COMMENTS

Words on the Wise From Isaiah Berlin

Philip Brantingham

"THE HISTORY OF IDEAS," Isaiah Berlin has written, "is a rich, but by its very nature an imprecise field...." One hates to disagree with so distinguished and learned a scholar, but to this writer the field does not appear to be as vague as Professor Berlin would have us believe. For he himself has spent a lifetime making it very precise—and sometimes even colorful—through the medium of his detailed essays on modern thought and its thinkers.

Others too have engaged in this intellectual adventure.

Indeed, far from being a distant, dim landscape, the world of the history of ideas has been crowded with explorers—and they have all returned to tell us about it in great detail.

To name only a few, Edmund Wilson, Friedrich Heer, and Alfred North Whitehead: these are men who have written important books about the history of ideas. Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1940) is an attempt to trace the roots of socialist ideas and their development to our day. Friedrich Heer's *The Intellectual History of Europe* (1953—first German edition) is a bold effort to trace the growth of ideas in Europe from St. Augustine to Father Karl Rahner. And Alfred North Whitehead's *Adventures of ideas* (1933) is a work in which the scope of men's ideas is discussed as "a study of the concept of civilization," as the author puts it.

It is possible to cite even earlier attempts to investigate the background of ideas. We can go back as far as Aristotle, whose scrappy, posthumous collection of lectures (published as the *Metaphysics* and issued some time after his death in 322 B.C.) reviewed the history of ideas up to his time.

In short, Berlin is neither alone nor a pioneer in his studies; for the field is far from deserted. Still, his own "adventures of ideas" are marked by a unique and individual approach, resulting in some of the most convincing writings to be found today on the nature of political philosophy.

It is important to keep in mind that Berlin has not tried, overall, to write popular essays on the history of philosophy. On the contrary, it has been his aim throughout his career to offer readers not historical instances, but full and detailed descriptions of the meaning of the important political ideas of modern times. As well, he has also provided us with brilliant sketches of the characters of their creators.

How did this unusual career begin? Considering his origins, he hardly seems a person likely to indulge in popular expositions of philosophy. Born in June of 1909 at Riga, Latvia, Isaiah Berlin was raised in Russia during some of its most tumultuous years. His family were Latvian citizens, so they were not bothered during the social upheavals of those early decades. But after the Soviet seizure of power in 1917, his father, who

was a timber merchant, decided that it was time to consider leaving the country. And in 1919 the family succeeded in emigrating to England. There, Isaiah quickly adapted to his new surroundings and eventually entered Oxford University. It was a long way from Riga and the Bolshevik seizure of power.

He remained at Oxford after his graduation to teach philosophy. Aside from his life at the university, he did not do much writing for the public, save for occasional music criticism. Then, in 1933, he was commissioned to write a short biography of Karl Marx for the Home Library series.

He was chosen to write the book because, as he modestly says, everyone else who had been asked had turned the project down. He himself undertook the project because, as he has written, "I thought that if I never wrote about him [Karl Marx] I would never read him, because when I read *Das Kapital* I frequently, particularly at the beginning, found it unreadable...."

After six years' labor on the manuscript, it was finally issued—to a surprising success (indeed, it is still in print today). This was not only because it was an excellent brief study of the ideas of the philosopher, but also because it was a no-nonsense biography, that is, Marx presented with all his warts. As Robert Heilbroner has written about Berlin's approach: "Ideas, however independent once they are born, are nonetheless the mysterious progeny of human beings, and if we are interested in the quality of ideas, we are naturally led to conjecture as to what kind of human being could have produced them."

In other words, Berlin believed that it was just as important to know the kind of man Karl Marx really was, as it was to know the meaning of his ideas.

Karl Marx is a masterful summary of Marx the man and Marx the thinker. "He was by temperament a theorist and an intellectual, and instinctively avoided direct contact with the masses to the study of whose interests his entire life was devoted." In this first major work, Berlin displayed a magisterial yet accessible style. It was a foretaste of Berlin's later work, in which the clarity of style is very close to that of George Santayana—though somewhat more donnish in its assertiveness.

During World War II, Berlin worked for the British Foreign Office, and was posted to New York (1941) and then Washington. In 1945 the Foreign Office sent him to Moscow, where, thanks to his knowledge of Russian, he was able to meet many of the great figures of modern Russian literature—chiefly, Pasternak and Akhmatova. In fact, Berlin has had a lifelong passion for Russian literature and philosophy. (His translation of Turgenev's short novel, *First Love*, into English was published in 1950.)

But it was his interest in political philosophy that provided him with his greatest inspiration. After the end of the war, he began to publish essays in such varied magazines as *Encounter*, *Partisan Review*, and *Foreign Affairs*.

His next long work was *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), an analysis of Tolstoy's political philosophy, as found in the philosophical sections of *War and Peace*. Then he edited an anthology, *The Age of Enlightenment* (1956), in which he was able to comment extensively on the philosophers of this most fertile period in the history of ideas. Many more essays and reviews appeared afterwards, the bulk of which have recently been collected in five volumes, edited by Henry Hardy. These volumes form Isaiah Berlin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, so to speak. It is a collection long overdue.

In reading these essays and reviews, one becomes aware of a probing and frank analyst who is not afraid to relate the ideas of a man to his life and his forebears. Sometimes Berlin finds the

ideas uplifting, and at other times, abhorrent. In the case of Georges Sorel, he even finds them frightening.

For Berlin is not a mere explicator. Behind his investigations into the history of ideas lies his own beliefs which might be best explained in Nicholas Berdyaev's words: "At the base of my notion of the world as I see it there has always lain the idea of liberty...."

Without question, this same preoccupation has concerned Berlin. In his book, *Four Essays on Liberty*, he has delineated his interest in the progress of liberty in the modern world. This interest is far from incidental; it is crucial to the understanding of the Berlin point of view.

In this view, the ideas of great thinkers of our age have often been counterproductive. In the case of Sorel and Josef de Maistre, their ideas have been, by and large, pernicious. For they were men who wrote books founded on the belief in all-powerful authority. Despite his fascination with these thinkers, Berlin ultimately refutes their thinking. He in fact refutes obeisance to all-powerful authorities—the church, the state, the leader.

He has said, in an interview, "Unless there is choice, there is no human action." In any case, Berlin calls himself a liberal and above all, a believer in metaphysics—something most academic philosophers flinch at admitting.

Most interesting of all, Berlin does not believe in words without breath; or, that words and ideas are things that float bodiless in the heavens, abstractions devoid of human origin. He believes that ideas were created by human beings, and that no matter how complicated these ideas are, they can be traced to the characters of their creators.

Like Edmund Wilson, when Berlin writes about political thinkers—such as Mill, Marx, and Montesquieu—he is a portrait painter. Of Georges Sorel he writes: "He was almost everything that he so vehemently denounced...." Of Montesquieu: "He observed curiously, minutely, and insatiably, all his life."

Berlin is not particularly interested in sordid details. At the same time, he is not afraid of exposing the unpleasant features of his subjects. Marx he presented as a pedantic boor, who neglected his family and lived the arid existence of a bookworm, each day trundling from his home to the British Museum library and back. Of Josef de Maistre: "...He went to a Jesuit school, and became a member of a lay order, one of whose duties it was to succour criminals, and in particular to attend executions and give last aid and comfort to their victims. Perhaps it was because of this that the imagery of the scaffold fills his thoughts."

As for Tolstoy, who in his old age took on the form of a genuinely tragic hero, Berlin wrote: "At once insanely proud and filled with self-hatred, omniscient and doubting everything, cold and violently passionate, contemptuous and self-abasing, tormented and detached, surrounded by an adoring family, by devoted followers, by the admiration of the entire civilized world, and yet almost wholly isolated, he is the most tragic of the great writers, a desperate old man, beyond human aid, wandering self-blinded at Colonus."

Berlin indeed seems attracted to the tragic heroes of the mind, sad and defeated radicals like Sorel, Bakunin, and Moses Hess. Their soaring ideals almost always collapse and sink to the ground—in Hess's case, in a transformation from the early euphoria of an extreme left-wing radical to the somber doggedness of a fanatical prophet of Zionism and the Talmud. Berlin acknowledges the tragic turns that the lives of the most dedicated political philosophers take.

As is evident from his writings, Berlin is not particularly interested in religious or scientific ideas. He has said in an interview, "I am not much good on religious philosophy," and science has not

attracted him. But in his essay "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," he has noted the tendency of scientists and theorists of science to trend towards "their ideal of a unified system of all the sciences, natural and humane," which is a heritage of the Enlightenment. In this, Berlin sees the danger of a constricting, almost superrogating intellectual policy. It is as if this elite were saying, " 'We'll let you know within what framework you can think.' "

One can't help noting that this "scientific" method of thinking, the grand unified scheme that excluded all interlopers, was exactly the kind of thing that the Positivists, from Bertrand Russell to A. J. Ayer, were wont to promote, condemning metaphysics and speculative thinking by simply stating, dismissively, that if something could not be scientifically proven, it wasn't knowledge. This kind of thing was not new. One recalls the old poem about Benjamin Jowett, the great Oxford scholar:

My name is Jowett

of Balliol College;

if I don't know it,

it isn't knowledge.

Isaiah Berlin knew A. J. Ayer, and the other Oxford Positivists, and in his memoir of his old Oxford mentor, J. L. Austin, "J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy," he has described the deep conflict between Austin and these practical rationalists.

The Positivists held that the one true touchstone of philosophy was whether or not an idea could be scientifically proven. Austin, for one, would not give up his belief in the essential need to examine continually ideas for their truth, whether or not a scientist could "prove" them or not. And Austin and Ayer, as Berlin writes, "gradually become the protagonists of two irreconcilable points of view."

As for himself, in his years in the Austin circle, "I was brought up originally as an English Hegelian. I rebelled against that...." Berlin eventually wrote three essays against Positivism—and certainly his entire outlook in his major works is not the kind that would have cheered Ayer and the other camp followers of the Vienna Circle.

But this is perhaps getting a bit technical—for it is possible to see in Berlin's approaches to political thought a willingness to accept, very generously in de Maistre's case, ideas on their own grounds—for the purpose of analyzing them, not as an excuse for denouncing them.

Writing about philosophers (and philosophical writers) entails solving the problems thrown up by them. "Philosophical problems," Berlin has written, "arise when men ask questions of themselves or of others which, though very diverse, have certain characteristics in common." It is the same with artistic problems; the writings of Kafka deal with the tribulations of men trying to survive in a modern society. By writing in parables and narratives, Kafka was able to deal with the kinds of problems that all men could understand.

In Berlin's works, the philosophical problems often are placed in a historical and personal setting. But sometimes this method does not succeed. His essay on Macchiavelli, "The Originality of Macchiavelli," bogs down in a kind of scholarly fustian, quibblings over what A thought of Macchiavelli, as opposed to B and C.

Macchiavelli is not a philosopher with whom Berlin feels comfortable, perhaps because the setting of the Italian's writings is so contradictory. Was he really an intellectual courtesan, or was he in fact a plain exponent of *realpolitik*, that is, how to succeed in politics without losing any sleep at night?

As opposed to many modern historians of ideas, Berlin does not mind taking a stand. His position on liberty and human freedom is uncompromising: "The word liberty means to me absence of obstacles: but I am not a disciple of Bakunin or Kropotkin." (The two were anarchists.)

He believes that there must be liberty and there must be at the same time, restraints. Complete equality leads to tyranny, and complete freedom leads to a state of anarchy.

By and large, the history of ideas can be either a temple or a museum. If it is a temple, as Alfred North Whitehead would have liked it, then it would end up as a narrative of "ideas" and their good deeds in civilization. If it is a museum, then, as Friedrich Heer treated it, the ideas would be separated into exhibition halls, with grandiose titles: "The New Age of Salvation" and "Italy of the Counter-Reformation."

What Berlin has done, in brief, is to do away with ideas as a religion or as artifacts. He has returned ideas to the bodies of their creators—and given them breath. When we read his essays on particular philosophers, we have a keen sense of who it was who came up with the ideas that formed the groundwork of—in Sorel's case—fascism.

His particular fascination with outlaws and curiosities of modern thought—de Maistre and Sorel fit this bill—is simply an admiration at the tremendous influence they had on later generations, despite the erratic nature of their ideas.

As for himself, his motto is simply put: "Reason and experience are not enough." For the cause of liberty and personal freedom, Isaiah Berlin tells us, is a worthy endeavor and needs to be protected. "Single-minded monists, ruthless fanatics, men possessed by an all-embracing coherent vision, do not know the doubts and agonies of those who cannot wholly blind themselves to reality."

He is a thinker who believes in the study of the ideas and the characters of the important philosophers of the modern age, and as such has done a good deal to present us with the intrinsic nature, and fallacies, of the philosophic systems of our time.