism. The “eggs” to be broken are in fact persons, and this line of reasoning leads to slaughter: “hundreds of thousands may have to perish to make millions happy for all time.”¹⁶

Berlin’s distaste for rough or “omelette” consequentialism and the atrocities that it permits remained a constant theme in his life, reappearing in his mature works such as “The End of the Ideal of the Perfect Society” (1975), “The Decline of Utopian Ideals in the West” (1978) and “The Pursuit of the Ideal” (1988).¹⁷ Berlin admonishes his readers to temper their wish for uniformity, for perfection, for finality in politics, for such a desire is “a recipe for

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose Justifies the Ways,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 331–35.

¹⁵ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 13.

¹⁶ Berlin, 13. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, “The Lessons of History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 276.

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “The End of the Ideal of the Perfect Society,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 390–419; Isaiah Berlin, “The Decline of Utopian Ideals in the West,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, by Isaiah Berlin, Second Edition (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 21–50; Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal.”

bloodshed, no better if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart.”¹⁸ If the history of revolutions has a lesson to teach, it is that idealists “will, however benevolent their desires, however pure their hearts, however noble and disinterested their ideals, always end by repressing and destroying human beings in their march towards the Promised Land.”¹⁹ This first type of anti-idealism, *anti-idealism as anti-utopianism*, is anti-consequentialist; it involves rejecting arguments about ultimate ends and their supposed ability to justify any means.

Berlin’s anti-idealism, however, goes beyond this rejection of “omelette” consequentialism. Ideals rest upon ideas. This second meaning of anti-idealism, *anti-idealism as anti-conceptualism*, involves doubt about ideas or the mind’s representations. If an anti-idealist of the first or *anti-utopian* variety rejects consequentialist ethical reasoning, one of the second or *anti-conceptual* variety would question whether the entities described existed at all (existence), or were as simple as portrayed (composition), or that there was mutual agreement about the meaning of the words and concepts at hand (understanding), or that it is appropriate to speak of will, rights, freedom, choice, or sacrifice in this domain (category error). The former thinks the “omelette” will not be worth the cost for moral reasons; the latter considers the goal utopian in the second etymological sense of being a no-place, incoherent or non-existent, a phantom.²⁰ If the first kind of anti-idealism is an *ethical* skepticism, this second type is a *metaphysical* skepticism.

¹⁸ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 15.

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Philosophy and Government Repression,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 93.

²⁰ Berlin, “The Lessons of History,” 276.

As a self-styled “historian of ideas,” Berlin attended to the ways that ideas were created, adopted, altered, and discarded. Ideas are historical phenomena; they are not static but change over time, often in ways that their originators could not foresee let alone intend. For example, Berlin argued that the ideas of Kant, the paragon of cosmopolitan universalism and liberal rationalism, the steadfast critic of inequality and paternalism, end up leading, with just a few minor transformations, to nationalism.²¹ The Kantian values of independence and autonomy can be applied in an un-Kantian way to social wholes rather than individuals; instead of grounding choice in reason one might ground it in an assertive will; the notion of ultimate ends and duty regardless of consequence can, if not rooted in rationality and universality, lead towards sacrifices for ends that Kant himself would have found abhorrent. Berlin’s goal in tracing the Kantian roots of nationalism is not to lay blame at the feet of Kant but to recognize the ways that ideas are dynamic and evolving entities: “Ideas do, at times, develop lives and powers of their own.”²²

Berlin’s style of intellectual history and focus on the lives and powers of ideas made him especially attentive to the ways that transformations in the fundamental concepts and categories of politics could lead to political extremism and the destruction it brings in its wake. One can oppress, exploit, or violate persons, either intentionally or unintentionally, by altering the meaning of words such as “human,” or “freedom,” or “justice.” Berlin’s hero, the Russian radical Alexander Herzen, saw that the modern age brought new forms of human sacrifice, ones that involved the offering up of “living human beings on the altars of

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 294–315.

²² Berlin, 297. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3.

abstractions,” and “holocausts for the sake of distant goals.”²³ Berlin, like Herzen, was an anti-idealist in this second sense, cautioning against a naïve credulity or misplaced faith in something that is nothing but a construction of the human mind.

Reality will often defy the manacles of categorization that the mind attempts to foist upon it. When these conflicts occur, it is the mind and its concepts that must yield, for “to force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity.”²⁴ Like Kant, Berlin thought that categories were indispensable tools for the comprehension of the world; unlike Kant, Berlin recognized that categories are not “identical for all sentient beings, permanent and unalterable” but entities that are created, transformed, or cast aside depending on their usefulness.²⁵ Ideas can be challenged, reconsidered, remade. Indeed, Berlin thought that this was the task of philosophy.

The Philosopher’s Task

Berlin thought that the philosopher’s task was the creation, transformation, and destruction of concepts. In “Philosophy and Government Repression” (1954), Berlin describes this task in terms strongly reminiscent of Socratic *dialectic*:

²³ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 13–14.

²⁴ Berlin, 16.

²⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 10. For other passages where Berlin emphasizes the alterable nature of categories against the backdrop of a non-fixed but mutually intelligible notion of what it means to be human, see Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 144n1; Berlin, *Liberty*, 25. It is likely that Berlin’s pragmatic view of the changeability of categories was derived from C. I. Lewis; Berlin recalls studying and teaching *Mind and the World Order* in the 1930s: “I bought it, read it, and thought that its pragmatist transformation of Kantian categories was original and fruitful.” Isaiah Berlin, “J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” in *Personal Impressions*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Third edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 164. Cf. Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought*, First edition, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8–9.

Philosophy is an attempt ... to find ways of thinking and talking which, by revealing similarities hitherto unnoticed, and differences hitherto unremarked (sometimes by drawing new analogies with hitherto unthought-of models, or pointing with new emphasis at ignored or underestimated differences between the models hitherto followed and the objects alleged to be like them), cause a transformation of outlook sufficient to alter radically attitudes and ways of thought and speech, and in this way solve or dissolve problems, redistribute subjects, reformulate and reclassify relationships between objects, and transform our vision of the world.²⁶

The greatest thinkers engage in ontological recategorization: they demonstrate an extraordinary aptitude for “the dissolution of concepts which have traditionally travelled tied in bundles.”²⁷ Seeing similarities and differences where others cannot, they either create a “new synthesis, a new vision of the relationship of the entities concerned” or “upset the previously existing ‘synthesis’ and force upon the attention of other human beings a new and disturbing vision which ... causes people to be troubled and restless where previously they were blind or uninterested.”²⁸ Berlin, again using imagery evocative of Plato, suggests that the greatest philosophers view problems “from some radically new angle from which everything is seen in what is called a ‘different light,’ so that what seemed insoluble problems are seen to be merely dark shadows apparently cast by no longer real entities which, from the new vantage point, are no longer visible at all.”²⁹

²⁶ Berlin, “Philosophy and Government Repression,” 81. Cf. *Phaedrus* 265d-266a, 270c-d, 277b-c.

²⁷ Berlin, 89.

²⁸ Berlin, 73.

²⁹ Berlin, 87. Berlin’s use of the Platonic imagery of light and shadow is not incidental, for he explicitly mentions Plato when treating the same theme in *Freedom and Its Betrayal*: “People who do this tamper with the very categories, with the very framework, through which we see things. This kind of tampering can of course be very dangerous, and can cast both light and darkness upon humanity. I have in mind thinkers like Plato and Pascal, Kant and Dostoevsky, who in some special sense are regarded as ‘more profound’, ‘deeper’ thinkers than other men of genius, because they penetrate to a level where they affect people in a way which transforms their entire vision of life, so that they come out, as it were, almost converted, as if they had undergone a religion conversion.” *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 5.

This is why, for all the destructive potential of ideas, there is hope: for “if professors can truly wield this fatal power,” Berlin asks, “may it not be that only other professors, or, at least, other thinkers (and not governments or congressional committees), can alone disarm them?”³⁰ Berlin concludes “The Purpose of Philosophy” with the following summation:

The perennial task of philosophers is to examine whatever seems unsusceptible to the methods of the sciences or everyday observation, for example, categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting, and particularly ways in which they clash with one another, with a view to constructing other, less internally contradictory and (though this can never be fully attained) less pervertible metaphors, images, symbols and systems of categories.³¹

The task of *political* philosophy is to weigh and measure the “categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting” that drive politics, especially ideas about who or what are the fundamental parts and what their relations ought to be.

Berlin famously claimed that he abandoned philosophy in favor of the history of ideas, preferring “a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one’s life than when one had begun.”³² Despite this self-redescription, Berlin was faithful to philosophy and the spirit of Socratic *dialectic*, for his *oeuvre* is a masterclass in the combining and separating of ideas. His fame as a public lecturer came in no small part from his ability to draw upon and synthesize from disparate periods in history, to distill the spirit of a given thinker or age, and to put these commonalities on display in new or insightful ways. At the same time, he is known for splitting concepts, for pointing to distinctions and differences that others could

³⁰ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 167.

³¹ Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” 14. Cf. Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 14–16; Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 208.

³² *Author’s Preface* in Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), xxvii. Cf. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 130–31.

not see or did not fully grasp, for typologies and bifurcations: between positive and negative liberty, monism and pluralism, hedgehogs and foxes, the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment. Berlin's century was one in which political ideas were employed for terrible ends. Unsurprisingly, he too engaged in the philosopher's "perennial task" of constructing "less internally contradictory" and "less pervertible" metaphors, images, symbols and systems of categories.³³

This work requires both dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectically, a philosopher must have a keen conceptual eyesight in order to track how concepts might be combined and separated, how the one can be many and the many, one, how some words conceal equivocations or are, in the final analysis, nothing but empty signifiers. Rhetorically, a philosopher writes or speaks to clear up contradictions and confusions, deflate ideas that are hollow, refute those that are dangerous, and offer replacements that are superior, either logically or rhetorically. Ultimately, Berlin's approach to ideas is pragmatic: metaphysical quandaries may not be answerable within the bounds of human knowledge; they can, however, be examined for internal consistency and evaluated based on the kinds of behaviors that they inspire. Politics, Berlin resolutely asserted, remains "indissolubly intertwined with every other form of philosophical enquiry."³⁴

Most of all, Berlin engaged in this philosophical work with respect to the concept of liberty. He thought the fundamental question of political philosophy was that of obedience and coercion: "Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else? Why should I not live as I like? Must I obey? If I disobey, may I be coerced? By whom, and to what degree, and in the name

³³ Berlin, "The Purpose of Philosophy," 14.

³⁴ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 167.

of what, and for the sake of what?”³⁵ Berlin was an anti-idealist in both senses: while his anti-utopianism was grounded in a distaste for the brutality of “omelette” consequentialism, his anti-conceptualism led him to make a philosophical intervention through conceptual clarification (i.e., what is liberty?) and political ontology (i.e., what are the concepts and categories that make up political life?). It is for this reason that Berlin’s writings, already massively influential in political theory, offer yet unexhausted resources for those who wish to understand liberty and the political philosophy that bears its name, liberalism.

The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin

This dissertation is about the political philosophy of Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), who, since his death, has become a canonical figure in twentieth-century political thought. Berlin spent most of his life at Oxford University, where he began his academic life as an undergraduate and later became a fellow, professor, and, eventually, the founding president of Wolfson College. But Berlin was an unusual academic in that he felt more at home when speaking than when writing: his public acclaim came from a number of high-profile lectures, and when he did write, his preferred method of composition was dictation followed by editing.³⁶ Berlin dazzled audiences by combining the empirical acumen and breadth of a historian with the sharp analytical eye of the philosopher, all the while eschewing both labels and instead calling himself an historian of ideas.³⁷ As a public intellectual, Berlin’s academic career, far more than most, involved both dialectic and rhetoric.

³⁵ 168. Cf. Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 1.

³⁶ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 113.

³⁷ For an analysis of Berlin’s notion of the history of ideas, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Berlin on the Nature and Purpose of the History of Ideas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Steven B. Smith and Joshua L. Cherniss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Undoubtedly, Berlin's most famous work is "Two Concepts of Liberty," his 1958 inaugural lecture as Oxford's Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, which has become a modern classic in political theory for its distinction between positive and negative liberty. True to the spirit of dialectic, Berlin took one word, "liberty," and showed that it obscured an equivocation: there are, among many meanings, two predominant ones. Negative liberty is freedom from interference; it answers the question: "what is the area within which the subject ... is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?"³⁸ To have negative liberty is to not be coerced *by human beings*, for "mere incapacity to attain a goal is not a lack of political freedom."³⁹ Positive liberty, on the other hand, answers a different question entirely: "what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?"⁴⁰ While Berlin insisted that both concepts are genuine, he was critical of the ways that that positive liberty could be twisted to justify paternalism, nationalism, and imperialism.⁴¹

Beyond "Two Concepts," Berlin's other enduring contribution to contemporary political theory is his articulation and defense of value-pluralism. This is the notion that the goods in life are multiple and not always compatible with one another, and that the tensions that result from this multiplicity are often not easily resolved within a single individual, let alone in a society. In short: "values can clash," and "it does not follow that, if they do, some

³⁸ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 169.

³⁹ Berlin, 169.

⁴⁰ Berlin, 169.

⁴¹ Berlin also advanced a largely underacknowledged critique of negative liberty, one which I will examine in the final chapter of this dissertation.

must be true and others false.”⁴² Rigorous justice may not be compatible with compassionate mercy; perfect equality may not be compatible with absolute liberty; dedicating one’s life to art may preclude being a good parent. Life is filled with dilemmas, trilemmas, ethical predicaments with no simple answer. There is little reason to assume these quandaries will have a single solution, that a solution to one will be in harmony with that of another, or that all possible answers will fit neatly, puzzle-like, into a perfect whole.

In “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” Berlin recalls gleaning this insight about value-pluralism from reading Machiavelli, Vico, and Herder. These three thinkers, sitting at the intersection of cultures and epochs, developed a certain historical sense: they saw the diversity of ways of life and understood that “there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other.”⁴³ It is mutual intelligibility, Berlin maintained, that keeps pluralism from collapsing into relativism. Machiavelli saw the difference between Christian humility and a prideful Roman *virtù*; he could choose the latter for himself without offering an “overarching criterion whereby we are enabled to decide the right life for men.”⁴⁴

Berlin’s value-pluralism has its corollary: monism, in all its philosophical and political varieties, ought to be rejected. Since antiquity, rationalists have hoped or assumed that, in the end, all separate goods, such as truth, beauty, knowledge, or virtue, will be harmonious facets of a singular good — *the good*. Berlin teaches his readers to doubt this wish for harmony: “the

⁴² Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 10.

⁴³ Berlin, 9.

⁴⁴ Berlin, 7; Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 269–325.

notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me not merely unattainable — that is a truism — but conceptually incoherent.”⁴⁵ Affirming value-pluralism means relinquishing the yearning, implicit in much of Western philosophy from its inception, to use the mind in order to transform the universe from convoluted *chaos* into a harmonious *cosmos*.

Monism is not only conceptually incoherent but also dangerous, for it often contributes to feelings of infallibility.⁴⁶ In “Notes on Prejudice” Berlin writes:

Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups (or tribes or states or nations or churches) that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth: especially about how to live, what to be & do — & that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: & need restraining or suppressing. It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees *the* truth: & that others cannot be right if they disagree. This makes one certain that there is *one* goal & one only for one’s nation or church or the whole of humanity, & that it is worth any amount of suffering (particularly on the part of other people) if only the goal is attained ...

Berlin continues in the next paragraph:

... nothing is more destructive than a happy sense of one’s own — or one’s nation’s — infallibility which lets you destroy others with a quiet conscience because you are doing God’s (e.g. the Spanish Inquisition or the Ayatollas) or the superior race’s (e.g. Hitler) or History’s (e.g. Lenin–Stalin) work. The only cure is *understanding* how other societies — in space or time, live: and that it is *possible* to lead lives different from one’s own, & yet to be fully human, worthy of love, respect or at least *curiosity*.⁴⁷

A sense of infallibility, driven by the monistic belief that if one is correct all others must be wrong, is often a key ingredient, albeit a poisonous one, in “omelette” consequentialism. Its

⁴⁵ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 11.

⁴⁶ Here is yet another example of seeking ideas that are both coherent (“less internally contradictory”) and salutary (“less pervertible”). Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” 14.

⁴⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “Notes on Prejudice,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 345–46.

antidote is the self-skepticism and curiosity found in the liberalism and pluralism that Berlin championed.

In political theory Berlin is best known for his writings on positive and negative liberty and on pluralism and monism. But his body of scholarly work is much deeper. Berlin's works might be grouped into three categories based on style and purpose. First, Berlin wrote a number of pieces that treat a single historical figure. In these essays, such as those on Machiavelli, Vico, Herder, Tolstoy, and de Maistre, Berlin offers biographical, historical, and philosophical insights into times and places unfamiliar, attempting to bring to life and distill the worldview of his subject. These explorations are reminiscent of the spirit of inquiry that Berlin admired in Vico: "members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand (what Vico called *entrare*) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in space and time."⁴⁸ Second, Berlin wrote a number of essays animated by a single philosophical question. Is history a science?⁴⁹ What is the subject matter of philosophy?⁵⁰ Is there still such a subject as political theory?⁵¹ Does knowledge always liberate?⁵² What is it to have good judgment in politics?⁵³ Why should philosophers have a special claim to the right to express themselves?⁵⁴ Third, Berlin looked to his own century and social circles to write "personal impressions" of

⁴⁸ Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 9; Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 83.

⁴⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 17–58.

⁵⁰ Berlin, "The Purpose of Philosophy."

⁵¹ Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?"

⁵² Isaiah Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 252–79.

⁵³ Isaiah Berlin, "Political Judgement," in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 50–66.

⁵⁴ Berlin, "Philosophy and Government Repression."

contemporaries, including Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Anna Akhmatova, and Chaim Weizmann, among others.⁵⁵

While Berlin wrote numerous pieces for various outlets throughout his career, the scattered nature of their publication led to the popular misconception that he was primarily a speaker and not a writer. In 1971, Maurice Bowra wrote of Berlin: “Though like Our Lord and Socrates he does not publish much, he thinks and says a great deal and has had an enormous influence on our times.”⁵⁶ In actuality, by 1971 Berlin had published over one hundred works, mostly essays and other short contributions. However, this misconception is changing thanks to the tireless work of Berlin’s literary trustees and especially his longtime editor, Henry Hardy, who has continued to collect and issue volumes of Berlin’s writings and maintain a virtual library of his yet unpublished works.⁵⁷ This invaluable scholarship ensures that Berlin’s writings will be accessible to future generations of scholars and non-specialists alike.

A Hedgehog or a Fox?

While Berlin’s scholarly output was voluminous, he did not approach the history of ideas systematically. His lectures and essays treat such a wide range of thinkers and topics that one cannot readily designate him as a scholar devoted to the study of any single century or culture. Berlin wrote no *magnum opus*; he published only one monograph during his

⁵⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy, Third edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, ed., *Maurice Bowra: A Celebration* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 53.

⁵⁷ Henry Hardy, ed., *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library* (Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust), accessed April 28, 2022, <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/index.html>.

lifetime, a biography on Marx.⁵⁸ He left few explicit remarks on method.⁵⁹ If one had to apply the Berlinian typology to Berlin himself, one might say that he was not a monist hedgehog but a pluralist fox, not an architect of a vast, unified system but somebody who knew many things, who reveled in the complexity and heterogeneity of history, who was endlessly fascinated by people and the never-ending variety of their ideas and ways of life.⁶⁰ If the fundamental question of metaphysics, going back to the Greeks, was the primordial question of the one and the many, Berlin was clearly on the side of the many.⁶¹

Given Berlin's foxiness — as seen in the wide scope of his work, his resistance to grand systems and tidy answers, and his sympathy for pluralism — it is unsurprising that scholars have been hesitant to write of a “Berlinism.” Yet Berlin himself argued, following Bertrand Russell, that each of the great thinkers had an “inner citadel,” a central idea that is “comparatively simple, a fundamental perception which dominates his thought and has formed his view of the world.”⁶² Plato had a geometrical model of man and society; Aristotle, a biological one; Hobbes, a mechanical one: “every political doctrine embodies a

⁵⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*, ed. Henry Hardy, Fifth edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Though, as I have argued above, Berlin's description of “the task of philosophy” might offer insight into his methodology if applied to Berlin himself.

⁶⁰ Later in his life, Berlin was at pains to downplay the seriousness of this distinction between hedgehogs and foxes, insisting that it was “no more than a simile and was not intended as a serious typology.” “Reply to Robert Kocis,” *Political Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1983): 389.

⁶¹ Berlin's description of Tolstoy seems an apt self-description as well: “... he has not, do what he might, a vision of the whole; he is not, he is remote from being, a hedgehog; and what he sees is not the one, but always, with an ever-growing minuteness, in all its teeming individuality, with an obsessive, inescapable, incorruptible, all-penetrating lucidity which maddens him, the many.” Isaiah Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 491.

⁶² Isaiah Berlin, “The Birth of Greek Individualism,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 288; Isaiah Berlin, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 246; Isaiah Berlin, “Georges Sorel,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 376; Berlin, *Liberty*, xxx. Hardy traces the source of this statement to chapter 23, paragraph 2 of Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, 1946).

vision of man in terms of which alone it can be truly understood.”⁶³ All arguments, examples, and anticipated objections are, Berlin suggested, merely bastions and defenses for this inner citadel, this rather simple worldview or central animating principle. Such a hypothesis naturally raises questions, even self-reflexive ones. Do all thinkers have an inner citadel? Do foxes have one, or is this something reserved for hedgehogs? What, if anything, is Isaiah Berlin’s inner citadel, his philosophical anthropology, his central animating principle?

Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy have suggested that if one had to apply a single label to Berlin’s constellation of beliefs and attitudes, that label would be *humanism*.⁶⁴ Cherniss and Hardy proceed to specify the major elements of Berlin’s humanism: the importance of individual choice; the presumption of freedom of the will upon which political freedom depends; the dangers posed by positive liberty; liberalism as being chiefly concerned with the avoidance of cruelty and harm rather than the pursuit of any single good or goods; liberalism as involving limitations on state power so that individuals are guaranteed some private sphere for action in which their liberty is not infringed; liberalism as resistance to paternalism, scientism, and technocratic managerialism; and, overall, a compassion, curiosity, and understanding for humanity in all of its radical diversity — an attitude or outlook that one might justifiably call “humane.”

Yet Cherniss and Hardy find themselves in a bind, torn between the many-ness and the one-ness of Berlin. At one and the same time, they wish to maintain that Berlin was not a

⁶³ Isaiah Berlin, “The Thought of de Tocqueville,” *History* 50, no. 169 (1965): 205.

⁶⁴ Joshua L. Cherniss and Henry Hardy, “The Life and Opinions of Isaiah Berlin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, The Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23–24.

systematic thinker and that, nevertheless, the disparate strands of his thought cohere. They write of Berlin:

He was an advocate of complexity, nuance, nice distinctions, untidiness, unique individuality, which made him a natural opponent of all the usual ‘isms’. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that he offered no message, no vision of or interpretive framework for the world which might be taken up by others. Any receptive reader of his work will become aware of a number of linked attitudes which, taken together, characterize his outlook, and are related in a non-random fashion. He was a peerless exemplar of a recognizable approach to life, an identifiable way of being human.⁶⁵

It is here, I will argue, that these foremost interpreters of Berlin do not go far enough, for there are important questions that remain unanswered. Berlin’s work exhibits, in Cherniss and Hardy’s words, “linked attitudes” that are “related in a non-random fashion.” If these attitudes are linked, what links them? If they are related in a “non-random fashion,” on what non-random principle(s) might they be ordered? What is Berlin’s “message,” “vision,” “framework?” How, if at all, might one extend or apply these attitudes to other political and historical questions? Is there a Berlinian liberalism, i.e., one distinct from Lockean, Kantian, Millian, Rawlsian, or other varieties?

Cherniss and Hardy’s summation is admirable and an excellent starting place for understanding the major contours of Berlin’s political thought. Still, there is work that remains. Any attempt to seek the inner citadel or core of Berlin’s political thought runs the risk of turning the foxy Berlin into a hedgehog, and such an oversimplification would fail to do justice to the range and brilliance of his work. And yet the attempt to find a “Berlinism” seems indispensable if one is to show that Berlin is a political thinker in his own right and not merely a commentator on others, that his liberalism is distinct from other varieties, that

⁶⁵ Cherniss and Hardy, 23–24.

he was not just a twentieth-century or Cold War intellectual but a philosopher who has something valuable to offer to humanity in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Berlin's Liberal Humanism

I have titled this dissertation "Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Humanism" because I will argue that Berlin's political thought flows from two central commitments: *liberalism* and *humanism*. These commitments are, at bottom, ontological ones. Yet all political theory ultimately depends upon such suppositions, whether knowingly or unknowingly; as Berlin himself emphasized: "politics has remained indissolubly intertwined with every other form of philosophical enquiry."⁶⁶ Understanding Berlin's commitment to *liberalism* and *humanism* will reveal that his writings have a greater consistency to them than previously acknowledged. This will, I argue, bring to light a distinct strand of liberalism that is useful for addressing several of the quandaries and conceptual disputes faced by liberal democracies in the twenty-first century.

These two commitments, *liberalism* and *humanism*, are positions in social ontology. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being. It involves inquiry about the existence, properties, and relations of the entities, concepts, and categories that make up reality. Social ontology, specifically, has to do with the complex set of abstractions and entities that constitute our shared social world, such as groups, money, property, corporations, governments, marriages, languages, or laws. To say that two people are married, or that a dollar bill has value, or that the house down the street belongs to Taylor, is

⁶⁶ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 167.

to deal with the subject matter of social ontology; as John Searle has argued, these are objective facts about the world, but “only facts by human agreement.”⁶⁷

Berlin’s inquiries about freedom brought him into the domain of social ontology, for freedom requires an understanding of who or what, rightly speaking, can be said to be free. For example, one might inquire ontologically about social groups: to what extent do groups exist? How, if at all, does a group differ from the amalgam of its constituent members? Can groups have attributes or properties? To what extent can groups have a collective will or exhibit collective intentionality? How, if at all, can groups be said to act? If they can act, can they be held responsible for those actions, and if so, how? How, if at all, can groups be free? Ontological reasoning involves inquiry about the existence, properties, relations, and agency (or lack thereof) of a given entity.

I will argue that Berlin answered ontological questions such as these in a consistent manner: persons exist, and while groups and other categories might be useful abstractions, we should never let ourselves manipulate or violate persons in their name. Berlin was not alone in this skepticism about abstract entities, for he was but one in a long line of critics of metaphysical realism. One might call this position, employing terms used by John Stuart Mill, either nominalism, or the notion that “there is nothing general except names,” or conceptualism, “that generality is not an attribute solely of names, but also of thoughts.”⁶⁸ Berlin’s scholarship is a testament to the power of ideas and language, especially the ways

⁶⁷ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, ed. Alan Ryan and John Robson, vol. 9 (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 302. In his personal impression of J. L. Austin, Berlin would fondly recall a joint class that the two taught on C. I. Lewis’s *The Mind and the World Order*: “We spent the term on nominalism. It was the best class that I have ever attended, and seems to me to mark the true beginning of Austin’s career as an independent thinker.” Berlin, “J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” 166.

that abstractions can be wielded to dehumanize, oppress, manipulate, and coerce. Berlin's political theory rests upon a philosophical anthropology or ontology of persons: persons are free and ought to be, as much as it is consistent with the similar freedom for all others, politically free (*liberalism*), and the fundamental unit for politics is the individual person (*humanism*).

First, Berlin insists that persons are, or ought to be treated as, free, and that choice is an intrinsically valuable or even constitutive element of being human.⁶⁹ Berlin wrote to the American diplomat George Kennan in 1951:

The whole of the Kantian morality ... seems to lie in this: that every human being is assumed to possess the capacity to choose what to do, and what to be, however narrow the limits within which his choice may lie, however hemmed in by circumstances beyond his control; that all human love and respect rests upon the attribution of conscious motives in this sense; that all the categories, the concepts, in terms of which we think about and act towards one another — goodness, badness, integrity and lack of it, the attribution of dignity or honour to others which we must not insult or exploit, the entire cluster of ideas such as honesty, purity of motive, courage, sense of truth, sensibility, compassion, justice; and, on the other side, brutality, falseness, wickedness, ruthlessness, lack of scruple, corruption, lack of feelings, emptiness — all these notions in terms of which we think of others and ourselves, in terms of which conduct is assessed, purposes adopted — all this becomes meaningless unless we think of human beings as capable of pursuing ends for their own sakes by deliberate acts of choice — which alone makes nobility noble and sacrifices sacrifices.⁷⁰

Berlin insisted, echoing Kant, that there is a link between freedom as a metaphysical concept and as a moral or political one: most ethical thought presupposes “the capacity to choose,” “conscious motives,” and “deliberate acts of choice.” At bottom, Berlin maintained that “the exercise of free will is, as Kant taught, the basis of all morality.”⁷¹ Liberalism cannot rest

⁶⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 52.

⁷⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 337.

⁷¹ Berlin, “Reply to Robert Kocis,” 391.

upon wholly deterministic foundations. Moreover, liberalism is about more than just institutions such as individual rights, the rule of law and equality before that law, the consent of the governed; liberalism is grounded in an attitude or set of beliefs about liberty — what it is and is not — and what entities can be said to possess it. Liberalism therefore rests upon ontological or anthropological attitudes: it requires assuming that human freedom is both desirable and possible, and that we ought to treat ourselves and others as if we are free, i.e., not merely as passive *objects* but as conscious *subjects*.

Accordingly, Berlin's treatment of liberty was not just political but far more capacious. Humans can and do "barter" freedom, conceptually speaking, for other ends.⁷² Psychologically, persons might deny their own liberty or agency so as to evade responsibility: the concept of inevitability, Berlin warns, is an ever-attractive alibi.⁷³ Ethically, inevitability or the denial of responsibility will also be attractive to egalitarians, for in the absence of moral desert they will have a ready argument for a more equal distribution of resources.⁷⁴ Historically, the wish to find a scientific or *nomothetic* history (from *nomothētēs*, "lawgiver"), one subject to the interaction of hard-and-fast laws, leads to the minimization of human agency (dehumanizing or *objectifying* persons) as well as the reification of impersonal forces (anthropomorphizing or *subjectifying* concepts). For these same reasons, liberty as a concept is

⁷² Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 322.

⁷³ Berlin's essay "Historical Inevitability" was originally delivered as the inaugural Auguste Comte Trust Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics in 1953 with the title "History as an Alibi."

⁷⁴ John Rawls argues that a person's inborn talents, social position, and choices are not one's responsibility but "arbitrary from a moral point of view." John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Original Edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 72. In denying the possibility of moral desert, Rawls rhetorically barter away the possibility of liberty for the purpose of equality. However, to the extent that agency matters in politics, this exchange will have other effects: if one is not responsible, why care about morality? If one is not an agent, why act politically? Robert Nozick criticizes Rawls on these grounds in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 213–27. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, "Equality," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 106–11.

in tension with the entire modern project of science, and especially social science, in its most reductionistic forms.

In this dissertation I pay special attention to these pre- or extra-political strands because they are inextricably tied to liberty as a political concept. I will call this first commitment, the commitment to freedom — including but not only in its political aspects — Berlin's *liberalism*.

Second, Berlin was committed to the idea that individual persons are the proper subjects and ends of politics. Berlin was clear about this link between ontology (or anthropology) and liberty:

... conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation of the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes.⁷⁵

Berlin continually resisted abstraction in political theory, especially the kind found in accounts of human behavior that attempt to divide persons into sub-personal forces, amass them into super-personal forces, or otherwise de-center the individual person from agenthood.

On the sub-personal side, it is by dividing the self — into higher and lower self, rational and irrational self, reasoning and appetitive self, etc. — that paternalists justify their interventions, suppressing one part of the self so as to “liberate” another part, often taken to be the “true” or “real” person. The partition of the self has been a mainstay in ethical and political thought since antiquity, and it figures prominently in Plato, Freud, and other psychological approaches to politics. However, it is a view that “renders it easy for me to

⁷⁵ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 181.

conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest.”⁷⁶

Liberalism instead ought to involve regard for the choices of the *actual* person (or the “empirical person” as Berlin sometimes put it) and not some *hypothetical* person or abstraction constructed on the basis of what someone would choose if they were other than what they are — more rational, not driven by desire, not mired in ignorance.⁷⁷

On the super-personal side, it is helpful to return once again to Berlin’s epigraph from Constant: it is by reifying abstract entities such as nations, classes, races, religions, or cultures that “real beings are sacrificed to an abstraction.”⁷⁸ Scholars have rightly interpreted Berlin’s critique of super-personal positive liberty as a condemnation of nationalism. Still, this same critique has ramifications for democratic and republican theory as well. If one is skeptical about the possibility of a unitary collective subject, then one ends up with radically different notions of what matters in democracy. If there is no *totum*, no singular *demos* or “The People,” only a *compositum* of (plural) people, then there can be no *vox populi* or univocal voice of the people, only the disparate and at times cacophonous voices of many individuals; many forms of representation, which often implicitly involve abstraction and analogy, come into question. Berlin’s critique of super-personal entities is useful, I will argue, for combating atavistic and illiberal forms of democracy such as democratic populism and sortition, as well as addressing some of the issues raised by group-oriented political theories such as multiculturalism and pluralism.

Lastly, Berlin’s *humanism* led him to reject the various ways that abstraction leads to the denial of human agency. Berlin offers a forceful critique of the worldview of an overly

⁷⁶ Berlin, 179.

⁷⁷ Berlin, 194, 217n1.

⁷⁸ Constant, *Political Writings*, 77.

reductive social science on the grounds that it gradually leads us to dehumanize persons and anthropomorphize concepts. Berlin's humanism is anti-idealist in the second or *metaphysical* sense described above: he teaches skepticism about concepts, which are merely tools to aid in human communication and comprehension. A map should not be confused with the territory it describes; to conceive of the world as solely the interaction of these concepts is to populate the world with "impersonal forces" to which all humans are merely playthings, a new form of animism that is incompatible with human freedom.

I will call this second commitment — to individualism, or the notion that the individual human being is the agent and end of politics, and a corresponding resistance towards dividing persons into sub-personal forces or aggregating them into super-personal ones — Berlin's *humanism*.

A Few Caveats

In an effort to head off certain misunderstandings, it is worth noting at this point what I mean and do not mean by calling Berlin a liberal humanist. First, Berlin was not a *human essentialist*. Berlin thought there were commonalities and interests that extended beyond cultures and borders, but in general he did not seek to describe, once and for all, an essence of humanity or an unchanging human nature.⁷⁹ Nor was Berlin a humanist in the sense of promoting biological collectivism or *species-consciousness*, as do those who worry about immanent climate disaster and look towards a future in which a united humanity colonizes the universe to avoid human extinction. Nor do I intend the word humanism as a slur, as

⁷⁹ Henry Hardy offers a "sympathetic reconstruction" and an overview of the features of Berlin's largely implicit conception of human nature in "Not Angels or Lunatics: Berlin on Human Nature" in *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, Reprint with corrections (London: Tauris Parke, 2020), 169–82.

human supremacy, as do those who see in the word nothing but the domination of animals or the natural world.

However, I do intend to invoke the notion of *humanism as secularism*, of a world ordered, if at all, by human rather than divine power. Berlin was skeptical of what he saw as the modern quasi-divine substitutes, the “new animism” of overly reductive social science, with its “genii and djinns” of impersonal forces in history, and its “new priesthood” of economists and sociologists, psychologists and historians.⁸⁰ And Berlin not only emphasized human agency, or the idea that individual persons are the agents of politics; his political theory is also one in which humans are the *ends* of those actions, in the Kantian sense of having intrinsic value or dignity. Humanism in this sense involves humans as both the subjects and the ends of politics — persons acting to promote their own well-being and that of other people.

I have also qualified this humanism by calling Berlin a *liberal* humanist. I do so in an effort to connect Berlin’s humanist ontology with his continual insistence on the value of freedom. For Berlin, persons are, or ought to be considered, free; the defense of life, dignity, and individual choice for persons are the chief goods to be achieved through politics; and the political and moral philosophy known as liberalism is the one that best protects persons while avoiding dehumanization, cruelty, paternalism, and oppression. Berlin’s liberalism is a “liberalism of fear” in that he focuses more on avoiding evils rather than pursuing goods in

⁸⁰ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 158–59.

politics; in the liberal family tree, one might say that Berlin's closest relatives are Kant, Constant, Mill, and Shklar.⁸¹

But I have called Berlin a liberal humanist and not a humanist liberal because, in the final analysis, his respect for freedom is rooted in the dignity of the individual. Freedom and choice are phenomena that only exist in consciousness. Fundamentally, choice matters because it matters to persons, while persons matter *simpliciter*: "all that is ultimately valuable are the particular purposes of particular persons; and to trample on these is always a crime because there is, and can be, no principle or value higher than the ends of the individual."⁸² This will factor heavily into the final chapter of this dissertation, for there are thinkers, including William Galston, John Gray, and others, who wish to appropriate Berlin's value-pluralism but attribute freedom, agency, or choice to groups in ways that are inconsistent with Berlin's nominalist or individualist anthropology.⁸³

I am not the first scholar to call Berlin a liberal humanist. Cherniss defines Berlin's liberal humanism in a footnote in his introduction to *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*:

By 'liberal humanism' I mean an ethical outlook that assigns moral priority to the dignity and well-being of individual human beings, which associates human dignity with the capacity for choice and self-development, and defines well-being, at its most basic, in terms of freedom of thought and behavior (at least in so far as the behavior in question does not harm others), physical safety, and protection against pain, fear, and humiliation.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum, 1989.

⁸² Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (London, England: Penguin Books, 2013), 128.

⁸³ William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁸⁴ Joshua L. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas: From the Twentieth Century to the Romantic Age," in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), lxxvii.

Cherniss's definition of liberal humanism is so fitting as a description of Berlin's "inner citadel," I argue, that it deserves a more prominent position than a footnote. The portrait of Berlin's liberal humanism that I offer in this dissertation differs from Cherniss's less in terms of substance and more in terms of method and emphasis. Cherniss's work is historical or genealogical; his monograph *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* is "an exercise in intellectual biography," intended to trace how the pre-war developments in Berlin's thought led to the post-war works for which he is known.⁸⁵ Cherniss shows how Berlin responded to the problems of his time but not only those problems; he was more than a "Cold Warrior," for he offers not just a critique of Marxist and fascist totalitarianism but also a critique of managerialism, technocracy, and scientism, to say nothing of his substantive defense of pluralism. This dissertation, on the other hand, is conceptual and therefore less historical if not explicitly ahistorical; where Cherniss traces the origins and development of Berlin's thought in his early years, I focus on the ontological foundations of Berlin's conceptual analysis of liberty, and the implications of this conceptual analysis for contemporary issues in political theory.

I also must note the limitations of the scope of this project. In order to focus on the ontological foundations of Berlin's liberal humanism, I must pass by a number of other topics. First, this dissertation is not biographical, for my subject is not Berlin himself but his thoughts on liberty. I owe a great debt to (and am a bit envious of) those who had the good fortune of knowing not just Berlin the thinker but Berlin the man; in publishing their recollections, they bring a bit of Berlin's personal warmth and humanity to future

⁸⁵ Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, vii.

generations. Second, as noted above, this dissertation is not historical, for I explicitly treat Berlin's works in a non-chronological manner so as to highlight their logical connections and continuity. Finally, in focusing on Berlin's contributions to political theory, I will only obliquely touch upon other topics that were of great importance to him, such as the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, Russian thought, Zionism and Jewish identity.

For an overview of the structure of this dissertation and brief synopses of the content of its chapters, I direct the reader to the summary preceding this introduction. I will only add here that the chapters might be understood as two pairs. Chapters one and two, on the renunciation of desire and the internalization of necessity, respectively, treat two defective conceptions of liberty; these chapters are more conceptual and psychological in nature. Chapters three and four, on the division of the self into sub-personal entities and the aggregation of multiple selves into super-personal entities, respectively, are more explicitly political. The dissertation progresses from the formation and delineation of concepts to their application. I give a justification for the ordering of the chapters, which mirrors that of the sections of Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty," in the first chapter.

Berlin championed a liberalism centered around the freedom and dignity of the individual. It is a liberalism that avoids the tempests of idealism, that eschews speaking of the forest so as to keep sight of the trees, that sets its sights lower but is thereby more humane. In writing of Berlin's *liberal humanism*, I wish to echo and expand upon Cherniss and Hardy's list of the major themes present in Berlin's thought and their use of the term humanism. However, I intend to build upon their foundation by tracing how Berlin's ontological commitments led him towards his political conclusions, and how this humanist

ontology might set the stage for a more comprehensive “Berlinism” than has been heretofore defended. Tracing these connections will, I hope, bring to light the ways that Berlin cared about more than just political liberty and will reveal a thinker who has theoretical insights to offer for political theory in the twenty-first century and beyond.

1. Choice and not Renunciation: The Desirability and Possibility of Freedom

The central assumption of common thought and speech seems to me to be that freedom is the principal characteristic that distinguishes man from all that is non-human; that there are degrees of freedom, degrees constituted by the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice; the choice being regarded as not itself determined by antecedent conditions, at least not being wholly so determined.

— Isaiah Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free”¹

The sense of freedom in which I use this term entails not simply the absence of frustration (which may be obtained by killing desires), but the absence of obstacles to possible choices and activities — absence of obstructions on roads along which a man can decide to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends not on whether I wish to walk at all, or how far, but on how many doors are open, how open they are, upon their relative importance in my life, even though it may be impossible literally to measure this in any quantitative fashion.

— Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Introduction²

What is liberty? Socrates, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, argued that a good speech must begin with a definition.³ One must know what something *is* to assess its consequences. Failure to define terms often leads to equivocation as one unknowingly disagrees with others or, at one time and then another, with oneself. As Berlin put it: “philosophical problems arise because concepts and words and thoughts ... come into special sorts of collision” due to an “original contradiction in some early half-conscious formulation.”⁴ Yet on this point the wily Socrates

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 270.

² Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32. Quentin Skinner refers to this passage, rightly in my view, as Berlin’s “final and perhaps most considered definition” of liberty. Quentin Skinner, “A Third Concept of Liberty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 244.

³ *Phaedrus* 237b.

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Philosophy and Government Repression,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 76; Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 200.

only partly practiced what he preached; instead of giving a definition of his own, about the meaning of justice, courage, friendship, or knowledge, Socrates would solicit one from an interlocutor only to reveal, and some might say revel in, its inadequacy. At its heart, the Socratic method is a *via negativa*, and a number of dialogues end in *aporia*, with all the examined definitions shown to be unsatisfactory. Yet even if Socrates and his interlocutors do not learn what these concepts *are*, they at least gain some sense of *what they are not* as they are brought to see the limitations of conventional definitions. Each chapter in this dissertation tracks a rival definition of liberty, one of the ways that liberty can be twisted into the “apotheosis of authority” by transforming what counts as the choosing self.⁵ At the risk of beginning at the end and asserting what is to be proved, I will begin with a definition: for Berlin, liberty is the *absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice*.

Of course, the mere assertion of a definition is inadequate, for questions immediately arise. What is meant by choice? What constitutes an obstacle? Who (or what) is the implied agent of the definition, the chooser whose potential paths may be blocked? How, if at all, might certain conditions or pre-requisites of the use of liberty, such as wealth, power, status, or knowledge, differ from liberty itself? How can such a singular definition be squared with Berlin’s famous bifurcation of liberty into two concepts, negative and positive? What of the scholars who have argued for a different typology of liberty, especially those who have argued for a distinct republican theory of freedom? Why try to define liberty at all? Why not accept that that the word imprecisely covers a whole family of concepts? My goal in this

⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 39.

chapter is to address these questions in order to show why Berlin developed the bipartite schema of liberty that he did.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I argued that Berlin's methodology remained philosophical despite his professed change in field from philosophy to the history of ideas. Ideas are not static but evolve through time, and Berlin looked to history to understand how ideas were created and transformed to achieve certain political or social ends. The conceptual innovations that bring illumination to one generation often become obscure in the next; once-novel categorizations ossify into dogma and, in turn, are abandoned; philosophy proceeds through "systematic parricide."⁶ Though Berlin abandoned the analytic philosophy of his early years, he remained true to the perennial "task of philosophy," the examination of "concepts, categories, models, ways of thinking or acting, and particularly ways in which they clash with one another," so as to craft "less internally contradictory" and "less pervertible" ones.⁷ He continually returned to the topic of liberty because he saw, in history and in the political conflicts that occurred in his lifetime, how liberty could be perverted, through "specious arguments and sleights-of-hand," into its opposite, such that what began as a "doctrine of freedom" could be twisted into a "doctrine of authority."⁸ For Berlin, the conceptual history of liberty was, in large part, a story not of freedom but of its betrayal.

⁶ Berlin, "Philosophy and Government Repression," 78.

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "The Purpose of Philosophy," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14.

⁸ Berlin, *Liberty*, 32, 37.

Joshua Cherniss has magisterially written of Berlin's "road to liberty," tracing the development of Berlin's political thought.⁹ Cherniss's scholarship is especially innovative in its use of Berlin's 1952 Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College, material later published in 2006 as the collection *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*.¹⁰ The Flexner lectures contain, in germ, a number of ideas that would bloom into the central or animating themes in Berlin's most famous works of the 1950s and 1960s, especially his seminal 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty."¹¹ Cherniss gives an origin story, an account of Berlin's works before "Two Concepts;" this present chapter, by contrast, examines "Two Concepts" in retrospect, in light of Berlin's later clarifications and qualifications. Berlin died in 1997, almost forty years after the lecture that would cement his fame. His scholarly career did not end in 1958, and he continued to develop his ideas and respond to his critics. Accordingly, I will re-examine "Two Concepts of Liberty" in light of the two works quoted at the outset of this chapter, Berlin's 1963 Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, titled "From Hope and Fear Set Free," and his 1969 introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*.¹²

In recent years, scholars have argued that Berlin gave an account of "basic liberty of choice" that contains both positive and negative elements.¹³ However, as Cherniss notes, this

⁹ Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, First edition, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*.

¹¹ Joshua L. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas: From the Twentieth Century to the Romantic Age," in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹² Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free"; Berlin, *Liberty*, 3–54. Berlin originally wished to have "From Hope and Fear Set Free" included as a fifth essay in his 1969 collection of works on liberty, such that the published *Four Essays on Liberty* would have instead been five; Berlin's wish came to fruition posthumously with the 2002 edition of the collection, which was simply renamed *Liberty*. Henry Hardy recounts the editorial disagreements surrounding the volume in "The Editor's Tale," in *Liberty*, by Isaiah Berlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix–xxxiv.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, "Reply to Robert Kocis," *Political Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1983): 388–93; Joshua L. Cherniss, "Against 'Engineers of Human Souls': Paternalism, 'Managerialism' and the Development of Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 3 (2014): 565–88; Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 188–220;

explication “came too late, and was insufficiently developed and incorporated into his ‘canonical’ writings on liberty, to be noticed by many commentators.”¹⁴ Confounding the matter even further, Berlin in his 1969 introduction also wrote of a “fundamental” sense of political liberty as “freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others” and the “absence of bullying or domination.”¹⁵ One might say that Berlin, in keeping with his distrust of those who claimed to possess ultimate answers or final solutions, did not seem too troubled about not providing one authoritative definition. These later statements raise questions about how, if at all, these two singular definitions can be squared with Berlin’s two concepts. My purpose in this chapter is to shed light on these apparent contradictions and offer, in addition to a reconciliation, a guide for the perplexed.

In this chapter, I argue that Berlin treated liberty as a conceptual family, a loose cluster of related meanings centered around a core idea involving the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice. This definition links Berlin’s notion of “basic” liberty described above, with its emphasis on choice, with his insistence that the “fundamental” sense of freedom was the absence of the interfering influence of other people. Families, however, have multiple members. These distinct meanings of liberty are not all the same, for there are more literal meanings and more metaphorical ones, more central or prototypical ones and more peripheral ones. The notion that one can be metaphorically or “spiritually” free while imprisoned or enslaved is semantically parasitic on a more literal meaning of liberty that is

John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 52–54; George Crowder, “Scholarly Exchange: Why We Need Positive Liberty,” *The Review of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 271–78; Gina Gustavsson, “The Psychological Dangers of Positive Liberty: Reconstructing a Neglected Undercurrent in Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’” *The Review of Politics* 76, no. 2 (2014): 267–91; Gina Gustavsson, “Reply to Crowder,” *The Review of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 279–84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000078>.

¹⁴ Cherniss, “Against ‘Engineers of Human Souls,’” 581n72.

¹⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 48.

incompatible with such a condition. In this sense, the liberty family is both one and many, for it always involves some notion of choice and non-interference, while also admitting of variation between different meanings or family members.

In light of this “family resemblance” approach, I argue that Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” should not be understood as an attempt to define disjoint concepts of liberty but rather to illustrate the ways that the family members, while each intelligible as liberty, may clash. Berlin was especially concerned with, in Gina Gustavsson’s words, “coercion that parades as liberation.”¹⁶ Berlin’s positive liberty, specifically, is framed in terms of the agent of choice because he saw the ways that, historically, these family conflicts often arise through transformations in which the self is understood to be something other than the individual and empirical person. The sections of “Two Concepts” trace these transformations, and I have echoed this structure in the ordering of the chapters of this dissertation. Berlin’s now-famous bifurcation is not the only one possible, and he points out a number of features of liberty that might allow for other typologies. I argue that Berlin’s singular or “basic liberty” can be squared with his two concepts if one assumes, as Berlin did, that the fundamental agent of choice is the individual. Ultimately, Berlin’s political thought rests upon a philosophical anthropology that affirms the importance of choice between plural values and the dignity of the individual as the locus of that choice.

This chapter has two unequal parts that might be abbreviated using the terms *choice* and *renunciation*. The first part, constituting the bulk of the chapter, is an extended treatment of the definition presented above, that freedom is the absence of obstacles to the exercise of

¹⁶ Gustavsson, “The Psychological Dangers of Positive Liberty,” 267.

choice. I argue that debates about the philosophy of language, as it was conceived by Berlin's Oxford colleagues and within philosophy from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century, informed Berlin's implicit method in "Two Concepts:" dilemmas and "arguments where both sides are felt to be saying something true yet mutually incompatible" derive their "paradoxical quality from the perhaps inevitable — and not always undesirable — vagueness and ambiguity of words."¹⁷ I then discuss what Berlin calls "basic freedom" and the "fundamental" sense of freedom, and review Berlin's two concepts, positive and negative, in light of these two later and apparent singular definitions of liberty, ultimately arguing that a reconciliation is possible along the lines described above. Finally, I compare Berlin with some of his most prominent commentators and critics, especially Eric Nelson, Gerald MacCallum, and Philip Pettit, who have argued that Berlin misspecified either the number of concepts of liberty or their most salient characteristics. While these other theorists of freedom each point to features of liberty in illuminating ways, Berlin's account is still useful for describing the transformations of the self that result in the "monstrous impersonation" or perversion of liberty that occurs when one equates "what X would choose if he were something he is not, or at least not yet, with what X actually seeks and chooses."¹⁸

In the second part of the chapter, I trace Berlin's efforts to differentiate choice from two adjacent-yet-distinct concepts, two metaphorical understandings of liberty that conflict with Berlin's basic or fundamental version of liberty: renunciation of desire (or self-abnegation) and knowledge of necessity (or self-realization).¹⁹ In order to account for these

¹⁷ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 200.

¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180.

¹⁹ Berlin, 181–91.

two faulty paths to freedom described by Berlin, I propose a framework of choice-worthiness involving two criteria, desirability and possibility, for people choose things that they deem both desirable and possible. Self-abnegation operates by manipulating one's desires, and self-realization, by manipulating one's view of the possibility of a specific action or action in general. Berlin's account of liberty is more psychological than is generally recognized, for he teaches that these two strategies function as coping mechanisms for dealing with obstacles to liberty in its more fundamental or non-metaphorical sense.

Self-abnegation and self-realization are responses to conditions of unfreedom, for each involves the manipulation of one's own internal state rather than the world of external obstacles. In this chapter, I focus primarily on self-abnegation or the renunciation of desire, as I will treat self-realization or knowledge of necessity in the next chapter in the context of Berlin's writings on the philosophy of history. Ultimately, I argue that Berlin's aim in "Two Concepts of Liberty" is not to give an exhaustive definition of what liberty *is* so much as an account of *what it is not*; his distinction between positive and negative liberty is a lens through which to see and address the defects and failings of rival concepts of liberty, each of which he would assess in greater detail in other essays.

Before examining "Two Concepts," I wish to situate Berlin's political thought in the context of twentieth-century philosophy, especially the intellectual movement known as the linguistic turn.²⁰ While Berlin practiced intellectual history, his early exposure to "Oxford philosophy" left an imprint that is still visible in his later works. The method of categorical

²⁰ Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

analysis that Berlin employs in “Two Concepts,” I argue, is a middle way between two schools of analysis that rose to prominence in the philosophy departments of midcentury Britain, logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, and for Berlin, these were not merely academic theories but rather the philosophical positions championed by two of his Oxford colleagues and longtime friends.

“Between Ayer and Austin”

Around the turn of the century, philosophers began to reconsider the role played by language in philosophy. A number of thinkers, including Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, Rudolf Carnap, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, sought to create a new analytic philosophy, cast in the mold of mathematics or formal logic, that would bring rigor and precision to the field and allow them to re-conceptualize or dispel existing philosophical problems. Their hope was that, through an exacting attention to the functions and limitations of words and grammar, everything vague and inexact could be expelled from philosophy. This wish for exactitude was itself a reaction to the lofty but murky British Idealism and Hegelianism in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century. It was in the shadow of this burgeoning analytic tradition that Berlin and many of his Oxford classmates and colleagues, including J. L. Austin, A. J. Ayer, Stuart Hampshire, H. L. A. Hart, Gilbert Ryle, and P. F. Strawson, all philosophical luminaries in their own right, would come to be preoccupied with the logic and limitations of language.

Oxford in the 1930s and 1940s was a place obsessed with words. However, such a statement requires a qualification: this linguistic obsession was, at least in the 1930s, largely extracurricular. The epicenter of the analytic revolution was Cambridge and not Oxford, where, as Michael Ignatieff notes, Moore’s *Principia Ethica* was not yet on any syllabus in

1930.²¹ Berlin's introduction to analytic philosophy did not come from coursework but from the influence of his social circle. In 1937, Berlin, then a fellow at All Souls College, created an informal club with his friends. The seven members were Berlin, Ayer, Hampshire, Austin, A. D. Woozly, Donald MacKinnon, and Donald MacNabb; the historian R. G. Collingwood, older than the others but greatly admired by Berlin, was invited but never joined.²² Calling themselves the "brethren," the young men met weekly on Thursdays after dinner in Berlin's rooms to discuss books, including C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World Order* (1929) and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), and to debate about topics of interest to them, especially verification and the philosophy of perception.²³ At stake was the very meaning and methods of philosophy, what could be known and how it could be known.

The "brethren" were curious but pugnacious, especially Austin, who had the Socratic talent for poking "holes into the solutions of others" while not advancing one of his own.²⁴ Austin would not develop his ordinary language philosophy position until the 1940s; at the time of the "brethren" meetings he had "no settled philosophical position, no doctrine to impart."²⁵ Ayer, on the other hand, had published *Language, Truth, and Logic* in 1936 and championed the logical positivism of the Vienna circle. Austin played the role of critic so well that participants would later recall an episode where an exasperated Ayer shouted at Austin, accusing him of being a "greyhound who didn't want to run himself; just bite the other dogs."²⁶ Berlin would recall in his personal impression of Austin: "although they were

²¹ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 50.

²² Ignatieff, 85. For Berlin's admiration of Collingwood, see Ignatieff, 58; Isaiah Berlin and Steven Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes," *Salmagundi*, no. 120 (1998): 68.

²³ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 77–96.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy," in *Personal Impressions*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Third edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 168.

²⁵ Berlin, 158.

²⁶ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 85.

in a state of almost continuous collision — Ayer like an irresistible missile, Austin like an immovable obstacle — the result was not a stalemate, but the most interesting, free and lively discussions of philosophy that I have ever known.”²⁷ In these “brethren” meetings, Berlin found himself, in Ignatieff’s words, in the role of “philosophical go-between, mediating between the logical positivism of Ayer and the emerging skeptical language philosophy of Austin.”²⁸

This tagline, “between Ayer and Austin,” suits Berlin not only in the context of his early life and the “brethren,” for it sheds light on the method of conceptual analysis that he would later use to examine the multiple and conflicting meanings of liberty. There were, Berlin thought, inflationary and deflationary movements in philosophy, periods where the fundamental elements to be analyzed grow or shrink. In “The Concept of Scientific History,” Berlin notes that oftentimes one is “compelled to choose between the rival rewards of increased extension or intension — between the range of the theory and the richness of its content.”²⁹ I want to suggest that to be “between Ayer and Austin” means, in terms of the philosophy of language, to take a principled stance to avoid the two extremes of this spectrum.

At the heart of deflationary movements is a wish for truth, however narrow: “maybe what I am about to say is not very exciting, but at any rate it’ll be true.”³⁰ Berlin described G. E. Moore’s deflationary approach in a 1979 interview on Belgian radio:

²⁷ Berlin, “J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” 175.

²⁸ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 85.

²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 35.

³⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 293.

... gradually enormous constructions arise, which come to be called metaphysical, which become more and more inflated, more and more enters into them — magnificent structures, which sooner or later are so vague and so large and so complicated that someone, some child, arises and says: The emperor has no clothes. Somebody says he doesn't really understand what is being said, that if the truth is to be spoken it must be stated a little more plainly than this.³¹

Berlin considered Ayer's logical positivism, and analytic philosophy generally, to be deflationary, and he considered this deflation a "quite natural" reaction against "vast, unanalysable, huge metaphysical structures, which ultimately confuse and puzzle people."³² In the same interview, Berlin characterized Moore's call for a constrained and therefore more rigorous form of inquiry: "maybe these edifices, great philosophical buildings, are all right, but can't we just test a brick or two?"³³

Yet Berlin thought that this exacting shrinking of the units of analysis, this careful study not of buildings but of bricks, could go too far. In the same interview, Berlin remarked that deflationary thinkers, in their desire for clarity, end up "saying less and less interesting things about smaller and smaller areas of experience," and "one cannot live, so to speak, by these dry little pellets."³⁴ The pendulum then swings back toward inflation. Berlin saw nineteenth-century German philosophy, especially the idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, as an inflation of the "still comparatively careful, comparatively acute and accurate and highly responsible thought of Kant," and he similarly thought that twentieth-century French philosophy exemplified the inflationary wish to say something meaningful about the human experience even if came at the expense of precision.³⁵

³¹ Berlin, 291.

³² Berlin, 293.

³³ Berlin, 292.

³⁴ Berlin, 293.

³⁵ Berlin, 292.

This dichotomy of inflation and deflation helps to situate Berlin's work as he turned from analytic philosophy to the history of ideas. Berlin's writings of the 1930s and 1940s show the influence of analytic philosophy on his thinking even as he came to criticize its methods; as scholars have argued, this ambivalence is especially evident in works such as "Verification" (1938) and "Logical Translation" (1949).³⁶ Berlin considered the wish to create an artificial language for philosophy, one akin to mathematics, well-meaning but misguided:

To translate, reduce, deflate, is philosophically laudable so long as there is a real gain in clarity, simplicity, and the destruction of myths. But where it is obvious that types of proposition or sentence cannot be 'reduced' or 'translated' into one another without torturing the language until what was conveyed idiomatically before can no longer be conveyed ... such attempts should be exposed as stemming from a false theory of meaning, accompanied by its equally counterfeit metaphysical counterpart — a view of the universe as possessing an 'ultimate structure', as being constructed out of this or that collection or combination of bits and pieces of 'ultimate stuff' which the 'language' is constructed to reproduce.³⁷

This passage from "Logical Translation," repudiating the notion that there is an "ultimate structure" or "ultimate stuff" to which words correspond, shows that Berlin rejected metaphysical monism or essentialism in the context of the philosophy of language long before articulating his celebrated rejection of monism and defense of pluralism in values.

³⁶ "Verification," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 15–40; "Logical Translation," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013). For an account of Berlin's relationship to "Oxford philosophy" and its influence on the development of his liberal political theory, see Naomi Choi, "Berlin, Analytic Philosophy, and the Revival of Political Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, by Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 33–52; Jamie Reed, "From Logical Positivism to 'Metaphysical Rationalism': Isaiah Berlin on the 'Fallacy of Reduction,'" *History of Political Thought* 29, no. 1 (2008): 109–31; Carla Yumatle, "Isaiah Berlin's Anti-Reductionism: The Move from Semantic to Normative Perspectives," *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 4 (2012): 672–700.

³⁷ Berlin, "Logical Translation," 104.

While Berlin distanced himself from Ayer's logical positivism and from those who wanted to create — or, in the case of the metaphysically inclined, discover — a philosophical language, he did not embrace the inflation of Austin's ordinary language approach. At the time of the “brethren” meetings in the late 1930s, ordinary language philosophy was still in embryo. Austin and Ryle, among others, would develop this position in the 1940s, and the movement continued into the 1960s with their students, heavily influenced by the posthumous publication, in 1953, of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁸ In broad strokes, Ayer and Austin's approaches to the philosophy of language tracked, respectively, the early and late work of Wittgenstein: if logical positivism was deflationary, seeking smaller, carefully delineated units of analysis, ordinary language philosophy was inflationary in that it sought to find linguistic meaning not in the specificity of a philosophical language but in the everyday use of words. Ordinary language philosophy was anti-essentialist; the late Wittgenstein wrote of *Familienähnlichkeit* or “family resemblances,” words that could be grouped together based on overlapping common features but without one single definitive feature common to all of them.³⁹ For the ordinary language theorists, words have a wide range of meaning, and to try to pin down a word by giving it a stipulative or philosophical definition is a fool's errand, bound to result in error and obfuscation rather than clarity.

I have traced here, in a brief and in no way exhaustive manner, some of the contours of linguistic philosophy in the beginning and middle of the twentieth century, and Berlin's

³⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, Rev. 4th (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). In his portrait of Austin, Berlin suggests that Austin was not directly influenced by the late works of Wittgenstein before the war, but Berlin also concedes that there may have been an indirect connection through the articles of John Wisdom that were circulating at the time. Berlin, “J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” 169, 173.

³⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, secs. 65–71.

unusually personal connection to some of its leading figures, solely to shed light on his analysis of liberty. While Berlin never articulated a comprehensive philosophy of language of his own, I want to suggest that he remained “between Ayer and Austin” in that he wished to keep in view, at one and the same time, the deflationary pieces as well as the inflationary family wholes. Berlin eschewed not only a rigid essentialism that would narrowly circumscribe the range of meaning for a word but also a sweeping anti-essentialism that would render that range excessively broad; he thought that between words and concepts there was “no sharp break, no frontier,” for the drawing and redrawing of conceptual and linguistic boundaries was itself the task of philosophy.⁴⁰ Berlin’s treatment of liberty as a conceptual family in “Two Concepts” is indicative of his desire to find a middle way “between Ayer and Austin,” between technical specificity and ordinary usage, between deflation and inflation, between essentialism and anti-essentialism, between the one and the many.

The Language of Liberty

In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin wished to show that there was a broad range of possible uses of the word “liberty,” and that, within that multiplicity, one ought to differentiate between those uses, since they can and often will conflict with one another. He did this by drawing distinctions on two levels.

First, one could discriminate *between* the liberty family and other conceptual families. Liberty, while multifaceted, could be separated from other adjacent concepts. Berlin sharply rejected the commonplace “stretching of the word ‘freedom’ to include an amalgam of other

⁴⁰ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 144n1.

desirable things — equality, justice, happiness, knowledge, love, creation and other ends men seek for their own sakes.”⁴¹ Berlin saw this inflation or conflation of words, whether intentional or unintentional, as indicative of monism, or the “natural tendency of all but a very few thinkers to believe that all the things they hold good must be intimately connected, or at least compatible, with one another.”⁴² Berlin traced the monistic conflation of goods back to Socrates’s identification of virtue with knowledge.⁴³ Berlin’s other usual example of monistic conflation was Condorcet, who wrote in the *Esquisse* that happiness, knowledge, virtue, and liberty were bound as “by an indissoluble chain.”⁴⁴ Berlin’s value-pluralism instead prompted him to reject these monistic tendencies and to speak of multiple goods rather than “The Good.” Berlin argued that, even if the boundaries between concepts and words are fuzzy, “nothing is gained by a confusion of terms,” and one should not do away with categorical distinctions: “everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.”⁴⁵

Second, Berlin wished to draw distinctions *within* the liberty family. Specifically, he wished to separate the more literal meanings of liberty from more metaphorical ones. In his 1969 introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, Berlin unequivocally asserts that liberty in its fundamental sense involves the absence of the interfering influence of other people:

The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor. To strive to be free is to seek to remove obstacles; to struggle for personal freedom is to seek to curb interference, exploitation,

⁴¹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 50.

⁴² Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 175n1.

⁴³ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 37.

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111; Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 212; Berlin, *Liberty*, 42; Isaiah Berlin, “Equality,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 125.

⁴⁵ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 172.

enslavement by men whose ends are theirs, not one's own. Freedom, at least in its political sense, is coterminous with the absence of bullying or domination.⁴⁶

Berlin's focus on this "fundamental sense of freedom" and skepticism about "extension" or "metaphor" reveals how, in his eyes, some members of the family were more central than others.

Berlin's insistence that there was a central or fundamental sense of liberty might be reframed, anachronistically, in terms of prototype theory, a cognitive science theory of categorization born out of the work of Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues in the 1970s.⁴⁷ Rosch's prototype theory departs from the classical theory of categorization inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle in which categories are construed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, Rosch hypothesized that people conceive of categories in terms of prototypical examples: a couch is more prototypical of the furniture category than a lamp or telephone in that people are more likely to include it in, or list it as an exemplar of, the category. Categories, then, are not discrete buckets of entities, where each entity belongs to the category equally, but loose associations that admit of gradations; instead of necessary conditions, there are possible ones. This anti-essentialism in prototype theory is not accidental but reflects the influence of the later work of Wittgenstein; Rosch's undergraduate thesis in philosophy at Reed College was on the *Philosophical Investigations*.

At multiple points in the 1969 introduction Berlin reiterates that the fundamental — or, as I argue here, prototypical — meaning of liberty is freedom from slavery or

⁴⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 48.

⁴⁷ Eleanor H. Rosch, "Natural Categories," *Cognitive Psychology* 4, no. 3 (May 1, 1973): 328–50, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(73\)90017-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(73)90017-0).

imprisonment, freedom from the interfering influence of other people.⁴⁸ I take this restatement to be fully compatible with Berlin's notion of "basic" liberty, understood together as the absence of (human) obstacles to the exercise of choice. The extended or metaphorical meanings of "liberty," on the other hand, are intelligible in everyday speech; in the anti-essentialist framework of ordinary language philosophy or Wittgenstein's family resemblances, these metaphorical meanings might fit unproblematically within the liberty family, broadly construed. Yet words can be used in metaphorical or non-prototypical ways that conflict with more literal and prototypical meanings, and not all such conflicts are as benign as expecting a couch and receiving a lamp.⁴⁹

I invoked Socrates at the outset of this chapter because Berlin faced the same perennial problem: the danger of language is equivocation, that one might ambiguously use one word to refer to two distinct entities or ideas. The task of philosophy in such a case is the dialectical separation of those disparate meanings. In order to understand liberty, one must see how it can be a composite unity, how it can be both many and one. Accordingly, I will discuss how the liberty family is a loose set of ideas centered around the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice; I will do so while also acknowledging, as Berlin did, other features of liberty that might allow for other typologies.

The Essence of Liberty as Choice

Berlin's liberalism rests upon a philosophical anthropology in which human beings are, first and foremost, choice-makers. Berlin writes that the "essence of liberty" is choice,

⁴⁸ Berlin, *Liberty*, 31, 40, 48; Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 169n2.

⁴⁹ Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 106n1.

“the ability to choose as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, unbullied, not swallowed up in some vast system; and in the right to resist, to be unpopular, to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions.”⁵⁰ He maintains that the “capacity for choosing is intrinsic to rationality.”⁵¹ At a few points in his writings, he even suggests that the ascription of the capacity for choice is commonly considered the boundary of humanity, or that which separates humans from all that is non-human.⁵² Choice is indispensable in the process of identity formation: a person must choose, for “the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.”⁵³ While the maximization of possible choices may not always be helpful, it is better to have some choice than none at all.⁵⁴ Even to forgo one’s choice is itself a choice, or can always be reconstrued in terms of choice.⁵⁵

In “Two Concepts” Berlin sets out, in a lengthy footnote, at least five considerations for evaluating the extent of a person’s choice and therefore freedom:

The extent of my freedom seems to depend on (a) how many possibilities are open to me (although the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic; possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples,

⁵⁰ *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 112.

⁵¹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 44.

⁵² “Kocis speaks of my conception of ‘an eternal and universal human essence — if by this he means no more than a particular characteristic, in this case a capacity for choice, this does indeed seem to me to be a *sine qua non* of being a fully developed human being...” Berlin, “Reply to Robert Kocis,” 389. Cf. Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 270.

⁵³ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 214.

⁵⁴ Research in psychology examining decision fatigue and analysis paralysis suggests that having too many choices may be constraining due to human limitations in decision processing. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, 1st ed (New York: Ecco, 2004).

⁵⁵ Berlin frequently highlights the “shuffling off of responsibility” in the context of deterministic theories of human behavior, e.g., in this passage on the Stoics: “My behaviour, my character, my personality, according to these critics, is not a mysterious substance or the referent of a pattern of hypothetical general (causal) propositions, but a pattern of choices or of failures to choose which themselves represent a kind of choice to let events take their course, not to assert myself as an active agent. If I am self-critical and face the facts, I may find that I shuffle off my responsibilities too easily.” Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 256–57; Berlin, *Liberty*, 43.

which can be exhaustively enumerated); (b) how easy or difficult each of these possibilities is to actualize; (c) how important in my plan of life, given my character and circumstances, these possibilities are when compared with each other; (d) how far they are closed and opened by deliberate human acts; (e) what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives, puts on the various possibilities.⁵⁶

Berlin would continue to describe choice using the imagery of paths and doors in both “From Hope and Fear Set Free” and the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*: choice has to do with “the width or extent of the paths” and “the number of open doors, as it were, and the extent to which they are open.”⁵⁷ To have paths and doors available is to have “competing possibilities” or a “range of objectively open possibilities.”⁵⁸ In these later restatements, Berlin reiterated that liberty was not easily quantified or measured, that kinds or degrees of freedom were often incomparable. However, despite his recognition that “no hard and fast rule can be provided,” Berlin affirmed that “the measure of the liberty of a man or a group is, to a large degree, determined by the range of choosable possibilities.”⁵⁹ The language of these later expositions, and of “Two Concepts” re-examined in light of them, suggests that Berlin assumed that this basic sense of freedom was conceived in personal terms: choice matters because it matters *to people*.

Is choice intrinsically good, or merely instrumentally good? Berlin’s response to David Spitz in the introduction is illustrative of his insistence on the intrinsic value of choice.⁶⁰ Spitz, in his review of “Two Concepts”, had acknowledged that Berlin’s treatment of liberty was grounded in a view of human nature, but also suggested that Berlin, in his

⁵⁶ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 177n1.

⁵⁷ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 271; Berlin, *Liberty*, 32.

⁵⁸ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 271, 273.

⁵⁹ Berlin, 272; Berlin, *Liberty*, 41.

⁶⁰ David Spitz, “The Nature and Limits of Freedom,” *Dissent*, Winter 1961.

“attempt to cope with the relativity of values,” had fallen “back on the views of J. S. Mill.”⁶¹ Berlin, in his reply, explicitly distanced himself from Mill, who had, in Berlin’s view, merely advanced “the old objectivist thesis, in an empirical form, with a special rider about the need for individual liberty as a necessary condition for the attainment of this final goal.”⁶² Mill’s position, according to Berlin, was that the freedom to choose and a political climate that allowed for individual spontaneity and growth were instrumentally good in light of the utility or happiness that they brought to an individual and to society. Freedom and toleration, on this view, are required for empirical or epistemological reasons, on the grounds that we do not yet know, or perhaps cannot know, the objective truth.

Berlin’s defense of the value of choice, on the other hand, was “conceptual and not empirical,” grounded in the pluralism and incommensurability of values: “since some values may conflict intrinsically, the very notion that a pattern must in principle be discoverable in which they are all rendered harmonious is founded on a false a priori view of what the world is like.”⁶³ But for Mill and others with an instrumental view, and for monists generally, once “perfection has been reached the need for choice between alternatives withers away;” in the “Platonic or theocratic or Jacobin or communist society ... basic disagreement is a symptom of error and vice.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, if values are plural, the necessity of choice will not recede with additional knowledge. It is due to the plurality and incommensurability of values that choice is of intrinsic worth; it is because “ends collide” and “one cannot have

⁶¹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 43.

⁶² Berlin, 43.

⁶³ Berlin, 42.

⁶⁴ Berlin, 44. For a treatment of the tendency of early-modern political theorists to view disagreement as vice and attempt to eliminate it under the guise of rationalism, see Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

everything” that “the need to choose, to sacrifice some ultimate values to others, turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament.”⁶⁵

Obstacles to the Exercise of Choice

Berlin’s identification of freedom with choice is fairly straightforward. Specifying what constitutes an obstacle to that choice, however, is bound to be more complicated. In *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Berlin initially gives a very capacious definition of obstacles to freedom: “Human beings have wishes, inclinations, impulses, and anything which stops them from realizing these is called an obstacle.”⁶⁶ However, not all of these obstacles are the same: “they may be physical or psychical, ‘inner’ and ‘outer,’ or complexes compounded of both elements, difficult and perhaps conceptually impossible to unravel.”⁶⁷ Berlin elaborates:

These obstacles may consist of physical power, whether of nature or of men, that prevents our intentions from being realised: geographical conditions or prison walls, armed men or the threat (deliberately used as a weapon or unintended) of lack of food or shelter or other necessities of life; or again they may be psychological: fears and ‘complexes’, ignorance, error, prejudice, illusions, fantasies, compulsions, neuroses and psychoses — irrational factors of many kinds.⁶⁸

If one were to develop a taxonomy of obstacles to freedom, the top branch in the tree structure might be the split between internal and external obstacles. Political liberty, as opposed to liberty in a more general sense, deals with external obstacles, specifically the subset of external obstacles having to do with the actions of other persons: “you lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 43.

⁶⁶ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 112.

⁶⁷ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 270.

⁶⁸ Berlin, 270.

⁶⁹ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 169.

This second split, between “animate and inanimate, human or non-human” external obstacles, is decisive for separating political liberty from liberty of a physical or natural kind. Freedom in general turns on the idea of possibility: “one might say that every sense in which the words ‘can’ or ‘cannot’ are used indicate the presence or absence of a freedom of some sort.”⁷⁰ Yet humans are subject to countless necessities that are not political or social but “physical or biological or historical or geographical;” nature prevents one from “gravitating upwards” or “living for long without food;” unaided by technology “I cannot fly to the moon or see the back of my head.”⁷¹ However, “when we speak of the lack of social or political freedom, we imply that somebody, rather than something, is preventing us from doing or being something we wish to do or be.”⁷² In short: to be unfree to do something ought to be distinguished from being unable to do something.⁷³

The necessities of nature, then, are not what we have in mind when talking about obstacles, at least in terms of political freedom. Berlin suggests that most of the time these physical limitations are not even perceived, let alone thought to be unfreedom. In one of the rare instances in which Berlin quotes Rousseau with approval, he notes that “the nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does.”⁷⁴ In *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* Berlin recognizes that human beings can serve as obstacles in multiple senses. As a body, a “piece of matter in space,” humans may obstruct one another in the same way as “a log, or a

⁷⁰ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 112. I discuss the relationship between liberty and possibility more extensively in the second part of this chapter and in the next.

⁷¹ Berlin, 113.

⁷² Berlin, 112–13.

⁷³ By increasing the bounds of what is possible, natural science and technology increase freedom in this natural or non-political sense: “knowledge, especially of scientifically established laws, tends to render us more effective and extend our liberty,” Berlin, *Liberty*, 27–28. This theme of freedom from fortune and nature is especially apparent in the works Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes. I am grateful to Michael Gillespie for this point.

⁷⁴ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 170. The quotation is from book II of Rousseau’s *Emile*.

stone.”⁷⁵ But political freedom has to do with motives and actions, with the “conscious or semi-conscious or, indeed, unconscious purposes of other beings — and not merely by the mechanical behavior of their bodies.”⁷⁶

To what extent does intention matter? Berlin, in his introduction, writes that political unfreedom involves the “closing of such doors or failure to open them, as a result, intended or unintended, of alterable human practices, of the operation of human agencies.”⁷⁷ To this statement, Berlin appends an important clarification: “although only if such acts are deliberately intended (or, perhaps, are accompanied by awareness that they may block paths) will they be liable to be called oppression.”⁷⁸ A person may unknowingly stand in another’s way without any ill will, entirely willing to move once alerted to the issue; to be unable to pass someone in a crowded room should be distinguished from being oppressed by the obstructing person.

Some critics saw in Berlin’s exposition of negative liberty in “Two Concepts” a deliberate dismissal of socialist critiques of systemic forms of oppression. A. S. Kaufman, for example, argued that unfreedom brought about by poverty could arise without any deliberate interference:

Indians are made unfree by their poverty — though not unfree in Berlin’s restricted sense. They lack material resources. This lack obstructs fulfilment of legitimate desires. But these obstructions are not due to any *deliberate* human interference in the affairs of Indians — unless failure to meet or even recognize a form of obligation is regarded as a form of deliberate human interference.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 113.

⁷⁶ Berlin, 114.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *Liberty*, 32.

⁷⁸ Berlin, 32.

⁷⁹ A. S. Kaufman, “Professor Berlin on ‘Negative Freedom,’” *Mind* 71, no. 282 (1962): 243.

Berlin's response to Kaufman in the introduction sheds light on his purposes, for there he acknowledges the existence of more systemic forms of inequality while also maintaining a distinction between freedom itself and the conditions of freedom. Berlin denounced the economic structures that permitted or promoted "a situation in which entire groups and nations are progressively shut off from benefits which have been allowed to accumulate too exclusively in the hands of other groups or nations, the rich and strong."⁸⁰ Yet Berlin thought Kaufman was incorrect to write of "non-human ... interference" in the context of *political* liberty: "unless, however, such obstructions do, in the end, spring from power relations, they do not seem to be relevant to the existence of social or political liberty."⁸¹ There may be poverty due to oppression, but it should be distinguished from poverty due to nature.

The Conditions of Choice

Berlin went to great lengths in the introduction to dispel the accusation that he did not care about other political goods that might be related to freedom:

If a man is too poor or too ignorant or too feeble to make use of his legal rights, the liberty that these rights confer upon him is nothing to him, but it is not thereby annihilated. The obligation to promote education, health, justice, to raise standards of living, to provide opportunity for the growth of the arts and the sciences, to prevent reactionary political or social or legal policies or arbitrary inequalities, is not made less stringent because it is not necessarily directed to the promotion of liberty itself, but to conditions in which alone its possession is of value, or to values which may be independent of it.⁸²

⁸⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 40.

⁸¹ Berlin, 40n1.

⁸² Berlin, 45.

Time and again, Berlin wished to draw or maintain conceptual boundaries where others sought to eliminate them. He elaborates on this distinction between freedom and its conditions:

Failure to discriminate between human and non-human obstacles to freedom seems to me to mark the beginning of the great confusion of types of freedom, and of the no less fatal identification of conditions of freedom with freedom itself, which is at the root of some of the fallacies with which I am concerned.⁸³

Why was Berlin so intent on enforcing this specific, perhaps arbitrary, boundary? Berlin thought that the elision of freedom and its conditions had, historically, opened the door to substitution:

In their zeal to create social and economic conditions in which alone freedom is of genuine value, men tend to forget freedom itself; and if it is remembered, it is liable to be pushed aside to make room for these other values with which the reformers or revolutionaries have become preoccupied.⁸⁴

Other goods may be possible or even necessary conditions for freedom; these other goods, however, should not be understood as being sufficient conditions on their own. Berlin's insistence on the distinction between freedom and its conditions is yet another example of his resistance to monism. One should not conflate freedom with other "social and political ends sought by men — such as unity, harmony, peace, rational self-direction, justice, self-government, order, cooperation in the pursuit of common purposes."⁸⁵

"From Hope and Fear Set Free" is illustrative here, for that essay is an extended treatment of the relationship between freedom and one of its conditions, knowledge. Berlin's purpose is to show that knowledge and freedom, while related, remain distinct: "to say that

⁸³ Berlin, 40n1.

⁸⁴ Berlin, 46.

⁸⁵ Berlin, 4.

knowledge is a good is one thing; to say that it is necessarily, in all situations, compatible with, still more that it is on terms of mutual entailment with (or even, as some seem to suppose, is literally identical with), freedom, in most of the senses in which this word is used, is something very different.”⁸⁶ Berlin grants that knowledge may be a condition of the exercise of freedom: “ignorance blocks paths and knowledge opens them.”⁸⁷ But the two are not identical: “To be free without knowing it may be a bitter irony, but if a man subsequently discovers that doors were open although he did not know it, he will reflect bitterly not about his lack of freedom but about his ignorance.”⁸⁸

Knowledge may be, as Berlin readily concedes in his reply to L. J. Macfarlane in the introduction, an indispensable “first step” to freedom. In another rare instance where Berlin is “happy to acknowledge the insight of Rousseau,” he writes that “to know one’s chains for what they are is better than to deck them with flowers.”⁸⁹ But to equate knowledge and freedom is a mistake, for to do so obscures the ways that the two might conflict. In “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” Berlin entertains the possibility that knowledge may at times close doors or block paths. Certain poetic and religious ways of life may rest upon “illusions and myths;” an artist may be impeded by “self-consciousness — the child of knowledge;” certain states of resolve or “resistance against vast odds” may only work if the odds remain unknown, for “if David had known more about Goliath, if the majority of the inhabitants of Britain had known more about Germany in 1940, if historical probabilities could be reduced to something approaching a reliable guide to action, some achievements might never have

⁸⁶ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 278.

⁸⁷ Berlin, 273.

⁸⁸ Berlin, 273.

⁸⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 32, 32n1.

taken place.”⁹⁰ Berlin’s “From Hope and Fear Set Free” complicates if not completely decouples the two parts of that adage from the Gospel of John: you may know the truth, but the truth will not always set you free.⁹¹

Berlin went to great lengths to draw distinctions between and within words and concepts so as to avoid equivocation and the substitution of certain goods for others. He was driven to do so not out of pedantry but by a recognition of the ways that conflation could lead to disastrous political outcomes; “if either clarity of thought or rationality in action is not to be hopelessly compromised, such distinctions are of critical importance.”⁹² I have recounted here a number of these distinctions, such as those between internal and external obstacles to choice, human and non-human obstacles, freedom and its conditions. Other distinctions, such as the difference between choice for oneself and choice as part of a collective whole, I will treat at length later in the dissertation. There are other points raised by Berlin in his introduction that I will not cover here, such as his reply to Erich Fromm and Bernard Crick about whether liberty is activity itself or the possibility of activity (Berlin argued it was the latter).⁹³ Nor will I discuss his remarks on whether the ancient world had an explicit concept of negative liberty in a political sense (Berlin maintained that it did not).⁹⁴ In light of all of these distinctions, Berlin’s positive and negative liberty are not to be taken as a definitive or exhaustive typology but as rough groupings to understand two contradictory trends in the history of political thought.

⁹⁰ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 275–76.

⁹¹ John 8:32.

⁹² Berlin, *Liberty*, 49.

⁹³ For Berlin’s response to Fromm and Crick, see Berlin, 34–35.

⁹⁴ “I do not say that the ancient Greeks did not in fact enjoy a great measure of what we should today call individual liberty. My thesis is only that the notion had not explicitly emerged, and was therefore not central to Greek culture, or, perhaps, to any other ancient civilisation known to us.” Berlin, 34.

Berlin's Two Concepts Revisited

Out of the two hundred senses of liberty recorded by historians of ideas, Berlin in his seminal essay focused on two. These two branches of the liberty family tree, while sharing a common root, have grown in different or even contradictory directions.⁹⁵ Negative liberty answers the question: “what is the area within which the subject ... is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”⁹⁶ Positive liberty, on the other hand, answers a different question entirely: “what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”⁹⁷ Berlin, in his introduction, rephrases these questions in explicitly political terms: negative liberty is concerned with the questions, “how much am I to be governed?” or “over what area am I master?” while positive liberty centers around the questions, “by whom am I governed?” or “who is master?”⁹⁸ This framing gives each type a specific emphasis: negative liberty emphasizes the scope of liberty, the “vacuum” or sphere in which an agent can act unimpeded; positive liberty emphasizes the identity of the choosing agent or agents, or “who controls me.”⁹⁹

I shall take this framing of negative and positive liberty, in terms of the *what or how much* and the *who or by whom* questions, to be the decisive one. To the extent that this is the case, Berlin's actual bifurcation differs from a number of others commonly attributed to him. For example, Christopher Hitchens, in a scathing review for the *London Review of Books*

⁹⁵ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 168.

⁹⁶ Berlin, 169.

⁹⁷ Berlin, 169.

⁹⁸ Berlin, *Liberty*, 35.

⁹⁹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 56; Isaiah Berlin, “Final Retrospect,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 326.

of Michael Ignatieff's biography *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, incorrectly maintains at least twice that Berlin's negative liberty is "to be left alone" while positive liberty is "to be uplifted by others, or modernised or forcibly emancipated," and therefore necessarily "interventionist."¹⁰⁰ But Berlin in his introduction goes to great lengths to distinguish negative liberty from *laissez-faire*; in this respect he echoes the distinction made by social contract theorists between natural and civil freedom.¹⁰¹ Nor is it the case that negative liberty is always individual and positive liberty, collective, for Berlin connects positive liberty with self-mastery at the outset of section II, and does so entirely in terms of the individual.¹⁰² Nor should negative and positive liberty be construed as simple synonyms for good and bad, for Berlin insists that positive liberty is a genuine human goal, "valuable intrinsically," even if historically it has been the one more likely to be twisted with disastrous consequence.¹⁰³

One might be tempted to shorten Berlin's concepts, calling negative liberty *freedom from* something and positive liberty *freedom to* do something. Berlin himself uses this shorthand language in "Two Concepts," and it has become one of the popular ways to summarize his thought.¹⁰⁴ However, as Quentin Skinner has noted, this shortening may obscure more than it clarifies, because "all cases of negative liberty are at once cases in which I am free from constraint and, *eo ipso*, free to act should I choose."¹⁰⁵ One can rephrase

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Hitchens, "Moderation or Death," *London Review of Books* 20, no. 23 (1998): 3–11. Cf. Timothy Garton Ash, "Two Spirits of Liberty: The World Could Use More of Christopher Hitchens's Courage and Isaiah Berlin's Tolerance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 13, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 38.

¹⁰² Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 179. Positive liberty can be construed in terms of either the individual (as is the case with the whole notion of "self-mastery") or collective terms (as is the case in nationalism, collectivism, or even democratic self-government); Berlin tends to portray negative liberty in terms of the individual. As I will argue later, Berlin's framing of negative liberty contains within it an implicit form of individual positive liberty.

¹⁰³ Berlin, *Liberty*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 174, 178; Berlin, "Final Retrospect," 326.

¹⁰⁵ Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," 239.

descriptions of the absence of obstacles or restraints in terms of actions that can be taken. Skinner gives as example: to not be impeded *from* leaving a lecture is to be free *to* leave.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, this framing of negative liberty as *freedom from* and positive liberty as *freedom to* seems liable to be interpreted along the lines of non-intervention and intervention while obscuring the distinction that Berlin actually intended to highlight: it is one thing to derive the conceptual legitimacy from the area of choice protected for the individual, and another to derive it from the identity of the choosing agent.

Skinner's clarification raises, in a roundabout way, one of the central points that I wish to make in this chapter. Negative freedom, as framed in Berlin's *what or how much* question, already contains an implicit answer the *who or by whom* question. The implicit subject of negative liberty is the individual: "*I* am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with *my* activity [emphasis added]."¹⁰⁷ Berlin's negative liberty rests upon a liberal anthropology: "Every plea for civil liberties and individual rights, every protest against exploitation and humiliation, against the encroachment of public authority, or the mass hypnosis of custom or organised propaganda, springs from this individualistic, and much disputed, conception of man."¹⁰⁸ Provided the choosing agent is the empirical or individual self, negative and positive liberty coincide.

This assumption, that the subject of negative liberty is the individual person, is not an omission or a defect on Berlin's part but central to the point that he wishes to make in "Two Concepts." It is the ground upon which his entire bifurcation is based, for his separation of negative and positive liberty is designed to screen out metaphorical meanings

¹⁰⁶ Skinner, 239.

¹⁰⁷ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 169.

¹⁰⁸ Berlin, 175.

of liberty that involve the alteration of the liberty-bearing subject to be something other than the individual or empirical person. Berlin emphasizes this in “Two Concepts of Liberty” in a line that I have chosen as the epigraph for this dissertation:

... conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation of the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes.¹⁰⁹

The structure of “Two Concepts” is illustrative of this. After an introduction and sections covering negative (i) and positive (ii) liberty, each of the remaining sections of “Two Concepts” treats one of the ways that the self (or the selves of others) could be transformed ontologically so as to render human beings “free” in a metaphorical sense while being unfree in a more literal sense.

Berlin first describes two ways one can accommodate oneself to conditions of unfreedom: self-abnegation or renunciation, which involves changing one’s desires through a “retreat to the inner citadel” (iii), and self-realisation, which involves the identification of the self with necessity, or the rational internalization of the ties that bind (iv). Berlin then turns to the sub-personal and super-personal transformations of the self. In sub-personal political theories, those that employ the “ancient and pervasive metaphysical image of the two selves,” the self is split into sub-personal components by way of a “metaphysical fission.”¹¹⁰ Historically, this has led to paternalism, to the manipulation of persons in the name of the “freedom” of one of their sub-personal parts, which is taken to be their “higher” or “true” or “virtuous” or “rational” self (v).

¹⁰⁹ Berlin, 181.

¹¹⁰ Berlin, 200.

The sections on “the search for status” (vi) and “liberty and sovereignty” (vii) each describe freedom in terms of the sublimation of the empirical self into a super-personal self. The former describes how positive liberty has been construed as participation in or identification with a collective group or identity that one treats as representative of the self, often along the lines of “fraternity and solidarity.”¹¹¹ Berlin acknowledges that the desire for group recognition may be a distinct and genuine good, and he links this super-personal identification to nationalism as well as cultural, religious, ethnic, and other forms of group identity. The section on “liberty and sovereignty” retraces Constant’s distinction between the liberty of the ancients as participation in self-government, even if that popular sovereignty is absolute, from the liberty of the moderns, which involves a private sphere of inviolable rights and, therefore, limited government. Berlin concludes with his characteristic denunciation of monism and defense of value-pluralism (viii).

If part of the genius of “Two Concepts” is found in the sweeping breadth of its scope, so too are its limitations, for Berlin treats each of these atavistic transformations of the self in just a few pages. But “Two Concepts” was not Berlin’s only work, and he took up the same issues in greater detail in other writings. I have structured this dissertation to mirror Berlin’s framework in “Two Concepts,” for each chapter examines one of the transformations of the self by looking to other writings in Berlin’s corpus. I discuss self-abnegation or renunciation by examining “From Hope and Fear Set Free” (chapter 1); self-realization or the identification of the self with necessity using “Historical Inevitability” (chapter 2); the “metaphysical fission” of the self into sub-personal components with

¹¹¹ Berlin, 206.

“Political Ideas in the 20th Century” and “A Letter to George Kennan,” along with Berlin’s lectures on Helvétius, Saint-Simon, Maistre, and Rousseau (chapter 3); and super-personal conceptions of the self by looking at “Two Concepts” and Berlin’s writings on Rousseau, Fichte, and Herder (chapter 4).

These transformations of the choosing agent are so drastic and decisive that they ultimately amount to rival definitions of freedom, ones that conflict with Berlin’s prototypical or fundamental sense of freedom as the absence of chains, imprisonment, enslavement, interference, exploitation, bullying, or domination by other human beings.¹¹² Language is slippery. In the introduction, Berlin uses the phrase “moral victory” as an example: a “moral victory” is not a literal victory at all but rather a literal defeat that can be construed or re-interpreted metaphorically as a victory. Perhaps the underdog performed better than expected; perhaps the losing party’s principles were vindicated somehow despite their loss; perhaps the defeated did not “go gentle into that good night” but made a glorious final stand, like the Spartans and their allies at Thermopylae or the British cavalry at the Battle of Balaclava as depicted in Tennyson’s poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Nonetheless, “spiritual freedom, like moral victory, must be distinguished from a more fundamental sense of freedom, and a more ordinary sense of victory, otherwise there will be a danger of confusion in theory and justification of oppression in practice, in the name of liberty itself.”¹¹³

¹¹² Berlin, *Liberty*, 48.

¹¹³ Berlin, 32.

The Contradictions of Liberty

In his introduction Berlin attempted to correct the perception that he favored negative liberty, insisting that it too could be subject to distortion: “each concept is liable to perversion into the very vice which it was created to resist.”¹¹⁴ In the case of negative liberty, the danger was that of construing non-interference “to support politically and socially destructive policies which armed the strong, the brutal and the unscrupulous against the humane and the weak, the able and ruthless against the less gifted and the less fortunate.”¹¹⁵ He excoriated the “exploitation, brutality and injustice” of *laissez-faire* and “an uncontrolled ‘market’ economy,” suggesting that “the case for intervention, by the State or other effective agencies, to secure conditions for both positive, and at least a minimum degree of negative, liberty for individuals, is overwhelmingly strong.”¹¹⁶ I will return to this oft-neglected critique of negative liberty at great length in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Berlin also insisted that positive liberty, understood politically as participation in self-government, was “a fundamental human need,” and “intrinsically valuable,” distancing himself from Constant’s view that self-government was merely instrumentally valuable to protect negative liberty:

... to be free to choose, and not to be chosen for, is an inalienable ingredient in what makes human beings human; ... this [choice] underlies both the positive demand to have a voice in the laws and practices of the society in which one lives, and to be accorded an area, artificially carved out, if need be, in which one is one’s own master, a ‘negative’ area in which a man is not obliged to account for his activities to any man so far as this is compatible with the existence of organised society.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Berlin, 39, 50n1.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, 38.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, 38–39; Berlin, “Final Retrospect,” 327.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *Liberty*, 52.

Linking negative and positive liberty, and the source of the value of each, is the primacy of choice as a quasi-universal human value or meta-value. Still, even if both forms are valuable, they should not be conflated, for they may not always be compatible with one another, nor is the one sufficient for the other:

... whatever may be the common ground between them, and whichever is liable to graver distortion, negative and positive liberty are not the same thing. Both are ends in themselves. These ends may clash irreconcilably.¹¹⁸

Berlin's value-pluralist world is one in which values and ends may conflict: "One freedom may abort another; one freedom may obstruct or fail to create conditions which make other freedoms, or a larger degree of freedom, or freedom for other persons, possible; positive and negative freedom may collide; the freedom of the individual or the group may not be fully compatible with a full degree of participation in a common life, with its demands for co-operation, solidarity, fraternity."¹¹⁹ One must avoid "reformulating the definition of freedom" so that it is "always represented as something good without qualification."¹²⁰ We ought to avail ourselves of the precision of language:

If the claims of two (or more than two) types of liberty prove incompatible in a particular case, and if this is an instance of the clash of values at once absolute and incommensurable, it is better to face this intellectually uncomfortable fact than to ignore it ... or, what is worse still, suppress one of the competing values altogether by pretending that it is identical with its rival — and so end by distorting both.¹²¹

Ultimately, the possibility of conflicts between and within values is why conceptual distinctions ought to be maintained.

¹¹⁸ Berlin, 42.

¹¹⁹ Berlin, 48.

¹²⁰ Berlin, 49.

¹²¹ Berlin, 42.

Why does this matter for politics? Later in this dissertation, I will argue that negative and positive liberty are two distinct political goods, and that liberalism and democracy are two distinct terms to refer to regimes that prioritize or defend these two distinct goods. The theoretical, if not historical, existence of illiberal democracies (e.g., ancient Athens) and liberal non-democracies (e.g., constitutional monarchy) is evidence for this distinction. Many of us wish to live in a regime that is both liberal and democratic; we want a negative sphere, a vacuum, an area protected by inviolable rights in which we can exercise choice free from the interference of others while also participating in self-government for matters that are truly collective. For now, I only wish to stress that a liberal democracy is a regime that satisfies two distinct conditions, and that political theorists must avoid conflating these conditions or thinking the one sufficient for the other. This danger of conflation and substitution is why the dialectical separation of negative and positive liberty and, politically, liberalism and democracy, must be maintained. I will conclude, for the time being, with a reversal of that marriage pronouncement: what Berlin has conceptually torn asunder, let no theorist heedlessly join together.¹²²

How Many Concepts?

My account of Berlin's family resemblance approach to liberty might be compared with other thinkers who have ostensibly disagreed with Berlin about the number of concepts of liberty or the content of those concepts. The first of these is Eric Nelson, who provocatively asks whether two concepts of liberty is one concept too many.¹²³ Nelson re-

¹²² Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9.

¹²³ Eric Nelson, "Liberty: One Concept Too Many?," *Political Theory* 33, no. 1 (2005): 58–78.

examines theorists who have conceived of positive liberty in terms of self-mastery or self-realization, such as T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, and Charles Taylor, among others, and argues that these theorists “fail to isolate a coherent view of liberty that is distinguishable from the absence of constraint.”¹²⁴ Nelson rightly notes that these positive liberty theorists often focus on internal rather than external obstacles to freedom, but that this does not amount to a different concept since inner obstacles also can be described within the framework of restraint. For this reason, Nelson maintains that, while there may be multiple concepts of liberty, they cannot be distinguished from one another on the basis of positivity and negativity in terms of restraint.¹²⁵

Nelson’s account does not conflict with mine. I too have suggested that Berlin’s liberty family, broadly considered, deals with the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice.¹²⁶ But I also stress certain distinctions within that unity: Berlin framed positive liberty in terms of the agent of choice precisely to screen out those who would change the subject or agent of liberty such that one could speak of freedom in less prototypical and more metaphorical ways, ways that directly conflict with freedom in a more literal sense. Berlin wanted, as Gina Gustavsson has persuasively argued, to call attention to the “monstrous impersonation” by which coercion is reframed as liberty, to the contradiction of saying the people can be “forced to be free.”¹²⁷ In the example discussed above, of how “moral victory” differed from “victory,” the qualifying word must be added precisely because the “victory” was in fact a defeat in the most common or prototypical sense. As a rough rule,

¹²⁴ Nelson, 58.

¹²⁵ Nelson, 73.

¹²⁶ I have merely echoed Berlin’s terminology in this phrasing; I have no objection to Nelson’s language of restraint.

¹²⁷ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 180; Gustavsson, “Reply to Crowder,” 272.

one can identify metaphorical varieties of liberty by these qualifying adjectives: Berlin's positive liberty theorists are those who speak of "true" or "real" or "higher" or "spiritual" freedom, or freedom for one's "true" or "rational" or "virtuous" or "self-actualized" or "authentic" or "super-personal" self, with the result that one's express wishes can be ignored and one's empirical self can be coerced by external forces in the name of this non-empirical "self."

Nelson acknowledges the limitation of his approach: in construing these various claims about liberty in terms of a single definition, we run the risk of "projecting on to them a uniformity that they palpably lack."¹²⁸ I would contend that, after so carefully recounting the nuances of these conceptual features of liberty and masterfully showing the multiplicity involved, Nelson does run this risk, collapsing these differences that he has so artfully enumerated. In one sense, "moral" victory and victory *simpliciter* are one; in another sense, they are not. Berlin cared less about providing a single definition of liberty and more about pointing to historical trends in the ways that people have come to conceptually alter the agents of choice. Berlin's bifurcation is valuable not because it offers neat, disjoint categories or a one-size-fits-all definition but because it captures a specific form of equivocation commonly present in the discourse of liberty.

Gerald MacCallum argued that freedom should not be understood in terms of the dyadic negative and positive but instead as one concept that admits of the "always one and the same" triadic relation of "agents, preventing conditions, and action or state of character."¹²⁹ MacCallum's framework is helpful in that "various contending parties disagree

¹²⁸ Nelson, "Liberty," 73.

¹²⁹ Gerald C. MacCallum, "Negative and Positive Freedom," *The Philosophical Review* 76, no. 3 (1967): 312, 327, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183622>.

with each other in what they understand to be the ranges of the term variables.”¹³⁰

Therefore, MacCallum’s triadic framework is, in Ian Carter’s words, “meta-theoretical,” facilitating the comparison of thinkers along these lines.¹³¹ Berlin replied to MacCallum in his 1969 introduction:

A man struggling against his chains or a people against enslavement need not consciously aim at any definite further state. A man need not know how he will use his freedom; he just wants to remove the yoke.¹³²

Despite Berlin’s insistence that freedom need not require a specific aim, MacCallum’s framework has become the standard for analyses of liberty. However, MacCallum does not offer three concepts of liberty so much as an account of the three constituent parts of one concept. Such a framework is useful for the purposes of description but does little to address the dangers that Berlin saw within positive liberty.

¹³⁰ MacCallum, 312.

¹³¹ Ian Carter fruitfully compares Berlin’s positive/negative distinction with MacCallum’s triadic elements, and his summary is so clear that it is worth repeating despite its length: “[On agents] Thus, those whom Berlin places in the negative camp typically conceive of the agent as having the same extension as that which it is generally given in ordinary discourse: they tend to think of the agent as an individual human being and as including all of the empirical beliefs and desires of that individual. Those in the so-called positive camp, on the other hand, often depart from the ordinary notion, in one sense imagining the agent as more extensive than in the ordinary notion, and in another sense imagining it as less extensive: they think of the agent as having a greater extension than in ordinary discourse in cases where they identify the agent’s true desires and aims with those of some collectivity of which she is a member; and they think of the agent as having a lesser extension than in ordinary discourse in cases where they identify the true agent with only a subset of her empirical beliefs and desires — i.e., with those that are rational, authentic or virtuous. [On constraints] Secondly, those in Berlin’s positive camp tend to take a wider view of what counts as a constraint on freedom than those in his negative camp: the set of relevant obstacles is more extensive for the former than for the latter, since negative theorists tend to count only external obstacles as constraints on freedom, whereas positive theorists also allow that one may be constrained by internal factors, such as irrational desires, fears or ignorance. [On actions or purposes] And thirdly, those in Berlin’s positive camp tend to take a narrower view of what counts as a purpose one can be free to fulfill. The set of relevant purposes is less extensive for them than for the negative theorists, for we have seen that they tend to restrict the relevant set of actions or states to those that are rational, authentic or virtuous, whereas those in the negative camp tend to extend this variable so as to cover any action or state the agent might desire.” Ian Carter, “Positive and Negative Liberty,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>.

¹³² Berlin, *Liberty*, 36n1.

Finally, Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit and other scholars have re-examined the republican tradition and have argued, often ostensibly against Berlin, that republicanism offers a third concept of liberty.¹³³ Freedom, according to these thinkers, is not non-interference but non-domination, a structural relationship in which one has no *dominus* or master and is independent from arbitrary or uncontrolled power. What matters for these republican theorists, then, is not the active exercise of power or interference but its mere possibility. To have a lenient master is still to have a master. Republicanism is an ambitious research program, one that is partly historical while also having implications for contemporary politics. While there is much that could be said about the relationship between Berlin's two concepts and republicanism, a full treatment lies outside the scope of this current chapter; nonetheless, a few points of comparison must be made.

First, I grant that the republican theory of liberty as non-domination offers a valuable qualification for analyses of liberty, and I suspect that Berlin would as well. Pettit has argued that Berlin's negative liberty, which Pettit calls liberty as non-interference, was an unstable "halfway house" between Hobbes's view of liberty as non-frustration and Pettit's view of liberty as non-domination. Pettit argues that Berlin ought to have (and may have, in

¹³³ The literature on classical republicanism and neo-republicanism is voluminous; I mention here only a number of seminal texts. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997); Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001); Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*, The Seeley Lectures (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Philip Pettit, *Just Freedom: A Moral Compass for a Complex World*, 1st ed., The Norton Global Ethics Series (New York, NY: Norton, 2014); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty"; Quentin Skinner, "Freedom as the Absence of Arbitrary Power," in *Republicanism and Political Theory*, ed. Cécile Laborde and John Maynor (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2008); Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002); Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008); Frank Lovett, *A General Theory of Domination and Justice* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010).

some sense) embraced the latter.¹³⁴ To return to Berlin's imagery of paths and doors: it is not enough that options be accessible, or that none of one's *preferred* options are blocked (as Hobbes suggests), for then one could be "free" by adapting one's preferences to conditions of unfreedom. Instead, there must be nobody with the "power to block access," or an absence of doorkeepers.¹³⁵ Pettit argues that Berlin was so intent on criticizing the perversions of positive liberty that he became too sympathetic to a liberal form of negative liberty as non-interference, missing a possible republican version.

Though I cannot claim to speak on Berlin's behalf, I do not think he would have wished to die on this hill. While Berlin followed classical liberals in using the word non-interference, he does not stress the distinction between active interference and its mere possibility. His "fundamental" freedom as "freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others" and the "absence of bullying or domination" captures some of the same structural and interpersonal elements emphasized by republicans.¹³⁶ In general, Berlin gives a more robust account of the dignity of individuals, and he is more critical of those who construe non-interference to defend *laissez-faire*, than Pettit recognizes. As Skinner notes, however, for all the same reasons that Pettit wished to assimilate Berlin to his position, the reverse can also be done: non-domination might be understood not as a third concept of liberty, but as negative liberty rightly understood. Pettit and Berlin agree that what matters is the sphere of choice for individual persons, but Pettit specifies a more stringent definition of what counts as an obstacle to that choice. Skinner departs from Pettit

¹³⁴ Philip Pettit, "The Instability of Freedom as Noninterference: The Case of Isaiah Berlin," *Ethics* 121, no. 4 (July 2011): 693–716, <https://doi.org/10.1086/660694>.

¹³⁵ Pettit, 693.

¹³⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 48.

on precisely these grounds, arguing that we have “inherited two rival and incommensurable theories of negative liberty.”¹³⁷ To the extent that this is the case, neo-republicanism is closer to liberalism than it may first seem.

Still, Berlin’s conceptual analysis of liberty, I argue, may have something to offer for republican theorists. First, in maintaining that negative and positive liberty are distinct goods, both desirable, Berlin gives us reason to combat the tendency, all too prevalent within certain strands of classical republicanism, to erroneously consider positive liberty as self-government to be a sufficient condition for negative liberty for the individual, as is the case in certain populist or democratic forms of republicanism, or to consider participation to be merely instrumentally valuable for protecting negative liberty understood as non-domination (on this point some contemporary republican theorists are similar to Constant, despite all their professed differences).

Second, Berlin’s critique of the transformations of the self and metaphorical forms of “freedom” helps to explain the fissure between forms of republicanism conceived along communitarian or holistic lines, or in terms of a common good or general will, and Pettit’s, which shares with liberalism an emphasis on the individual as the relevant political entity. Pettit prefers the Italian-Atlantic republican theorists (Machiavelli, Sidney, Harrington, Price, the Federalist) to the Franco-German ones (Rousseau, Kant), who offered a “new communitarian ideology” that “replaced freedom as nondomination with freedom as participation,” and he argues for a democracy of common standards rather than a democracy

¹³⁷ Skinner, “A Third Concept of Liberty,” 262. For arguments about neo-republicanism’s relationship to liberalism, and the notion that it is a form of liberalism, see Alan Patten, “The Republican Critique of Liberalism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 1 (1996): 25–44; Charles Larmore, “A Critique of Philip Pettit’s Republicanism,” *Philosophical Issues* 11, no. 1 (October 2001): 229–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-2237.2001.tb00045.x>.

of common will.¹³⁸ If one thinks that the non-domination of individuals is of central importance, certain liberal thinkers, oddly enough, may provide the normative justifications for this individualism while certain republican thinkers must be disavowed. Pettit finds himself in this very bind, and Berlin's work may help to explain why this is the case: the historical development of these traditions has always involved equivocation.¹³⁹ Yet one need not choose a side. One can accept the more stringent republican definition of freedom while also endorsing a liberal anthropology of the self; indeed, this is, as it seems to me, what Pettit himself does even if he does not explicitly acknowledge it.

The Desirability and Possibility of Freedom

I have argued that Berlin conceived of liberty, in the most general, “basic” or “fundamental” sense, as the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice. I have also re-examined “Two Concepts of Liberty” in light of Berlin's 1969 introduction and “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” arguing that Berlin's two concepts were designed to highlight the ways that the choosing subject could be altered, or liberty conceived in metaphorical terms, such that coercion could be construed as liberty. Each of the chapters in this dissertation traces one of these transformations. While this present chapter largely sets the stage for these

¹³⁸ Philip Pettit, “Two Republican Traditions,” in *Republican Democracy: Liberty, Law and Politics*, ed. Andreas Niederbeger and Philipp Schink (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 200; Philip Pettit, “Republican Democracy and the Common Good,” in *Republicanism and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Genevieve Rouseliere and Yiftah Elazar (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 11–40.

¹³⁹ Another way of explaining the republican-liberal divide is to say that each critiqued the other, but for something different. Classical liberals were critical of holism and the idea that the sovereignty of the people should be absolute, ideas prevalent in certain strands of classical republicanism, wanting instead to insist on the distinct value of negative liberty for the individual; neo-republicanism, while implicitly incorporating this critique and adopting an individualist concept of the self, is critical of certain strands of classical liberalism on the grounds that the classical liberal definition of freedom as non-interference may allow for private domination and can be construed as defending a *laissez-faire* that allows the strong to dominate the weak. Each tradition, therefore, offers a genuine theoretical insight; all of these points, however, can be explained using Berlin's analysis of liberty.

later chapters, I will conclude by introducing two of the sleights of hand that Berlin identified. In all three of the texts examined in this chapter, Berlin contrasted choice with two adjacent yet distinct concepts: renunciation of desire (or self-abnegation) and knowledge of necessity (or self-realization).¹⁴⁰

In order to make sense of these two erroneous paths to freedom, I will here introduce a framework of choice-worthiness involving two dimensions: desirability and possibility. My contention is that people seek and choose things that they deem both desirable and possible. Many paths may be available, many doors open, but those conceived as both desirable and possible are the most important ones. However, one may manipulate these concepts of desirability and possibility in ways that matter for liberty. I trace this framework, in political and psychological terms, back to Plato and Descartes. For Plato, the nexus of desirability and possibility is at the root of the split between ideal and non-ideal theory, for if there are things that are desirable but not possible, e.g., a utopian ideal regime, then a distinction can be made between the best *possible* regime and the best regime *simpliciter*.¹⁴¹ Descartes, for his part, gives two psychological principles: first, “our will neither seeks nor avoids anything except as it is judged good or bad by our reason;” second, “it is our nature to desire only that which we imagine to be somehow attainable.”¹⁴² This framework helps to explain how one might modulate one’s liberty in an internal or metaphorical way not by opening doors or clearing paths but by changing one’s view of what is desirable or not, what is possible or not. Berlin’s self-abnegation and self-realization are

¹⁴⁰ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 181–91.

¹⁴¹ *Republic* 450c-d, 592b.

¹⁴² René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence Lafleur (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1960), 20–21.

two coping mechanisms for dealing with obstacles to liberty in its conventional or non-metaphorical sense by manipulating these concepts of desirability and possibility.

The equation of renunciation with freedom, Berlin contends, rests on Hobbes's definition of freedom as non-frustration, as "getting or having all that I desire," such that "a desire satisfied and a desire killed come to much the same thing."¹⁴³ The logic of renunciation, then, involves a substitution: if I cannot be free externally, cannot choose as I wish without interference, I can instead become "free" internally by changing myself and my desires. This is the path endorsed by ascetics since time immemorial; the ascetic claims that she can be "free" even while in chains provided that she renounces her desire to be unchained. Renunciation is at the heart of the metaphorical form of freedom described earlier as "spiritual" freedom. Berlin notes that it is compatible with, and perhaps appears most frequently in, conditions of literal unfreedom: "the concept of the rational sage who has escaped into the inner fortress of his true self seems to arise when the external world has proved exceptionally arid, cruel, or unjust."¹⁴⁴

Berlin argues that renunciation might be salutary or virtuous in some sense — it might bring equanimity, or peace of mind, or holiness. But it is not what we mean (or should mean) when we speak of *political* freedom: "to remove obstacles by removing desire to enter upon, or even awareness of, the path on which the obstacles lie, may contribute to serenity, contentment, perhaps even wisdom, but not to liberty."¹⁴⁵ Berlin instead saw renunciation as

¹⁴³ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 60. Hobbes defines a "free-man" as "he that in those things by which his strength and wit he is able to do is not hindered to do what he has a will to." Chapter XXI, Of the Liberty of Subjects, in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. E. M. Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 136.

¹⁴⁴ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 185.

¹⁴⁵ "From Hope and Fear Set Free," 272.

a form of “sour grapes,” a reference to Aesop’s fable of The Fox and the Grapes.¹⁴⁶ In the fable, the fox sees the appealing fruit hanging from a vine but, upon jumping for them, finds them just out of reach; frustrated and unwilling to admit defeat, the fox pronounces the grapes sour or undesirable. The moral of the story is that one should be wary of those who speak disparagingly about that which they cannot attain.

Berlin’s distinction between renunciation and liberty is evidence for the claim that I have made in this chapter about avoiding the contradictions present in the metaphorical uses of “liberty:”

There is, of course, a sense, with which all moral philosophers are well acquainted, in which the slave Epictetus is more free than his master or the Emperor who forced him to die in exile; or that in which stone walls do not a prison make. Nevertheless, such statements derive their rhetorical force from the fact that there is a more familiar sense in which a slave is the least free of men, and stone walls and iron bars are serious impediments to freedom; nor are moral and physical or political or legal freedoms mere homonyms. Unless some kernel of common meaning — whether a single common characteristic or a ‘family resemblance’ — is kept in mind, there is the danger that one or other of these senses will be represented as fundamental, and the others will be tortured into conformity with it, or dismissed as trivial or superficial.¹⁴⁷

In ordinary language, “spiritual” or “inner” freedom is intelligible as freedom due to “family resemblance;” yet if one accepts it as genuine, then “some despotic systems should presumably be described as creators of liberty.”¹⁴⁸ In a passage on the same theme in the introduction, Berlin cites with approval Robert Waelder’s distinction between “authoritarianism, which entails obedience to authority without acceptance of its orders and claims, and totalitarianism, which entails in addition inner conformity to the systems

¹⁴⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 186.

¹⁴⁷ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 274.

¹⁴⁸ Berlin, 273.

imposed by the dictator.”¹⁴⁹ The problem with renunciation, or with construing liberty in terms of the non-frustration of desire, is that it is compatible with the most literal forms of unfreedom: “if the tyrant (or ‘hidden persuader’) manages to condition his subjects (or customers) into losing their original wishes and embracing (‘internalizing’) the form of life he has invented for them, he will, on this definition, have succeeded in liberating them.”¹⁵⁰ To accommodate oneself to conditions of unfreedom, however effective a coping mechanism, is ultimately a self-defeating defensive strategy of strategic retreat, for to shore up one’s defenses by minimizing points of vulnerability is an exercise that ultimately ends in suicide.

The second misguided path to freedom, that of knowledge or self-realization, functions by manipulating the other requirement for choice-worthiness, possibility. Freedom does not matter if realizing a given desire is impossible, or if all freedom and choice are impossible. Berlin at times refers to this path as “The Metaphysical Heart of Rationalism.”¹⁵¹ For some rationalists, one is “free” by recognizing the limits of one’s power, by shrinking the realm of possibility, by denying one’s own agency, by identifying oneself with the very chains that bind. This second path makes freedom synonymous with a certain kind of knowledge or self-realization: to truly understand the world is to know its “unbreakable” laws or its “true” purpose and reconcile oneself with this inevitability; one becomes “free” in that one does not attempt the futile task of resisting the inevitable. Yet “to accept a state of affairs as inevitable seems *prima facie* very different from escaping it;” functionally, self-

¹⁴⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 31; Robert Waelder, “Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism: Psychological Comments on a Problem of Power,” in *Psychoanalysis and Culture; Essays in Honor of Géza Róheim*, by George B. (George Browning) Wilbur 1887-1976 and Werner Muensterberger (New York, NY: New York, International Universities Press, 1951).

¹⁵⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 186.

¹⁵¹ “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 190; “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 278.

realization is achieved by “substituting the notion of adjustment, or happiness, or frictionless contentment, for that of liberty or freedom from interference, and calling it liberty.”¹⁵²

Similar to renunciation, the “freedom” achieved through knowledge or self-realization is metaphorical, or, more specifically, wholly psychological.

Both paths, the path of self-abnegation and that of self-realization, operate by manipulating concepts about the world and self rather than the world itself; they make “freedom” wholly dependent on interior conditions rather than exterior ones. Asceticism, quietism, and renunciation may be valuable for other reasons, Berlin teaches, but they are *not* freedom, or at least not political freedom as it is usually understood. Instead, they are emblematic of the ways that certain metaphorical members of the liberty family can conflict with liberty in its more literal or prototypical sense. In the next chapter, I will examine self-realization in greater detail in the context of the philosophy of history; self-realization is a psychological strategy that, perhaps paradoxically, promises “freedom” from the burdens of freedom.

¹⁵² Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 209–10.

2. Agency and not Inevitability: Berlin's Liberal Philosophy of History

The socialist critic Mikhailovsky said: I do not wish to be the toe of the foot of some enormous giant called history, so that I have no liberty at all, so that I am operated by *it*, so that I do not choose but am chosen for, so that I have no real liberty of action but am simply a cog in some vast machine. Darwin, Marx tell me this, but it is not true. There is such a thing as human freedom, there is the human will. All the greatest attainments of mankind were made by men who operated in a free medium, not coerced into it, not conditioned into it, not determined by some vast pattern from which they could not escape.

— Isaiah Berlin, “The Russian Occupation with History”¹

What is the relationship between the philosophy of history and liberty? In the previous chapter I traced two faulty paths to liberty described by Berlin, two ways one could manipulate conceptions of the self and the world to be “free” in a wholly psychological sense. The first path, renunciation, involves changing one’s desires; the second path, self-realization, involves altering one’s view of possibility or necessity. This second chapter treats self-realization specifically as it occurs in the philosophy of history. In order to introduce the central theme of this chapter, I will first turn to another thinker who, like Berlin, saw how the philosophy of history, with its manipulation of the concepts of possibility and necessity, was of great import for politics.

In a brief chapter in *Democracy in America* titled “On Some Tendencies Particular to Historians in Democratic Centuries,” Alexis de Tocqueville divides historians into two categories. The first group, aristocratic historians, “make all events depend on the particular wills and humors of certain men, and they willingly tie the most important revolutions to the

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Four Lectures on Russian Historicism,” ed. Henry Hardy (Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, n.d.), 140–41, https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/singles/bib297.pdf.

least accidents.”² For the aristocratic historian, it is heroic individuals — leaders, prophets, artists, philosophers, and visionaries — that are the engine of world affairs, the “principal actors who guide the whole play.”³ Hegel, after spotting Napoleon just before the Battle of Jena, would recall seeing not merely a man but the world-spirit sat astride a horse, the concentration and consummation of history in a single person.⁴ The aristocratic approach to history involves examination of these actors and their character traits, psychological makeup, personal foibles, and acts of decisive importance. Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1841, just one year after the publication of the second volume of *Democracy in America*, encapsulates this approach: “the history of the world is but the biography of great men.”⁵

Tocqueville maintains that democratic historians, on the other hand, “attribute almost no influence to the individual over the destiny of the species or to citizens over the fate of the people.”⁶ In times of political and social equality, political action becomes the fruit of collective action. As European kings and queens gave way to parliaments and polling, Tocqueville recognized that it was becoming more difficult to ascribe an outsized influence to any single actor or cause. The rise of mass society complicates the historian’s task, for these “secondary causes are infinitely more varied, more hidden, more complicated, less powerful, and consequently more difficult to unravel and follow in times of equality than in centuries of aristocracy.”⁷ Unable to untangle the web of causes, the democratic historian,

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 469.

³ Tocqueville, 469.

⁴ Letter to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, Jena, October 13, 1806 in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, ed. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 114.

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, The Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 469.

⁷ Tocqueville, 470.

to craft a cohesive narrative, must simplify. If aristocratic history is the personal story of individuals, democratic history is impersonal and *nomothetic* (from *nomothētēs*, “lawgiver”), involving ever more general laws intended to explain human behavior in the aggregate.

Tocqueville criticizes both approaches along familiar lines, insisting that all historical periods have both general facts and particular influences. Aristocratic historians are liable to exaggerate the genius of leaders and overestimate public actions such as political decrees and great battles. Democratic historians, by minimizing the agency of persons and attributing causal power to impersonal forces, obscure where the “motor” of history lies, or how those forces themselves originate. Tocqueville himself initially appears to side with the democratic historians, not for theoretical but for historical reasons: the rise of equality of conditions, that “providential fact” that undergirds *Democracy in America* from beginning to end, means that the democratic approach will be more fitting for the nineteenth century and those to follow.⁸ Aristocratic history may have been suitable for feudal Europe, Tocqueville reasons, but the world has changed. Not just “a new political science” but a new history “is needed for a world altogether new.”⁹

After this apparent concession, however, Tocqueville spends the remainder of the chapter on historians denouncing the “doctrine of fatality” endemic to democratic history, revealing the chapter’s true purpose: democratic historians “not only deny to a few citizens the power to act on the destiny of a people, they also take away from peoples themselves the ability to modify their own fate, and they subject them either to an inflexible providence or

⁸ “The gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it has the principal characteristics of one: it is universal, it is enduring, each day it escapes human power; all events, like all men, serve its development.” Tocqueville, 6.

⁹ Tocqueville, 7.

to a sort of blind fatality.”¹⁰ The initial dichotomy, between aristocratic and democratic historians and their respective reliance upon personal and impersonal explanations, gives way to a second: there are histories that retain or emphasize human agency and those that instead invoke necessity, fate, or inevitability. Independent of their veracity, Tocqueville considers democratic or impersonal histories dangerous due to the political attitudes they inculcate — fatalism, quietism, prostration.

This theme, fatalism and how it leads to democratic despotism, is perhaps the central *motif* of the second volume of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville himself seems to sit uneasily between agentic and non-agentic history. After beginning volume one with an appeal to inevitability, with the “providential fact” of the rising equality of conditions, Tocqueville concludes volume two with a call to resist that same Providence, which traces “a fatal circle around each man that he cannot leave; but within its vast limits man is powerful and free.”¹¹ Tocqueville’s reflections on the interplay between agency and historiography may constitute a self-referential recognition of “tendencies” that he himself wished to avoid.¹² Whatever its underlying purpose, Tocqueville’s chapter shows how philosophies of history are

¹⁰ Tocqueville, 471. Further evidence for this interpretation can be found in the chapter title. The title is not, “On Aristocratic and Democratic Historians,” “Personal and Impersonal Histories,” or “On Democratic Historians,” but “On Some Tendencies Particular to Historians in Democratic Centuries.” The title emphasizes the *tendencies* of democratic historians, especially the tendency to invoke impersonal forces to explain history and, relatedly, to craft narratives that employ the concept of inevitability. Such an interpretation also highlights the continuity between the chapter and the themes of volume two of *Democracy in America*, especially the danger of fatalism, inaction, resignation, enervation, and how, politically, these can lead to democratic despotism.

¹¹ Tocqueville, 6–7, 676.

¹² “The historian is soon fatigued by such work; his mind is lost in the middle of this labyrinth, and, as he is unable to perceive clearly individual influences and bring them sufficiently to light, he denies them. He prefers to speak to us of the nature of races, the physical constitution of the country, or the spirit of the civilization. That shortens his work and, at less cost, satisfies the reader better” (Tocqueville, 470). Yet what does Tocqueville do if not write of the nature of races (“Some Considerations on the Present State and the Probable Future of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States” I.ii.10), the physical constitution of the country (“External Configuration of North America,” I.i.1), the spirit of the civilization (II, *passim*)? One might interpret this chapter as a bit of ironic self-criticism.

inextricably tied to notions of human agency and responsibility; whether one sides with the aristocratic historians or their democratic counterparts, the choice will have psychological and political effects. The philosophy of history, Tocqueville teaches, is always political.

Tocqueville's preoccupation with the philosophy of history was not unique to him but common among nineteenth century thinkers, including Hegel, Marx, and Tolstoy. Berlin notes: "This kind of talk about history — not really about history, but about historicism, about meta-history, about patterns of history ... goes right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."¹³ Tocqueville's chapter is notable, however, in that he theorizes about how meta-histories might affect people psychologically and thereby matter for politics. His is less a philosophy of history and more a philosophy of philosophies of history, a third-order call to resist the deleterious tendencies of philosophers and their second-order meta-histories.

Berlin would underscore this theme in the one place where he discussed Tocqueville at length, his 1965 review of Jack Lively's *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville*:

Mr Lively makes an excellent case for supposing that what Tocqueville cared for most deeply was not equality of rights or even resistance to despotism but a certain kind of moral character; what he feared most was not oppression but apathy — the voluntary shuffling off of his responsibilities by the individual. [...] Determinism is still more dangerous: whatever the natural or historical limitations upon men's freedom of action, this freedom exists; the belief that it does not, itself (he thinks) makes for authoritarianism: any doctrine according to which men propose, but some other agency wholly determines, what occurs — whether this is the physical or social structure of the universe, or the inevitable march to victory of a chosen class or race or Church — disposes men to give up and let themselves be dictated to.¹⁴

¹³ Berlin, "Four Lectures on Russian Historicism," 144.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "The Thought of de Tocqueville," *History* 50, no. 169 (1965): 201.

Evocative as it may be, Tocqueville's chapter on the tendencies of historians is but a few pages, a small piece of a larger work. A century later, Berlin would take up the same theme and treat it extensively in "Historical Inevitability." Like Tocqueville, Berlin offers a third-order critique of meta-histories; like Tocqueville, Berlin thinks that the philosophy of history is always political.

The Anti-philosopher of History

The determinists look on the libertarians as irrationalists, utopians, unrealistic, soft-headed. The libertarians look on the determinists as doctrinaires, people who twist facts in order to fit them into the theory, fanatical men who disregard human issues in order to force the poor resistant human material into a historical framework which is in fact bogus, unreal, simply the fruit of a false metaphysical theory.¹⁵

If my essay ["Historical Inevitability"] has any polemical thrust, it is to discredit metaphysical constructions of this kind.¹⁶

While Berlin would treat historiography and the philosophy of history in multiple places in his corpus, these themes find their greatest exposition in his Auguste Comte Trust Memorial Lecture, delivered at the London School of Economics in 1953, titled "History as an Alibi" and later published as the essay "Historical Inevitability."¹⁷ In "Historical Inevitability," Berlin sweeps through the history of Western thought, referencing various thinkers and time periods in order to collate and critique deterministic accounts of human behavior. To call it an essay is almost misleading; it is a polemic, a diatribe, an onslaught with blows aimed in all directions. Berlin begins and ends by humorously lambasting none other

¹⁵ Berlin, "Four Lectures on Russian Historicism," 144–45.

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27.

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94–165.

than the lecture's dedicatee, Comte, and Comtean positivism.¹⁸ Spinoza, Saint-Simon, Godwin, Tolstoy, Condorcet, Schelling, Hegel, Marx, Bossuet, Toynbee, and Spengler are other specific targets of Berlin's ire, along with "mystics and rationalists, theologians and scientific materialists, metaphysicians and dogmatic empiricists, American sociologists, Russian Marxists and German historicists."¹⁹ Despite this vast scope, Berlin's blows land with great force. In Berlin's eyes, all of these figures are peddlers of determinism, of, in Bernard Berenson's words, those "doubtful and certainly dangerous dogmas, which tend to make us accept whatever happens as irresistible and foolhardy to oppose."²⁰

Berlin's critique of historical determinism in "Historical Inevitability" is both unusual and complex. He claims that he will not — and cannot — refute determinism.²¹ Instead, he argues that self-proclaimed determinists are seldom consistent in acting as if determinism were true, for to do so would require "a set of new conceptual tools" and a "break with traditional terminology" so great that it would entail a massive reconfiguration our social world.²² The basic concepts and categories we use to understand ourselves, our fundamental notions of what it means to be human, our language and ethics, and, most especially, our notions of agency and responsibility would all require radical revision under a deterministic framework. Given that the assumptions supporting historical inevitability are "exceedingly unpalatable," Berlin instead seeks to analyze it along psychological lines, ultimately arguing that people invoke determinism to absolve themselves of responsibility (hence the lecture's

¹⁸ Berlin's lopsided litany continually amuses this reader: "His [Comte's] grotesque pedantry, the unreadable dullness of much of his writing, his vanity, his eccentricity, his solemnity, the pathos of his private life, his dogmatism, his authoritarianism, his philosophical fallacies, all that is bizarre and Utopian in his character and writings, need not blind us to his merits." Berlin, 95.

¹⁹ Berlin, 129.

²⁰ Berlin, 94.

²¹ Berlin repeatedly emphasizes this point in his reply to his critics. Berlin, *Liberty*, 5, 7, 21, 27.

²² Berlin, 54.

original title, “History as an Alibi”).²³ While the subject matter of “Historical Inevitability” is history, Berlin’s approach to that subject is not historical but *conceptual*.

Despite its apparent oddity, “Historical Inevitability” is consistent with and representative of Berlin’s approach to philosophy and the history of ideas, which Berlin conceived of as the study of the changes in the fundamental concepts and categories that people use to make sense of their world. The history of political thought does not “constitute progress” but “only the history of successive attitudes towards their predicament on the part of human beings.”²⁴ The study of these categories, and of the peoples remote in space and time that have employed them, requires a certain moral imagination or insight: “I understand my parents’ or my ancestors’ reactions, thoughts, desires because I am a thinking, desiring, reacting being and can imaginatively place myself in the situation of other men.”²⁵ This process of mutual understanding depends upon the “relative stability and unchanging characteristics of human beings in their social aspect” even as amidst this relative stability there is also change over time.²⁶ Berlin’s conception of human nature therefore straddles Vico’s universalism and Herder’s historicism.²⁷ His approach might be summed up using the words of the Roman playwright Terence: *homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* — I am a human being, and I consider nothing human alien to me.

²³ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 160.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 15; Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 221.

²⁵ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 15, 272.

²⁶ Berlin, 15.

²⁷ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 148–52; Berlin, *Liberty*, 23–26. While one could say much more about Berlin’s concept of human nature and its relation to the study of history, such a discussion lies outside the scope of this chapter. A good summary can be found in chapter 9, “Not Angels or Lunatics: Berlin on Human Nature” in Henry Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, Reprint with corrections (London: Tauris Parke, 2020), 169–82.

The subject matter of philosophy, then, is not “the items of experience, but the ways in which they are viewed, the permanent or semi-permanent categories in terms of which experience is conceived and classified,” a line of categorical thinking that Berlin traces to Kant.²⁸ Berlin departs from Kant, though, in arguing that these categories are not “permanent and unalterable,” not a fixed part of the human experience but a changing set of models or “category-spectacles” through which persons view the world.²⁹ One can put on or remove a pair of spectacles; models can be refuted or improved; “all our categories are, in theory, subject to change.”³⁰ The philosopher’s task is the construction of “other, less internally contradictory and (though this can never be fully attained) less pervertible metaphors, images, symbols, and systems of categories.”³¹

It is this categorical approach to the history of ideas that makes Berlin a deeply anti-metaphysical thinker. His approach to the history of ideas led him to evaluate metaphysical claims indirectly: instead of asking *whether* God exists, or whether there is life after death, etc., one asks *what* these beliefs might entail, their relation to other beliefs or categories, *how* these beliefs might affect behavior, as well as *why* someone might come to believe in them.³² This approach resembles that of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in which Nietzsche evaluated concepts such as good, evil, bad, guilt, and conscience from a similar second-order

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 11.

²⁹ Berlin, 10; Isaiah Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 176–77; Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” 215, 223.

³⁰ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 144n1.

³¹ Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” 14.

³² “... it would be a gratuitous abdication of our powers of reasoning ... not to want to know what we believe, and for what reason, what the metaphysical implications of such beliefs are, what their relation is to other types of belief, what criteria of value and truth they involve, and so what reason we have to think them true or valid.” Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” 224.

position, inquiring about the origin and value of those values.³³ “Historical Inevitability” is best understood as a conceptual analysis or genealogy of determinism and the psychological and political implications of accepting narratives that present history as the machination of impersonal forces.

Due to its lofty themes and lack of focus on a single central figure or time period, “Historical Inevitability” is less accessible than Berlin’s usual intellectual portraits, personal impressions, and more bounded topical analyses. While it initially caused a stir upon publication, it has since been overshadowed by his more conspicuously political works.³⁴ However, I argue that “Historical Inevitability” is key to understanding Berlin’s liberalism, for it is there that he emphasizes the connection between metaphysical freedom and political freedom. It is also the essay in which the ontological foundations of Berlin’s humanism (nominalism) and liberalism (Pelagianism) are most evidently on display. For articulating a critique of philosophies of history and offering a rival anti-philosophy of history of his own, Berlin ought to be considered one of the foremost thinkers in that subfield in the twentieth

³³ Nietzsche’s Preface, section 3, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann, Vintage Books (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 17.

³⁴ Early commentators on “Historical Inevitability” included Peter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955); John Passmore, “History, the Individual, and Inevitability,” *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 1 (January 1959): 93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182549>; Ernest Nagel, “Determinism in History,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20, no. 3 (1959): 291–317; Amartya Sen, “Determinism and Historical Predictions,” *Enquiry* 2 (1959): 99–115; E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*, George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures (University of Cambridge, 1961); Nathan Rotenstreich, “Historical Inevitability and Human Responsibility,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23, no. 3 (1963): 380–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105080>; Morton White, *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1965). Berlin would in turn reply to many of these critics in his 1969 introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, Berlin, *Liberty*, 1–30. More recent treatments of “Historical Inevitability” include Alexander Maar, “A Critical Commentary on Isaiah Berlin’s Philosophy of History,” *Revista Guairacá de Filosofia* 36, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.5935/2179-9180.20200002>; Renzhi Li, “An Unrealised Project? —Isaiah Berlin and the Philosophy of History,” *History of European Ideas*, January 27, 2023, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2023.2171462>.

century, alongside the likes of Collingwood, Spengler, Toynbee, Löwith, Popper, Carr, Ricœur, Foucault, and Fukuyama.³⁵

In this chapter, I argue that Berlin's collation and quasi-refutation of the varieties of determinism constitutes a meta-philosophy or anti-philosophy of history in its own right, one that I will call a *liberal philosophy of history*. Berlin's approach to history is liberal in that human freedom, understood in its metaphysical and not political sense, is its defining feature. If some modicum of freedom exists for human beings, then most philosophies of history or meta-histories — those that invoke directionality, purpose, ends, impersonal forces, or inevitability in history — cannot be true. People nonetheless look for meaning in time: “some look to history for salvation; others for justice; for vengeance, for annihilation.”³⁶ Possibility and human freedom can be traded or bartered away, conceptually speaking, so as to achieve other ends, and for this reason, philosophies of history will often reveal more about the psychological needs and political agendas of their adherents than they do about history itself. “Historical Inevitability” therefore offers insight into the psychological foundations of the philosophy of history, as well as the conceptual or ontological means by which these psychological ends are achieved.

³⁵ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1934); Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934); Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, Phoenix Books Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Revised (London: Routledge, 1957); Carr, *What Is History?*; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1970); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

³⁶ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 111.

Since Berlin's argument is complex, I have structured this chapter so as to highlight, one by one, what I take to be his key conceptual contributions (italicized below). First, a number of diverse traditions and sets of ideas, including teleology, religion, and natural science, lead toward a view in which the agents of history are not persons but "impersonal forces" such as cultures, classes, nations, races, religions, gods, and "World Spirits." Berlin gives, I argue, an account of *reification*, the process whereby the human mind creates abstract entities, and how, in the context of history, this process frequently entails the personification or *subjectification* of impersonal forces and the *objectification* of human beings. Second, Berlin, like Tocqueville, thinks that reification in history is not benign but has major psychological and political ramifications. Within the logic of inevitability, a person either swims upstream against or downstream with the rushing river of time, two attitudes that I will call, respectively, *fatalism* and *fanaticism*. Third, Berlin suggests that there is a perpetual temptation towards the *self-negation of agency* or the strategic use of the supposed inevitability of history as an "alibi" to absolve oneself or others of responsibility. Fourth and finally, I argue that Berlin's rejection of most prior philosophies of history and, indeed, nearly the very possibility of such a subfield, constitutes an alternative philosophy of history in its own right, one that I will call a *liberal philosophy of history*. Ultimately, with "Historical Inevitability" Berlin gestures towards a humanist and anti-metaphysical view of history, one that re-centers persons as agents and reaffirms the importance of responsibility as an ethical ideal.

What is Historical Inevitability?

Like Tocqueville, Berlin begins with the “familiar story that there exist personal and impersonal theories of history.”³⁷ Of the personal theories, there are individualist ones, like Carlyle’s, that presume that “entire peoples and societies have been decisively influenced by exceptional individuals.”³⁸ Greatness in this sense is “not a mere characteristic of individuals in a more or less private context, but is ... directly connected with social effectiveness, the capacity of individuals to alter things radically on a large scale.”³⁹ According to Berlin there is a second type of personal history — the personal but non-individual — that looks to “large numbers of unspecified persons, with the qualification that these collective wishes and goals are not solely or even largely determined by impersonal factors.”⁴⁰ This qualification is pivotal: personal and impersonal histories diverge not in the number of persons involved but in the attribution of agency to those persons. This second variety of personal history, the personal but non-individual, still requires investigation into human motives, explanations, goals, and plans.

Berlin contrasts these two varieties of personal history with impersonal histories or those that do not rest upon analysis of human motives. These impersonal theories are:

... a cluster of views ... according to which all explanations in terms of human intentions stem from a mixture of vanity and stubborn ignorance ... the importance of motives is delusive; that the behaviour of men is in fact made what it is by causes largely beyond the control of individuals; for instance by the influence of physical factors or of environment or of custom; or by the ‘natural’ growth of some larger unit — a race, a nation, a class, a biological species; or (according to some writers) by some entity conceived in even less empirical terms — a ‘spiritual organism’, a religion, a civilisation, a Hegelian (or Buddhist) World Spirit; entities whose careers or manifestations

³⁷ Berlin, 97.

³⁸ Berlin, 97.

³⁹ Berlin, 97. Cf. Berlin, 143.

⁴⁰ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 97.

on earth are the object either of empirical or of metaphysical enquiries, depending on the cosmological outlook of particular thinkers.⁴¹

Adherents of this impersonal approach to history are “committed by it to tracing the ultimate responsibility for what happens to the acts or behaviour of impersonal or ‘trans-personal’ or ‘super-personal’ entities or ‘forces’ whose evolution is identified with human history.”⁴² Through *reification*, historians of this disposition engage in an ontological substitution in which impersonal forces become the *subjects* or agents of history and individual persons are minimized, becoming *objects* or passive recipients of the agency of those forces.

Historians of this sort, Berlin notes, may offer “deflationary caveats,” paying “lip-service” to the notion that impersonal forces are “only convenient devices” to describe individuals in the aggregate.⁴³ But in actuality, these same historians turn those forces into history’s primary ontological structures or agents:

Thus nations or cultures or civilisations, for Schelling or Hegel (and Spengler; and one is inclined, though somewhat hesitantly, to add Toynbee), are certainly not merely convenient collective terms for individuals possessing certain characteristics in common; but seem more ‘real’ and more ‘concrete’ than the individuals who compose them. Individuals remain ‘abstract’ precisely because they are mere ‘elements’ or ‘aspects’, ‘moments’ artificially abstracted for *ad hoc* purposes, and literally without reality (or, at any rate, ‘historical’ or ‘philosophical’ or ‘real’ being) apart from the wholes of which they form a part...⁴⁴

Berlin is here describing holism, the notion that a whole exists independent of its constituent parts and is greater than each and all of them. In holism, the wholes or collectives are given

⁴¹ Berlin, 98.

⁴² Berlin, 98.

⁴³ Berlin, 98–99.

⁴⁴ Berlin, 99.

ontological priority, are “more ‘real’ and more ‘concrete’ than the individuals who compose them.”⁴⁵

Reification also involves a shift in which attributes normally reserved for humans are ascribed to abstract entities. Such a transfer can be seen, for example, in the language of organic unity found in romantic nationalism:

We are further told that we belong to such wholes and are ‘organically’ one with them, whether we know it or not; and that we have such significance as we do only to the degree to which we are sensitive to, and identify ourselves with, these unanalysable, imponderable, scarcely explicable relationships; for it is only in so far as we belong to an entity greater than ourselves, and are thereby carriers of ‘its’ values, instruments of ‘its’ purposes, living ‘its’ life, suffering and dying for ‘its’ richer self-realisation, that we are, or are worth, anything at all.⁴⁶

As the constituent elements of the nation, its citizens, are subsumed into the organic whole, the nation-as-concept takes on properties normally reserved to describe those citizens, including “purposes,” “life,” and “self-realisation.” Reification therefore involves the *objectification* of persons and, at the same time, the *subjectification* or personification of abstract concepts. History then becomes a narrative about the subtle but irresistible agency of these impersonal forces.

What happens if one extends this process of reification? As the impersonal forces become larger, they become ever more abstract. Berlin argues that many so-called philosophies of history are, in actuality, “metaphysico-theological theories of history, which attract many who have lost their faith in older religious orthodoxies,” a kind of “ersatz

⁴⁵ Berlin, 99.

⁴⁶ Berlin, 100.

metaphysics or ersatz religion or ersatz theodicy” intended to “satisfy the craving to know not merely why the world exists, but why it is worthy of existence.”⁴⁷

A meta-history is a story. It has a beginning, a middle, an end. One can plot them as Kurt Vonnegut graphed narrative arcs in his rejected master’s thesis, an insight he gleaned after recognizing that the narrative arc of Cinderella resembled that of the New Testament.⁴⁸ Humans tell Biblical stories of a blissful pre-history or paradise before a fall and then a return at the eschaton, utopian stories of gradual progress, Kafka-esque stories that go from bad to worse, stories like Hamlet in which it is unknown which way is up:

For Bossuet, for Hegel, for Marx, for Spengler (and for almost all thinkers for whom history is ‘more’ than past events, namely a theodicy) this reality takes on the form of an objective ‘march of history’. The process may be thought of as being in time and space or beyond them; as being cyclical or spiral or rectilinear, or as occurring in the form of a peculiar zigzag movement, sometimes called dialectical; as continuous and uniform, or irregular, broken by sudden leaps to ‘new levels’; as due to the changing forms of one single ‘force’, or to conflicting elements locked (as in some ancient myth) in an eternal Pyrrhic struggle; as the history of one deity or ‘force’ or ‘principle’, or of several; as being destined to end well or badly; as holding out to human beings the prospect of eternal beatitude, or eternal damnation, or both in turn, or neither. [...] There is, we are told, a nature of things, and it has a pattern in time...⁴⁹

For those thinkers most inclined to abstraction, history itself becomes the impersonal force to be analyzed: history is assumed to have such an arc, directionality, recurring patterns, a purpose, an end. The historian eventually attributes a providential agency not just to impersonal forces but to the largest and most impersonal of forces, to God or to history itself. What begins as a useful abstraction, e.g., the idea of class in Marxism, becomes, through over-abstraction and reification, a narrative about an impersonal force that acts

⁴⁷ Berlin, 162; Berlin, “Four Lectures on Russian Historicism,” 77; Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 110.

⁴⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

⁴⁹ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 101.

independently of human volition, the movement of which becomes synonymous with history itself.

Measured against these immense and inscrutable abstract forces, persons shrink to insignificance. What individual can compare with God or History? These are totalizing ideas of monstrous proportions. Having traveled this road in its entirety, the thinker arrives in the end at the idea of inevitability: “everything is caused to occur as it does by the machinery of history itself,” which is “ultimately responsible for everything.”⁵⁰ For most philosophers of history, choices must be illusory, “for if such choices were real, the determined world structure which alone, on this view, makes complete explanation, whether scientific or metaphysical, possible could not exist.”⁵¹

Conceptual abstraction is useful, perhaps even indispensable, for it facilitates the analysis of personal-but-non-individual phenomena. Overreliance on these abstract concepts, however, results in a form of reification that annihilates the agency of persons. Ontologically, these theories involve an inversion of the intuitive and agentic — one is tempted to say the pre-historical, pre-scientific, and pre-sociological — self-conceptions held by most persons.⁵² It is for this reason that philosophies of history are inextricably tied to conceptions of what it means to be human, for they affect “not merely ways of observing and describing the activities and characters of human beings, but moral and political and religious attitudes towards them.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Berlin, 103.

⁵¹ Berlin, 103.

⁵² One might object at this point, arguing that, since religious belief is near-universal in human anthropology, animism and anthropomorphism are a fundamental part of the human condition. Even if this is the case, the belief in impersonal forces does not necessitate a belief in the omniscience and omnipotence of those forces (and therefore the concept of inevitability), nor does a theoretical belief in their existence necessitate acting in a way consistent with that belief.

⁵³ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 96–97.

Three Streams of Determinism

Berlin traces several ways that thinkers come to hold deterministic views, for there are multiple *species* in the deterministic *genus*. In “The Concept of Scientific History,” Berlin uses the imagery of a waterway, a “stream of history” or a “river of time” with an “inexorably fixed time-order.”⁵⁴ Using similar imagery in “Historical Inevitability,” he writes of three major “streams” that feed into the “cosmic river” of historical inevitability: teleology, the dichotomy of Appearance and Reality, and the natural sciences.⁵⁵ Berlin’s great insight in “Historical Inevitability” lies in his ability to highlight commonalities between these apparently dissimilar worldviews.

The first stream that Berlin identifies, teleology, is a “metaphysical attitude,” a “faith” or “cosmology” about purposes.⁵⁶ Whether the *teloi* of entities are “imposed upon them by a creator” or “internal to their possessors,” they are pervasive and omnipresent: “every entity has a ‘nature’ and pursues a specific goal which is ‘natural’ to it, and the measure of its perfection consists in the degree to which it fulfils it.”⁵⁷ Each entity in the cosmos is thought to have such a purpose, and all of these purposes, when taken together, crystalize into hierarchies or even a monistic “all-inclusive hierarchy” that structures the relationships between them: to know the place of a thing is to understand how it fits into the overall cosmic scheme.⁵⁸ For the teleological thinker, history is rendered intelligible by describing these patterns and their necessity: “the more inevitable an event or an action or a character

⁵⁴ Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” 141; Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 133–34.

⁵⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 106.

⁵⁶ Berlin, 104–6.

⁵⁷ Berlin, 104.

⁵⁸ Berlin, 104.

can be exhibited as being, the better it has been understood, the profounder the researcher's insight, the nearer we are to the one embracing, ultimate truth."⁵⁹

This teleological attitude, Berlin asserts, is "profoundly anti-empirical" because the possibility that some entities might not have purposes is rejected in advance.⁶⁰ Any apparent lack of purpose is attributed to error, weak vision, the inadequacy of human reason: "total failure is excluded *a priori*, for at a 'deeper' level all processes will always be seen to culminate in success" or will fit neatly into the all-encompassing hierarchy.⁶¹ Under teleology, "to understand the cosmic symphony wholly is to understand the necessity for every note of it; to protest, condemn, complain is merely to show that one has not understood."⁶² Therefore, teleology is "not a theory, or a hypothesis, but a category or a framework in terms of which everything is, or should be, conceived and described;" it is a form of determinism in that it presupposes directionality toward ends and a culmination in, or asymptotic approach towards, their ultimate fulfillment.⁶³

The second stream that Berlin identifies is the dichotomy between Appearance and Reality. In this stream, "it is not goals, less or more dimly discerned, which explain and justify whatever happens, but a timeless, permanent, transcendent reality, 'above', or 'outside', or 'beyond'; which is as it is forever, in perfect, inevitable, self-explaining harmony."⁶⁴ This dichotomy is distinct from the temporal and directional one present in the teleological worldview: Reality is understood to be the "self-consistent, eternal, ultimate

⁵⁹ Berlin, 105.

⁶⁰ Berlin, 105.

⁶¹ Berlin, 107.

⁶² Berlin, 153.

⁶³ Berlin, 105.

⁶⁴ Berlin, 107.

‘structure of reality’, compresent ‘timelessly’, as it were, with the confused world of the senses which it casts as a distorted image or a feeble shadow, and of which it is at once the origin, the cause, the explanation and the justification.”⁶⁵ The world of Appearance, on the other hand, is the result of human ignorance, of limited sense perception, of inadequate understanding of the “true” structure of Reality.

Berlin does not initially mention by name thinkers who endorse this dichotomy between Appearance and Reality, but examples can be readily supplied. To borrow a term from Nietzsche, these are the *Hinterweltlern*, the “after- or back- or behind-world men.”⁶⁶ This group includes Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, theologians of many faiths, and all metaphysicians in the etymological sense, i.e., those who would place a world “after,” “behind,” or “beyond” (μετά) physical reality (τὰ φυσικά). Images of light and darkness, and sight and blindness, are pervasive when dealing with this dichotomy: humans are prisoners chained in a cave, watching shadows dance on the wall (in Plato’s words), see “through a glass darkly” (in Paul the Apostle’s), are “much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air” (in Melville’s).⁶⁷

Whether the blindness is literal or metaphorical, the result is the same: if only we could see (and by see, it is implied, understand) the “true” nature of things, we would find the world a harmonious *cosmos* rather than a haphazard *chaos*. It is assumed that history must have its analogue to this dichotomy, that the unfolding of events is, in the final analysis,

⁶⁵ Berlin, 107.

⁶⁶ “On the Afterworldly” in part one of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 142–45. Cf. “Reason” in Philosophy and How the “True World” Finally Became a Fable: The History of an Error in “Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 479–86.

⁶⁷ *Republic*, book VII, 514a; 1 Corinthians 13:12; *Moby Dick*, chapter vii, “The Chapel.” Milton also continually and self-referentially assimilates the imagery of sight and understanding in *Paradise Lost*.

monistic and not pluralistic. Surely something — God, the demiurge, principles subject to rational consistency — must hold it all together in a way that is whole or intelligible, “for without universal order ... how could history be ‘intelligible?’”⁶⁸ In both teleology and in Appearance and Reality, intelligibility serves as the cosmic glue for reality, “the goal in virtue of which alone it is a universe at all, and not a chaos of unrelated bits and pieces.”⁶⁹

The third stream identified by Berlin is the worldview of the natural sciences. Though science may at first seem to be the “very negation of metaphysical speculation,” it too rests upon metaphysical supposition and “shows important affinities with it, namely, the notion that all that exists is necessarily an object in material nature, and therefore susceptible to explanation by scientific laws.”⁷⁰ This topic, the possibility of applying the methods of the natural sciences to the social and political realm, is one that Berlin treats repeatedly in his corpus and most thoroughly in “The Concept of Scientific History.”⁷¹ The dream of Helvétius, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, and Comte was to find general laws in the social realm: “if psychology and sociology ever attain to their proper stature — and why should they not? — we shall have laws enabling us, at least in theory (for it might still be difficult in practice), to predict (or reconstruct) every detail in the lives of every single human being in the future, present and past.”⁷² Throughout his works Berlin suggests that this desire to find a unified science of humanity and history arises out of a wish to emulate Newton’s revolutionary success in reducing physics to just a few general laws, applicable at all scales and in all places,

⁶⁸ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 102.

⁶⁹ Berlin, 105.

⁷⁰ Berlin, 108.

⁷¹ Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History.”

⁷² Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 108–9.

suitable for predicting the trajectories of falling fruit and heavenly bodies alike.⁷³ For historians, this Newtonian impulse takes the form of wish to construct a *nomothetic* history, one subject to general laws analogous to those found in Newtonian physics.

Yet the science of history, Berlin avows, remains “stillborn.”⁷⁴ The social sciences have not found laws that can match the tidiness and generality of Newton’s:

What historiographer, what sociologist, can claim as yet to have produced empirical generalisations comparable to the great uniformities of the natural sciences? It is a commonplace to say that sociology still awaits its Newton, but even this seems much too audacious a claim; it has yet to find its Euclid and its Archimedes, before it can begin to dream of a Copernicus.⁷⁵

The tantalizing possibility of applying the methods of science to the social realm remains. In its most extreme formulations, such a science would be able to disregard human motives entirely; it would “predict the publicly observable behavior of men (what more can a science ask for?) without taking the vaguer and more elusive data of introspection much into account.”⁷⁶ This human science would not be one of reasons and motivations but one describing patterns in human behavior. Through abstraction and reification, the psychological phenomena of human motives, choices, intentions, and explanations will be rendered superfluous by the contrivance of general “laws,” which in essence are just another variety of impersonal force. The peculiarity of this language should not go unnoticed; that we call these scientific principles or necessities “laws” shows the affinity between this third strand and the other two, for, as Nietzsche noted, laws are suggestive of command and

⁷³ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 262.

⁷⁴ Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” 145.

⁷⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 160.

⁷⁶ Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” 138.

obedience, of a lawgiver who orders the cosmos, giving it unity or monistic coherence and therefore intelligibility.⁷⁷

All three streams — teleology, Appearance and Reality, and the Newtonian impulse to apply the methods of natural science to human beings — lead towards the concept of inevitability:

All these theories are, in one sense or another, forms of determinism, whether they be teleological, metaphysical, mechanistic, religious, aesthetic or scientific. And one common characteristic of all such outlooks is the implication that the individual's freedom of choice (at any rate here, below) is ultimately an illusion, that the notion that human beings could have chosen otherwise than they did usually rests upon ignorance of facts; with the consequence that any assertion that they should have acted thus or thus, might have avoided this or that, and deserve (and not merely elicit or respond to) praise or blame, approval or condemnation, rests upon the presupposition that some area, at any rate, of their lives is not totally determined by laws, whether metaphysical or theological or expressing the generalised probabilities of the sciences.⁷⁸

The genius of “Historical Inevitability” is that Berlin analyzes determinism in its various guises, whether “teleological, metaphysical, mechanistic, religious, aesthetic or scientific,” highlighting the commonalities between these seemingly disparate streams.⁷⁹

The Incompatibility of Determinism and Responsibility

At its heart, Berlin's thesis in “Historical Inevitability” is conceptual and not metaphysical. Berlin does not (and cannot) prove that determinism is false.⁸⁰ Instead, his

⁷⁷ Nietzsche gestures to this tension in section 109 of *The Gay Science*: “Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word “accident” has meaning.” And from earlier in the same aphorism: “The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos — in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 168. Cf. Maxims and Arrows, 18 in Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 469.

⁷⁸ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 110.

⁷⁹ Berlin, 110.

⁸⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 4–5, 21.

point is this: *if* determinism is true, our most fundamental notions of what it means to be human and our existing social and political categories would become unrecognizable to us such that “the meaning and use of certain concepts and words central to human thought would become obsolete or else have to be drastically altered.”⁸¹ Berlin’s approach is one that eschews treating metaphysical questions directly and instead evaluates them along conceptual and psychological grounds. Rather than ask *whether* determinism is true, Berlin urges his readers to consider 1) *what* its veracity would entail, i.e., the implications for related concepts, “what schema or model of man and nature is implicit in the terms used,” as well as 2) *how* this shift might affect human behavior and 3) *why* somebody might have reasons to think it true, i.e., what psychological motivations might lead one to adopt or reject such a position.⁸² I shall call the first of these the *categorical critique* and the latter two the *psychological critique*.

Of the objections that Berlin levels against determinism in this first or *categorical critique*, I wish to highlight three: the incompatibility between responsibility and determinism, the inconceivability that results from this incompatibility, and finally, the inconsistency on the part of advocates of determinism as evidence of this unresolved tension.

After outlining the three streams, Berlin summarizes his position: “I do not here wish to say that determinism is necessarily false, only that we neither speak nor think as if it could be true, and that it is difficult, and perhaps beyond our normal powers, to conceive what our picture of the world would be if we seriously believed it.”⁸³ Under determinism, the concepts and categories that we use to delineate and make sense of experience and the

⁸¹ Berlin, 5.

⁸² Berlin, 11. Cf. Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” 224.

⁸³ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 122.

language that we employ to communicate would all have to change, especially assessments of what one could have or ought to have done:

If determinism were a valid theory of human behaviour, these distinctions would be as inappropriate as the attribution of moral responsibility to the planetary system or the tissues of a living cell. These categories permeate all that we think and feel so pervasively and universally that to think them away, and conceive what and how we should be thinking, feeling and talking without them, or in the framework of their opposites, psychologically greatly strains our capacity — is nearly, if not quite, as impracticable as, let us say, to pretend that we live in a world in which space, time or number in the normal sense no longer exist.⁸⁴

The categorical critique that Berlin presents is, once again, not a metaphysical claim about the veracity of determinism but a conceptual claim about the relationship between determinism and related human concepts, especially moral responsibility. These concepts are linked like the strands of a net or web; to pull on one will cause a change, great or small, to all the others, for they are entangled with and depend upon one another.

The most important of these entanglements for Berlin's purposes is the fundamental incompatibility between liberty and historical determinism.⁸⁵ Berlin writes in the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty* that "it is patently inconsistent to assert, on the one hand, that all events are wholly determined to be what they are by other events (whatever the status of this proposition), and, on the other, that men are free to choose between at least two possible courses of action."⁸⁶ Under determinism, "the notion of a morally responsible being becomes, at best, mythological; this fabulous creature joins the ranks of nymphs and

⁸⁴ Berlin, 121.

⁸⁵ For a critique of Berlin's incompatibilism, see Maar, "A Critical Commentary on Isaiah Berlin's Philosophy of History." Maar argues that Berlin's commitment to incompatibilism and neglect of compatibilism weakens his thesis; Berlin gives reasons for why one might find compatibilism unsatisfactory in "From Hope and Fear Set Free," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 259–62.

⁸⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 5.

centaurs.”⁸⁷ All of the concepts tied to responsibility — praise and blame, merit and desert — would require revision, if not outright removal, if determinism were true.

This incompatibility between determinism and responsibility causes inconceivability, for it is unclear how determinism can be reconciled with other ethical intuitions and common notions of what it means to be human. One example that Berlin treats at length is the language of praise and blame. Under determinism, morality is assimilated to aesthetics:

Admiration and contempt for this or that individual may indeed continue, but it becomes akin to aesthetic judgement. We can eulogise or deplore, feel love or hatred, satisfaction or shame, but we can neither blame nor justify. Alexander, Caesar, Attila, Muhammad, Cromwell, Hitler are like floods and earthquakes, sunsets, oceans, mountains; we may admire or fear them, welcome or curse them, but to denounce or extol their acts is (ultimately) as sensible as addressing sermons to a tree...⁸⁸

A deterministic worldview would call for a different ontology, one involving the *intentional* objectification of humans on the grounds that they would be no different than other entities in nature. But by reducing history “to a kind of physics,” one might “as well blame the galaxy or gamma-rays as Genghis Khan or Hitler.”⁸⁹ Such a transformation would so utterly upend the conventional view of the notion of praise that it is worth considering why such a change should be accepted, or if it even could be accepted.

The inconceivability of reconciling a deterministic world with our other prevalent social concepts, such as justice, fairness, and goodness, leads to hypocrisy. The charge that Berlin levels against the determinists is not that of inaccuracy but of inconsistency: even the most committed among them, he contends, “evidently find it perfectly possible to subscribe

⁸⁷ Berlin, 11.

⁸⁸ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 115–16.

⁸⁹ Berlin, 131.

to determinism in the study and disregard it in their lives.”⁹⁰ To the extent that defenders of determinism still think in terms of categories that presuppose freedom and still attribute moral responsibility to individuals, this discrepancy reveals that they have not fully grappled with “what the effect of its elimination on our thought and language would be.”⁹¹ If universal determinism could be proved true, finally and definitively, Berlin would accept its truth; his point is that the moral and conceptual world that would result from the acceptance of this truth would be nearly unrecognizable to us.⁹² Still, his theoretical contribution in this area consists in two insights about the logic of determinism. The first of these is about the psychological *effects* of belief in determinism; the second, about its *causes*.

The Psychological Effects of Determinism: Fatalism and Fanaticism

If a person comes to believe in historical inevitability, what psychological and behavioral effects might result? Berlin offers, I argue, a taxonomy of two prominent ways that people might react to determinism, for belief in its truth “breeds irrational passivity in some, and no less irrational fanatical activity in others.”⁹³ To return to the image of the river: if one views history as steady flow of events, a person may either swim upstream against the current or downstream with it. Berlin uses debates within Marxism about accelerationism as evidence for this tension:

... but if history will inevitably bring about the perfect society, why should one sacrifice one’s life for a process which will, without one’s help, reach its proper, happy destination? Yet there is a curious human feeling that if the stars in their courses are fighting for you, so that your cause will triumph,

⁹⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 10.

⁹¹ Berlin, 6.

⁹² Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 263–68, 277.

⁹³ Berlin, *Liberty*, 27.

then you should sacrifice yourself in order to shorten the process, to bring the birth-pangs of the new order nearer, as Marx said.⁹⁴

A belief in determinism, then, produces two diverging attitudes: either inaction as one swims futilely against the stream of the inevitable, or an irrepressible feeling of infallibility and righteousness as one is carried downstream with it. I will call these two attitudes, respectively, *fatalism* and *fanaticism*.

The first of these attitudes, *fatalism*, is the passive or non-agentic belief in inevitability: “what is meant or implied by fatalism is the view that human decisions are mere by-products, epiphenomena, incapable of influencing events which take their inscrutable course independently of human wishes.”⁹⁵ Whether an individual welcomes the outcome or abhors it, the current will eventually carry one downriver, and the result will be the same. The result is inaction, withdrawal, quietism, complacency. If one cannot change the course of history or resist the will of God, why bother trying? If the inevitable outcome is desirable, one might call the resulting passivity complacency (“why should we take these vast risks for a conclusion which history will furnish in any case?”); if not desirable, dismay, or perhaps resignation (“why should we risk our lives, and certainly our liberties, in fighting against the regime which kills us, and sends us to Siberia, and maims us, and arrests us, and obstructs us in every way, if it is going to happen anyhow?”).⁹⁶ A passive fatalism that would lead a people to acquiesce to democratic despotism was Tocqueville’s fear; the great nightmare in

⁹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Final Retrospect,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 325. Cf. Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 162.

⁹⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 7.

⁹⁶ Berlin, “Four Lectures on Russian Historicism,” 141–42.

Democracy in America was, in Berlin's eyes, "not oppression but apathy," not tyranny itself but a populace who, enervated and no longer willing to act, would not resist tyranny.⁹⁷

Berlin goes beyond Tocqueville by maintaining that determinism is not identical with fatalism, "which is only one, and not the most plausible, species of the vast deterministic genus."⁹⁸ On the other side are those who think that their actions not only affect the currents of history but are indispensable to it. I will call this second attitude *fanaticism*, or the "tendency on the part of those who desire to change society to believe that the stars in their courses are fighting for them," that "History', or 'social forces', or 'the wave of the future' are with one, bearing one aloft and forward."⁹⁹ While the fatalist is a passive non-agent, the nail hit by history, the fanatic thinks he is the hammer or the agent of history, an angel of God or Providence or Progress or the coming utopia, one whose action is aligned with and indispensable to the unfolding of events. While the fatalist will tend towards passivity or inaction, the fanatic will act so as to bring about or accelerate that which is deemed inevitable.

Among both passive fatalists and the active fanatics, Berlin notes that there are some who find self-satisfaction in seeing the coming destruction that others cannot. In this last group, Berlin includes Hegel and Marx, "two great prophets of destruction," who thought that the world advanced stochastically or in "violent cataclysmic leaps, destructive revolutions which, often with fire and sword, establish a new order upon the ruins of the old."¹⁰⁰ Self-declared realists take satisfaction in their ability to perceive inevitability, often in

⁹⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 661–76; Berlin, "The Thought of de Tocqueville," 201.

⁹⁸ Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 116.

⁹⁹ Berlin, 162; Berlin, *Liberty*, 27; Isaiah Berlin, "A Letter to George Kennan," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 341.

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 112–13.

ways that are contemptuous of ordinary people: “there is a sardonic note (inaudible only to their most benevolent and single-hearted followers) in the words of both these thinkers as they contemplate the discomfiture and destruction of the philistines, the ordinary men and women caught in one of the decisive moments of history.”¹⁰¹ If the dialectical movements of history involve periods of dormancy and then Vesuvian eruptions that destroy entire peoples, “Hegel, like Marx, is on the side of the lava.”¹⁰²

Here, then, is the explanation for the curious phenomenon that Berlin calls *self-realization*, at least as it occurs in philosophies of history. The animating question of Berlin’s essay “From Hope and Fear Set Free” was: does knowledge always liberate?¹⁰³ Berlin concluded that it does not: knowledge may bring about a kind of metaphorical freedom, a “freedom from illusion, fantasy, misdirection of emotions.”¹⁰⁴ But knowledge or internalization of necessity will not increase freedom of choice, for “where there is no antecedent freedom — and no possibility of it — it cannot be increased.”¹⁰⁵ Instead, this kind of knowledge, knowledge of necessity, merely sets one “beyond hope and fear ... and beyond choices too.”¹⁰⁶ The thinker, in “knowing” or truly understanding that which is deemed inevitable, attempts to internalize or identify with these conditions of necessity; he changes himself so as to side with that which he thinks he cannot change. In the context of philosophies of history, this involves the identification of the self with the supposed “inevitable” forces of history: “to be wise is to understand the direction in which the world

¹⁰¹ Berlin, 113.

¹⁰² Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 315; Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 340.

¹⁰³ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 252.

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, 269.

¹⁰⁵ Berlin, 263.

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, 276.

is inexorably moving, to identify oneself with the rising power which ushers in the new world.”¹⁰⁷

In “Two Concepts of Liberty” Berlin calls this process of self-realization “the metaphysical heart of rationalism:”

To understand why things must be as they must be is to will them to be so. Knowledge liberates not by offering us more open possibilities amongst which we can make our choice, but by preserving us from the frustration of attempting the impossible.¹⁰⁸

Self-realization requires the erroneous conflation of “knowledge” of necessity and freedom:

“knowledge and only knowledge liberates, and absolute knowledge liberates absolutely.”¹⁰⁹

Crucially, this self-realization can be achieved whether or not the necessity internalized is true. It is possible for the mind to infinitely extend the bounds of necessity, and universal historical determinism is precisely this extension. Such a view may enable a certain peace of mind, but it does so while leaving humans in a different predicament altogether in that it robs them of agency: “the puppets may be conscious and identify themselves happily with the inevitable process in which they play their parts; but it remains inevitable, and they remain marionettes.”¹¹⁰

Berlin concedes that a belief in determinism may promote certain pro-social behaviors, for it may lead to a humane pity. Advocates of determinism, “by stressing how much narrower is the area of human freedom, and therefore of responsibility, than it was

¹⁰⁷ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 113.

¹⁰⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 190.

¹⁰⁹ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 130.

¹¹⁰ Berlin, 107. John Gray explores and embraces the paradoxes of self-realization in *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom*, First American paperback edition (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016). While much of Gray’s earlier work took inspiration from Berlin, on the question of determinism the two diverge irreconcilably.

believed to be during the ages of scientific ignorance, have taught many admirable lessons in restraint and humility.”¹¹¹ Social science, likewise, may be salutary in that it reminds us that “the scope of human choice is a good deal more limited than we used to suppose; that the evidence at our disposal shows that many of the acts too often assumed to be within the individual’s control are not so.”¹¹² This is especially relevant to the link between responsibility and punishment, as determinism is often invoked to justify “therapeutic rather than penal treatment.”¹¹³ While recognition of the boundedness of human choice is a “salutary reminder to us of our limitations,” a more general deterministic outlook, “when it goes beyond indicating specific obstacles to free choice where examinable evidence for this can be adduced, turns out to rest either on a mythology or on a metaphysical dogma.”¹¹⁴ One must not forget that concepts cannot be changed without secondary effects to related concepts. To render oneself not responsible through the objectification offered by determinism comes at a cost, for it requires the denial of human agency.

The Psychological Cause of Determinism: The Self-negation of Agency

Berlin’s account is richer still, for in addition to thinking through the psychological and political *effects* of a belief in determinism, his account also discusses the likely *causes* of those same beliefs. Given that the assumptions underlying universal historical inevitability are, in Berlin’s eyes, “exceedingly unplausible,” why would anybody think this way?¹¹⁵ Berlin grants that there may be multiple reasons driving the belief in historical inevitability. It might

¹¹¹ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 120.

¹¹² Berlin, 124. “...the frontiers of free choice are a good deal narrower than many men have in the past supposed, and perhaps still erroneously believe...” Berlin, *Liberty*, 27–28.

¹¹³ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 125.

¹¹⁴ Berlin, 155.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, 139, 160.

come from a monistic desire to find that the “whole of experience, past, present and future, actual, possible and unfulfilled, is symmetrically ordered,” to find the universe an intelligible or “seamless whole.”¹¹⁶ It might arise from a “genuine misunderstanding of the philosophical implications of the natural sciences” or a misguided monistic attempt to unify all the sciences into one master science.¹¹⁷ It might result from apophenia, the human tendency to seek patterns even in random noise; the mind “sees” what it wants to see, whether mythical heroes in the constellations of the stars, faces in rock formations, or the likeness of the Virgin Mary on a piece of toast.¹¹⁸ Ever the pluralist, Berlin rejects these forms of monism in language reminiscent of Nietzschean perspectivism: “The same facts can be arranged in more than one single pattern, seen from several perspectives, displayed in many lights, all of them valid, although some will be more suggestive or fertile in one field than in another, or unify many fields in some illuminating fashion, or, alternatively, bring out disparities and open chasms.”¹¹⁹

From among the possible causes, however, Berlin singles out one. He argues that the chief cause of the belief in historical inevitability is a desire to renounce one’s agency in order to find moral absolution:

But principally it seems to me to spring from a desire to resign our responsibility, to cease from judging, provided we ourselves are not judged and, above all, are not compelled to judge ourselves; from a desire to flee for refuge to some vast amoral, impersonal, monolithic whole — nature, or history, or class, or race, or the ‘harsh realities of our time’, or the irresistible evolution of the social structure — that will absorb and integrate us into its

¹¹⁶ Berlin, 155–56.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, 164.

¹¹⁸ Buzz Poole, *Madonna of the Toast: Adventures in Secular Iconography* (West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty Publishers Group UK, 2006).

¹¹⁹ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 156.

limitless, indifferent, neutral texture, which it is senseless to evaluate or criticize, and against which we fight to our certain doom.¹²⁰

Inevitability is, conceptually speaking, connected to the concept of necessity, which in turn is inversely related to responsibility and therefore blameworthiness. One may tug the whole web so as to cause changes in the latter. I will call this process the *self-negation of agency*. The lecture that became “Historical Inevitability” was originally titled “History as an Alibi,” and this earlier title more accurately captures the ways that people use the supposed inevitability of history as an excuse, a justification, a defense against criticism, a conceptual reason for absolution. Inevitability is the alibi “pleaded by those who cannot or do not wish to face the fact of human responsibility, the existence of a limited but nevertheless real area of human freedom.”¹²¹

We do not blame persons for that which they cannot help but be or do. Berlin writes: “it would be stupid as well as cruel to blame me for not being taller than I am, or to regard the colour of my hair or the qualities of my intellect or heart as being due principally to my own free choice; these attributes are as they are through no decision of mine.”¹²² Knowledge of the “inevitable” then serves as a mitigating factor in the moral evaluation of actions: “to know all is to forgive all.”¹²³ To call someone a thief is quite different from calling him a kleptomaniac; justice involves evaluation not only of the actions of persons but also of their intent, their rationality or ability to understand what they do, their capacity to act otherwise.¹²⁴ This connection between freedom and responsibility “rests not on a

¹²⁰ Berlin, 164.

¹²¹ Berlin, 164.

¹²² Berlin, 115.

¹²³ Berlin, 131.

¹²⁴ Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 254.

particular set of moral values (which another culture might reject) but on the particular nexus between descriptive and evaluative concepts which governs the language we use and the thoughts we think.”¹²⁵ Justice and law therefore rest upon a philosophical anthropology; they require that one take a position, implicitly or explicitly, about the extent and limits of human freedom in this metaphysical sense.

Impersonal forces also assuage the anxieties of freedom, for they “divest their victims of all responsibility — from all those moral burdens which men in less enlightened days used to carry with such labor and anguish.”¹²⁶ Choice is not always easy to bear. The thought that one has chosen poorly, or might have chosen differently, brings a psychological weight to human life that is absent in a fully deterministic world: “where there is no choice, there is no anxiety; and a happy release from responsibility.”¹²⁷ Determinism generally, and historical inevitability specifically, lifts this weight: “freedom notoriously involves responsibility, and it is for many spirits a source of welcome relief to lose the burden of both.”¹²⁸

That every evil is justified by its ultimate necessity is the great “sermon” preached not only by Spinoza, Godwin, and Tolstoy but by the fathers of social science, “Condorcet and Henri de Saint-Simon, and their disciple, Auguste Comte.”¹²⁹ Berlin’s use of theological language is not incidental, for historical inevitability functions as both a religious and a secular theodicy. As “we are freed from the sense of personal endeavour” by inevitability, “our sense of guilt and of sin, our pangs of remorse and self-condemnation, are

¹²⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 16.

¹²⁶ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 160.

¹²⁷ Berlin, 160.

¹²⁸ Berlin, 131.

¹²⁹ Berlin, 129.

automatically dissolved” and “original sin is thus transferred to an impersonal plane” where “acts hitherto regarded as wicked or unjustifiable” turn out “no longer wicked but right and good because necessitated by the whole.”¹³⁰ In this manner, narratives of historical inevitability function, to paraphrase Milton, to justify the ways of History to men.

For his insistence on the metaphysical freedom of human beings, Berlin might be called, in theological language, a Pelagian, after the fourth-century British monk and heresiarch Pelagius. The little that is known about Pelagius is reconstructed from the arguments of his theological opponents, including Augustine and Jerome. From these reconstructions, it appears that the Christians of Pelagius’s community were fatalistic, thinking that they could not help but sin, and that this was, at best, a sign of God’s injustice that he would punish those who could not help but do what they did, or, far worse, a sign of God’s wickedness that he would create beings destined to fall. Pelagius in turn emphasized human freedom, minimizing the doctrine of original sin so as to preserve God’s justice and goodness. For ostensibly holding these views, Pelagius was excommunicated in 417. Eric Nelson has argued that liberalism was, from the outset, a Pelagian theodicy, with figures such as Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant all espousing Pelagian beliefs, and that Rawls’s denial of moral desert, given as an argument for equality, was an anti-Pelagian departure from liberalism’s Pelagian roots.¹³¹

Berlin would write of his “Pelagian soul” in a letter to Andrzej Walicki, summarizing his position: “better choose badly than not choose at all, better determine oneself

¹³⁰ Berlin, 128.

¹³¹ Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

disastrously than be determined for by benevolent manipulators.”¹³² Berlin’s rejection of historical inevitability and insistence on the metaphysical freedom of human beings shows his continuity with liberal thinkers before and besides Rawls. Despite this congruence with other Pelagian liberals, Berlin was interested less in justifying the ways of God to men and more in preserving a belief in human agency for the sake of individual choice and political freedom.¹³³ Pelagius and other Pelagian thinkers saw the connection between freedom and responsibility and formed a theodicy so as to preserve the goodness of God; Berlin’s treatment of the same topic points, even if implicitly, in an anti-theological direction.

Berlin’s Liberal Philosophy of History

Berlin concludes “Historical Inevitability” with a summation: “the attempt, therefore, to shuffle off responsibility ... on to some metaphysical machinery which, because it is impersonal, excludes the very idea of moral responsibility, must always be invalid...”¹³⁴ I wish to conclude by arguing that Berlin’s anti-metaphysical position is a philosophy of history in its own right, one that I will call a *liberal philosophy of history*. By dismantling the edifices, metaphysical machinery, and *idées fixes* of philosophers, theologians, and scientists,

¹³² Berlin to Andrzej Walicki, June 26, 1970 in Andrzej Walicki, *Encounters with Isaiah Berlin: Story of an Intellectual Friendship* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 82. See also Ilya P. Winham, “Isaiah Berlin’s Pelagian Soul: Response to Riley,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 338–44; Jonathan Riley, “Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Pelagian Soul’: A Reply to Ilya Winham,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 345–54.

¹³³ Nelson’s account differs from Berlin’s in two important ways. First, Nelson generally implies that these theorists started with the needs and requirements of theology: “for each of these theorists, then, the rationalist question of God’s justice was meaningful and urgent. They were therefore required to seek a theodicy ... human freedom alone could vindicate God’s justice, both punitive and creative.” *The Theology of Liberalism*, 7. Berlin suggests that the causal link goes in the opposite direction: the theological or metaphysical views are the effects and not the causes; the theology is epiphenomenal to the psychological needs of human beings. The wish to find an alibi to absolve oneself of responsibility, or to find a providential future in which one’s cause will be victorious in the end, comes first; then the theology or philosophy of history changes to facilitate this absolution or redemption. Second, while Nelson primarily focuses on the implications of the Pelagian debate for distributive justice, Berlin is more intent on examining its implications for human agency and therefore political action.

¹³⁴ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 157. Cf. Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” 257.

Berlin lays the groundwork for a worldview centered around a belief in the metaphysical freedom of human beings.

Such a worldview, I argue, is rooted in a skeptical distrust of abstractions and the reification that produces them. In the final section of “Historical Inevitability” Berlin repeatedly uses religious language and imagery, for there is “no sharp break between history and mythology; or history and metaphysics.”¹³⁵ Historical inevitability rests upon “a belief in the occult presence of vast impersonal entities ... agencies and forces at large in the world which we have but little power to control or deflect;” these “non-empirical figments” are “all but personified powers both good and bad.”¹³⁶ The modern era is, in Berlin’s eyes, increasingly polytheistic: the social sciences have produced a “panoply of the new divinities,” have “peopled the air with supernatural entities of great power, Neoplatonic and Gnostic spirits, angels and demons who play with us as they will, or, at any rate, make demands on us which, we are told, we ignore at our peril.”¹³⁷ Berlin writes of the “new animism” of the social sciences:

Wars, revolutions, dictatorships, military and economic transformations are apt to be conceived like the genii of some oriental demonology, djinns which, once set free from the jars in which they have been confined for centuries, become uncontrollable, and capriciously play with the lives of men and nations. ...with so luxurious a growth of similes and metaphors, many innocent persons nowadays tend to believe that their lives are dominated not merely by relatively stable, easily identifiable, material factors ... but by even more powerful and sinister, and far less intelligible, factors ... above all, by inexorable ‘societal’ and ‘behavioral’ patterns, to quote but a few sacred words from the barbarous vocabulary of the new mythologies.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 157.

¹³⁶ Berlin, 158–59.

¹³⁷ Berlin, 158–59.

¹³⁸ Berlin, 159; Berlin, *Liberty*, 27.

The target of Berlin's criticism is not those who practice the "patient and useful accumulation of facts and analyses, taxonomy, useful comparative studies, cautious and limited hypotheses" but those who speak of "theoretical constructions, obscured by picturesque metaphors and a bold mythology."¹³⁹ Berlin criticizes not social science itself but those who, by practicing a form of scientism, "perpetuate absurdities in theory and dehumanization in practice."¹⁴⁰

Berlin would readily concede that economists and sociologists fruitfully describe the social world. At their worst, however, they become a new "priesthood" who tell people about "the attributes and habits of their new masters," become figures who, "like the astrologers and soothsayers whom they have succeeded, cast up their eyes to the clouds and speak in immense, unsubstantiated images and similes, in deeply misleading metaphors and allegories, and make use of hypnotic formulae with little regard for experience, or rational argument, or tests of proven reliability."¹⁴¹ At stake is the meaning and goal of the activity of historians. History, Berlin contends, must not only study the behavior of human beings but "motives, purposes, choices, the specifically human experience that belongs to human beings uniquely, and not merely with what happened to them as animate or sentient bodies."¹⁴² Faithful to Vico, Berlin would say that history is not a science of general laws but an art of particulars; it involves not just the "knowing that" of describing human behavior but the

¹³⁹ Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 161.

¹⁴⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 159, 165.

¹⁴² Berlin, *Liberty*, 27.

“knowing why” of beings who can imaginatively comprehend the motives of similar beings.¹⁴³ The art of history is, on Berlin’s telling, itself a form of humanism.

While Berlin waxes poetical and polemical at the end of “Historical Inevitability,” he more carefully qualifies his denunciation of impersonal forces elsewhere in the essay, most especially in a footnote about the danger of metaphors and figures of speech. There, he defines reification as the “mistaking of words for things,” and he suggests that the most notorious cases of it are “those of the State or the Nation, the quasi-personification of which has rightly made philosophers and even plain men uneasy or indignant for over a century.”¹⁴⁴ Despite the perils of the language of abstraction, one should not stray too far in the other direction:

Historical movements exist, and we must be allowed to call them such. Collective acts do occur; societies do rise, flourish, decay, die. Patterns, ‘atmospheres’, complex interrelationships of men or cultures are what they are, and cannot be analysed away into atomic constituents. Nevertheless, to take such expressions so literally that it becomes natural and normal to attribute to them causal properties, active powers, transcendent properties, demands for human sacrifice, is to be fatally deceived by myths. ‘Rhythms’ in history occur, but it is a sinister symptom of one’s condition to speak of them as ‘inexorable’. Cultures possess patterns, and ages spirits; but to explain human actions as their ‘inevitable’ consequences or expressions is to be a victim of misuse of words.¹⁴⁵

Historians and intellectuals must navigate between the “Scylla of populating the world with imaginary powers and dominions” and the “Charybdis of reducing everything to the verifiable behavior of identifiable men and women in precisely denotable places and

¹⁴³ Berlin, *Political Ideas In the Romantic Age*, 260–70. Cf. Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” 164, 180n2, 181n1.

¹⁴⁴ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 106n1. Cf. Berlin, *Liberty*, 26–27; Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the 20th Century*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 87; Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 95.

¹⁴⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 106n1.

times.”¹⁴⁶ Perhaps there have been other ages in which the ship strayed too far towards the Charybdis of particularity. In antiquity, perhaps what was most necessary was a mind that could create and wield ideal forms; the entrance to Plato’s academy supposedly bore the inscription: *may none who are ignorant of geometry enter*. Berlin’s diagnosis for the twentieth century, however, was that the world was erring toward the Scylla of over-abstraction.

Berlin’s inclusion of this caveat also underscores how a liberal philosophy of history differs from a reactionary retreat to the aristocratic histories of heroic individuals. As noted above, Berlin maintained that “history is not mainly a ‘dramatic conflict’ between individual wills.”¹⁴⁷ Tocqueville also sought a new style of history, not an aristocratic one but a democratic one freed from the usual enervating tendencies of that type; in the final lines of *Democracy in America*, he writes not just of the freedom of persons but also of peoples.¹⁴⁸ Mikhailovsky too, in “Heroes and Crowd,” developed a phenomenology of groups, of the ways that crowds could both influence and be influenced by individuals.¹⁴⁹ All three continually recognized the ways that groups, while useful abstractions, are composites made up of individuals. These thinkers were not interested in going backwards but in moving forwards, in finding ways to think and speak about collective actors without succumbing to the perils of reification.

What, in conclusion, would a liberal philosophy of history entail? I have argued here that it would involve an understanding of *reification*, a process that involves the *subjectification*

¹⁴⁶ Berlin, 106n1. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, “Logical Translation,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 102.

¹⁴⁷ Berlin, *Liberty*, 27. Cf. Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 97.

¹⁴⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 676.

¹⁴⁹ Nikolay Konstantinovich Mikhaylovsky, *Geroi i Tolpa. Izbrannye Trudy Po Sotsiologii [Heroes and Crowd: Collected Works in Sociology]*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 1998).

of abstract personal forces and the *objectification* or dehumanization of human beings; it would involve attention to the ways that the logic of inevitability leads down two paths, *fatalism* or *fanaticism*, as persons either struggle against or flow with that which is deemed inevitable; it would require an awareness of the *self-negation of agency*, or the tendency to invoke inevitability as an alibi to absolve oneself of responsibility. In general, it would recognize the ways that people project their own needs onto history and the likely side-effects, intended and unintended, of this projection.

While Berlin did not explicitly spell out further implications, I argue that he nonetheless gestured towards them. A liberal philosophy of history would mean resisting the desire to find an end, whether a *telos* or *finis*, in time. Karl Löwith, in his 1949 book *Meaning in History*, argued that the modern notion of progress is Christian in derivation due to its assumption of directionality and purpose in history but anti-Christian in its rejection of redemption. Löwith defined the philosophy of history as “a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning.”¹⁵⁰ Yet nearly every word in Löwith’s definition is burdened with the kind of metaphysical baggage that Berlin found objectionable. Why assume that history is universal or *nomothetic*, bound by rules or principles, capable of systemization, directed or with direction, imbued with an ultimate meaning? As for a Hegelian or Fukuyaman end of history, Timothy Snyder put it best in his introduction to *The Sense of Reality*: “if we want to be free, history cannot end.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1.

¹⁵¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), xv.

The idea of progress, at least in its teleological and inevitable forms, must be jettisoned. We may wish for such improvement, undoubtedly. But the human condition remains precarious. Progress may be subject to reversal. Amelioration will be the fruit of tireless work by human hands, will arise from the continual labor of those who, succumbing to neither complacency nor despair, remain diligent and vigilant when faced with the openness of the future. Berlin's call for an attitude of responsibility shows his continuity with existentialist writers; his rejection of meta-narratives in history anticipates that of post-modern and anti-foundationalist thinkers. On this point Berlin resembles Benedetto Croce, whose work Berlin reviewed in 1952, contemporaneous with the writing of "Historical Inevitability:" both men, inspired by Vico, rejected scientific approaches to history; both were skeptical of reification; for both, history is a story of liberty.¹⁵²

A liberal attitude towards history would also require abandoning historical messianism. Heidegger thought that the rise of technology had obscured man's connection to Being, and that, in light of this withdrawal, all that could be done was a kind of thinking and poetizing, a contemplative preparation for a new revelation. Heidegger's quietism is epitomized by the line that became the title of his 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*: "only a god can save us."¹⁵³ Contra Heidegger, in Berlin's liberal philosophy of history humanity is the revealer of Being, and the appropriate attitude is more in line with the words of the

¹⁵² Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans. Sylvia Sprigge (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000). In his review of Croce's *My Philosophy*, Berlin lauds Croce's rejection of reification and abstract forces in history but criticizes him for hypocritically advancing a form of idealism that, in Berlin's eyes, indulged in that same reification. Isaiah Berlin, "Eminent Poseur, Review of Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy: And Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time*, Ed. R. Klibansky, Trans. E. F. Carr (London, [1949]: Allen & Unwin)," *Mind* 61, no. 244 (1952): 574–78.

¹⁵³ Martin Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us": *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, 1st MIT Press ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), 107.

mother of Chris Gardner, whose journey from homeless father to stockbroker is recounted in the 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happyness*: “the cavalry ain’t coming.”¹⁵⁴ In an age of newfound technological power, and the potential nuclear and climatological catastrophes that this power enables, the imperative is responsibility.¹⁵⁵

This is Berlin’s challenge, the same one issued, if not always clearly or consistently, by Croce, Tocqueville, and Mikhailovsky. I will conclude by quoting Nietzsche, from the same aphorism quoted above. Nietzsche and Berlin may initially seem worlds apart, for Nietzsche despised the liberalism that Berlin championed. Nonetheless, the two men shared a skepticism about the misuse of abstractions. Nietzsche ends section 109 of *The Gay Science*, in which he warns against speaking of regularities, laws, and purposes in nature, with the following questions:

When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to ‘naturalize’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?¹⁵⁶

What Nietzsche asks about nature, Berlin enjoins us, in the end, to ask about history.

¹⁵⁴ *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2006).

¹⁵⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁵⁶ Section 109 in Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 168–69. Cf. section 337, The “humaneness” of the future, Nietzsche, 267–68. Cf. Berlin’s remark: “To confuse our own constructions and inventions with eternal laws or divine decrees is one of the most fatal delusions of men...” in Isaiah Berlin, “Georges Sorel,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 382.

3. Subjects and not Objects: The Anatomy of Technocratic Paternalism

It is the denial to human beings of the possibility of choice, the getting them into one's power, the twisting them this way and that in accordance with one's whim, the destruction of their personality by creating unequal moral terms between the gaoler and the victim, whereby the gaoler knows what he is doing, and why, and plays upon the victim, i.e. treats him as a mere object and not as a subject whose motives, views, intentions have any intrinsic weight whatever — by destroying the very possibility of his having views, notions of a relevant kind — that is what cannot be borne at all.

— Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, 13 February 1951¹

“Aristotle was born, spent his life in philosophizing, and died.”² So began a series of lectures on the ancient thinker given the epithets “The First Teacher,” “The Master,” or simply “The Philosopher.” Such a succinct biography was sufficient, it was implied, for in the case of certain towering figures it is their thought, and not their life, that mattered. It would not be wholly unjust to say, similarly: Isaiah Berlin was born, spent nearly his entire life at Oxford philosophizing, and died. The one exceptional period in Berlin's life, other than his childhood in the Russian empire, was during the Second World War. Berlin served in New York for the British Information Services in 1940-1941 and then in the British Embassy in Washington; his job was, at first, to get America into the war, and later, to report to the Foreign Office on American opinion and the workings of government. Berlin, a natural socialite with a love for people, parties, and gossip, flourished in this diplomatic role.

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 339.

² “Many, many years ago, I attended a series of lectures on Aristotle's philosophy. The lecturer began his exposition as follows: ‘as regards Aristotle himself, as regards the circumstances and course of his life, suffice it to say: Aristotle was born, spent his life philosophizing, and died.’” Jacob Klein, “Aristotle: An Introduction,” in *Lectures and Essays*, by Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985), 171. I encountered this anecdote and reference in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett, Paperback (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), vii.

As the war concluded, Berlin spent six months working in the Moscow embassy and traveled to Leningrad, where he had his fateful evening with the poet Anna Akhmatova, an encounter that would leave both transfigured. In 1946 Berlin returned to Oxford where he would remain in a professional capacity for the rest of his life.

Berlin's visit to Akhmatova in 1945 was, in Michael Ignatieff's words, a reunion of "two Russian cultures — one in external exile, the other in internal exile."³ Berlin was born in Riga in 1909 but had spent part of his childhood in Leningrad (then Petrograd) before his family emigrated to England in 1921. Akhmatova, a famous pre-revolutionary poet twenty years his senior, had been barred from publishing; she was watched with suspicion by a regime that could neither trust nor eliminate her. The visit lasted fourteen hours, all through the night, yet Berlin insisted that their rapturous connection remained wholly intellectual.⁴ Akhmatova told him of her first husband, Nikolay Gumilyov, who had been executed by the Soviet secret police (her second husband, Nikolay Punin, would later die in a gulag); Berlin was deeply moved but hid his emotions as she recited some of her poetry; they debated the merits of Pushkin, Chekov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy; they confessed about their past loves and deepest longings.⁵ They were two intellectuals in possession of a shared cultural heritage, soon to be separated by an Iron Curtain. Afterwards, the KGB, thinking Berlin an English spy, wiretapped Akhmatova's rooms and persecuted her family.

Akhmatova immortalized Berlin in "Poem without a Hero," writing of her visit with "the

³ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 156.

⁴ Ignatieff writes: "In fact, they hardly touched. He remained on one side of the room, she on the other. Far from being a Don Juan, he was a sexual neophyte alone in the apartment of a fabled seductress, who had enjoyed deep romantic attachments with half a dozen supremely talented men. She was already investing their meeting with mystical historical and erotic significance, while he fought shy of these undercurrents and kept a safe intellectual distance." Ignatieff, 160.

⁵ Ignatieff, 148–69.

guest from the future;” Berlin, for his part, called their meeting the most important event of his life.⁶

Berlin’s wartime service also introduced him to leading American policymakers in the State Department. Among them was George Kennan, the American diplomat who wrote the 1946 “long telegram” and 1947 “X Article” outlining the strategy of containment against the Soviet Union.⁷ Ignatieff recounts a remarkable episode involving the two men: in 1949 Berlin delivered a lecture at Mount Holyoke College on “Democracy, Communism, and the Individual,” one of his earliest statements criticizing monism and defending pluralism.⁸ The *New York Times* article covering the lecture, however, ambiguously and provocatively suggested that Berlin was urging American students to study Marx, downplaying Berlin’s critical attitude.⁹ Wary of being targeted as a communist sympathizer during the post-war Red Scare, Berlin asked Kennan to write to the FBI on his behalf, vouching for him. Kennan obliged, writing in his letter to his FBI contact that Berlin was “probably the greatest and wisest student of Soviet affairs in the whole Anglo-Saxon world.”¹⁰

While Kennan’s words surely evince the embellishment of a friend, Berlin’s identity as a Russian-born Jew living in England did allow him to straddle this cultural divide.¹¹

⁶ György Dalos and Andrea Dunai, *The Guest from the Future: Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin*, revised and expanded edition (London: John Murray, 1998).

⁷ X, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1946): 566–566.

⁸ A synopsis of this lecture can be found online. Isaiah Berlin, “Democracy, Communism, and the Individual” (Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, 2004), <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/demcomind.pdf>.

⁹ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 192.

¹⁰ Kennan to Loach, 5 July 1949. The episode is recounted in Ignatieff, 192–93.

¹¹ Berlin acknowledged Kennan’s esteem for him in a letter, Berlin to Kennan, 23 June 1958: “...you make me blush too violently by your praise: I have no self-confidence, I am ashamed of virtually all that I do, and words such as yours (not that anyone has said anything like this to me before) make me wonder if I have taken you in in some dreadful way — concealed my deficiencies too successfully — that in itself being a yet further proof of my shortcomings — & yet, of course, I am not only profoundly moved & grateful, but most immensely pleased.” Henry Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, n.d., 88, https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/e/l2supp.pdf.

Berlin's first major work, and the only monograph published during his lifetime, was a biography of Marx.¹² Tolstoy, Herzen, Bakunin, Turgenev, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Mikhailovsky, and other "Russian thinkers" were recurring figures in his essays.¹³ Berlin extensively treated the Russian preoccupation with history and historicism: in a series of lectures, he argued that Russian intellectuals desired to find a teleological meaning in history; yearning for a national purpose, they asked "whither Russia?" and sought an understanding of the required stages of industrial development and, therefore, revolution.¹⁴ Berlin's love for the history of ideas similarly led him to look to the past for answers to contemporary problems. He too was, at least in this sense, also a "Russian thinker."

Berlin's Anti-Anatomical Humanism

This third chapter is a conceptual anatomy of technocratic paternalism. I specifically use the word anatomy (*aná*, "up" and *témmō*, "I cut, incise") because Berlin links paternalism to the division of the self into sub-personal components. My goal, in keeping with the thesis of this dissertation, is to trace Berlin's account of the possible ontological transformations and deformations of the self, especially those rhetorical strategies used by authoritarians in order to manipulate persons not just in the name of their *good* but ostensibly in the name of their *freedom*. Other scholars have discussed Berlin's anti-paternalism, especially in the context of the ideologies of the twentieth century; Joshua Cherniss's work is especially fruitful for

¹² Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*, ed. Henry Hardy, Fifth edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (London, England: Penguin Books, 2013).

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "Four Lectures on Russian Historicism," ed. Henry Hardy (Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, n.d.), https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/singles/bib297.pdf.

providing a sort of glossary of terms such as managerialism, planning, technocracy, conditioning, and scientism.¹⁵

My focus is slightly different. I will not provide a comprehensive account of Soviet communism, or Nazi fascism, or American managerial bureaucracy in the twentieth century. Instead, my aim is more general and conceptual. Berlin provides, I argue, a roadmap of certain assumptions about the nature of the world and of human beings that lead toward paternalism. This same path has been retraced at a number of points in history. Just as one can manipulate the concept of liberty by changing the self, especially one's ideas of what is desirable (chapter 1) and possible (chapter 2), it is a *conceptual* characteristic of liberty that a person can be coerced in the name of "freedom" provided that the self being coerced is distinct from the self being liberated. Berlin therefore offers a conceptual critique of political theories that employ a sub-personal or divided self on the grounds that these lead to a dangerous equivocation about freedom.

I wish to show that, for Berlin, paternalism was a perennial political possibility. Twentieth century varieties of totalitarian paternalism were not unique or unprecedented but had their antecedents in other historical periods. Accordingly, I will draw from a wide variety of sources. In addition to Berlin's 1949 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," and the correspondence with George Kennan it generated, I will draw from a series of lectures broadcast on the BBC in the autumn of 1952 and published in 2002 as the collection *Freedom and Its Betrayal*. In the six lectures-turned-essays of this series, Berlin

¹⁵ Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, First edition, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 4; Joshua L. Cherniss, "Against 'Engineers of Human Souls': Paternalism, 'Managerialism' and the Development of Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 3 (2014): 565–88.

sought to uncover the authoritarian legacy of Helvétius, Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon, and Maistre, six thinkers who “all discussed the problem of human liberty” but whose doctrines, in the end, “are inimical to what is normally meant, at any rate, by individual liberty.”¹⁶ I will draw primarily from the lectures on Helvétius, Saint-Simon, Maistre, and Rousseau. The purpose of this chapter is to trace how this third transformation of the self, in which persons are divided into sub-personal entities, facilitates the most egregious forms of paternalism, those that involve dehumanization and the treatment of human beings as inert objects rather than as conscious subjects.

Berlin’s road to technocratic paternalism has four stages. First, there is the notion that the goals sought by human beings are fixed, whether by Nature, or God, or History, or some other force. If the ends of human life are fixed, then there is little or no room for individual choice in values. Under such an assumption, politics shifts from involving deliberation, discussion, or dissent about ends to the discovery and implementation of means to achieve ends that are assumed to be universal; all political problems then collapse into technical problems, and political philosophy morphs from a theoretical discipline to an applied science. This first transformation flies in the face of Berlin’s value pluralism and is indicative of the monism that he so stridently rejected.

The second assumption is that there is such a thing as political knowledge, of either the “true” ends of politics or of the effective means to achieve those ends, and that some people have this knowledge and others do not. Etymologically, “paternalism” evokes the

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 5.

vast gap in knowledge between parent and child: persons can be sorted into those who know and those who do not, elite and mass, the harbingers of progress and those who must be dragged into the future, the visionary sculptor and the recalcitrant clay or marble to be shaped. Disparities in knowledge may indeed exist, but there are several ways to address them: one might educate persons, reason with them, persuade them. If these softer or less coercive strategies are not successful, however, the reformer will be tempted to reach for more extreme measures. Berlin thought that the rise of communism was the result of a growing cynicism among humanitarian liberals, cynicism generated by the insufficiency of these softer forms of power.

The third idea that Berlin ties to paternalism is the division of the self. For the purposes of this chapter and for a conceptual analysis of liberty, this transformation is most decisive. Instead of considering a person as a unit, the reformer comes to divide the “self” into sub-components, into two or more parts: into the actual self and the ideal self, or the present (ignorant) self and the future (enlightened) self, or the rational (human) self and the appetitive (animal) self. Through this stratagem, the reformer claims to act in service of one part of a person at the expense of another part. Berlin thought that this fission was benign when it remained wholly psychological; in politics, however, it often led to coercion:

“similarly (the fatal transition from individual to social concepts is almost imperceptible) the higher elements in society — the better educated, the more rational, those who ‘possess the highest insight of their time and people’ — may exercise compulsion to rationalize the

irrational section of society.”¹⁷ These sub-divisions gradually shift from psychological divisions within a single person to political divisions between groups within the body politic.

Fourth and finally, the reformer comes to view those to be reformed as inhuman. In this case, dehumanization need not involve the likening of humans to animals (though this may also occur) but their reduction, more generally, to entities without properties of mind. Through this process, paternalists transform persons from reasoning and self-moving *subjects* into inert *objects* to be prodded, nudged, manipulated, coerced. Specifically, a recalcitrant citizen’s “external” or “false” self is cast as an object to be shaped in the name of the interests of their “inner” or “true” self. The paternalist gradually minimizes the former to a vanishing point: the “true” or *hypothetical* self is magnified and given priority despite any protests of the actual or *empirical* self. The result is that the reformer can, with a clearer conscience, dominate persons in the name of some abstract idea of who they are and what they should want.

Ultimately, Berlin offers a critique of paternalism on the grounds that it involves a hollow, decrepit, and corrupt idea of what it means to be human: “all forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them, shaping them against their will to your own pattern, all thought-control and conditioning, is, therefore, a denial of that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate.”¹⁸ In this respect Berlin does not depart from the Kantian notion that persons are distinct from the rest of the matter in the universe and ought to be treated as ends in themselves. Berlin’s theoretical contribution in this area is his recognition of the ways that the sub-division of the self allows paternalists to justify their coercion not

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

¹⁸ Berlin, 184.

just in the name of the *good* of those coerced but in the name of their *freedom*. The metaphysical fission of the self is an ontological shift that, like those examined in the previous two chapters, leads to equivocation, to scenarios where coercion is equated with freedom, to the dangerous absurdity of thinking that people can be “forced to be free.”¹⁹

Berlin and Kennan’s Liberal Ethos

In 1949 Berlin was invited to write an article for the mid-century issue of *Foreign Affairs*. His essay, titled “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” traces, in broad strokes, the intellectual trends that preceded Stalinist communism and Nazi fascism. Berlin thought these ideologies grew out of, and were reactions against, two dominant intellectual movements in the nineteenth century, “humanitarian individualism and romantic nationalism.”²⁰ These two paradigms, like others, rested upon an account of the fundamental nature of humanity, of what it meant to be a human being:

Either he is a creature free and naturally good, but hemmed in and frustrated by obsolete or corrupt or sinister institutions masquerading as saviours, protectors and repositories of sacred traditions; or he is a being within limits, but never wholly, free, and to some degree, but never entirely, good, and consequently unable to save himself by his own wholly unaided efforts; and therefore rightly seeking salvation within the great frameworks — States, Churches, unions.²¹

Whether deliverance was to come through education or institutions, the common thread, Berlin thought, was the idea that “the problems of both individuals and societies could be solved if only the forces of intelligence and of virtue could be made to prevail over ignorance and wickedness.”²²

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “On the Social Contract,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2011), chap. I.8.

²⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the 20th Century*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.

²¹ Berlin, 60.

²² Berlin, 59.

This faith in rationalism, Berlin argued, a faith shared by nineteenth-century liberals, socialists, and conservatives alike, was shaken by the heirs of the romantic movement. Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud suggested that the springs of human action lay in darker, more obscure regions. In their wake, liberal optimism deteriorated into skepticism and, eventually, into outright cynicism: “education, rationalist propaganda, even legislation were perhaps not always, or everywhere, quite enough.”²³ The humanitarian goal remained, but what was needed was a change in the means, especially a new political science that would achieve that goal:

In a sense Communism is doctrinaire humanitarianism driven to an extreme in the pursuit of effective offensive and defensive methods. No movement at first sight seems to differ more sharply from liberal reformism than does Marxism, yet the central doctrines — human perfectibility, the possibility of creating a harmonious society by a natural means, the belief in the compatibility (indeed the inseparability) of liberty and equality — are common to both.²⁴

Lenin’s politics of military discipline, his call for an elite vanguard party acting in the interest of the proletariat and providing them with political consciousness, Berlin thought, reflected this mixture of pre-existing utopian ends with new means called for by a rising cynicism about rationalism.

If the vast bulk of human beings are not rational, are not capable of understanding what it is they truly want and how to achieve it, cannot be persuaded via argument, then education can no longer be, as it was throughout most of history, open-ended inquiry about fundamental questions. Instead, the reformers must proceed by “obliterating the questions themselves.”²⁵ Marx himself was a genuine questioner, Berlin insisted, but communist states,

²³ Berlin, 62.

²⁴ Berlin, 68.

²⁵ Berlin, 76.

ironically enough, could no longer accommodate such questioning.²⁶ Instead, the flock of humanity would need shepherds: human needs, assumed to be fixed and unchanging, would be met by experts. Conflicts within the individual were construed as pathological; disagreements within the political community were viewed as perilous to the smooth organization of society along industrial lines. Censorship and the enforcement of orthodoxy came to be endorsed not just by reactionaries or enemies of individual freedom but by self-proclaimed progressives. Gradually, the “repression of the discontented,” achieved through the “perpetual tightening of discipline,” balloons and “grows to be a hideous end in itself.”²⁷ Overall, Berlin’s essay emphasizes the well-intentioned or utopian origins of twentieth-century totalitarian ideology and the slow slide, step by step, into horror.

In April 1950, Kennan wrote to Berlin with praise for the article but slight disagreement. Kennan wished to emphasize the “weakness and fallaciousness” and “ultimate impossibility” of modern totalitarianism.²⁸ He wrote of the growing hollowness of the Soviet state, which had severed the “organic relationship” between regime and citizen: “people acquiesce, but do not believe; and around the central conspiratorial group there grows a great political loneliness — a loneliness ominous to the point of despair.”²⁹ Kennan noted that the party, once the revolutionary vanguard, had withered into a “a glorified *Beamtenbund*” (“official association”) in which insiders self-interestedly sought not the good of the state but personal “security and more rapid promotion.”³⁰ He also likened communism to a plague,

²⁶ “That the disciples of those who first exposed the idolatry of ideas frozen into oppressive institutions — Fourier, Feuerbach and Marx — should be the most ferocious supporters of the new forms of ‘reification’ and ‘dehumanisation’ is indeed an irony of history.” Berlin, 86–87.

²⁷ Berlin, 89, 91.

²⁸ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” 13, 15.

²⁹ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, 17. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, A Harvest Book (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

³⁰ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” 17.

with the implication that such a state could not endure: Nazi Germany, Kennan avowed, was destroyed by external forces before its cancerous corruption could run its course; the Soviet Union, he thought, would soon collapse due to its vacuity.

Yet Kennan also suggested that the Soviets were right about one thing: the modern world had brought about a new relationship between elite and mass. The great horror of modern totalitarianism was the manipulation of persons using the tools of psychology: “this taking advantage of the helpless corner of man’s psychic structure — is the original sin.”³¹ The error of totalitarian paternalists was thinking that they could shape men when they themselves “*are* emphatically only men” with no “Archimedian ‘place to stand on’ — outside and above this world or malleable human frailty, a platform from which they can intervene as outsiders in the world or the human subconscious.”³² While Kennan abhorred the exploitation of the irrational side of human beings through propaganda and advertising, he thought Americans were more amenable to central planning, which he thought might be “conducted with methods characterized by a due humility in the sense of a recognition of our mortal weaknesses and susceptibility to error.”³³ Nature, Kennan reasoned, had set the ends, had prescribed the rules for human societies; the difference between technocratic utopia and dystopia was a difference of “methodology and not of aim.”³⁴

Berlin did not reply for almost ten months, until February of 1951. Berlin stressed that Kennan’s letter had moved him profoundly, and that he “read it and re-read it,” searching in vain to craft a suitable reply.³⁵ In his response, Berlin walked a fine line between

³¹ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, 15.

³² Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, 14.

³³ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, 18.

³⁴ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, 18.

³⁵ Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 336.

acknowledging points of agreement and pushing back against Kennan's optimism about the speed of Soviet disintegration and the goodness of technocratic or managerial politics. Berlin remained skeptical about a quick collapse: "I do not believe that the corrosive force from inside will work away at the rate which you, more hopefully, anticipate."³⁶ Berlin also rejected Kennan's theological framing of Soviet communism as a plague or scourge or as something wholly alien to other nations:

But that in the end the worm would eat them I doubt no more than you; but whereas you say that is an isolated evil, a monstrous scourge sent to try us, not connected with what goes on elsewhere, I cannot help but seeing it as an extreme and distorted but only too typical form of some general attitude of mind from which our own countries are not exempt.³⁷

Totalitarianism, Berlin thought, was neither an evil sent by God nor something unique to a specific historical or cultural period; instead, totalitarianism was a perennial danger, an ever-present possibility within the human experience.

Berlin's 1951 letter to Kennan is a brilliant testament to the influence of Kant on his thinking, and Berlin scholars have come to view it as a credo of Berlin's anti-paternalism. There are a staggering number of eminently quotable passages from this single letter; I will mention just a few. Berlin affirmed their mutual revulsion at paternalism and "tampering" with human beings:

... Western civilization has rested upon the principle that, whatever else was permitted or forbidden, the one heinous act which would destroy the world was ... tampering with human beings so as to make them behave in a way which, if they knew what they were doing, or what its consequences were likely to be, would make them recoil with horror and disgust.³⁸

³⁶ Berlin, 343.

³⁷ Berlin, 343.

³⁸ Berlin, 337.

The Kantian idea that humans are ends in themselves presupposes “the capacity to choose what to do, and what to be, however narrow the limits within which this choice may lie.”³⁹

Berlin also suggested that authentic choice was admirable, had a certain “aesthetic splendor” even when achieved in the name of ends that one did not personally hold:

...those human beings are a credit to their kind who do not let themselves be pushed too far by the forces of nature or history, either passively or by glorying in their own impotence; and we idealize only those who have purposes for which they accept responsibility, on which they stake something, and at times everything; living consciously and bravely for whatever they think good, i.e. worth living, and, in the last resort, dying for.⁴⁰

The romantics, Berlin argued, had turned dedication to a cause, however ill-fated or misguided, into a good: the romantic ideal was the self-expression of a tortured but authentic artist like Beethoven or the “integrity, devotion, self-fulfillment, self-direction” of a true believer like Luther.⁴¹

Given this primacy of authenticity and choice in the liberal ethos, persons must not be treated “like pieces of clay with no purpose of their own” but as subjects capable of choice:

...the one thing which no utilitarian paradise, no promise of eternal harmony in the future within some vast organic whole will make us accept is the use of human beings as mere means — the doctoring of them until they are made to do what they do, not for the sake of the purposes which are their purposes, fulfilment of hopes which however foolish or desperate are at least their own, but for reasons which only we, the manipulators, who freely twist them for our purposes, can understand. What horrifies one about Soviet or Nazi practice is not merely the suffering and the cruelty ... no; what turns one inside out, and is indescribable, is the spectacle of one set of persons who so tamper and ‘get at’ others that the others do their will without

³⁹ Berlin, 337.

⁴⁰ Berlin, 338.

⁴¹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 68.

knowing what they are doing; and in this lose their status as free human beings, indeed as human beings at all.⁴²

Musing about the etymology of paternalism, Berlin offhandedly suggested that, if pushed to the extreme, this anti-paternalist doctrine would bring even the education of children into question.⁴³ While Berlin likened the “moulding” of children without their consent to “temporary enslavement,” he acknowledged that most people considered it a “necessary evil.”⁴⁴ Communists and Fascists, however, spoke of “educating” not only children but entire nations; Berlin insisted that this was a specious analogy because peoples and nations are “not individuals and still less children.”⁴⁵

The trouble with “necessary evils” is that they can be used to justify all sorts of horrors on consequentialist grounds. As the adage goes: “to make an omelette, one must break a few eggs.” Berlin turned to Dostoevsky for the fundamental argument against such a rough or “omelette” consequentialism: “When, in the famous passage, Ivan Karamazov rejects the worlds upon worlds of happiness which may be bought at the price of the torture to death of one innocent child, what can utilitarians, even the most civilised and humane, say to him?”⁴⁶ For Berlin, the utilitarian conclusion, that the torture of a single innocent child may be justified if it brings about some greater good, was unthinkable. Berlin, like Ivan, “would rather return the ticket,” and for liberals like Berlin, “Ivan Karamazov cannot be

⁴² Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 341, 339.

⁴³ I have explored this same question in greater detail in my (currently unpublished) paper “What’s Wrong With School Choice? The Limits of Parental Authority and the Separation of Educational Power.”

⁴⁴ Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 341–42. Cf. Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 193–98.

⁴⁵ Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 342.

⁴⁶ Berlin, 338.

totally exorcised; he speaks for us all.”⁴⁷ Berlin’s liberalism is explicitly anti-consequentialist, at least in this rough or crude sense:

For we, i.e. those who join with us, are more concerned with making people free than making them happy; we would rather that they choose badly than not at all; because we believe that unless they choose they cannot be either happy or unhappy in any sense in which those conditions are worth having; the very notion of ‘worth having’ presupposes the choice of ends, a system of free preferences; and an undermining of *them* is what strikes us with such cold terror...⁴⁸

One must lower one’s sights about the aims of politics. In their pursuit of a distant utopian goal, “omelette” consequentialists come to violate persons, and this leads not to utopia but to the atrocities, brutalities, and inhumanities that are rightly regarded as the greatest of evils.

Berlin’s letter is such a staggering summary of his ethical and political views, I argue, because Berlin saw Kennan as a professed liberal who was in danger of losing his faith.

Berlin’s professed excitement about Kennan’s letter appears genuine; his slow reply, however, is suggestive of more than just procrastination. If one reads between the lines of Berlin’s cordial reply, it becomes apparent that Berlin thought that Kennan’s skepticism of *laissez-faire*, while not entirely unjustified, might lead to more than just flirtation with central planning and set him down a path toward radically illiberal conclusions.⁴⁹ Kennan, like the

⁴⁷ Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” 338.

⁴⁸ Berlin, “A Letter to George Kennan,” 342. One might object, saying that all ethical theories merely appeal, in the end, to consequences, and that deontology, virtue ethics, or other frameworks are themselves consequentialist. However, there are still distinctions to be made between these varieties. Berlin, in general, seems concerned about avoiding the bad more than pursuing the good; in this sense his view may be compatible with negative or rule consequentialism. Samuel Scheffler, ed., *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ Kennan would write to Berlin about his skepticism of *laissez-faire* and openness to central planning again, Kennan to Berlin, 5 March 1959: “[about America] ... this 175 million people, stumbling thoughtlessly into self-indulgence, bad habits, decadence and political apathy — your cogent words about the evils of paternalism fill me with despair. I fully agree that there are natural limits beyond which power must never go; but if some men are not to do the thinking for others, I despair of where we shall get. The effect of a total *laissez-faire* is ultimately to create conditions which limit the possibilities open for the individual no less cruelly than do the strictures of a benevolent despot. No single human will has said that I shall be deprived of servants, or restricted for purposes of transportation to the inferior device of the automobile, or shall put up with the evils

humanitarian liberals of the nineteenth century, was beginning to succumb to cynicism: he abhorred the means employed by the Nazi and Soviet regimes but despaired at the sight of human ignorance; he found himself drawn towards the rational organization of society. Berlin takes on the role of a spiritual advisor: he employed the Socratic strategy of using first-person plural statements, those “we believes,” in order to reaffirm their shared creed.⁵⁰ Kennan mistakenly thought of totalitarianism as residing “out there,” as an external evil, embodied in a specific nation and historical moment, something alien to America or Britain. Berlin thought that, in actuality, the potential for totalitarianism was lurking in Kennan himself, indeed, in all of us: as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”⁵¹ Berlin saw certain tendencies in Kennan’s letter that, while perhaps harmless initially and in isolation, were nonetheless the first steps toward the kind of politics that caused them both to shudder.

of a permanent inflation, or be dependent for my bread and butter on a cultural life dominated by the advertisers and the mass media. Yet these are all requirements which the development of American society, under the law of laissez-faire, places upon me. Could the decisions of a Frederick the Great or even a modern Salazar (provided only he recognised the natural and decent limits of power you have defined) be less enlightened than these blind workings of a society out of control?” Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” 90–91.

⁵⁰ Socrates, as depicted by Plato, often reframed a discussion so that he and an interlocutor who formerly disagreed with him would respond, as a pair, to objections of a hypothetical third-party, often a famous poet or sophist. The *Symposium* contains a glaring example of interlocutor substitution: Socrates, after reaching *aporia* in his discussion with Agathon, takes the dialectical position of Agathon and introduces a new, perhaps entirely fictional character, Diotima, to play the role of the Socratic questioner. This substitution allows the dialogue to continue while sparing Agathon the potential embarrassment of having his argument refuted by the *elenchus*. *Symposium* 201d. Cf. *Republic* 335e.

⁵¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (Harper & Row, 1974), 168.

The Ends and Means of Politics

In the introduction to this dissertation, I traced how Berlin's approach to the history of ideas led him to evaluate the models, concepts, and categories used by humans to make sense of their world. Most academic disciplines or areas of human inquiry ask questions that are either empirical (physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology) or formal (mathematics, logic, heraldry, chess). Philosophy, however, deals with questions that are neither empirical nor formal; disputes about the meaning of concepts are "irreducibly philosophical."⁵² In his essay "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" Berlin elaborates on the implications of this view:

If we ask the Kantian question 'In what kind of world is political philosophy possible?' the answer must be 'Only in a world where ends collide.' ... In a society dominated by a single goal ... no serious questions about political ends or values could arise, only empirical ones about the most effective paths to the goal.⁵³

Political philosophy, then, "can be pursued consistently only in a pluralist, or potentially pluralist, society."⁵⁴

Throughout history, a number of human groups have been organized around one end or one overriding purpose. Some people live in monastic communities dedicated to meditation or the glory of God; others live a life of rigid military discipline; others band together for commercial or entrepreneurial purposes. Under monism, "all that would matter would be to find the right roads to the attainment of the universally accepted end."⁵⁵ Berlin qualifies this statement in two ways, acknowledging, first, that even in monistic societies there are still secondary ends, such that even monistic societies are not wholly monolithic;

⁵² Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 195.

⁵³ Berlin, 195.

⁵⁴ Berlin, 196.

⁵⁵ Berlin, 196.

and second, that even if people agree on an ultimate end they may hold differing interpretations of the meaning of that end or how to attain it. Undoubtedly, there are circumstances in which having a clearly defined end or purpose is extremely advantageous. Open-ended questioning may not be very helpful in “battles, surgical operating rooms, revolutions.”⁵⁶ Totalitarian regimes, however, “represent all situations as critical emergencies, demanding ruthless elimination of all goals, interpretations, forms of behaviour ... which calls for ends and means so narrow and clearly definable that it is easy to impose sanctions for failing to pursue them.”⁵⁷

In monist societies, those with a single dominant model or ideological foundation, politics can only be an applied science. Despite all of their differences, on this point Berlin is similar to Leo Strauss, who drew a distinction between political thought and political philosophy. Strauss argued that all political philosophy was political thought, but not all political thought was political philosophy, for “a political thinker who is not a philosopher is primarily interested in, or attached to, a specific order or policy; the political philosopher is primarily interested in, or attached to, the truth.”⁵⁸ Strauss’s non-philosophical political theorists are Berlin’s mercenary political theorists in monist societies who, like engineers or lawyers, are tasked with finding and applying technical solutions or arguments to ends that are assumed and unquestioned.

⁵⁶ Berlin, 198.

⁵⁷ Berlin, 198–99.

⁵⁸ Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 12. For an extended comparison of Strauss and Berlin, see Steven B. Smith, “Isaiah Berlin and Leo Strauss: Notes Toward a Dialogue,” *Critical Review* 32, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 539–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2020.1891705>.

Rationalist thinkers, Berlin suggests, have often found themselves drawn to this narrowing of ends: “thinkers of this [rationalist] type argued that if moral and political problems were genuine — as surely they were — they must in principle be soluble; that is to say, there must exist one and only one true solution to any problem.”⁵⁹ This view, which one might call the *assumption of the univocity of reason*, likely originates from mathematics; Descartes writes in the *Discourse* that “a child who has learned arithmetic and performed an addition according to the rules may feel certain that, as far as that particular sum is concerned, he has found everything that a human mind can discover,” such that there is “only one true solution to a given problem.”⁶⁰ Berlin’s body of scholarship, and especially his articulation of pluralism, is a direct attack on this monistic assumption. Why assume that reason will always point to one answer? Implausible as it may be upon examination, this assumption is recognizable in the thought of many rationalists throughout history.

Berlin stresses this implicit monism in many rationalist systems of thought in his treatment of Rousseau, who, despite popular misconceptions, was “not at all in favour of unbridled feeling,” for “sentiments divide people, whereas reason unites them.”⁶¹ Reason is uniting only if there is one true answer, or a few reasonable alternatives, capable of being found by all persons with a nature free from corruption. Berlin characterizes this rationalist view:

What is true for one rational man will be true for other rational men, just as, in the case of the sciences, what one scientist finds to be true will be accepted by other scientists; so that if you have reached your conclusion by a valid method from true premisses, using correct rules, you may be certain that other people, if they are rational, will arrive at the same solution; or

⁵⁹ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 191.

⁶⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence Lafleur (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1960), 17.

⁶¹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 29.

alternatively, if you feel sure of the rationality of your thought, but they arrive at some different solution, this alone shows you that they cannot possibly be rational; and you may safely ignore their conclusions.⁶²

Moreover, the rationalist position has frequently been that “all true solutions to all genuine problems must be compatible: more than this, they must fit into a single whole; for this is what is meant by calling them all rational and the universe harmonious.”⁶³ It is one step from this kind of monism about ends to the coercion of persons as one comes to think that “the rational ends of our ‘true’ natures must coincide, or be made to coincide.”⁶⁴

Berlin’s intellectual portraits of Helvétius and Saint-Simon are, comparatively speaking, far less scathing than those of the other “betrayers” of liberty that he covers. Nonetheless, both came to view liberty as undesirable because they held rationalistic and monistic views of morality and the ends of political life. Berlin argues that Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771) was a proto-utilitarian, or perhaps even the original utilitarian, because he was a forerunner of Bentham. Helvétius, Berlin contends, wanted to be the Newton of politics: his lifelong aim was “the search for a single principle which was to define the basis of morality.”⁶⁵ He found this single principle, admitting of two parts, in the *summum bonum* of pleasure and the *summum malum* of pain. The philosophy of Helvétius rests on the idea that Nature has fixed ends but is made up of pliable material, including human beings: “man, like everything in nature, is malleable, plastic and alterable.”⁶⁶ Ethics and politics, then, are to be transformed into sciences. Berlin argues that Helvétius sought to do this through legislation,

⁶² Berlin, 40; Berlin, 24.

⁶³ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 193.

⁶⁴ Berlin, 194.

⁶⁵ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 12.

⁶⁶ Berlin, 25.

“by inventing a system of sticks and carrots for the human donkey.”⁶⁷ It is through this same line of reasoning, Berlin argues, that a number of thinkers came to hold similar views: Condorcet thought there could be a moral science of humanity akin to the study of “bees or beavers;” Holbach sought a “geometry of ethics;” Comte asked why, “if we do not allow free thinking in chemistry or biology, we should allow it in morals or politics.”⁶⁸ If the ends are fixed, then task of politics is the accommodation of flexible humans to those fixed ends.

It was this same tendency, the tendency to view the ends of nature as fixed, and to view politics as a science of molding human beings to fit those ends given by nature, that Berlin saw in Kennan’s letter. Kennan had written: “Nature, it seems to me, has prescribed our objectives for us out of its own good judgment, and has decreed that we shall desire to remain alive, generally speaking, as long as possible and to multiply our kind — simple and clear objectives, if not very inspiring.”⁶⁹ Kennan’s personification of nature held aside, there are questions raised by this statement. In what sense are life and reproduction imperative? One might say that many people generally act accordingly, or that the survival of the species requires these. Berlin likely would not dispute this descriptive version.

But it is another thing to suggest that this imperative shall guide public policy in a stronger, more prescriptive sense, that these ends can be assumed universal, that persons can be coerced along these lines. To what extent should people be encouraged to pursue health, or to stay alive, or to reproduce? Should they be made to do so? What of Berlin’s authentic choosers, inspired by the romantics, who are willing to suffer or even die for a cause? Are all of these romantic or liberal tendencies “unnatural?” Might there be an advantage, in a

⁶⁷ Berlin, 17.

⁶⁸ Berlin, 12–13, 15; Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 197.

⁶⁹ Kennan to Berlin, 26 April 1950, Hardy, “Supplementary Letters 1946–1960,” 18.

Darwinian sense, in having individual variation or diversity, even if the “goal” of the species in a teleological sense can rightly said to be survival?⁷⁰ Kennan was starting down the same path that would lead Helvétius to devalue liberty and seek a central authority that would adjust or condition people to achieve the fixed ends given by that ultimate tyrant, Nature.

The Inequality of Knowledge

The second step along the road toward paternalism is the notion that, in the system of fixed or given political ends, some people are better than others at perceiving those ends or implementing policies or other means in order to achieve them. Berlin connects these first and second steps:

Let me dwell a little on the presuppositions of this kind of system — this Brave New World (for that is what it comes to). To begin with, all questions of value are factual, and the answers discoverable by observation and reasoning. Ethics and politics are natural sciences. Some people are better at discovering their laws than others. There is such a thing as specific moral and political knowledge and skill, which specialists must have. These specialists should be given supreme power.⁷¹

Berlin’s essay on the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) is illustrative of this second step. Berlin argues that Saint-Simon was “the father of European historicism far more than the Germans,” for he advanced a “technological interpretation of history” in which history is understood as the “evolution of mankind in the satisfaction of its various needs.”⁷² In their conquest of nature, humans created technology, but in doing so they also created weapons, and weapons allowed for classes. Saint-Simon’s account of the origins of class placed a greater emphasis on the power of ideas than Marx; he thought that slavery did

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Michael Gillespie for this point.

⁷¹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 24.

⁷² Berlin, 114–15, 123.

not end due to its unprofitability but due to idea, born out of Christianity, that persons are equal.⁷³ Ideas, and not just materialist economic conditions of production, are, for Saint-Simon, a form of technology.

Saint-Simon thought that the world was shifting, and the new center of power would be found in science and industry. Bankers and industrialists would be the vanguard of the future, not priests, or soldiers, or feudal lords.⁷⁴ This new world, he thought, belonged to the working class, broadly understood, and not the idling class, those social parasites who passively benefit from the work of others. Society was to be understood on the model of “an enormous business establishment:” political leaders would be bureaucratic managers dedicated to the rational organization of the great mass of human beings.⁷⁵ In such a worldview, however, liberty is always disorganizing. The holism of bureaucratic organization, the idea that the nation or the whole world is a joint enterprise, shows that Saint-Simon’s vision also included a super-self, the fourth transformation of the self that will be treated in the next chapter of this dissertation: “the notion that one must make human society coherent, that one must create some kind of planned single entity out of it, and not allow human beings to freewheel ... that is the Saint-Simonian idea.”⁷⁶ This line of reasoning, Berlin suggests, led Saint-Simon to believe in the “impossibility of self-government” due to the “incompatibility between the view that wise men ought to direct society and the view that people ought to govern themselves.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Berlin, 122–23.

⁷⁴ Berlin, 130.

⁷⁵ Berlin, 131.

⁷⁶ Berlin, 139.

⁷⁷ Berlin, 116.

If Saint-Simon offers a paternalistic political theory that emphasizes the knowledge possessed by the elite managers of the new industrial economy, the Savoyard lawyer and diplomat Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) offers a paternalistic theory grounded not in the knowledge of elites but in the ignorance of ordinary people. Berlin makes the case that Maistre was a “precursor and early preacher of fascism,” and that his political theory is not merely a relic of feudal aristocracy or a reactionary rejection of the French Revolution but an ultra-modern theory rooted in irrationalism.⁷⁸ For Maistre, reason is not a force for the organization of society but a corrosive force that tears down all established institutions: “anything which human beings can construct, human beings can destroy.”⁷⁹ Berlin characterizes Maistre’s view of the governments of France and Poland:

France was governed by sixty-six kings, some good, some bad, but mostly efficient, mostly capable, and is the fairest kingdom upon the face of the earth, whereas Poland with its rational system is plunged into constant turbulence and has collapsed before the very eyes of the civilised world in a welter of blood and chaos.⁸⁰

Maistre also defended xenophobia and anti-intellectualism; he gave, in Berlin’s words, the “first real sermon against refugees.”⁸¹ Maistre thought scientists and intellectuals were shifty characters who ought to be distrusted; he argued that immigrants and outsiders, especially itinerant scholars, were sources of corruption and discontent, for only those who are unhappy at home go adventuring abroad.

In Maistre’s writings, Nature is not benevolent or good but a violent slaughterhouse in which every being devours every other being. Animals kill plants; animals kill other

⁷⁸ Berlin, 166.

⁷⁹ Berlin, 152.

⁸⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Enemies of the Enlightenment, The Second Onslaught: Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism” (Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, 1965), 7, <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/maistre.pdf>.

⁸¹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 160.

animals; man kills plants and animals; man kills his fellow man. Maistre thinks it a sign of society's irrationality that people recoil from the executioner, the very cornerstone or foundation of society, a man who merely kills out of necessity so as to uphold the law, while valorizing the soldier who slaughters enemy combatants in the name of the nation, or religion, or some other form of collective self-immolation. Maistre's vision of Nature is almost a straight negation of Rousseau's: Nature is not good but wicked; savages are not noble but ignorant brutes; to say that "man is born free but everywhere is in chains" is, as Émile Faguet summed up in an epigram that Berlin liked to use as a joke, "as if one were to say how strange it is that sheep, who were born carnivorous, should nevertheless everywhere be nibbling grass."⁸² For Maistre, humans are not born free, and they ought to be thankful for their chains, for they are the only thing saving them from their own depravity. Maistre's vision of human nature is nearly unparalleled in its bleakness.

Given the corrosiveness of reason, the malevolence of nature, and the depravity of humanity, what possible deliverance could there be? Like Burke, Maistre argues for the value of the wisdom crystalized in prejudice and tradition; he thinks that the healthy political order is one that stops people from questioning and holds their darkest tendencies in check. All of our deepest desires must be repressed. This is done not through a social contract but through terror, by grounding the foundations of government and religion in places so dark and so mysterious, the origins of which are so lost in the mists and "deep darkness of antiquity," that they are viewed as infallible.⁸³ This is the origin of, and justification for,

⁸² Berlin, 155; Berlin, "Two Enemies of the Enlightenment, The Second Onslaught: Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism," 8.

⁸³ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 154.

Maistre's monarchism and ultramontanist: the unquestionable trifecta of Pope, King, and Hangman are the last bastions against the darkness of human nature.

For Maistre, these elites must rule not based on knowledge but based on unquestionable authority; the more unquestioning and unquestioned they are, the more stable their rule will be. It is notable that Berlin's portrait of Lenin in "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" is very similar to his portrayal of Maistre, such that Berlin himself draws the parallel: "his [Lenin's] practice was strangely like that of those irrationalist reactionaries who believed that man was everywhere wild, bad, stupid, and unruly, and must be held in check and provided with objects of uncritical worship."⁸⁴ Elitism, an emphasis on physical security, the notion that humans are slaves by nature, a reliance on myth, dogma, and superstructure, and a stifling of dissent are common elements in both.

Helvétius, Saint-Simon, and Maistre, despite their differences, each held these first two paternalistic assumptions: they assumed that the ends pursued by human beings were fixed by nature, and, perhaps more importantly, that a political elite was necessary in order to fulfill those ends (or, in the case of Maistre, prevent them from being fulfilled). All three questioned or were hostile to both liberalism and democracy. Helvétius called for a "technocratic tyranny:"

For the tyranny of ignorance, of fear, of superstitious priests, of arbitrary kings, of all the bogies fought by eighteenth-century enlightenment it substitutes another tyranny, a technological tyranny, a tyranny of reason, which, however, is just as inimical to liberty, just as inimical to the notion that one of the most valuable things in human life is choice for the sake of choice, not merely choice of what is good, but choice as such.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the 20th Century*, 73–74.

⁸⁵ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 27.

For Helvétius, “to have a right which nobody may impinge upon ... is an obstacle to the transformation of society in the direction of the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”⁸⁶ Utilitarians, and consequentialists more generally, will always balk at absolute rules.

Similarly, for Saint-Simon, “liberty is always disorganizing,” always “leads to absolute chaos.”⁸⁷ Berlin writes:

At the heart of the whole conception is science, or scientism — the belief that unless things are done under a rigorous discipline by people who alone understand the material of which the world is composed, human and non-human, chaos and frustration are the result. [...] Liberty, democracy, laissez-faire individualism, feudalism ... must go in order to make room for something clearer, bolder, newer: big business, State capitalism, scientific organisation, an organisation of world peace, a world parliament, a world federation.⁸⁸

Saint-Simon envisions a universal brotherhood, but one that is this-worldly rather than other-worldly: he wanted to “reconstitute the medieval hierarchy in industrial terms.”⁸⁹ The new abstract entity, society, is taken to have its own direction, impersonal forces, tendencies, and hidden causes; these hidden springs and impersonal forces cannot be removed but “the elite of experts can canalize them and control them to some extent.”⁹⁰ Here is the connection between the historical inevitability described in the previous chapter, with its ascription of agency to impersonal forces, and paternalism: in both, society is an abstract force, but in paternalism the elite retain some agency while the mass does not. Berlin saw a direct line from Saint-Simon’s utopian socialism to the Soviet Union: “In this sinister fashion

⁸⁶ Berlin, 20.

⁸⁷ Berlin, 136.

⁸⁸ Berlin, 140.

⁸⁹ Berlin, 139.

⁹⁰ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the 20th Century*, 85.

has Saint-Simon's prophecy about (in Engel's paraphrase) 'replacing the government of persons by the administration of things' finally come true — a prophecy which once seemed so brave and optimistic."⁹¹

For Maistre, freedom is only an apparent good. Berlin characterizes Maistre's view: "if you study the actual history of man you will discover that what men desire is security, stability, authority, obedience."⁹² While it is difficult to imagine a thinker with views more distant from Berlin's, Berlin had a certain fondness for Maistre as a foil. As Mark Lilla put it, Berlin "had a weakness for underdogs, especially if he found their views uncongenial."⁹³ Berlin thought that Maistre had provided a valuable critique of excessive rationalism, had offered a "violent antidote to the overblown, over-optimistic and altogether too superficial social doctrines of the eighteenth century."⁹⁴ Maistre forced his generation to "look at the seamy side of things."⁹⁵ While Maistre's vision was far too dark, pessimistic, authoritarian, religious, and misanthropic for Berlin, Maistre was still an open enemy of liberalism, an enemy with internally consistent views, stated plainly. Those who are indifferent about

⁹¹ Berlin, 85.

⁹² Berlin, "Two Enemies of the Enlightenment, The Second Onslaught: Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism," 8.

⁹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), xii.

⁹⁴ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 167. "Therefore his [Maistre's] psychology and his sociology are just as lop-sided as that of the most superficial, the most rosy-spectacled, the most idealistic and starry-eyed of the idealists of the eighteenth century, whom he regards with such contempt and hatred. But it can be said for Maistre that he did attract people's attention to the black aspects of individual and social life, that if rational behaviour is to occur at all, then reality must be looked at as it is, and not as we would like it to be, and that if self-understanding is of any importance, then Maistre undoubtedly did bring out in a manner which was extremely bold and unusual in his day those huge, socially irrational factors which afterwards people like Marx and Freud wrote about, those aspects of human life which were not suspected or dreamt of in most of the writings of the eighteenth century. In this respect he did render a service to mankind." Berlin, "Two Enemies of the Enlightenment, The Second Onslaught: Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism," 24.

⁹⁵ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 167.

liberty, or even openly hostile to it, like Helvétius, Saint-Simon, or Maistre, are, as we shall see, easier to refute and rebut than duplicitous or traitorous friends.

The Metaphysical Fission of the Self

The third stop along the road to paternalism involves the “metaphysical fission” by which the “self” of a person is divided into parts. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin suggests that this fission emerges out of the idea of self-mastery combined with an emphasis on *internal* rather than external obstacles to liberty: “I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes.”⁹⁶ Berlin characterizes this line of thought:

‘I am my own master’; ‘I am slave to no man’; but may I not (as Platonists or Hegelians tend to say) be a slave to nature? Or to my own ‘unbridled’ passions? Are these not so many species of the identical genus ‘slave’ — some political or legal, others moral or spiritual? Have not men had the experience of liberating themselves from spiritual slavery, or slavery to nature, and do they not in the course of it become aware, on the one hand, of a self which dominates, and, on the other, of something in them which is brought to heel? This dominant self is then variously identified with reason, with my ‘higher nature’, with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my ‘real’, or ‘ideal’, or ‘autonomous’ self, or with myself ‘at its best’; which is then contrasted with irrational impulse, uncontrolled desires, my ‘lower’ nature, the pursuit of immediate pleasures, my ‘empirical’ or ‘heteronomous’ self, swept by every gust of desire and passion, needing to be rigidly disciplined if it is ever to rise to the full height of its ‘real’ nature.⁹⁷

I wish to emphasize Berlin’s qualification immediately preceding this quote, that these sub-personal divisions are “initially perhaps quite harmless” when understood to be wholly

⁹⁶ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 178.

⁹⁷ Berlin, 179.

psychological. To use Plato's *Republic* as an example, there is something intuitively appealing about understanding *akrasia* or the weakness of will in terms of sub-divisions of the self. If one attempts to persuade a friend, or even oneself, to act on one's better judgment, or to act authentically, there is no obvious violation of negative liberty. The trouble arises when sub-division is invoked to justify the discipline or coercion of one part of the populace by another part.⁹⁸

This fission facilitates the manipulation of persons not only in terms of their *good* but also in terms of their *freedom*, specifically the freedom of one of the parts at the expense of others: "this inner spirit is the only self that deserves to have its wishes taken into account," such that what matters is "the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self" and not what Berlin calls the "empirical" self.⁹⁹ There are many possible varieties of this second or "true" self: it may be conceived in spiritual terms, or rational terms, or in the language of the future against the present, or in a number of other ways. I will not attempt to catalogue all of these varieties here. What matters is the general framework, one in which a *hypothetical* self is set up against the *empirical* self or the "empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel," such that a person's express wishes, protests, cries, and screams can be suppressed or ignored.

The sub-division of the self is a conceptual maneuver that provides a ready justification for persons or groups that wish to coerce others in the name of "liberation."

⁹⁸ There are, in this sense, two very different ways of interpreting the *Republic*. On the common political interpretation, the animating question is the abstract political question: what is justice? Yet Glaucon and Adeimantus framed their challenges to Socrates in terms of a different question, one far more personal, one that might be said to be not a political question but a moral or psychological question: why should I be just? The city-in-speech is set up as a construct in order to understand what justice is within the soul. Many of the interpretive difficulties in reading the *Republic* arise out of the tension, and perhaps incompatibility, between these two levels.

⁹⁹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 180, 194.

Berlin's gives his most succinct exposition of this process in "My Intellectual Path," a retrospective autobiography written in 1996, one year before his death:

In short, they [the rational elite] are acting on my behalf, in the interests of my higher self, in controlling my lower self; so that true liberty for the lower self consists in total obedience to them, the wise, those who know the truth, the élite of sages...¹⁰⁰

Berlin continues:

There is no despot in the world who cannot use this method of argument for the vilest oppression, in the name of an ideal self which he is seeking to bring to fruition by his own, perhaps somewhat brutal and *prima facie* morally odious means (*prima facie* only for the lower empirical self). The 'engineer of human souls', to use Stalin's phrase, knows best; he does what he does not simply in order to do his best for his nation, but in the name of the nation itself, in the name of what the nation would be doing itself if only it had attained to this level of historical understanding. That is the great perversion which the positive notion of liberty has been liable to: whether the tyranny issues from a Marxist leader, a king, a Fascist dictator, the masters of an authoritarian Church or class or State, it seeks for the imprisoned, 'real' self within men, and 'liberates' it, so that this self can attain to the level of those who give the orders.¹⁰¹

Berlin's criticism of the sub-division of the self illuminates his subtle disagreement with Kennan. The American technocrat may think himself better than other paternalists on account of his using supposedly "softer" or more palatable means; the conceptual maneuvers that allow him to sub-divide persons so as to act not just in the name of their good but in the name of their "freedom," however, are one and the same. So-called "soft" paternalism may be different in degree, but it is not different in kind. All of these forms of paternalism rest upon the objectification of persons and an atavistic conception of human beings; Berlin's framework reveals how this objectification is largely incompatible with

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah Berlin, "Final Retrospect," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 327–28.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, 328.

recognizing persons as ends in themselves, entities capable of choice and worthy of respect and dignity.

The Objectification of the Empirical Self

The final stop on the road towards paternalism is the dehumanization of persons, an ontology in which persons are treated not as conscious *subjects* but as inert *objects*. In the previous chapter, I traced how objectification occurs in Berlin's second transformation, self-realization, when human beings are stripped of agency and impersonal forces are imbued with it. There, objectification was self-oriented: self-realization involves self-objectification for the purpose of the self-negation of agency. This third transformation, the division of the self into sub-personal parts, by contrast, typically involves the objectification of *other* people as the reformer casts those to be reformed as inert objects:

Paternalism is despotic, not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal, unenlightened tyranny, nor merely because it ignores the transcendental reason embodied in me, but because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being, determined to make my own life in accordance with my own (not necessarily rational or benevolent) purposes, and, above all, entitled to be recognised as such by others.¹⁰²

As the *hypothetical* "self" is magnified, the *empirical* self is squashed. As a person is shaped or "moulded" by the paternalist, the notion of liberty as the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice, as "freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others" and the "absence of bullying or domination," has entirely disappeared.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 203.

¹⁰³ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48.

This is the great perversion, the “magical transformation,” the “sleight of hand,” the “monstrous impersonation” that occurs in the substitution of the *hypothetical* self for the *empirical* self:

It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good, which I am too blind to see: this may on occasion, be for my benefit; indeed it may enlarge the scope of my liberty. It is another to say that if it is my own good, then I am not being coerced, for I have willed it, whether I know this or not, and am free (or ‘truly’ free) even while my poor earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it, and struggle with the greatest desperation against those who seek, however benevolently, to impose it.¹⁰⁴

Here, at the end of the road, the contradiction or equivocation is exposed: the sub-division of the self leads to situations in which persons can be called “free” in some abstract or metaphorical sense while literally unfree. Berlin’s work fruitfully reveals how paternalism often emerges from a well-meaning rationalism and monism:

In this way the rationalist argument, with its assumptions of the single true solution, has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection to an authoritarian State obedient to the directives of an elite of Platonic guardians.¹⁰⁵

The sub-division of the self allows for this equivocation because there are in actuality two selves being invoked: the self that is shackled or obstructed differs from the “self” that is liberated.

Berlin challenges his readers to revisit the assumptions that allow liberty to be assimilated to authority:

If this leads to despotism, albeit by the best or the wisest — to Sarastro’s temple in *The Magic Flute* — but still despotism, which turns out to be

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 181–82.

¹⁰⁵ Berlin, 198.

identical with freedom, can it be that there is something amiss in the premisses of the argument?¹⁰⁶

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argued that Berlin's framed negative and positive liberty in terms of the *what or how much* question and the *who or by whom* question precisely because he was keen to trace the ways that the self of a person could be transformed, and liberty spoken of in metaphorical ways, such that a contradiction would arise. The division of the self into sub-personal components yields such a contradiction. The statement that people can be "forced to be free" can only be rendered comprehensible if the self being forced and the "self" being freed are conceived as separate entities. It can be rendered intelligible, but it cannot be legitimized, for the real or *empirical* self is forced while the liberated *hypothetical* "self" is usually a fiction, an abstraction, a phantom.¹⁰⁷

Cain, Brutus, Judas, and Rousseau

I will conclude by discussing Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the thinker who, I argue, ought to be considered the arch-villain in Berlin's political theory of liberal humanism. Berlin considered Rousseau "one of the most sinister and formidable enemies of liberty in the whole history of modern thought."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, this was not simply the result of his doctrines being misunderstood, or twisted by others, for the idea of freedom was altered not only by professed followers but by Rousseau himself. Some scholars have contested Berlin's portrait of Rousseau, arguing that it is excessively uncharitable to the point of being

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, 200.

¹⁰⁷ I qualify this statement only because there may be circumstances in which the two selves are both *empirical* but separated in time. One's *empirical* self may be forced at time B to do that which their *empirical* self, in sound mind, agreed to at time A, and this involves two selves but no *hypothetical* self. The famous example of this in literature is Ulysses having himself bound to the mast so as to hear the song of the sirens without succumbing to their power. These problems of precommitment were, to my knowledge, not discussed by Berlin. Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, Revised, Cambridge Paperback Library (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁸ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 52.

inaccurate.¹⁰⁹ One could write a whole chapter about Berlin's portrayal of Rousseau, but that would lead far afield from the topic at hand. Instead, I simply wish to suggest that even if Berlin's account does not provide an accurate or fair picture of Rousseau's political thought, it may still be instructive about Berlin's own views. Why did Berlin reserve such vitriol for one of the great champions of individual integrity against exploitation, the thinker who would inspire Kant, the father of modern republicanism? In Dante's *Inferno*, the ninth circle of hell is reserved for traitors, betrayers, and oath breakers. While Rousseau claimed to defend liberty, Berlin thought Rousseau's innovations about the meaning of liberty had led to its greatest betrayals.

There have been many thinkers throughout history who have not valued freedom. Plato, or at least the Plato of the *Republic*, employing the sub-personal logic described in this chapter, thought that liberty was license: to be free for Plato was, psychologically speaking, to have a licentious or unordered soul, one untethered from the wise rule of reason and instead subject to a tyrannical *eros*; politically, this meant that the souls disordered in this manner would rule in the city. In the *Republic*, democracy is only one step before tyranny in the corruption of regimes.¹¹⁰ Similarly, in Maistre's pessimistic account of human nature, authority is the only thing keeping human beings from destroying one another, and freedom is vice, violence, and self-immolation in the name of some collective and irrational goal. Plato and Maistre were enemies of liberty, but they were, at the very least, open enemies.

¹⁰⁹ For a defense of Rousseau against his liberal critics, including Berlin, see Robert Wokler, "Rousseau's Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, by Robert Wokler, ed. Bryan Garsten (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 154–84; Christopher Brooke, "Isaiah Berlin and the Origins of the 'Totalitarian' Rousseau," in *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 89–98; Jeremy Waldron, "Isaiah Berlin's Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism," in *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford University Press, 2016), 205–19.

¹¹⁰ *Republic* 555b-569c.

Rousseau, on the other hand, was for Berlin a traitor, an enemy who came in the guise of a friend, for he claimed to value liberty but, through a few key conceptual innovations, sought to reconcile it with authority. In his essay, Berlin argues that Rousseau conceived of liberty as an absolute value: “the whole notion of moral responsibility, which for Rousseau is the essence of man almost more than his reason, depends on the fact that a man can choose, choose between alternatives, choose between them freely, be uncoerced.”¹¹¹ Rousseau professed dedication to the same choice and dignity that Berlin championed: “the belief which is most passionately held by Rousseau, one of the values to which he devoted more eloquence than to almost any other, is this notion of human integrity, the fact that the ultimate crime, the one sin to not be borne, is dehumanization of man, degradation and exploitation of man.”¹¹² These quotes defending choice and denouncing exploitation might well have been taken out of Berlin’s letter to Kennan.

But in seeking to reconcile liberty, which is of absolute value, with the need for rules, also of absolute value, Rousseau encountered a paradox that he could only resolve by redefining liberty. Berlin portrays Rousseau’s reconciliation in the terms of revelation: the “blinding solution” came to him suddenly on his way to visit Diderot in prison; like a “mystic,” he had a sudden “flash of inspiration” that he called the central event of his life; he in turn binds his spell upon his readers like a hypnotist or enchanter.¹¹³ Berlin characterizes Rousseau’s line of thought:

¹¹¹ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 33.

¹¹² Berlin, 35.

¹¹³ “He uses deductive reasoning, sometimes very cogent, very lucid and extremely well-expressed, for reaching his conclusions. But in reality what happens is that this deductive reasoning is like a straitjacket of logic which he claps upon the inner, burning, almost lunatic vision within; it is this extraordinary combination of the insane inner vision with the cold rigorous straitjacket of a kind of Calvinistic logic which really gives his prose its powerful enchantment and its hypnotic effect. You appear to be reading logical argument which distinguishes between concepts and draws conclusions in a valid manner from premisses, when all the time something very

He says to himself: ‘Here is liberty and here is authority, and it is difficult — it is logically impossible — to arrange a compromise. How are we to reconcile them?’ The answer has a kind of simplicity and a kind of lunacy which maniacal natures are often capable of. There is no question of compromise. The problem must be viewed in such a way that one suddenly perceives that, so far from being incompatible, the two opposed values are not opposed at all, not two at all, but one. Liberty and authority cannot conflict for they are one; they coincide; they are the reverse and obverse of the same medal. There is a liberty which is identical with authority; and it is possible to have a personal freedom which is the same as complete control by authority.¹¹⁴

As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Berlin wished to maintain distinctions between concepts: values and concepts may clash with one another externally as well as internally, and in such instances “it is better to face this intellectually uncomfortable fact than to ignore it ... or, what is worse still, suppress one of the competing values altogether by pretending that it is identical with its rival — and so end by distorting both.”¹¹⁵ In Berlin’s eyes, Rousseau committed that cardinal sin, the conflation of concepts, and he did so not accidentally but deliberately.

Though Berlin does not explicitly enumerate them, his multifaceted critique suggests that Rousseau’s error was actually three separate errors, ones so intertwined that they become difficult to separate at points. First, the concept of autonomy, that a “man who is self-chained is not a prisoner,” or that “self-control is not control,” involves a decisive alteration with vast implications for the concept of liberty.¹¹⁶ Second, Rousseau’s general will can be interpreted in terms of a super-personal self, as a conceptual innovation that

violent is being said to you. A vision is being imposed on you; somebody is trying to dominate you by means of a very coherent, although often very deranged, vision of life, to bind a spell, not to argue, despite the cool and collected way in which he appears to be talking.” Berlin, 45.

¹¹⁴ Berlin, 39.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 46.

facilitates a slide from a social contract between individuals to a super-personal entity, “The People” or “The State,” conceived in holistic terms. Third, Rousseau’s rationalism and monism also led him to the division of the self into sub-personal parts and the paternalist line of reasoning outlined and criticized in this chapter.

First, autonomy, etymologically speaking, involves the coincidence of oneself (*auto*) and the laws (*nomos*). If “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” those chains might be rendered legitimate, Rousseau reasons, if they are self-imposed: “but if the chains are chains of your own making, if the chains are simply the rules which you forge, with your own inner reason . . . if the chains are simply rules the very obedience to which is the most free, the strongest, most spontaneous expression of your own inner nature, then the chains no longer bind you.”¹¹⁷ Whether the self creates that law, or chooses to affirm it, identifies with it in some abstract sense, or otherwise incorporates or internalizes it into itself, the result is the same. Yet, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the “self” is a malleable concept, one that can be transformed in ways that render the concept of autonomy inconsistent with the express wishes of a person. In this present chapter, I have attempted to trace how paternalists create a *hypothetical* self, and how this concept facilitates the manipulation of persons along these lines.

There may be cases where the *empirical* self explicitly consents at one time to be held to an agreement at a future time. The alcoholic who, in a moment of sober clarity, asks a good friend to withhold the bottle if he tries to drink is one such example; another is the man who, recognizing that he is prone to anger, entrusts his weapons to a friend with the

¹¹⁷ Berlin, 46.

instruction to withhold them from him if he ever wishes to do anything rash.¹¹⁸ Theorists have called such situations *precommitment*, and autonomy understood as precommitment does not pose the same paternalistic danger, or at least not to the same degree. In precommitment, both selves, the one making the choice and the one being bound, are both the *empirical* self. There may be certain hazards involved; perhaps it would be prudent to renew one's vow at points or set certain limits on the scope of control ceded to others, but situations of precommitment differ fundamentally from the logic of paternalism. The concept of autonomy becomes problematic when the "self" involved is wholly alienated from the *empirical* self, when the contract is not the result of explicit consent at all but assumed by the reformer.

Christopher Bertram's scholarship provides terms that help to clarify Rousseau's second and third errors. Bertram argues that there are two competing conceptions of Rousseau's general will, one he calls a "democratic" conception, and the other, a "transcendent" one: "the first of these identifies the general will with the decisions of the sovereign people as they legislate together; the second conceives of the general will as a transcendent fact about the society which may or may not be reflected in actual legislative decisions."¹¹⁹ The democratic and transcendent interpretations of the general will correspond to the fourth and third chapters of this dissertation, to Berlin's critique of the aggregation of selves into a super-self or into the division of the self into sub-personal parts.

The super-personal logic of autonomy can be seen in the conflation that occurs in the "democratic" interpretation of the general will. Berlin writes:

¹¹⁸ Socrates uses this example at *Republic* 331c.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Bertram, "Rousseau's Legacy in Two Conceptions of the General Will: Democratic and Transcendent," *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 403–19.

What is wanted — I quote Rousseau again — is ‘the surrender of each individual with all his rights to the whole community’. If you surrender yourself to the whole community, then how can you not be free, for who coerces you? Not X, not Y, not this or that institution — it is the State which coerces you. But what is the State? The State is you, and others like you, all seeking your common good.¹²⁰

There is a tendency, in those who subscribe to the “democratic” or super-personal interpretation of the general will, to conflate individual choice and collective choice. In Berlin’s view, Rousseau’s republic “begins in the harmless notion of a contract,” a “semi-commercial affair,” something “voluntarily entered into, and ultimately revocable also.”¹²¹ But Rousseau, Berlin contends, “gradually moves towards the notion of the general will as almost the personified willing of a large superpersonal entity, of something called ‘the State’, which is now no longer the crushing leviathan of Hobbes, but something more like a team, something like a Church, a unity in diversity, a greater-than-I, something in which I sink my personality in order to find it again.”¹²² This “mystical moment” in Rousseau, as in other thinkers who, through a form of holism, conflate the individual with the collective, allows for one to speak, in an intelligible but politically dangerous way, of dissenting individuals as “choosing” or consenting to the actions of the very state that oppresses them. I will discuss this fourth transformation of the self, the creation of the super-personal self or the conflation of the individual with the collective, at great length in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Third, the “transcendent” interpretation conceives of the general will as something independent of the collective choice, involving rational principles that can be generalized or

¹²⁰ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 47.

¹²¹ Berlin, 47.

¹²² Berlin, 47–48.

universalized. This is Rousseau the rationalist, the thinker who inspired Kant and Rawls.¹²³ This interpretation can also alter the meaning of freedom in the ways already described in this chapter. If the “democratic” interpretation facilitates the alienation of choice to a collectivity, the “transcendent” interpretation facilitates the alienation of choice in the name of an abstract principle of reason, one that an expert might claim to understand. Berlin summarizes Rousseau’s steps: one must know not just what one wants, but what will satisfy one’s nature; “true” freedom, then, depends on a certain kind of knowledge; what is true for one rational man must be true for any other rational man (the principle of rationalism); from the idea that “nature is a harmony (and this is the great premiss, the great and dubious premiss of almost all of eighteenth-century thought), it follows that what I truly want cannot collide with what somebody else truly wants;” those who cannot recognize this have suffered a corruption of their nature, and they must be coerced in the name of their “true” freedom.¹²⁴ In the “transcendent” interpretation, the general will refers not to the literal actions of the body politic, though it may be revealed by their collective decisions, provided that those who participate do so with the appropriate attitude. Instead, the general will is, on this account, an impersonal set of logical propositions, an internally consistent framework.¹²⁵

¹²³ One might say that Berlin identifies a tension, perhaps even an incompatibility, within the philosophy of Kant. The Kant who insists that humans are ends in themselves, who defends individual autonomy, is at odds with Kant the rationalist. Radical choice would mean choosing, even if the choice was not rational, and this view seems to lead to pluralism; but most rationalist thinkers who assume the univocity of reason think that reason will point toward one single solution, and this assumption leads to monism. Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 199n1; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 67, 107.

¹²⁴ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 40–42.

¹²⁵ The “democratic” and “transcendent” interpretations will at times be incompatible with one another, as I will argue in the next chapter, so too are democracy and liberalism at times at odds.

While Berlin recognizes all three of the issues outlined here, he insists that “it is this notion of the two selves which really does the work in Rousseau’s thought.”¹²⁶ One might think that Berlin, like other liberals, would be most critical of the collectivist or communitarian strand in Rousseau and those who followed him; in actuality, Berlin is far more critical of Rousseau the rationalist. Berlin characterizes the rationalist position and how it reaches paternalistic conclusions:

When I stop a man from pursuing evil ends, even when I put him in jail in order to prevent him from causing damage to other good men, even if I execute him as an abandoned criminal, I do this not for utilitarian reasons, in order to give happiness to others; not even for retributive reasons, in order to punish him for the evil that he does. I do it because that is what his own inner, better, more real self would have done if only he had allowed it to speak. I set myself up as the authority not merely over my actions, but over his. This is what is meant by Rousseau’s famous phrase about the right of society to force men to be free.¹²⁷

By articulating a political theory in which freedom is conflated with authority, either through the super-personal identification of the self with the whole or through the sub-personal division of the self that gives sanction to paternalists, Rousseau opened the floodgates to multiple forms of tyranny.

It is only by assimilating freedom and authority, or by creating separate “selves” that are then each coerced and “liberated,” that people can be “forced to be free:”

This is the sinister paradox according to which a man, in losing his political liberty, and in losing his economic liberty, is liberated in some higher, deeper, more rational, more natural sense, which only the dictator or only the State, only the assembly, only the supreme authority knows, so that the most untrammelled freedom coincides with the most rigorous and enslaving authority. For this great perversion Rousseau is more responsible than any thinker who ever lived.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 49.

¹²⁷ Berlin, 49.

¹²⁸ Berlin, 52.

Just as Berlin was keen to find a kernel of good in uncongenial thinkers like Maistre, he also sought to knock some of the canonical heroes of the history of political thought down a few pegs. Berlin's portrayal of Rousseau is so negative that it perhaps verges on hyperbole. However, Berlin's polemic against Rousseau offers insight *about Berlin*. It is illustrative of what Berlin held most dear: political theorists must avoid the uncritical conflation of concepts and the transformation of ideas in ways that allow for the domination of persons.

Ultimately, Berlin's critique of the sub-division of the self is continuous with his larger philosophical investigation about the concept of liberty. Berlin's critical analysis of paternalism is yet another example of his attempt to carry out that perennial task of philosophy, the examination of "categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting" with the aim of constructing "other, less internally contradictory and (though this can never be fully attained) less pervertible metaphors, images, symbols and systems of categories."¹²⁹ For, as Berlin, Kennan, and Akhmatova clearly saw as they lived through the horrors of the twentieth century, these were not mere academic squabbles but debates with far-reaching implications for political life.

¹²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Purpose of Philosophy," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 14–16; Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 208.

4. The Individual and not the Collective: Wolves, Lambs, and the Limits of Liberty

On this also Bentham seems to me to have spoken well: ‘Individual interests are the only real interests ... Can it be conceived that there are men so absurd as to ... prefer the man who is not, to him who is; to torment the living, under pretence of promoting the happiness of those who are not born, and who may never be born?’ This is one of the infrequent occasions when Burke agrees with Bentham; for this passage is at the heart of the empirical, as against the metaphysical, view of politics.

— Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”¹

The “philosopher’s task,” Isaiah Berlin maintained, was the examination of “categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting, and particularly ways in which they clash with one another, with a view to constructing other, less internally contradictory and (though this can never be fully attained) less pervertible metaphors, images, symbols and systems of categories.”² Philosophy is therefore both a critical discipline and a constructive one. In each chapter thus far, I have traced a transformation of the self and a rival meaning of “liberty;” the focus has largely been on Berlin the critic. Yet Berlin also thought that each of the great thinkers had an “inner citadel,” a “comparatively simple” central idea “which dominates his thought and has formed his view of the world.”³ My overall goal in this

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 217n1.

² Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 14–16; Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 208.

³ Isaiah Berlin, “The Birth of Greek Individualism,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 288; Isaiah Berlin, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 246; Isaiah Berlin, “Georges Sorel,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 376; Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xxx. Hardy traces the source of this statement to chapter 23, paragraph 2 of Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, 1946).

dissertation is to show that Berlin himself had an inner citadel, a philosophical anthropology that I have called *liberal humanism*, centered around the desirability and possibility of freedom for human beings and the notion that the individual ought to be considered the proper ontological unit in moral and political philosophy.

Just as Berlin traced the ways that the sub-division of persons could lead to paternalism, he also criticized theories that reductively aggregated persons into super-personal entities or spoke of a super-personal “self” in politics. This is the “famous and fatal analogy between the individual and the nation, the organic metaphor which leaves the field of theological imagery and is secularized by Burke and by Rousseau” and is “very powerful in Fichte.”⁴ This holistic collectivism is especially apparent in forms of nationalism that subsume and sacrifice persons in the name of an abstract whole or super-self. Yet Berlin’s critique of collectivism, I argue, applies not just to nationalism but also to certain branches of democratic and republican theory. In this chapter, my intention is to continue the critique by examining this fourth transformation of the self, but in completing this portrait of the critical Berlin I also hope to clear the way for the constructive Berlin.

Specifically, I wish to relate Berlin’s critique of collectivism to his insistence on the truth of value-pluralism. Against the political theorists who have argued for a political pluralism or multiculturalism centered around the liberty of sub-national groups, I argue that Berlin’s premises allow for the construction of an individualistic form of pluralism and multiculturalism. In this fourth chapter, I look to “Two Concepts of Liberty” and Berlin’s

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 75.

essays on Rousseau, Fichte, and Herder to trace Berlin's critique of super-personal positive liberty.

Metaphysical Collectivism

Berlin's essay on Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) in *Freedom and its Betrayal* is especially notable in that the majority of it does not treat Fichte. Berlin spends much of the chapter discussing the intellectual climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it is in this essay, along with the parallel sections in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, that Berlin works out the major contours of what would later become his discussion of positive and negative liberty in "Two Concepts." In the essay, Berlin writes of two competing traditions of liberty, one Anglo-French, and the other, German. "The principal preoccupation of many Western European thinkers," including Condorcet, Paine, Constant, and Mill, Berlin argues, "was to guard the liberty of the individual against encroachment by other individuals."⁵

Berlin portrays German thinkers in this period, on the other hand, as being preoccupied with inner freedom, with freedom from necessity, something "in practice unrealizable and, as an ideal, deeply and passionately desirable."⁶ Faced with national humiliation in battle at the hands of the French and living in a cultural climate seen as backwards or provincial, German intellectuals reached for the strategy described in the first chapter, renunciation or self-abnegation. Berlin argues that this is the origin of Kant's focus on inner freedom; what matters is not external circumstance but the performance of duty to the laws of morality. Romanticism also brought an emphasis on authenticity as an ideal and

⁵ Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 55.

⁶ Berlin, 58.

the valorization of the heroic artist. Morality in this period, Berlin argues, undergoes a transformation, shifting to something that is “invented, not discovered, made, not found.”⁷

The “quantum leap” in Fichte’s thought, however, is the move to a “theological conception of the self;” “from the isolated individual to the group as a true subject or self.”⁸ Berlin insists that Fichte and Hegel are best understood as “theologians” and “not secular thinkers,” as heterodox or heretical Christian theologians who theorized about a “pantheistic divinity” embodied in “a collection of persons bound together metaphysically.”⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), one of the other intellectuals who Berlin frequently wrote about from this period, spoke of cultural belonging in terms of language, art, legislation, music, handwriting; cultures, on this view, appear to have purposes of their own and give a common “family resemblance” to those who live within them.¹⁰ Herder himself was not a nationalist but instead favored cultural self-determination; the greatest enemies of human diversity were conquerors like Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne who “stamped out native cultures” in the course of their imperialism.¹¹ What Herder valued was true multiplicity in ways of life, in cultures and in individuals. It is in this intellectual milieu, however, that individual self-determination becomes collective self-realization: “Fichte gradually adopts the idea that the individual himself is nothing, that man is nothing without society, that man is nothing without the group, that the human being hardly exists at all.”¹²

⁷ Berlin, 64.

⁸ Berlin, 71.

⁹ Berlin, 72.

¹⁰ Berlin, 85.

¹¹ Nathan Gardels, “Two Concepts of Nationalism: An Interview with Isaiah Berlin,” *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, n.d., <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/interviews/gardels.pdf>.

¹² Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 72.

This ontological prioritization of the collectivity over the individual has appeared twice already in this dissertation, once in the context of Berlin's analysis of "impersonal forces" in history in chapter two, and again in the "democratic" interpretation of Rousseau's general will in chapter three. In each of these cases, the pattern is the same. The collective comes to have ontological priority over the individual:

A self is a spirit, but it is not an isolated spirit, and it is here that Fichte begins on that path which leads to such peculiar conclusions, that path which begins to move towards the notion that selves are not individual human beings at all, that the self is something to do with society, that perhaps the self, the human self, is really not only itself the product of history and of tradition, but also bound to other human beings by Burke's myriad indissoluble spiritual links, that it exists only as part of a general pattern, of which it forms an element. So much so that it becomes misleading to say that a self is an empirical individual born in a certain year, living a certain kind of life, in a certain physical environment, and dying in a certain place at a certain date.¹³

Berlin focuses on two Fichtean terms that help to illustrate this holism: "Fichte contrasts *compositum*, which is a mere artificial combination, and *totum*, which is a total nation, which is something organic, single, whole, and in which the higher principle dominates, the higher principle which may take the shape of a great nation, or of history."¹⁴ Fichte's collectivism differs from Rousseau's, or at least that of the republican or "democratic" Rousseau, in that the collective receives its direction not from the citizenry acting in concert in a bottom-up manner but from a visionary political artist, a "divine conqueror or leader," from the top-down "quasi-divine leadership of the *Zwingherr*."¹⁵ I shall return to this distinction, between metaphysical and democratic forms of collectivism, in the next section.

¹³ Berlin, 71.

¹⁴ Berlin, 75.

¹⁵ Berlin, 75.

What matters, Berlin emphasizes, is that Fichte's political theory begins with Kantian autonomy but ends in militaristic despotism; the self-expression of the visionary artist becomes the conquest of a muscular state:

Individual freedom, which in Kant has a sacred value, has for Fichte become a choice made by something superpersonal. It chooses me, I do not choose it, and acquiescence is a privilege, a duty, a self-lifting, a kind of self-transcendent rising to a higher level. Freedom, and morality generally, is self-submission to the superself — the dynamic cosmos. We are back with the view that freedom is submission.¹⁶

Once again, for the fourth time in this dissertation, Berlin argues that a series of transformations in the history of ideas has led to a situation in which freedom is no longer the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice but a kind of metaphorical "freedom" that is actually submission: "we have indeed travelled a long way from the Anglo-French notion of freedom which allowed each man his own circle, that small but indispensable vacuum within which he can do as he pleases."¹⁷ Berlin concludes the essay with one of his favorite testaments to the power of ideas, Heinrich Heine's "prophesy," given in 1834, in which he warned the French that one day "armed Fichteans" would come to liberate and unite Germany, that "the romantic faith of Fichte and Schelling would one day be turned, with terrible effect, by their fanatical German followers, against the liberal culture of the West."¹⁸

In section VI of "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin would write of "the search for status," of that wish for collective recognition, a desire for fraternity, solidarity, "union, closer understanding, integration of interests, a life of common dependence and common sacrifice."¹⁹ This desire, Berlin thought, was a common and genuine human desire, even if it

¹⁶ Berlin, 76.

¹⁷ Berlin, 79.

¹⁸ Berlin, 77; Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 167.

¹⁹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 204.

conflicted with other kinds of freedom, especially individual or negative liberty. The mechanism of metaphysical collectivism, however, is clearly a form of positive liberty, for it turns on the identification of self with the greater whole:

Provided the answer to ‘Who shall govern me?’ is somebody or something which I can represent as ‘my own’, as something which belongs to me, or to whom I belong, I can, by using words which convey fraternity and solidarity, as well as some part of the connotation of the ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘freedom’ (which it is difficult to specify more precisely), describe it as a hybrid form of freedom; at any rate as an ideal which is perhaps more prominent than any other in the world today, yet one which no existing term seems precisely to fit. Those who purchase it at the price of their ‘negative’, Millian freedom certainly claim to be ‘liberated’ by this means, in this confused, but ardently felt, sense.²⁰

Berlin waffles a bit on this point, suggesting that conceiving of social groups as “being literally persons or selves” is a fallacy, but such a common and understandable one that it might not be a fallacy. The wish for collective status often involves the barter of one kind of liberty for another, for the freedom of one’s group or culture, even at the expense of one’s own individual liberty. For the purposes of this present inquiry, I will refer to this Fichtean holism, this imaginative identification of the self with some super-personal entity, as *metaphysical collectivism*.

At this point the reader may think that a critique of nationalism is *passé*, perhaps fitting for the nineteenth or twentieth centuries but out of place in the twenty-first. Berlin certainly had plenty to say about nationalism.²¹ But Berlin’s critique of the super-personal

²⁰ Berlin, 206.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 420–48; Isaiah Berlin, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 294–315; Isaiah Berlin, “The Problem of Nationalism: A Dialogue with Stuart Hampshire, Chaired by Bryan Magee,” *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, n.d., <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/probnati.pdf>; Isaiah Berlin, “The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Second Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 253–78.

conception of the self, I will argue, applies beyond just the nation; it is a framework that might be applied to sub-national groups organized along the lines of religion, culture, or other identity traits. Before that can be done, though, Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty must be revisited once again.

Democratic Collectivism

Section VII of "Two Concepts of Liberty," titled "Liberty and Sovereignty," might be the best-known or most widely read part of Berlin's entire corpus. It is a sort of paean to the liberals of the early nineteenth century, especially Benjamin Constant, who, Berlin argues, made a genuine discovery about the concept of liberty: the "sovereignty of the people could easily destroy that of individuals."²² Berlin paraphrases Mill's *On Liberty*, "those who govern are not necessarily the same 'people' as those who are governed, and democratic self-government is not the government 'of each by himself', but, at best, 'of each by all of the rest'."²³ Mill, Constant, and Tocqueville argued that the tyranny of the majority was still a kind of tyranny, one that may be preferable to other forms in certain ways, but tyranny nonetheless: "the doctrine of absolute sovereignty was a tyrannical doctrine in itself."²⁴

Berlin characterizes Constant's view:

He reasonably asked why a man should deeply care whether he is crushed by a popular government or by a monarch, or even by a set of oppressive laws. He saw that the main problem for those who desire 'negative', individual freedom is not who wields this authority, but how much authority should be placed in any set of hands... 'It is not against the arm that one must rail,' he wrote, 'but against the weapon. Some weights are too heavy for the human hand.'²⁵

²² Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 208.

²³ Berlin, 208–9.

²⁴ Berlin, 210.

²⁵ Berlin, 209. Benjamin Constant, *Écrits Politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet, Collection Folio Essais; 307 (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 312.

This passage from “Two Concepts” helps to explain why Berlin’s portrait of Rousseau, as treated in the previous chapter, was so acrimonious. On this topic, Berlin was inspired by Constant, who “saw in Rousseau the most dangerous enemy of individual liberty,” for “an equal right to oppress — or interfere — is not equivalent to liberty.”²⁶ Berlin credits this period with the promulgation of the conceptual language of rights, the idea that there must be “frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable.”²⁷

Berlin’s insistence on the value of negative liberty and his attempt to clarify the difference between a protected private sphere for the individual and equal participation in collective decision-making reflects the influence of Constant. Yet Berlin did not merely repeat or parrot Constant, for he offered several innovations of his own.²⁸ Berlin built upon the foundation laid by Constant and other liberals, but also treated self-abnegation, self-realization, and other ways that people could be metaphorically “free;” Berlin’s positive liberty is a more general and abstract framing that attempts to contain and explain Constant’s liberty of the ancients; positive liberty, as a concept, is thereby more capacious. Berlin also transforms Constant’s bifurcation from a historical one into a conceptual one: while Berlin did not think that anyone in the ancient world had explicitly articulated a concept of negative liberty, there were certainly examples from modern history of freedom understood in collective terms: the liberty of the ancients was, in fact, alive and well in modern Europe. Finally, as noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, Berlin departed from Constant in arguing that positive liberty, understood in political terms as equal participation in self-

²⁶ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 209.

²⁷ Berlin, 211.

²⁸ For a fuller treatment of Berlin and Constant, see Maria Dimova-Cookson, “The Two Modern Liberties of Constant and Berlin,” *History of European Ideas* 48, no. 3 (April 3, 2022): 229–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2022.2056336>.

government, was intrinsically valuable and not merely instrumentally valuable as a tool for the preservation of negative liberty.²⁹ For Berlin, both positive and negative liberty are genuine goods, valuable intrinsically; though, as I will argue in the next two sections, each must be tempered with certain qualifications.

Berlin, inspired by these giants of classical liberalism, developed a theory outlining two divergent concepts of liberty, and in doing so, his work provides the resources to conceptually separate democracy and liberalism. Berlin's "Two Concepts" reveals that democracy and liberalism are wholly distinct; they may be empirically related, but they do not entail one another, for democracies can be illiberal and liberal regimes can be non-democratic. A group may decide, using democratic procedures, to strip a person of her property and exile her from the city; such a decision might be called democratic but illiberal. A sovereign may make the decisions for a country but nonetheless have certain checks placed upon him such that he cannot violate the property rights of his subjects. The *Magna Carta* set limits on feudal obligations to the crown, created a council of barons, regulated trials, and set rules around imprisonment. It placed a law over and above the will of the king, and such a political arrangement may be said to be liberal in certain ways without being democratic.

Having equal say in collective decision-making is a genuine good; so too is having a private sphere for action in which one is protected from these collective decisions. The one does not, however, entail the other: "democracy as such is logically uncommitted to it [negative liberty], and has historically at times failed to protect it, while remaining faithful to

²⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 52; Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 211.

its own principles.”³⁰ Super-personal entities, I argue, raise two distinct problems for political theorists. I call these the *input problem* and *output problem*. In its thin or procedural forms, democratic theory concerns the *input* into political decisions; it specifies procedures that answer the *input* question of *who* decides rather than what is decided. Liberalism, on the other hand, generally concerns limitations on the *outputs* of those collective decisions, or *what* can be decided, and is largely concerned with maintaining a private sphere of negative liberty for individuals. Treating groups or collectives as ontological units creates theoretical issues relating to the concept of liberty.

The *output problem* or the traditional liberal critique of super-personal entities is more straightforward: the holism, or the notion that the whole is independent of or greater than the sum of the parts, that occurs when persons are aggregated into super-personal entities makes it easier to violate those parts in the name of that whole, i.e., the *output* of political processes can be ones that violate individual persons. This is the error of composition alluded to by Berlin’s epigraph drawn from Constant, that “real beings are sacrificed to an abstraction; individual people are offered up in a holocaust to people as a collectivity.”³¹ This is a critique of certain forms of collectivism and positive liberty on the grounds of its illiberality or its conflict with individual negative liberty. Once again, this critique is not unique to Berlin but one that he shares with Constant, Tocqueville, and other liberals. Liberalism, then, largely has to do with limits on the outputs of political processes. Rights place certain decisions beyond the power of normal politics, specifying certain things that no

³⁰ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 210.

³¹ Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, trans. Biancamaria Fontana, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77.

political body may do (“Congress shall make no law...”); liberal constitutionalism, in general, specifies these rights and provides an institutional framework for political life.

There are also important features to note on the *input* side. The first is that there is a difference between what I have called *metaphysical collectivism* and what I call *democratic collectivism*. In the former, persons are represented abstractly by the collective whole, and there is therefore little or no individual input; in the latter, persons participate equally in terms of their input into the political process. Both involve a super-personal self and the holism that this often entails, and both can violate individual negative liberty. *Democratic collectivism*, therefore, satisfies the *input* criterion while failing to satisfy the *output* one, while *metaphysical collectivism* does not satisfy either.

Ontologies that prioritize groups create problems for political theorists, for it is not obvious that groups choose in any simple way analogous to the way that individuals choose. If there is no collective entity to be represented independent of the aggregate of individual persons, no *totum* but only a *compositum* (to borrow and invert Fichte’s distinction), then representation comes into question. If the question is: “who (meaning what person or grouping of persons) should make this decision?” there is no unproblematic answer except the level of the individual.

Positive Liberty Rehabilitated

Berlin’s rejection of both sub-personal (chapter three) and super-personal (chapter four) versions of positive liberty, however, paves the way for a type of positive liberty that avoids these pitfalls: *individual positive liberty*. Conceptually, individual positive liberty may help democratic and republican theorists to avoid errors having to do with composition; if the appropriate political unit is the individual person, then there is no whole except an aggregate

that includes all persons. This revised concept, I argue, helps to distinguish between liberal democracy and other atavistic theories of representation, including democratic demagoguery, populism, and sortition.

As I argued in the first chapter, Berlin thought that liberty was, generally speaking, the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice. I then sought to track and recover Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty: negative liberty answers the question: "what is the area within which the subject ... is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?"³² Positive liberty, on the other hand, answers the question: "what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?"³³ Berlin rephrases these questions in explicitly political terms: negative liberty is concerned with the questions, "how much am I to be governed?" or "over what area am I master?" while positive liberty centers around the questions, "by whom am I governed?" or "who is master?"³⁴ I noted in chapter one that Berlin's framing of negative liberty contained an implicit answer to the *who* question: the subject of negative liberty is the individual person. I have argued throughout this dissertation that Berlin's multifaceted critique of positive liberty arose from the ways that the self could be transformed such that it no longer referred to the empirical or individual person. This raises the question: might there be a kind of positive liberty that does not fall afoul of these critiques?

I wish to argue that there is indeed a form of positive liberty that is not subject to the four critiques that I have covered: positive liberty can be redeemed provided that the

³² Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 169.

³³ Berlin, 169.

³⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 35.

choosing agent is the individual. Berlin used positive liberty, in this limited or rehabilitated sense, to refer to the genuine good of having a “voice in the laws and practices of the society in which one lives.”³⁵ Individual positive liberty, then, would refer to the equal participation, on the part of the individual, in collective decision-making and the framing of the laws. It is important to note that this rehabilitated version of positive liberty is still not negative liberty, which has to do with the private sphere in which a person is left free to choose, either through deliberate constitutional protections or generally accepted rights, or through what Hobbes called the “silence of the laws,” those things not explicitly prohibited.³⁶ On this interpretation, both positive and negative liberty are concepts that only apply at the individual level, and the distinction between them has to do with the level at which the choice might be said to apply: negative liberty concerns self-regarding choices and positive liberty concerns choice in a collective sense.

It is not my intention to attempt to turn this rehabilitated version of positive liberty into a comprehensive theory of democracy. Such a task would require a more extensive treatment and would lead far afield from this present investigation about the meaning and limits of liberty. I do wish to note in passing, though, that framing democracy in these terms would change the landscape of democratic theory. Earlier, I suggested that Berlin’s scepticism about super-personal entities was an inversion of Fichte’s *totum* and *compositum*. If individual choice matters, then there cannot be a *totum*; there is no singular *demos* or “The People,” only a *compositum* of (plural) people; there can be no *vox populi* or univocal voice of the people, only the disparate and at times cacophonous voices of many individuals.

³⁵ Berlin, 52.

³⁶ Chapter xxi, “Of the Liberty of Subjects,” in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. E. M. Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 143.

This framework would bring into question many quasi-democratic or anti-democratic forms of representation, which often involve a *metaphysical collectivism* rather than a *democratic collectivism*. A demagogue claims to be the *vox populi* or to “represent” the people; but if individual positive liberty is what matters, then no one person can speak on behalf of the composite whole. This individualistic form of liberty would also cut against both left and right forms of populism that attempt to frame the body politic in terms of elite and mass. Finally, if individual choice is to matter then certain forms of representation may be recognized as anti-democratic. Sortition, or the choosing of representatives by lot, is a form of representation purportedly aimed at addressing the shortcomings of election, especially the capture of the political sphere by elites. Sortition has seen a resurgence among democratic theorists as of late. Sortition, however, would not suffice for universal individual positive liberty, for it in fact just another form of *metaphysical collectivism* that aims to represent the whole in statistical or demographic terms. Berlin, in “Equality” (1955), wrote of “Bentham’s dictum,” that “everybody was to count for one, nobody for more than one.”³⁷ If individual choice matters in democracy, if “Bentham’s dictum” has any validity, then sortition is not a democratic theory at all. At stake in this debate would be the meaning of democracy, especially whether the *demos* could be said to have a coherent or unitary will and whether, or how, the *demos* could be represented independent of its constituent parts, individual persons.

³⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “Equality,” in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 106.

Negative Liberty Qualified

The concept of negative liberty also must be re-evaluated and qualified. While Berlin's critique of positive liberty in "Two Concepts" is well-known, he also saw the ways that individuals and groups could wield the language of negative liberty in the service of oppressive ends. Berlin's oft-neglected critique of negative liberty is encapsulated in a line from R. H. Tawney that Berlin was fond of quoting: "freedom for the wolves is death to the lambs."³⁸ If people are to live together in society, negative liberty cannot be absolute, for persons will come into collision with one another:

Men are largely interdependent, and no man's activity is so completely private as never to obstruct the lives of others in any way. 'Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows'; the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others.³⁹

Berlin's awareness of the latent danger in the concept of negative liberty is an indispensable if underappreciated aspect of his thought, for it allows liberalism to be distinguished from anarchism, libertarianism, political pluralism, group multiculturalism, and other political theories that claim to value liberty.

Both classical and modern liberals, Berlin contends, wished to maximize the compossible liberty of persons in a way that, at the very least, recognizes them each as having a genuine claim to unobstructed choice:

Most modern liberals, at their most consistent, want a situation in which as many individuals as possible can realise as many of their ends as possible, without assessment of the value of those ends as such, save in so far as they may frustrate the purposes of others.⁴⁰

³⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 10; Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 215; Berlin, *Liberty*, 38.

³⁹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171.

⁴⁰ Berlin, 199n1.

Berlin seems to have in mind something like Mill's harm principle: society should not choose on behalf of the individual or compel him except to prevent harm to others.⁴¹ Berlin's invocation of Tawney's maxim about the wolves and the lambs, however, is instructive about the limitations of liberty and liberalism. The concept of liberty, especially negative liberty, will provide an attractive cover to those who wish to dominate others: "the cry for individual liberty has often disguised desire for privilege, or for power to oppress and exploit, or simply fear of social change."⁴² To use the language of republicanism: when the state attempts to prevent *dominium*, or the horizontal domination of some citizens by others, those who wish to dominate will cry that this intervention is *imperium*, or state overreach, the vertical imposition of power by the state on the citizenry.

When the wolves call for the freedom to harm the lambs, insisting that it is their right, their pleas must be resisted. However, when this is the case, it is not appropriate to say that those being coerced are being freed: this would fall afoul of the critique of Rousseau and the sub-personal self as described in the third chapter of this dissertation. Nor are the wolves wholly incorrect in their claim that their liberty is being curtailed; throughout "Two Concepts" Berlin insists, following Bentham, all laws constrain, are impediments:

Bentham, almost alone, doggedly went on repeating that the business of laws was not to liberate but to restrain: every law is an infraction of liberty — even if such infraction leads to an increase of the sum of liberty.⁴³

Berlin repeats this idea in another footnote:

⁴¹ Sections IV and V of "On Liberty" in John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴² Berlin, *Liberty*, 44.

⁴³ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 195, 194n3.

Law is always a fetter, even if it protects you from being bound in chains that are heavier than those of the law, say some more repressive law or custom, or arbitrary despotism or chaos. Bentham says much the same.⁴⁴

Berlin's 1969 introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty* is illuminating on this point. There, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Berlin argued that conceptual distinctions ought to be maintained so that concepts are not conflated. Berlin writes:

The fact that given examples of negative freedom (especially where they coincide with powers and rights) — say the freedom of parents or schoolmasters to determine the education of children, of employers to exploit or dismiss their workers, of slave-owners to dispose of their slaves, of the torturer to inflict pain on his victims — may, in many cases, be wholly undesirable, and should in any sane or decent society be curtailed or suppressed, does not render them genuine freedoms any the less; nor does that fact justify us in so reformulating the definition of freedom that it is always represented as something good without qualification — always leading to the best possible consequences, always likely to promote my 'highest' self, always in harmony with the true laws of my own 'real' nature or those of my society, and so on, as has been done in many a classical exposition of freedom, from Stoicism to the social doctrines of our day, at the cost of obscuring profound differences.⁴⁵

We must avoid “reformulating the definition of freedom” so that it is “always represented as something good without qualification.” In this manner, Berlin reaches the limits of liberty: liberty may not always be good. Moreover, it often will be in tension with other goods that people value, such as equality or justice, or one type of liberty will be at odds with another.

How, then, should the liberty of wolves be understood? How should the liberal state respond to these claims? When confronting the wolves, I contend that the proper charge is hypocrisy. The wolves are claiming a right to a freedom that, if granted, would allow them to be destroyed by other wolves or other predators. Similarly, those who wish to choose on

⁴⁴ Berlin, 170n3.

⁴⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 48–49.

behalf of others, whether in some individual sense or collectively through democratic means, are also hypocritical; they are claiming the right to a “choice” that is incompatible with the choice of others. I will take up this problem in greater detail in the next section in the context of pluralism and multiculturalism.

Berlin’s discussion of wolves and lambs helps to show where a number of his critics have mistakenly targeted him. As discussed in chapter one, republican theorists have charged Berlin with defending non-intervention in ways that allow for domination; in actuality, Berlin thought that liberalism, rightly understood, could not be *laissez-faire* or non-interventionist: “the case for intervention, by the State or other effective agencies, to secure conditions for both positive, and at least a minimum degree of negative, liberty for individuals, is overwhelmingly strong.”⁴⁶ He noted that, historically, the “evil against which the concept of negative liberty was directed as a weapon was not *laissez-faire*, but despotism.”⁴⁷ Still, the classical liberals were, at least at their most consistent, not as hostile to social legislation as some of their detractors have suggested. Berlin himself was no libertarian or market fundamentalist; he supported the expansion of the welfare state, wrote a very positive “personal impression” of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, and greatly admired the post-war ministry of Clement Attlee in the UK that saw the creation of the National Health Service.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Berlin, 38.

⁴⁷ Berlin, 39.

⁴⁸ Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought*, First edition, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 225.

Pluralism and Multiculturalism Reconceptualized

My goal in the remainder of this chapter is to draw upon Berlin's critiques of negative liberty, reification (chapters 2-3), and super-personal entities (chapter 4) in order to critique theories of political pluralism and multiculturalism.⁴⁹ I believe this to be a friendly critique, for in my view Berlin's liberalism and humanism point toward an improved version of these theories, revised in light of his ethical and conceptual insights. In this manner, I hope to extend Berlin's arguments to (what I take to be) their logical conclusions and apply these principles to a topic of enduring relevance in the twenty-first century. In keeping with the theme of the rest of the chapter, I will focus specifically on the relationship between the individual and the collective as it occurs within sub-national political groups; the target of my critique is not the moral position of value-pluralism but the political interpretation and application of its implications, sometimes called political or liberal pluralism.

Much has been written about Berlin's value-pluralism and its relationship to liberalism.⁵⁰ Leo Strauss maintained that Berlin's position was not pluralism but relativism.⁵¹ Ernest Gellner similarly thought Berlin was trapped between liberalism and relativism, for if values were plural, then one should presumably be expected to give leeway to illiberal values,

⁴⁹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171; Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10.

⁵⁰ For a general overview of the literature on Berlin, see Ian Harris, "Berlin and His Critics," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 349–64; George Crowder, "After Berlin: The Literature 2002–2022," *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, 2020, <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/after-berlin.pdf>. Other important contributions include George Crowder, "Pluralism and Liberalism," *Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 1994): 293–305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1994.tb01913.x>; George Crowder, "Value Pluralism, Diversity and Liberalism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, no. 3 (2015): 549–64; William A. Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory," *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 769–78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586111>; William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); William A. Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism," in *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Catherine H. Zuckert 1942– (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13–26.

too; Gellner's charge is that the pluralistic "sauce for the liberal goose is sauce for the illiberal gander."⁵² John Gray falls afoul of this same critique, for Gray wishes to undercut the connection between value-pluralism and liberalism. Gray thinks that value-pluralism leads one to view values as contingent, such that the choice that undergirds liberalism is itself only another value among many.⁵³

For present purposes, I will use John Gray as the primary avatar for this critique of Berlin, though this same rebuttal could be relevant and applicable to other scholars as well. John Gray goes astray, I argue, in that his analysis assumes that value-pluralism is "deeper than" or "prior to" the value of choice. While this may be a possible interpretation of the meaning of value-pluralism, it was not Berlin's. Values are not mind-independent entities, but ideas created and transformed by persons:

All that is ultimately valuable are the particular purposes of particular persons; and to trample on these is always a crime because there is, and can be, no principle or value higher than the ends of the individual, and therefore no principle in the name of which one could be permitted to do violence to or degrade or destroy individuals — the sole authors of all principles and all values.⁵⁴

As I stated in the introduction to this dissertation, values and choice matter because they matter *to persons*, while persons matter *simpliciter*. The bedrock of Berlin's political thought is humanism, and it is from this that the value of pluralism and liberalism are derived.

⁵² Ernest Gellner, "Sauce for the Liberal Goose," *Prospect*, no. 2 (November 1995): 56–61.

⁵³ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 175–202; John Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 17–36; Michael Bacon, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: John Gray's Complicated Relationship with the Liberal Project," *Social Theory and Practice* 36, no. 3 (2010): 365–84; George Crowder, "John Gray's Pluralist Critique of Liberalism," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (1998): 287–98.

⁵⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy, Second Edition (London, England: Penguin Books, 2013), 128. I encountered this quotation in Henry Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, Reprint with corrections (London: Tauris Parke, 2020), 174.

This mistake about the foundational value of Berlin's thought leads to strange conclusions in the final chapter of Gray's otherwise illuminating book. Gray asks:

...why should liberty always trump diversity — especially if one is a value-pluralist? To claim that it must do so is to say that no form of life deserves to survive if it cannot withstand the force of the exercise of free choice by its members.⁵⁵

Gray's statement, however, is incompatible with the passage from *Russian Thinkers* quoted above: if humans are ends-in-themselves, then to promote a given value, or to wish for the perpetuation of a certain way of life even against the choice of those within it, is to treat persons as means, as objects, as vessels for the continuation of a religion or a culture. Diversity is certainly something to be celebrated, and the presence of diversity might rightly be considered an indicator of the absence of coercion. But surely diversity must be a secondary goal, something epiphenomenal, for if it were the primary goal it would lead towards conclusions that are truly repugnant: the world would be more diverse if truly horrible ways of life, such as slavery, torture, and human sacrifice continued to exist; some people would have to be singled out to bear the weight of continuing certain dying or dead cultures or religions, such as those of the Assyrians or Olmecs; intellectuals might then be tasked with the job of innovating and creating new cultures and religions for the sake of this diversity. The absurdity of these conclusions shows that Gray has it backwards: it is far more sensible to say that diversity is valuable because it reflects the genuine choices of human beings, who, by their very nature, choose, create, and transform values. Diversity is an inescapable part of being human because to be human is to choose.

⁵⁵ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 186.

Or to give another example: Gray writes of illiberal ways of life, or those subject to radical choice, lives that do not prioritize choice: “the forms of life so chosen are ones in which choice-making is accorded no special significance.”⁵⁶ The very wording of this statement, however, betrays or runs counter to Gray’s intent, for those forms of life that do not value choice are “chosen;” Gray, in describing the situation, cannot escape the language of choice. This shows that choice is not a first-order value but a second-order or meta-value. Even a life that does not privilege choice can be, and often is, framed in the liberal language of choice: as Meira Levinson has noted, “even illiberal citizens base their claims about education on liberal values,” since liberty, broadly construed, allows for illiberal uses of that liberty.⁵⁷ As noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, even to abstain from choosing can be construed within the language of liberalism; to quote the great philosopher Neil Peart of the Canadian rock band Rush: “if you choose not to decide you still have made a choice!”⁵⁸ If Gray wishes to say that a person may make a choice at one time to enter a way of life that largely precludes other choices (e.g., taking up a monastic way of life), that decision can still be framed, and will be defended, in the language of choice.

William Galston’s interpretation of liberal pluralism largely construes choice at the level of the group.⁵⁹ His aim is noble, for he wants to secure liberty for diverse ways of life along the lines of culture and religion; his approach, however, runs into all of the same issues outlined in the first half of this chapter. Groups are not individuals, and they do not “choose” in the same way that individuals choose. Galston thinks that many groups that are

⁵⁶ Gray, 195.

⁵⁷ Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁵⁸ Rush, *Freemill*, Permanent Waves (Mercury Records, 1980).

⁵⁹ Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*.

illiberal are voluntary, and that this voluntariness excuses the illiberality, such that what matters is the ability to exit. But the very example the Galston uses, that of Amish children, shows just how implausible it is to say that their choice is voluntary. What of those groups that exercise power upon their members to enforce orthodoxy, or to keep members within the group, or to condition them to live according to certain values? Group-level interpretations of political pluralism, I argue, cannot withstand the various critiques that have been outlined in this dissertation.

The first ontological error commonly made by multiculturalists and pluralists is to reify abstract entities such as religions and cultures. By this mystical transformation, the “survival” of the abstract entity takes priority, independent of whether people choose it. However, if it is individual freedom or choice that matters, it is not clear why abstract entities such as religions, cultures, or groups should have any value independent of that derived by persons who freely choose them. Nor is it clear that these are singular and clearly bounded entities; the history of religions and cultures is one of doctrinal conflict, schism, exchange, syncretism, and transformation. As Susan Moller Okin has argued, advocates of multiculturalism at the group level make two erroneous assumptions: first, “they tend to treat cultural groups as monoliths — they pay more attention to differences between and among groups than to differences within them,” and they “pay little or no attention to the private sphere.”⁶⁰ On top of this, these categories are not mutually exclusive; in an increasingly globalized world, a person often must form an identity that grapples with and

⁶⁰ Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Craven Nussbaum (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.

synthesizes different (and sometimes conflicting) identities. Berlin himself had to grapple with the Russian, Jewish, and English strands of his heritage.

Plurality and Multiplicity at What Level?

At stake, then, is the multiplicity in multiculturalism and the plurality in pluralism. Where, ontologically speaking, is the multiplicity? Any multiculturalism worthy of the name, I argue, must contend with multiplicity *within* groups and even *within* persons, and not only between groups of persons. This was something that Berlin saw quite clearly: “Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false.”⁶¹ The word “pluralism,” therefore, often obscures an equivocation: the existence of a plurality of values (value-pluralism) is not the same as what advocates of political pluralism usually mean, which is the co-existence of radically diverse and even illiberal groups within a polity. The way out of these ontological quagmires is to not to conceive of religions, cultures, etc. as abstract entities with lives of their own but as identities adopted or affirmed by persons.

This critique applies not only to identities but also actual groups, i.e., sets of people who explicitly conceive of themselves in group terms. Advocates of group rights, multiculturalism, and pluralism often take Berlin’s insight about value-pluralism as supporting sub-national collectivist approaches to politics. However, one of the insights gleaned from Berlin’s critique of super-personal entities (chapter four) was that there is no answer to the question of “who decides” that is unproblematic except for individual positive

⁶¹ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 10. Cf. Jeremy Waldron, “Multiculturalism and Mélange,” in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, ed. Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

liberty. Sub-national groups will be subject to the *output* and *input problems* in the same ways as the state itself, i.e., a group can “choose” in ways that violate the individuals within the group (*output* problem) or not reflect the collective input of the individuals that constitute the *compositum* of the group (*input* problem). Berlin captures this tension in “Two Concepts:”

I may, of course, prefer to be deprived of my liberties by an assembly, or a family, or a class in which I am a minority. It may give me an opportunity one day of persuading the others to do for me that to which I feel I am entitled. But to be deprived of my liberty at the hands of my family or friends or fellow citizens is to be deprived of it just as effectively.⁶²

All the same issues of representation and choice reappear at the level of the group, or sub-groups within the group, and so on, all the way down to the level of the individual. This process might be considered a recursive charge of hypocrisy as each sub-level accuses those at the level above of trying to “choose” on their behalf.

Illiberal pluralists of all stripes who employ the language of negative liberty will perpetually find themselves, like Berlin’s wolves, open to this charge of hypocrisy. Their wish to “not be interfered with” by a higher level of government or other political entities invokes the language of negative liberty, yet power exercised within the group itself in an effort to constrict individual choice will expose the group to the critique that it (or, as is often the case, some part of it, such as its leaders, elders, men) is claiming a right to “freedom” for the group as an abstract entity while denying that same freedom to the group’s constituent members. Therefore, Berlin’s critique of negative liberty helps to explain the paradox of multicultural vulnerability, sometimes called the problem of minorities within minorities, as

⁶² Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 210.

an ontological problem.⁶³ Calls for “freedom,” “autonomy,” or “self-determination” at the group level can, if indulged, paradoxically result in *less* individual freedom for certain group members and the violation of rights of vulnerable minorities within the group, such as women and children.⁶⁴

Each of the chapters of this dissertation has also tracked an equivocation about liberty, and this critique of group-rights is no different, for one can see this hypocrisy in the double-speak of phrases such as “state’s rights” or “school choice.” Both phrases call for non-interference on the part of some larger entity, but historically neither has meant individual choice, i.e., for slaves or for children. The “self” that is clamoring for choice in these cases is not the individual self and often not even a democratic collective but a metaphysical collective, usually based on the choice of an elite minority, that involves the deliberate suppression of the rights or choice of some subgroup. Groups that employ the language of “self-determination” at the group level will always be subject to these compositional critiques, for in a group there is not one person or “self” but many selves.⁶⁵

Political theorists generate all sorts of new issues by treating group claims about freedom as being categorically similar to individual claims about freedom. Earlier in this chapter, positive liberty was rehabilitated and negative liberty was qualified: strong individuals, those who wish to dominate or restrict the freedom of others, will have to be restrained if others are to be free. The same logic applies, I argue, for groups that wish to

⁶³ Ayelet Shachar, “On Citizenship and Multicultural Vulnerability,” *Political Theory* 28, no. 1 (2000): 64–89; Avigail I. Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev, eds., *Minorities Within Minorities: Equality, Rights, and Diversity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Craven Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ Amitai Etzioni, “The Evils of Self-Determination,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 89 (1992): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149071>.

dominate; their calls for “freedom” will have to be countered with the explanation that their desire to act unimpeded would violate the freedom of other persons. The result of all of this is that, perhaps counterintuitively, a liberal society cannot be one that is *laissez-faire* nor fully pluralist in this group-level sense, for unlimited freedom for illiberal groups and dominating individuals (wolves) will necessarily conflict with the equal freedom of all individuals (lambs).

Conclusion: Toward a Liberalism for the 21st Century

... conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation of the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes.

— Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”

Liberalism faces many challenges in the twenty-first century. The end of history is not here yet, nor guaranteed, for recent decades have brought the decline of liberal-democratic institutions in a number of countries. Authoritarianism is on the rise; populist movements, both left-wing and right-wing, have come to shape national politics; global inequality and forms of neo-colonial wealth-extraction persist; in a number of countries, there are fierce debates about how to navigate the challenges of globalism and religious and ethnic difference. In light of these issues, some critics have claimed that liberalism has failed.¹ And while some of these challenges are practical or institutional, others are rooted in more fundamental disagreements that are conceptual or ontological in nature. Liberals, libertarians, pluralists, anarchists, socialists, democrats, and multiculturalists claim to value liberty, yet their various differences reveal that they do not agree about what liberty is — and is not. The days of Socrates sparring with sophists in the *agora* may be long gone, but equivocation, especially about political concepts such as liberty, remains.

Berlin spent many decades thinking about liberty, and this work might help us to see and address some of the problems associated with it. Freedom is not renunciation or knowledge but genuine choice between alternatives; freedom is of value to human beings; it is important to think of oneself as free and not wholly determined by impersonal forces; it is

¹ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Politics and Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Deirdre McCloskey, “Why Liberalism’s Critics Fail,” *Intercollegiate Studies Institute*, July 19, 2018, <https://isi.org/modern-age/why-liberalisms-critics-fail/>.

likewise important to think of other people as similarly free so as to avoid paternalism; one ought to treat one's fellow citizens as subjects and not as objects; freedom, rightly understood or conceived in non-contradictory terms, is a property of individuals and not groups; and the language of negative liberty is ambiguous because those who wish to dominate or choose on behalf of others will need to be constrained by law if those others are to be free.

With this project I have endeavored to make a scholarly contribution on two different levels. First, this project contributes to the growing literature on Isaiah Berlin. By tracing the links between Berlin's ontology and his political views, I hope to have shown, without twisting the foxy Berlin into a hedgehog, that there is an underappreciated coherence to his writings. While he may be best known for the broad and synoptic "Two Concepts of Liberty," a number of his lesser-known essays treat specific aspects of liberty in greater detail. His work on the philosophy of history (e.g., "Historical Inevitability," "The Hedgehog and the Fox," "The Concept of Scientific History") and writings on the difference between the humanities and the sciences (e.g., "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," "Does Political Theory Still Exist?") are not vestigial writings but key to understanding his central political works. By analyzing not just liberty but its relation to other concepts such as renunciation, knowledge, history, responsibility, objectification, social science, nationalism, and collectivism, Berlin shows how concepts are woven together — one might even say entangled — such that any transformations to one concept will affect many others. At the same time, Berlin's approach to the study of ideas yields a methodological insight similar to the one drawn by the Platonic Socrates in the

Phaedrus: philosophy is about the combining and separating of ideas, and the philosopher's task is the creation, transformation, and destruction of categories.

Berlin's liberalism can be contrasted fruitfully with other major varieties found in the history of political thought. Like Locke, Berlin assumes that the protection of the individual is the end of politics; unlike Locke, Berlin emphasizes lives and choice far more than property. The liberal perfectionist Mill assumed that freedom would also result in the greatest utility, and in this sense wished to have his cake and eat it too; Berlin, grounding liberalism in deontology and not consequentialism, urges us to forgo the impulse for efficiency in politics for the sake of decency.² Rawls argues that there is no moral desert because, at bottom, no person is truly responsible for his or her attributes or skills; in order to argue for equality, Rawls trades away the very possibility of freedom in a way that the Pelagian Berlin could never endorse.³ Unlike most thinkers from Socrates onward, Berlin does not attempt to ground choice in rationalism or autonomy; contra Kant and Raz, there can be a value in making a choice even if that choice is not rational.⁴

² Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 68.

³ Eric Nelson traces the relationship between Pelagian theodicy and liberalism in *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019). Nelson argues that early modern liberal theorists including Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant were Pelagians or advanced Pelagian ideas, i.e., they insisted on the metaphysical freedom of human beings. Nelson then explores the ways that Rawls departed from this liberal tradition with his anti-Pelagian rejection of moral desert. Nelson's account differs from Berlin's in two important ways. First, Nelson generally implies that these theorists were starting with the needs and requirements of theology: "for each of these theorists, then, the rationalist question of God's justice was meaningful and urgent. They were therefore required to seek a theodicy . . . human freedom alone could vindicate God's justice, both punitive and creative." 7. As I argue in chapter two, Berlin in "Historical Inevitability" suggests that the causal link goes in the opposite direction: the theological or metaphysical views are the *effects* and not the causes; the theological views are epiphenomenal to the psychological needs of human beings. The wish to find an alibi to absolve oneself of responsibility, or to find a providential future in which one's cause will be victorious in the end, comes first; *then* the theology or philosophy of history changes to facilitate this absolution or redemption. Second, while Nelson primarily focuses on the implications of the Pelagian debate for distributive justice, Berlin is more intent on examining its implications for human agency and therefore political action.

⁴ John Gray neatly summarizes this distinction between negative liberty and autonomy as espoused by Raz, showing how Raz's position makes autonomy of instrumental value towards the end of pursuing a good life: "Raz's argument is of great subtlety and profundity, yet it is clear that it is not acceptable to Berlin. For one

For contemporary political life, Berlin's work helps to reveal and dispel the anti-democratic uses of democratic theory and the illiberal uses of liberal theory. Democratic demagoguery rests on the implicit assumption that a strong leader can "represent" the *demos* or "The People;" there is, of course, nothing democratic about such a political regime. Other forms of populism divide the body politic into the elite and masses, or the citizens and foreigners, or an in-group and out-group, or majorities and minorities; whatever the division, the result is the familiar dichotomy of Appearance and Reality, in which some section of the body politic is assumed to be the "true" one. Sortition, a method of choosing representatives via lottery, a notion that is seeing a revival recently, also rests on a form of representation through statistics or demographics; but it too faces issues of democratic legitimacy since not all citizens actually participate or have individual positive liberty. Each of these conceptions of the *demos* involves an appropriation of the language of democracy, but each relies upon an abstraction and substitution. Berlin's anti-idealism brings these — perhaps even all — notions of representation into question. Berlin's *liberal humanism* shows how each of these conceptions of democracy fails to satisfy the most fundamental democratic condition, that of individual positive liberty: that each and every person have an equal say or *input* in politics.

A similar case can be made about the illiberal uses of liberal political theory. To the extent that Berlin exhibits the liberal humanist ontology that I have presented, scholars who invoke his work to defend group multiculturalism or what might be called illiberal or

thing, the intrinsic value of freedom, especially of negative freedom, is in its embodiment of the 'basic freedom' of choice itself — not the rational choice among genuine goods and worthwhile options that is designated by autonomy, but choice *simpliciter*. Such choice may be capricious or whimsical, perverse or unreasonable, quixotic or self-destructive: it remains choice, and, as such, the source of the value of negative freedom (as well as of positive freedom in its genuine conceptions). The danger of Raz's account, from Berlin's viewpoint, is that it confines the value of freedom to the rational adoption of worthwhile ends." Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 65.

political forms of pluralism are, I argue, mistaken about the implications of value-pluralism. By reifying abstract entities — groups, nations, religions, sects, corporations — they fall afoul of the various ontological errors described in this dissertation. These entities are not living, and they have no existence independent of their constituent members. Groups (or, more often, some subset of the group claiming the mantle of the whole group) will make claims to “freedom” or “self-determination,” but these concepts frequently cannot be applied to these abstract entities without hypocrisy or contradiction as groups are composed of multiple selves.

So-called “pluralists” are therefore mistaken about the ontological status of values, or *where* the plurality resides. Values can clash not only between groups but “within the breast of a single individual.”⁵ Values are plural, but they are of value to persons who freely choose them. For this reason, liberal regimes may maintain or even see an increase in the diversity of ways of life as people choose freely. But diversity is the byproduct and not the goal; diversity may be an indicator of freedom, but it is not co-extensive with it. It is a mistake, however, to think that the diversity or number of these abstract entities is what matters, and it is a perverse ontological inversion to turn persons into mere vessels for the continuity of a culture or a religion or a corporation. We should not lament when some ways of life are lost (e.g., slavery or human sacrifice).

While Berlin did not write a *magnum opus* or give a programmatic definition of liberalism, his methodical separation of liberty from adjacent concepts makes clear *what liberalism is not*. Liberalism is about choice, and to change oneself rather than the outer world

⁵ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 10.

of obstacles is not political freedom (Choice and not Renunciation). Liberalism is largely incompatible with the kind of determinism implicit in metaphysical or “scientific” views of history, for a political philosophy that insists upon the value of choice cannot rest upon a worldview in which there is no choice (Freedom and not Determinism). Social science, at least in its most reductive forms, is in tension with (if not inimical to) liberalism because it inculcates an ontology and anthropology in which persons are treated not as subjects but as objects; the perpetual temptation to apply scientific principles to the social realm through the direct manipulation of people means that social science is liable to lead to technocracy and paternalism (Subjects and not Objects).

Berlin’s critique of collectivism in its nationalist and communist varieties applies equally to many forms of democratic and republican theory. There is no such thing as “The People” — indeed, Berlin suggests our internal alarms ought to sound any time we are tempted to capitalize some noun in this manner — only *specific* people of the individual and empirical sort. Finally, this critique about collective entities applies similarly to sub-national groups. If freedom is to be considered something of value for all human beings, the liberal or liberty-defending state will not be characterized by non-interference, decentralization, or devolution simply, as is the case in anarchism, libertarianism, laissez-faire — or, as I hope to have shown, certain forms of pluralism and multiculturalism which amount to the same — but will seek the maximum individual liberty consistent with the liberty of all others, for “liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs” (The Individual and not the Collective).

Ultimately, Berlin’s *liberal humanism* offers an antidote to the kinds of abstraction found in various contradictory and perverted interpretations of liberalism. In light of the

ontological argument I have presented, I will conclude by emending Constant's description of the state in a way consistent with Berlin's liberal humanism:

We are always hearing about the great empire, of the whole nation, abstract notions that have no reality. The great empire is nothing independently of its ~~provinces~~ *people*. The whole nation is nothing separated from the ~~parts~~ *persons* that compose it. It is in defending the rights of these ~~parts~~ *individuals* that one defends the rights of the whole nation; since the nation itself is divided into each of those parts.⁶

Fundamentally, political theory is entangled with or dependent on metaphysics. At its worst, political theory is complicit in perpetuating the fallacious metaphysical substitutions that lead not to freedom but to its betrayal. Most broadly, I hope to have contributed to the ontological work that Berlin began, the task of clarifying the concepts and categories that make up our social world. By seeking a concept of liberty that is "less contradictory" and "less pervertible," we might find a renewed liberalism for the twenty-first century and craft for ourselves a future that is more humane.

⁶ Constant, *Political Writings*, 77.

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Biography

Brian Spisiak grew up in Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. He graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, where he earned a BA in Political Science, *magna cum laude* and with distinction in 2013. At Carleton he was awarded the Philip H. Niles Prize for the best essay in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. After a brief period back in Chicago, he enrolled in the doctoral program in Political Science at Duke University, where he earned his MA in 2019 and PhD in 2023. His graduate studies have been generously funded by The Graduate School at Duke University, The Kenan Institute for Ethics, The Henry Luce Anthropocene Graduate Fellowship, and the Institute for Humane Studies. He currently resides in Boulder, Colorado, and when not teaching or writing he enjoys playing the piano and trail running in the mountains with his friends.