

From Helvetius to Hegel:  
Isaiah Berlin on  
Romantic Political Theory

Dr. Spencer Davis  
Peru State College

It is now a decade since the passing of Isaiah Berlin. In these ten years his industrious editor, Henry Hardy, has collected and published Berlin's essays and a volume of letters and prepared for publication three of Berlin's lecture series. These lecture series have been published as The Roots of Romanticism, Freedom and Its Betrayal, and Political Ideas in the Romantic Age. Although published last, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age is the first of Berlin's explorations of Romantic philosophy. It is also the longest manuscript Berlin ever produced. (1) Drawing on his research from the 1930's and introducing the themes of his later works, it must be considered a key work in the development of his political philosophy.

This work, published in 2006, is based upon lectures Berlin gave at Bryn Mawr College in 1952. After delivering the lectures, Berlin revised and extended the manuscript for publication. But rather than seeing the manuscript through to publication, Berlin drew upon the manuscript for other projects, and the work remained unpublished. Years later Henry Hardy devoted considerable work to the manuscript and completed a "fair copy" of four of the six lectures, including Berlin's revisions of these chapters, and a prologue Berlin added some time after delivering the lectures. Berlin received the "fair copy" Hardy prepared but remained non-committal. Hardy continued to believe the work should be published, and almost a decade after Berlin's death, Hardy was able to bring Political Ideas of the Romantic Age into print.

What is the value of this work first published fifty years after it was written? Certainly Berlin drew on and agreed with respected works in the history of ideas. His view of the philosophes resembles in one important respect that of Carl Becker. Berlin cites Becker's Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century, and Berlin shares with Becker the conclusion that the political reforms – often radical – advocated by eighteenth century thinkers rested upon traditional, unexamined, and shaky foundations. (p. 62) Berlin's strongly negative assessment of Rousseau was conventional at the time, and Rousseau's influence on Kant was already the subject of an important essay by Ernst Cassirer. (2) Berlin's assessment of the dangerous consequences of German Romantic philosophy was close to the view of A.O. Lovejoy. (3) And there are passages that acknowledge the works of Karl Popper, R.G. Collingwood, and Irving Babbitt. (pp. 4, 13, 127) In several respects Berlin was expressing conventional wisdom. (4)

Neither is the work distinguished as a literary achievement. Political Ideas of the Romantic Age has some eloquent passages, but it is not easy reading. Berlin does remarkably little to help his readers. His sentences pile qualification on qualification until the main thought is often lost, and many paragraphs extend over a page, thus compromising the organizing power of paragraphing. Berlin established the chronological limits of his study and then ignored them. He repeatedly referred to "Romantics" when more accurately he probably should have referred to "German Romantic philosophers." Hardy's editorial labors did not extend to excising the significant number of repetitive passages.

Berlin shifts his terms, sometimes without warning and without explanation; the natural interpretation would be that the terms he was alternating are synonyms, but that is hard to credit when, for example, the quondam synonyms are "French materialists," "Encyclopediasts," "philosophes" (Ch. 1). Berlin shifts, without adequate warning to his

readers, from descriptions of individual thinkers, to intellectual circles, to the wider public and “public mind,” and at times the actual referent is hard to identify. Berlin refers to “the entire rationalist programme of the eighteenth century” but it is not easy to understand whom we should count as the “rationalists” or why a term commonly a classifier in epistemology should be transferred to political theory. (p. 82)

What makes Political Ideas in the Romantic Age worth studying is Berlin’s combination of philosophical acuity and boldness in probing the psychological affinity of ideas. Philosophers, and possibly literary scholars, may react in indignation at this suggestion for mixing opposites, but this combination seems at the very least to be the assumption upon which Berlin studied political theory. Berlin accepted Bertrand Russell’s contention that great philosophers defend with elaborate and ingenious reasoning a simple basic belief. (p. 13) Berlin assumed, I think, that for political philosophers that simple core belief was psychological as much as philosophical or that, at this basic level, the two were inseparable. Without the aid of letters, memoirs, and biographies, Berlin’s tracing of intellectual connections and influences among his subjects rested on his personal vision. On occasion he relied on social causes, such as the wounded national pride of Germans, or Rousseau’s petit bourgeois resentments, but he resorted to social causes only on occasion and never gave up the belief in the power of great individuals (pp. 95-96, 106). And complicating the picture was Berlin’s sense of the diverse, unpredictable combinations of explicit ideas, unexamined assumptions, and unexpected consequences. One thing is certain, for Berlin the relations among a thinker’s political ideas were often more psychological than logical.

A second theme of Berlin’s was the frequency with which thinkers of the period perverted language as the means to prove their theories. Among Berlin’s examples of this perversion of language are the following. The Romantic philosophers conflated the two distinct meanings of “realize” (realizing the truth of a proposition, and realizing a goal) so

as to make the intellectual realization of the need to submit to the laws of universal development into the realization of freedom. (p. 97) Schelling meant by “understanding” the opposite of what it meant in natural science. (pp. 195ff.). Rousseau pioneered the use of oxymoron as profundity by speaking of forcing persons to be free (pp. 112, 116, 124, n.1), and he treated obvious metaphors, such as the general will, as though they were “metaphysical entities.” (p. 131). Whether the philosophy of other periods equally relies on verbal trickery Berlin does not say, but he documents its significance in Romantic philosophy. The moral must be that the perversion of common usage is dangerous.

Berlin claimed his work broke new ground in one respect by its emphasis on the “transformation of values” presented in Romantic philosophy. (p. 10) By “transformation of values” Berlin meant the Romantic claim that moral values are not discovered within the natural order and hence objective but imposed, willed, created. Berlin termed this sense that ethics, like works of art, are personal creations the most significant change in consciousness since “the ending of the Middle ages, perhaps since the rise of Christianity.” From the Romantic era to the present time, advocates of ethical objectivity arrayed against believers in the willed creation of value. Berlin declared, somewhat melodramatically, this “the time has come” to assess that fundamental divide he had discovered. (p.11) As Berlin describes in turn Rousseau, Kant, Herder, and Hegel, it becomes clear that each had a distinct sense of what the creation of values meant, differences more distinct than Berlin allows.

Berlin’s Prologue begins forcefully – the political ideas of the period 1760-1830, while leading to or reacting against the French Revolution “form the basic intellectual capital on which, with few additions, we live to this day.” (p.1) Nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use – perhaps unknowingly – the language of Rousseau; “fascists and communists, imperialists and totalitarians, liberals, republicans and constitutional monarchists too, to this day” use the language of Burke or Hegel; social

scientists and national planners follow Saint-Simon; enemies of democracy repeat de Maistre; existentialists repeat Fichte and Schelling. (p.2) Presently the French Revolution disappears from its central role and is replaced by the Enlightenment with its contradictory parties - French materialists, Encyclopedists, economists, utilitarians - followed by their opponents who constitute the Counter-Enlightenment. (pp. 3-6) Then Berlin introduces a third organizing theme, the momentous shift from conceiving of political norms as part of the fabric of the natural, material world to conceiving of political norms as ideals invented and imposed upon, not drawn from or found in, the natural world. As the Prologue develops it becomes clear that Berlin recognized no sharp distinction between ethical and political theory and that his interest is in rival visions of human nature rather than in political ideas about mechanisms of suffrage, legislation or inheritance.

Given the chronological boundaries Berlin set, one could expect him to begin his survey with the thinkers of the mid-eighteenth century, or perhaps their predecessors, but his first chapter ranges over the whole of Western political theory, beginning with the Greeks. This survey is intended to demonstrate that all Western philosophers before the Romantic era assumed first, that moral and political truths were part of the empirical world and – potentially – four-square with the laws of natural science; second, that all truths were consistent; and third that human nature – the subject of moral and political theory – was unchanging. The thinkers of the Enlightenment, except for Hume and Kant in some degree, assumed these propositions. The danger, according to Berlin, was that these beliefs led to, provided the building blocks for, scientism – the proposition that science explained the past and explained what should be done in the future. (p. 75)

Helvetius is the philosopher Berlin focuses on as the representative Enlightenment figure, and he is portrayed as an advocate of social engineering. Berlin is thus creating a Hobson's choice between two forms of enforced conformity – the social engineering of the Enlightenment and the self-enforced conformity of the Romantics. (p. 53) This rapid

descent into social engineering was the first flaw in Enlightenment political theory; the second flaw was the confused notion of nature. For Helvetius and Holbach, and presumably many more Enlightenment figures, the concept of nature bridged the gap between fact and value. (pp. 62, 71, 75-78) Nature was regarded as a source of lessons or laws, even a teacher, by thinkers, including Helvetius, who officially believed nature was simply a field organized by the laws of physics. In this inconsistency the philosophes were not hypocrites but typically human in refusing to examine a useful hypothesis.

Chapter One ends with a moral – the philosophes’ hope that science applied to social problems would lead to liberation turned into the seemingly similar but dangerously different idea that scientific experts should direct – by legislation and education – the unscientific masses, thus legitimating the rule of an elite that imposes its values on and destroying the liberty of the majority. The remaining chapters show how, in different ways, other theories that promise freedom are also actually recipes for unfreedom. These other philosophies of unfreedom are versions of Romanticism.

Rousseau is the central figure in Chapter Two. From Rousseau’s fevered and embittered mind came the dangerous notion that persons could be forced to be free. Of course tyrants and fanatics were only too happy to hear this; Rousseau was, in Berlin’s words, “the master” of Saint Just and Robespierre. (p. 142) Rousseau proposed that man is free when doing the right thing (obeying the moral law). This is Rousseau’s attempt to reconcile liberty and order and preserve absolute personal liberty. But Rousseau expects the pure-hearted villager to have a deeper sense of the moral law than the city-dweller. Despite his very critical approach to Rousseau, Berlin doesn’t observe that this change introduces moral disagreements and the need for politics, but it must be so.

Following the section on Rousseau comes a section on the “real will” (which is to say, an unreal, fictitious will). This is a piece of psychology by Berlin describing the steps

by which philosophers convince themselves that persons who do not want x or y actually at a deeper, more real, but invisible level do want x or y and in their own real interest should be forced to do x or y. The connection of this section to Rousseau presumably is this – Rousseau showed how the individual reasoned this way about his own situation, now others will do it for you. If a person can force himself to be free, others can too. According to Berlin, this dangerous reasoning rationalizes despotism and was used by Hegel and Marx. (p. 124)

Kant and the German Romantics adopted from Rousseau the dangerous notion of the two selves, the empirical and the real selves (p. 140) Kant's doctrine of the two selves was his contribution to the "romantic doctrine of man" and allied with it was Kant's concept of duty, the moral demand for self-sacrifice. Berlin considered Kant's concept of duty much more valuable than the doctrine of two selves because Kantian duty provides a better explanation of self-sacrifice than the utilitarian claim that self-sacrifice is a disguised type of personal happiness. (pp. 148-49) This vindication of duty was one of Kant's contributions to European culture; the other was his doctrine of autonomy, the worth of every person as creator of value. (pp. 150-51) In developing the doctrine of autonomy Kant was again deeply influenced by Rousseau. (p. 153). This sense of the equal moral value of every person, pioneered by Rousseau and developed by Kant, is the basis of nineteenth century democratic theory. (p. 154) One of Berlin's most eloquent passages follows, arguing for the importance of Rousseau and Kant and denying the importance of the humanitarian and utilitarian thinkers as advocates or sources of the democratic ideal. Thus Rousseau's works had diametrically opposite uses.

Berlin begins Chapter Three distinguishing two types of freedom – Romantic, positive freedom and liberal, negative freedom. (p. 155). Of these two, negative freedom is the core, and the essence of political liberty. Although the doctrine of positive freedom is ancient, Fichte gave it a new sense- freedom is active, incessant imposition of meaning

upon recalcitrant material; it is conflict, creation, self-assertion that is like artistic and also Divine creation. Berlin considered this blend of the personal and the cosmic orders a dangerous inflation of the concept of freedom. (pp. 77, 188-93).

This valorization of willfulness is relatively new in Western thought, as is the feeling that the success of the will was what mattered now, not the worth of the cause. This amounted to the worship of success, the worship of power, or could take the form even of admiration for doomed, utterly impractical self-assertion in a lost, hopeless cause. This attitude spread through European society in the nineteenth century, as shown by the wide-spread idealization of Beethoven and the enthusiasm for powerful rulers like Napoleon and Frederick the Great. (pp. 193-96)

Schelling defined reason as immediate insight such as artists, political leaders, historians have, instantly recognizing a pattern in a swarming chaos, intuiting a necessary inevitable arrangement. This definition elevated the role of artists, historians and – ultimately – undemocratic political leaders whose intuitions are ranked above the decisions of electorates. Freedom, intuition, creativity are a unified, single process. (pp. 198 ff.) The concept “positive freedom” rests on a confusion (the opportunity created by negative freedom is a possibility, therefore, it is nothing, or nothing in particular, therefore it is of no value). Berlin believes this commitment to positive freedom has cost many lives and claims that the divide between the humanist, negative concept of freedom and the anti-humanist, positive concept of freedom evident in the nineteenth century is the fundamental divide in twentieth century politics – an unchangeable antagonism divides these two. (p. 205)

Chapter Four is entitled “The March of History”; its central figures are Herder and Hegel. While the leaders of the German Enlightenment were committed to cosmopolitanism, the German Romantics stressed the uniqueness of national cultures, and

successively added more extreme theses so that the tolerant cultural pluralism of Herder evolved into the historical determinism of Hegel. Herder began by observing that although immigrants can survive in new lands, each person feels (literally) most at home in and functions best in his or her native culture. Herder envisioned each national culture playing its role in a larger progress, and he had no desire to slow or arrest cultural change as Burke did. At the same time Herder was an enthusiast for folk traditions, for whatever was ancient, immemorial, or medieval. (pp. 223 ff.) Herder's legacy was ambiguous; he created the foundation of "romantic conservatism," and he inspired or added his weight to romantic self-assertion and spontaneity, and he inspired others to an apolitical mysticism and nostalgia. More distressingly, Schelling, as he created what Berlin labeled 'romantic Fascism,' drew on Herder's nationalism. On the positive side, Herder created the concept of national culture, a constellation of traits common to all a nation's arts and institutions, thus laying the foundation for cultural history. (pp. 231-32).

The legacy of Herder is complex; Hegel's legacy is clearer and clearly negative. His vision is of the universe as a single entity whose elements by ceaseless conflict progress necessarily to a final end. Wisdom, the purpose of philosophy, is perception of and submission to this necessity. The story is the progressive self-revelation of the world-spirit, in which all human suffering, all wars and disasters are necessary elements. (pp. 237ff). When referring to this, Hegel "speaks of history as the 'slaughter-bench' of humanity," and Berlin is shocked by Hegel's heartlessness revealed in this passage. (p. 243)

Part of this cosmic drama is political. Hegel viewed nations as the players in the political drama; individuals should see that their place is within a nation and as an element or cell of the national body. An exception to this diminution of the individual is Hegel's interest in and advocacy of the great men in history; for Berlin, this amounts to the worship of power and contempt for the weak. Hegel's followers unfortunately adopted

this attitude. For Hegel whatever is powerful is real while whatever is weak is unreal – to demote individuals or minorities or small nations to the inferior status of unreal can make their exploitation that much easier Berlin feels. Since Hegel admired powerful rulers, he had no interest in limiting their powers over the public, and the rights of citizens thus disappear from his philosophy. (pp. 250-51)

Berlin returned to the “enemy’s of freedom” in his BBC lectures delivered in the fall of 1952 and in many later essays, and he defended throughout his career the contrast of positive and negative freedom. The BBC programs focused on six of the figures from Political Ideas in the Romantic Age, and the narrower focus made for greater clarity. Published – again through the editorial labor of Henry Hardy many years later – Freedom and Its Betrayal is clearer and shorter and in books sometimes “less is more.” But something has been lost, and not only in scope. The combination of historical vision and logical analysis combined in Political Ideas in the Romantic Age gives way to the biographical essay. (5)

Political Ideas in the Romantic Age has problems beyond those of style and organization. Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment is deeply flawed. He criticizes laissez-faire as a justification of unfreedom, disguising economic necessity as consumer freedom. This attack on laissez-faire conflicts with his later description and advocacy of negative freedom as political only, not social or economic. The claim that Adam Smith was an advocate of extreme laissez-faire is just wrong, as a reading of leading Smith scholars Berlin could have consulted, for example Edwin Cannan, Lionel Robbins, or Jacob Viner, not to mention reading Adam Smith himself, would demonstrate. Berlin credited Hume with recognizing the fact-value distinction but ignored his economic essays, political essays and History of England, an omission hard to understand. Since Berlin wrote, the study of both the Scottish Enlightenment and the history of economic theory have been transformed beyond recognition, and Berlin cannot be criticized for

failing to anticipate these developments, but when he misinterpreted or omitted key primary sources as well as the leading secondary sources on figures essential to his argument, it can be observed at least that he missed an opportunity to enrich the documentation of negative liberty and bring under his banner two opponents of fanaticism.

Berlin's interpretation of Romantic philosophy is also flawed; we may note two respects in which Berlin failed to fulfill his own objectives. Berlin judged that the Romantics (and their precursor Vico) had enriched the conception of history. This judgment was not a grasping for a positive talking – point to balance the powerfully negative view of the Romantics; Berlin genuinely believed that history was a distinct and important subject and not second-rate social science, and thus its Romantic origins were important. But Berlin evaded the issue of the often alleged ties between Romantic historicism and illiberal politics. Berlin claimed that the Romantic philosophers recognized the fact-value distinction and as a consequence were driven to carry out a transformation of values. In fact, this hypothesis remains unproven; Berlin noted counter-examples (Hume advancing or discovering, the latter, but not accepting the former; Rousseau rejected the former, but pioneered the latter), and he made no systematic effort to assemble the favorable examples.

Berlin presents a very unflattering portrait of philosophers and their enterprise. They seem to recapitulate – or in the case of the German Romantics, exaggerate – the errors of their predecessors. Where is wisdom to be found? Not in Berlin's subjects, except for Kant. Berlin's subjects are historically important as the first political thinkers speaking as we do about politics, but they are less important as philosophers; only Kant and Hume (in part) are recognized for profound philosophical thought. One is tempted to conclude that Political Ideas in the Romantic Age is an unhistorical exercise in turning the techniques of twentieth century analytical philosophy upon (mostly) eighteenth century works. The history of ideas, it might be said, can be critical, but it ought to present only

the criticism contemporaneous with the works criticized. Berlin's practice can be defended against such criticism in two ways. First, the philosophes and Romantics are our contemporaries in respect to political concepts (not chronologically, but conceptually) and therefore legitimate objects of contemporary criticism – to shield thinkers from all criticisms they had not thought of or heard or read makes the exercise truly antiquarian. Second, for Berlin it seems that criticizing the earliest of his contemporaries clarified or contributed to the political theory of his day. The philosophical enterprise, whatever it may be, he considered scant protection against the monistic temptation. From Political Ideas in the Romantic Age to My Intellectual Path, written forty-three years later, Berlin warned political philosophers to respect diversity and complexity by pointing to the appalling theories that resulted once that respect was lost. (6) Political Ideas in the Romantic Age is the first of these warnings – instructive for its flaws, but also for its scale and purpose and, in a world of fundamentalist regimes and a Russia returning to soviet-style one party rule, for its relevance. (7)

### Endnotes

- (1) Isaiah Berlin, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age. Ed. by Henry Hardy. Intro by Joshua L. Cherniss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Hereafter all page references will be in parentheses in the text.
- (2) Ernst Cassirer, Rousseau Kant Goethe: Two Essays, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945). Trans. by James Gutmann, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr.
- (3) Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," pp. 85-102 in Franklin L. Baumer, ed., Intellectual Movements in Modern European History (New York: Macmillan, 1965). 1<sup>st</sup> appeared in Journal of the History of Ideas (June, 1941) pp. 260-78;

The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936).

- (4) As represented by John Herman Randall, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940).
- (5) Henry Hardy, “Editor’s preface,” pp. ix-xx, in Political Ideas in the Romantic Age; Michael Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin: A Life (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); A.J. Ayer, Part of My Life (New York: Harcourt, Bruce, Jovanovich, 1977).
- (6) Isaiah Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” pp. 21-78 in The First and the Last. (New York: New York Review Books, 1998); Isaiah Berlin, Letters: 1928-1946. Ed. by Henry Hardy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is not very helpful.
- (7) “Philosophers, as it happens, need a lot of reminding.” John Passmore, Philosophical Reasoning, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961) p. 8.

## Bibliography

Annan, Noel, Our Age: English Intellectuals Between the Wars. New York: Random House, 1990.

Ayer, A.J., Part of My Life: The Memoirs of a Philosopher. New York: Harcourt, 1977.

Becker, Carl L., The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932.

Berlin, Isaiah, The First and the Last. New York: New York Review Books, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_, Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty. Ed. by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_, Letters, 1928-1946. Ed. by Henry Hardy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_, Karl Marx: His Life and Environment. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963 (1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1939).

\_\_\_\_\_, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age. Ed. by Henry Hardy. Intro. by Joshua L. Cherniss. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_, The Roots of Romanticism. Ed. by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_, and Beata Polanowska-Sygułska. Unfinished Dialogue. Foreword by Henry Hardy. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006.

Cassirer, Ernst. Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays. Trans. By James Gutmann, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945.

Dworkin, Ronald, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers, eds. The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin. New York: New York Review Books, 2001.

- Gray, John, Isaiah Berlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Ignatieff, Michael, Isaiah Berlin: A Life. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.
- Johanbegloo, Ramin, Conversations with Isaiah Berlin. London: Phoenix Press, 2001 (1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1992).
- Lovejoy, Arthur O., The Great Chain of Being. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936.
- \_\_\_\_\_, “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas.” In Intellectual Movements in Modern European History, edited by Franklin L. Baumer, 85-102. New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- Mali, Joseph, and Robert Wokler, eds. Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003.
- Margalit, Edna, and Avishai Margalit, eds. Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration. London: Hogarth Press, 1991.
- Passmore, John, Philosophical Reasoning. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961.
- Randall, John Herman, Jr. The Making of the Modern Mind. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1940 (1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1926).