

Negative liberty and the Cold War

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Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty," delivered as his inaugural lecture for the Chichele professorship at Oxford on October 31st, 1958, remains his most influential contribution to political philosophy. Published shortly thereafter as a pamphlet by the Clarendon Press, "Two Concepts" became the armature for Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty*, which appeared in 1969 and established him as one of the leading theorists – if not *the* leading theorist – of the subject writing in English in the twentieth century. Citation indexes stand as emphatic testimony of that status, but perhaps even more so is the reality that the terms *negative liberty* and *negative freedom*, which Berlin – like many successors – tended to use interchangeably, have become commonplace in the lexicon of ordinary usage. They are widely deployed to depict the freedom that is created and preserved when the state acts, if at all, principally to stop people from interfering with one another. "Two Concepts" was presented as an analytical treatment of the differences between it and *positive* liberty, conceived as the freedom *to do* something that might be more or less fully specified, but Berlin was a manifest champion of the negative idea that has become so widely associated with his name.

Berlin was not, as he would be the first to say, negative liberty's original advocate.¹ Hobbes's discussion of "liberty by pretermission" in chapter 21 of *Leviathan* is a close relative at least. So are the robust zones for liberty of conscience and private action carved out in Locke's third *Letter Concerning Toleration* and Mill's *On Liberty*, and – if more ambiguously as we will see – in Kant's insistence that people should always be recognized as ends in themselves, not mere instruments for the use of others. Berlin was keen to establish that negative liberty has a substantial pedigree and provenance among these and other canonical thinkers as part of his case for its enduring appeal. He stood firm for it, but he did not stand alone.

Even negative liberty's critics affirm its importance. The revival of civic humanism since the 1970s rests, for instance, on self-conscious repudiation of a Berlinian construction of the alternatives. J.G.A. Pocock embraces a version of the dichotomy by counterposing his virtue-

¹ On the antecedents of Berlin's political theory, see Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-14.

based paradigm to the characteristic liberal focus on legal protections for individuals.² Philip Pettit anchors his choice of a third conception of freedom in what he finds unsatisfying in the choice between the negative and positive alternatives.³ Sensing, perhaps, negative liberty's enduring appeal, Quentin Skinner takes a different tack. His civic humanism centers on reclaiming negative liberty from Hobbes and his successors in a contest in which battles have been lost but Skinner is as yet unwilling to concede the longer war.⁴ For the civic humanists, it seems that negative liberty must be displaced, transcended, or coopted, but it cannot be ignored.

Nor were the civic humanists the first to throw down the gauntlet. In *Natural Right and History*, Leo Strauss took aim at the seventeenth-century shift in focus from natural law to the centrality of natural rights, which he read as heralding the modern fetish with individualism – a cousin if not a precursor of the negative idea.⁵ From a different perspective, C.B. Macpherson viewed those same developments as ushering in an ideology supportive of the emerging capitalist market order.⁶ In this he echoed Marx's polemical footnotes directed at Mill in *Das Capital* and elsewhere, where the individual's freedom to transact freely is seen to buttress – while it obscures – an exploitative economic order.⁷ This last notion was carried into twentieth century debates via Herbert Marcuse's "repressive tolerance."⁸ In these and related formulations, negative freedom's staying power has more to do with ideological considerations than intellectual ones – or at least the two bleed into one another.

It is the staying power that interests us in this essay. That endurance is all the more remarkable in view of the fact the negative/positive dichotomy rests on questionable logical

² J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 39-40 and J.G.A. Pocock, "Virtues, rights and manners: A model for historians of political thought," *Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (August 1981), pp. 357-59.

³ On Pettit's third way view of freedom as "discursive control," see Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 67ff and Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 17-79.

⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 211-16 and "A third concept of liberty: Living in servitude," *London Review of Books* (April 4, 2002), pp. 16-18.

⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 323.

⁶ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford University Press, 1962)

⁷ See, for instance, Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (Pelican, 1976), p. 492.

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 81-117.

foundations. In 1967, Gerald MacCallum Jr. made short work of it by pointing out that liberty is a relational concept that ranges over agents, restraining or enabling conditions, and actions.⁹ That is, for any claim about freedom it is always possible to ask: “*Who is free; from what restraint or because of what enabling conditions; to do what?*” When people seem to disagree about the meaning of the term freedom, he noted, they are really disagreeing about how to characterize the relevant agent, the relevant restraining or enabling conditions, or the relevant action. Moreover, the restraining or enabling conditions can easily be re-described as one another, as when one might characterize a prisoner as unfree because of the presence of chains or the lack of a key. Proponents of negative freedom, he argued, tend to focus attention on the first term in the relation – the agent – while describing the second in terms of impediments and leaving the relevant action implicit. Positive libertarians, by contrast, pay less explicit attention to agents, typically speak of the second in terms of enabling conditions, and focus explicit attention centrally on the actions to be performed.

There is a sense in which MacCallum was right, testified to by the fact that a good deal of the philosophical writing on freedom genuflects toward his seminal article. But there is also a sense in which his argument is too whiggish. The attacks on negative freedom, old and new, suggest that something more is at stake than analytical clear-headedness. They make it obvious that the negative freedom ideal carries substantial ideological freight regardless of philosophical considerations. This has been observed before, but the standard contention is that this has to do with the logic of individualism that undergirds the market behavior of *homo economicus*.¹⁰ Instead, we advance the different – though perhaps complementary – thesis that Berlin’s influential formulation is best understood through the lens of the Cold War. Both in his own mind and in those of his audience, including such figures as Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek, who developed comparable accounts of liberty, and George Kennan, for whom the confrontation between positive and negative freedom was “the greatest contest of the age,”¹¹ Berlin’s negative freedom was a bulwark against communism and particularly the Stalinist form it had taken by

⁹ Gerard MacCallum, Jr., “Negative and positive freedom,” *Philosophical Review* Vol. 76 (1967), pp. 312-34.

¹⁰ See Ian Shapiro, “Gross concepts in political argument,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (February, 1989) pp. 73-76.

¹¹ See John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (Penguin, 2011), p. 416.

the 1950s. Our evidence for this is taken largely from Berlin's letters that have been published over the past fifteen years. Fascinating in their own right, the letters illuminate Berlin's experience of the ideological context of the 1950s, his agenda in defending negative liberty, and his contemporaries' reaction to that agenda.

We set out the main contours of the Cold War intellectual context, and Berlin's place in it, in part I. Like Popper's open society and Hayek's constitution of liberty, Berlin's negative liberty was billed and welcomed as a repudiation of the oppressive teleology built into Soviet Communism. And like Kennan, Berlin saw negative liberty as an integral component of the bulwark that was needed to face down that threat. But unlike Kennan and the other Cold War liberals, Berlin believed that developing a technically sound philosophical defense of negative freedom and repudiating communism, while important, were not enough. He was skeptical that people are naturally inclined to opt for freedom, let alone to fight for it. As a result, he thought it necessary to develop a powerfully appealing, even romantic, defense of his favored conception of it that differentiated him from such negative libertarians as Popper and Hayek in that it also had a Herderian self-expressive dimension. This brought him, at times, uncomfortably close to positive libertarians like Rousseau – with whom he wrestled ambivalently for much of his life.

As we discuss in part II, Berlin agreed with Kennan that the Soviets took advantage of frailties in human psychology for nefarious ends, but he thought those frailties were good deal older, and ran a lot deeper, than the Soviet's perverse exploitation of them. They are part of what it means to be human as he thought Rousseau understood and exemplified, and we discount them at our peril. Exploring Berlin's view of the human psychology that underlies both the need for freedom and its vulnerability leads us to a discussion of what he saw as Kant's successful modification of Rousseau's treatment of the matter in part III, and of his belief that Kant's account of autonomy is a viable – perhaps even the best – philosophical basis for the view of liberty that might win the high political ground. But perhaps ironically, Berlin was not confident that removing the external impediments to the negative liberty he prized would be enough for it to triumph. He saw it as a value that must be argued and even fought for, and, partly because of

the reasons that give malevolent forms positive liberty their powerful psychological pull, he was unsure that this battle could be won.

I. The Intellectual Context of the Cold War

The Cold War had a profound impact on all areas of public life, and academia was far from an exception, particularly in the United States where Berlin was to take up nearly 25 years of visiting appointments starting in 1949 with a position at Harvard's Russian Research Center. Towards the end of that year, Berlin gave a speech at Mount Holyoke College on "Democracy, Communism and the Individual" whose substance and aftermath are particularly illuminating. This was a high profile event, which included speakers such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Sir Alexander Cadogan, and Abba Eban, and Berlin seems, characteristically, to have risen to the public persona he wished to project for the occasion while shying away from the implications. Despite expressed fears that the *New York Times* reporter present at the event would print his words and that "very grave"¹² consequences might follow for his various contacts in the USSR, Berlin delivered what Michael Ignatieff portrays as a "worthy but hardly incendiary sermon"¹³ and what Berlin himself described as being "somewhat Fascist Beast in character, on how a modus vivendi wasn't really possible between any democracy and "them", etc."¹⁴

The day after the event, a write up of Berlin's speech appeared in the *New York Times* under the headline "Study of Marxism Backed at Parley," in which Berlin's key purpose in the speech was described as "to impress upon [his] audience the importance of studying Marxism, and specifically of not placing a ban upon such studies."¹⁵ Berlin felt he had been interpreted "as backing more and more Marxism in American universities and staunchly defending the Russian

¹² In a note to Elizabeth Green, the Director of the Mount Holyoke College News Bureau, Berlin said "I must again beg you not permit any of this to appear in print under my name as the consequences to various persons in the U.S.S.R. would be very grave, & I should certainly decline to speak if I thought that there [was] any risk of my words appear in print anywhere." When Green replied that this would not be possible, Berlin apparently decided to speak anyway and agreed to meet briefly with the *New York Times* correspondent. From Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946-1960*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (Chatto & Windus, 2009). p. 98.

¹³ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1998), p. 192.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan on June 30th, 1949, *Enlightening*, p. 98, note 3.

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin to the Editor of the New York Times dated June 30th, 1949, *Enlightening*, p. 99.

Revolution and all the other horrors”¹⁶ and, (apparently now worrying less for his USSR informants than the possibility that he might be seen as a pro-Marxist), wrote a frantic letter to the *Times* clarifying his position, which was published under the headline “Attitude on Marxism Stated: Dr Berlin Amplifies his Remarks Made at Mount Holyoke.” Berlin attributed the misinterpretation of his aim and approach in the lecture to a private interview with the *Times* reporter, and he feared that his comments in this interview had given the reporter the impression that Berlin was a weak, but true supporter of Marxism, hiding his defense of Marx within the language of a false objectivity. And yet, when one reads the speech, it is easy to see how the *Times* reporter could have interpreted Berlin in a way at odds with Berlin’s stated agenda.

While the body of the speech may critique Marx, it is framed as an attack on eighteenth-century rationalism – and principally Rousseau – of which Marxism is described as a particular instance. Berlin’s main argument suggested that “the root of communism...lay in the eighteenth-century belief – expressed in its most extreme form by Rousseau – that there was one right way for human beings to live,”¹⁷ and that “Communism, Fascism and all other totalitarian orders” were an offshoot of that basic proposition.¹⁸ But they were not the only offshoot. In his opening paragraph, Berlin submitted that both democracy and Communism issue from this same central idea, and that where Marxism went wrong was in thinking that liberty and equality are completely compatible, even as the lesson of the 19th century was that they are not.

One can recognize here the pieces of what would become Berlin’s celebrated distinction between positive and negative liberty, and of his contention that the former “[denied] that different ideals of life, not necessarily altogether reconcilable with each other, are equally valid and equally worthy,”¹⁹ whereas the latter embraced that idea. Yet in this early formulation, with Rousseau taking a central role, Berlin found that in a world with ears keenly attuned to how one would take a position on Marx, Marxism, and the USSR, his 18th century culprit hardly

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin to Corinne Also dated July 5th, 1949, *Enlightening*, p. 101.

¹⁷ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Democracy, Communism and the Individual,” in *The Power of Ideas*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton University Press 2013), p. 277.

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Democracy, Communism and the Individual,” p. 277.

registered an impact, and instead seemed to make him vulnerable to the appearance of defending Marx and Marxism.

In addition to his letter to the *Times*, Berlin also wrote to the Provost of Harvard to assure him that he was not a secret communist, and to George Kennan at the State Department, asking him “to write a reassuring note to the FBI liaison officer at State.”²⁰ The event clearly rattled Berlin profoundly, and even in his indignation he seems to have taken it to heart as a critique of his work and way of communicating it, for he wrote shortly afterwards that “I feel that the rest of my life will be spent in démentis to people like the Provost of Harvard that I am an ambiguous snake of some sort.”²¹ Berlin seems nonetheless to have walked away from his first stint in the U.S. with a heartening lesson. In the same letter, he expressed admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt’s speech at the Mount Holyoke event, writing, “I feel that she really did, almost single-handedly, make it possible for people here to be critical of the USSR and still not afraid of being condemned as Fascist Beasts – the opportunity for an anti-Soviet but ‘progressive’ attitude.” He saw this accomplishment reflected in her clash with Soviet jurist Andrey Tanuar’evich Vyshinsky over civil liberties in the UN General Assembly, commenting that this clash’s impact “really does seem to me to be important and very satisfying.”²²

These lessons provide an important orienting framework for understanding Berlin’s subsequent intellectual trajectory, as well as the larger fabric of intellectual and social pressures within which Cold War political theory operated. On the one hand, there was powerful pressure to place one’s thought in clear relationship to the Marxist East, which for Berlin at times would develop into a fight not just over ideas and the meaning of the history of ideas, but also the task and identity of political philosophy as such. On the other hand, there was a fear, even among liberals, that post-war malaise, social transformation, and a kind of temperate, perhaps unfocused commitment to pluralism were breeding the possibility for communism to gain root in Western Europe. People worried that the available arguments against communism were essentially negative and technical, and hardly inspiring.

²⁰ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, p. 193.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin to Joseph Alsop dated July 1st, 1949, *Enlightening*, p. 100.

²² Isaiah Berlin to Corinne Alsop dated July 5th, 1949, *Enlightening*, p. 101.

This anxiety is manifest in an exchange between Berlin and Alan Dudley, head of the Information Policy Department in the Foreign Office, in the spring of 1948. In January of that year, Secretary of State Bevin had given a speech in which he sought “to stem the further encroachment of the Soviet tide...by creating some form of union in Western Europe,” but in the process of distinguishing the West from the Soviet encroachment in the East, Bevin remarked on the importance of not just economic and political union, but also of a spiritual component. “If we are to have an organism in the West,” he said in his conclusion “it must be a spiritual union.”²³ The Working Party on Spiritual Aspects of Western Union was set up in 1948 to explore what this unity would consist in, and it apparently found difficulties immediately in defining assertive aspects apart from anti-communist positions. Dudley consulted Berlin to ask if he could be of assistance in identifying “common factors in terms of attitudes towards a great variety of things (and ideas) ranging from art to social services” which Dudley thought must ultimately lie in “what philosophical ideas there are which are common to the West.”

Berlin at first responds that he cannot identify any ideas in “technical philosophy” which belong specifically to the West more than the East. “But you do not, of course, mean that. You mean to refer to general ideas, attitudes to this or that activity or form of life etc...” Berlin writes, and then quickly rules out some unwise avenues of approach to the question. First, he says Hegel, being key to both Marxism and “dominant English philosophy from, say, 1870 to say 1920” is a bad avenue of critique. He also suggests that pointing to the West as standing for “scientific objectivity, pursuit of truth by disinterested means” is a poor strategy since Marxist thought makes the same claims. Finally, Berlin suggests that any meaningful differences “seem to me to boil down to...conflicting views of social life,”²⁴ and breaks this down into two components. The first of these he calls civil liberties, which he describes in a way recognizable

²³ “Address given by Ernest Bevin to the House of Commons (22 January 1948).” Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons. Official Report. Third session of the Thirty-Eight Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2002/9/9/7bc0ecbd-c50e-4035-8e36-ed70bfbfd204c/publishable_en.pdf

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Alan Dudley received March 17th, 1948, *Enlightening*, p. 45.

as negative liberty, although he asserts that “there is no Eastern Democracy, as opposed to Western, any more than there is Eastern Liberty, Eastern Equality or Eastern Truth.”²⁵

The difference between the West and the “Marxists” is not exactly that one has civil liberties and the other does not, so much as that the former has the protection of civil liberties as a public ideal, a belief that without them, justice and liberty are not possible, while the latter believes that “men below a certain economic level are as helpless & unable to use their freedoms as people coerced by totalitarian states.”²⁶ Ultimately Berlin recommends that Dudley dispense with the attempt to distinguish West from East on the level of ideas, and suggests instead that it would be better to write “a clear & unwoolly” liberal manifesto.

Yet these pressures continued to appear in the impetus for and reception to Berlin’s developing work. It is evident, for example, from the correspondence which followed from the airing of Berlin’s BBC 1952 Lecture series (*Freedom and Its Betrayal*) that Berlin felt a continuing obligation to mount a clear – and inspiring – vision and agenda against communism. These lectures took the form of a condensed, less complex, and more pointedly critical version of his earlier Flexner Lectures on the same topic (*Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*), the argument of which we will discuss shortly, but the basic project Berlin laid out was to look at six thinkers – Helvetius, Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon, and Maistre – who all wrote around the time of the French Revolution and shared two central things in common. The first was that they all seemed to Berlin to be concerned with human liberty, and some passionate defenders of it, but “in the end their doctrines are inimical to what is normally meant, at any rate, by individual liberty, or political liberty.”²⁷ And second, Berlin thought they were all affected by the Newtonian revolution in establishing order in the realm of the sciences in such a way that they sought to find “some simple single principle”²⁸ which could establish a similar degree of order within political life. The broadcasts created something of a sensation, and they inspired an unprecedented leader column published in *The Times* on December 6th, 1952 called “The Fate of

²⁵ Isaiah Berlin to Alan Dudley, p. 46.

²⁶ Isaiah Berlin to Alan Dudley, p. 46.

²⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 5.

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, p. 9.

Liberty,” whose topic was then taken up in the correspondence columns of the paper, to which Berlin himself contributed.

In a letter to Herbert Elliston referencing the *Times* leader, Berlin reacts to the characterization of the purpose of his lectures as represented by journalist Thomas Utley. Utley had described the upshot of Berlin’s argument as suggesting that “The need of the twentieth century is not so much for a new political faith (it has had too many) as for a firm foundation for political doubt.”²⁹ Berlin agrees with the description that he indeed meant to suggest that there had been too many political faiths, but disagrees with the conclusion that this meant Berlin was calling for systematic doubt. Instead, he suggests, that he is calling for “more a kind of cautious empiricism” and mentions Popper and Hayek (although the latter with more reservations)³⁰ as writers with kindred projects, although he specifies that this implies “a society in which the largest number of persons are allowed to pursue the largest number of ends as freely as possible, in which these ends are themselves criticized as little as possible and the fervor with which such ends are held is not required to be bolstered up by some bogus rational or supernatural argument to prove the universal validity of ends.”³¹

Here again, Berlin struggles with how to articulate this in a way that is not just clear and distinct from (and critical of) the Communist alternative, but also involves some spiritual force – if not quite political faith – of its own, i.e. one that is not merely skeptical or hangs mainly on doubt and empirical uncertainty. He laments, “I do not see why it is not possible to believe in the various ends in which we do believe with as much fervor and self-dedication as Communists believe theirs.”³² But here, Berlin seems to describe the anxiety not merely as finding some (inspiring) way to describe the Western moral commitments in contrast to the Soviets, but also, as worrying that in the process, the West might manifest the very same tendency that it seeks to

²⁹ From “The Fate of Liberty” (December 6th, 1952), *Enlightening*, p. 343.

³⁰ “I even find myself in some sympathy with the wicked Hayek, although I think he is quite wrong in assuming that political liberty is indissolubly tied to economic private enterprise.” Isaiah Berlin to Herbert Elliston dated December 30th, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 350.

³¹ Isaiah Berlin to Herbert Elliston, p. 350.

³² Isaiah Berlin to Herbert Elliston, pp. 350-351.

combat in the enemy – “as people here think is happening in America, what with McCarran Acts etc., although I keep trying to persuade them that this is not so.”³³

This anxiety reflected an argument that was pressed in the political domain by George Kennan, someone who greatly admired Berlin and would eventually have considerable influence on Berlin’s understanding of his own project.³⁴ Both men were appalled by Joseph McCarthy, who Kennan saw as meriting at least as much opprobrium as the Marxism he was allegedly rooting out and Berlin deplored as “a sadist who enjoys tormenting the egg-heads who give him a sense of inferiority.”³⁵ Apart from McCarthy’s deleterious effect on American foreign policy and diplomacy, both men worried about his assault on the U.S. as an appealing alternative to the USSR, one whose allure depended on its embodying the negative freedom that McCarthy was undermining. In Kennan’s case this was rooted in his view of what today is called the battle for hearts and minds. Rather than engage in the hopeless ideological debates with Soviets leaders, the way to prevail was to build manifestly flourishing democratic capitalist systems that the populations behind the iron curtain would envy. This meant resisting pressures to erode the quality of Western institutions, lest they start resembling those whom they sought to contain.³⁶

McCarthy embodied that threat. Kennan was so troubled by him that, in response to overtures in 1952 about the possibility of his returning to the State Department in the event of an Eisenhower victory, he insisted that this would be contingent on the future President and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles repudiating McCarthyism unequivocally.³⁷ Berlin agreed that the “frightful” McCarthy was destroying America’s social and intellectual fabric and promoting paranoia. Indeed, Berlin himself was not immune to the threat. In March of 1953 he

³³ Isaiah Berlin to Herbert Elliston, p. 351.

³⁴ Kennan’s long standing admiration for Berlin dates to their meeting in the Soviet Union in December of 1945 when Berlin, who Kennan quickly identified as “undoubtedly the best informed and most intelligent foreigner in Moscow,” was working for the British Information Services and Kennan was the State Department’s Deputy Chief of Mission. George F. Kennan. *The Kennan Dairies*, ed. by Frank Costigliola (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p. 191.

³⁵ Gaddis, *An American Life*, p. 417; Isaiah Berlin to Arthur Slesinger dated December March 17, 1954, *Enlightening*, p. 435. As it turned out Kennan never went into the Dulles State Department, though he did manage some foreign projects in the Eisenhower Administration.

³⁶ See Ian Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2016), p. 139.

³⁷ Gaddis, *An American Life*, p. 172.

worried that he might become the target of a probe at Harvard, and, a few months later, that he might be denied a U.S. visa.³⁸ Nor did he think McCarthy was a transient menace who could safely be ignored. As he wrote of to Alice James in June of 1953, “I do not for a moment believe in the doctrine of giving him enough rope – enough rope and he will hang everybody else.”³⁹

Kennan was optimistic about the longer term prospects in the battle between the West and the Soviets. He was convinced that most people did not in the end submit to the Soviet model out of true ideological conviction, but rather “by a ‘bandwagon effect’: a sense that communism was ‘the coming thing,’ an unstoppable ‘movement of the future’.”⁴⁰ As we will see shortly, Berlin would adopt a similar view, but he was considerably less sanguine that apparently thriving democracies would be enough on their own to combat the Soviet outlook, or that the Soviets were the only, unique front where this baleful outlook could manifest itself.

The Ellison letter is frequently cited by others with a different interpretation in view – that Berlin was not an anxious but willing participant in the ideological battles of the Cold War, but rather a proud champion of a version of liberalism free from the fervency which grows out of ideological fault lines, a liberalism which could celebrate moderation and pluralism. Aurelian Craiutu argues, for instance, that “Berlin’s anticommunism lacked the fervent zeal of those who saw themselves in an all-or-nothing crusade against communism and thirsted for absolute moral clarity and purity.”⁴¹ Similarly, Joshua Cherniss claims that Berlin must be read as principled and not just hand-wringing in his resistance to pressures to offer a clearer and more inspiring account of liberalism, asserting that “opposition to crusading was central to his outlook.”⁴² Our view is not incompatible with these readings of Berlin, but we contend that Berlin was not merely arguing against passionate, simplistic, or ideological political views. His underlying claim was that those views are compelling to people for a reason, and that cannot be discounted no matter

³⁸ Berlin to Morton White, March 4, 1953, *Enlightening*, p. 162; Berlin to Alice James, June 6, 1953, *Enlightening*, p. 378.

³⁹ Berlin to Alice James, June 6, 1953, *Enlightening*, p. 37.

⁴⁰ X [George Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, (July 1947). For discussion, see Ian Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination* (Harvard Belknap, 2016), p. 138.

⁴¹ Aurelian Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 87

⁴² Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, p. 67.

how destructive they seem or how much one feels themselves to be immune to their pull. For even in Berlin's rejection of "monolithic... establishments," his language of choosing between a certain loss in "energy" or "drive" and being "hypnotised by the blood-curdling threats of the enemy into a frame of mind similar to [one's] own"⁴³ reflects his conviction that people commit themselves to such causes for reasons that lie outside of the measured logic of tradeoffs. Berlin's spirited insistence that we *must* choose operates alongside his darker acknowledgement that in reality people often embrace monolithic conceptions of politics because the mere possibility of choice does not inspire them.

This reading is further supported by Berlin's letter to Denis Paul in December of 1952, written in response to a comment Paul had made on Berlin's lectures that they only left the audience with an impression that Communism/Fascism were bad, but that this only left listeners complacent, and additionally might do little to affect those in the West who were sympathetic to socialist ideas. Berlin agreed that he should say more, but struggled with what to say, equivocating over whether economic planning in itself is a threat to political freedom. "I did try and make it clear that the notion of freedom which I approved of was what the English and French Liberals and Radicals were preaching in the early 19th century as opposed to the German brand, that it was a negative concept, that it was what you call elbow-room freedom, that it largely meant non-interference." But that in the end, when that preferred brand of freedom conflicts with other social purposes, "there is no clear solution." As a result, he concludes that "it is all a matter for compromise and balance and adjustment and empirical Popperism etc., and, in short, that the truth, when found, is not dramatic but possibly rather dreary."⁴⁴ Here Berlin appears both frustrated with Paul's critique and simultaneously troubled by it, and even in defending his approach, he says "But I daresay I really avoided crucial issues and should have said something else. I wish you would tell me what."⁴⁵

Similarly, in his address on "The Intellectual Life of American Universities" (1949), Berlin does not conclude with a resolute and straightforward rejection of outlooks that promote

⁴³ Isaiah Berlin to Herbert Elliston dated December 30th, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 351.

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Denis Paul dated December 30th, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 352.

⁴⁵ Isaiah Berlin to Denis Paul, p. 353.

protection “from the intellectual and moral burden of facing problems that may be too deep or complex to be dealt with by any patented method,”⁴⁶ but rather, a question which evinces genuine grappling with the complex forces that foster such mindframes: “what is to become of us?” After all, even if Berlin thought anxiety might be necessary in a world of complex and contradictory moral and political institutions and commitments, and we might do well to reject those who promise easy cures to it (as if it is simply a disease to be treated), the fact of the matter is that anxiety is not a pleasant experience. Indeed, in the closing paragraphs of “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century” (1950), Berlin emphasizes the role of anxiety in moving a real increased need for social regulation into 20th Century examples of fascism and totalitarianism, arguing, “The progress of technological skill makes it rational and indeed imperative to plan, and anxiety for the success of a particular planned society naturally inclines the planners to seek insulation from dangerous, because incalculable, forces which may jeopardize the plan.”⁴⁷

After “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century” was published in *Foreign Affairs* in April of 1950, Berlin wrote a letter to Hamilton Fish Armstrong, in which he remarked on the reception of the article, and particularly the reaction he had received from Charles Bohlen, a US diplomat and an expert on the Soviet Union: “he said he had talked most seriously with George Kennan about it, and they thought it was unfinished (!) and there should have been a long piece explaining why Communism cannot last and is contrary to human nature etc., and in effect formally refuting it and its claim to survive.”⁴⁸ Berlin responds that he feels his position was quite clear throughout the piece, and that this might move his exercise in analysis closer to propaganda, and in any case would have required a separate article likely taking the form of “a long coda full of exorcisms against the devil.” He admits that he was not understood clearly by Professor W. Y. Elliot of Harvard, who criticized Berlin for making totalitarianism too attractive, but also that Elliot’s opinion did not much matter to him. On the other hand, “that George Kennan” Berlin writes, “should also half think this seems to me more serious.”⁴⁹ Berlin’s

⁴⁶ Isaiah Berlin. “The Intellectual Life of American Universities.” In *Enlightening*, p. 760.

⁴⁷ Isaiah Berlin. “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century.” In *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 39.

⁴⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Hamilton Fish Armstrong dated May 25th, 1950, *Enlightening*, p. 179.

⁴⁹ Isaiah Berlin to Hamilton Fish Armstrong, p. 179.

resistance, in both principled and personal ways, to the ideological pressures issuing from Cold War politics, does not mean he was not deeply affected by them. After all, even if Berlin did not give in to pressures to create propaganda, his understanding of the predicament was nonetheless informed by the evident existence of voices whom he admired that were actively calling for it. And yet, Berlin's response, perhaps unique among the Cold War liberals with which he is typically associated, was not simply to combat Soviet communism by championing a notion of freedom at variance with theirs, but also to seek to do so in a way that could account for what made this brand of communism, and other outlooks like it, attractive to its adherents.

II. The Psychology of Freedom

In 1935, while working on what would become his celebrated book on Karl Marx, a twenty-six-year-old Isaiah Berlin wrote to an undergraduate classmate of his named John Hilton complaining of his troubles. "I am trying desperately to write a book on Marx: & find myself (a) unable to write at all for at least an hour after settling to, (b) when I begin I suddenly let loose a flood of words about Rousseau's influence on the romantic style, & then remember that the relevance needs proving."⁵⁰ Rousseau held a deep connection to Marx in Berlin's mind even in the earliest years of Berlin's scholarship, albeit an uncertain one, and it was a connection that would continue to trouble Berlin throughout his career.

But whereas Berlin's Russian would offer him a perspective on Marx denied to many of his English contemporaries, and through it lead him to both his hero Herzen and his perspective on Marx's place in Enlightenment thought via Plekhanov, Berlin's position on Rousseau would remain uncertain, increasingly disdainfully so,⁵¹ such that nearly twenty years later, he would write to Jacob Talmon speaking again of the connection between Marx and Rousseau, and the troublesome position of the latter in his thought: "Now I must sit down to the hideous task of writing a book. God knows, the awful shadow of Marx broods over the entire thing, and I do not

⁵⁰ Isaiah Berlin to John Hilton, received October 13th, 1935, *Isaiah Berlin Letters 1928-1945*, Ed. Henry Hardy (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 137.

⁵¹ It has often been noted that Berlin's interpretation of Rousseau seems appears to be one of his weakest treatments of a figure in the history of political thought. For some speculation on where Berlin may have gotten his peculiar reading of Rousseau see Christopher Brooke. "Isaiah Berlin and the Origins of the 'Totalitarian' Rousseau." *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*. Ed. Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford University Press, 2016).

know whether to put him in or keep him out, and I still feel terribly obscure and muddled about Rousseau.”⁵² Indeed, when Henry Hardy set out to challenge Berlin’s reputation “as a man who talked much but wrote little”⁵³ by cataloging his published works and collecting his unpublished ones, all of Berlin’s major substantive treatments of Rousseau were in lecture form and remained unpublished, including what would become *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age, Freedom and its Betrayal* and *The Roots of Romanticism*.

Yet even as Berlin would exhibit great difficulty and reticence in committing his engagement with Rousseau to the written word, Rousseau would serve as an influential foundation and point of reference for his most famous insights. And while positive and negative freedom would permeate the language and structure of debates within political theory for the second half of the 20th Century, the debates that would play out concerning his interpretation and use of Rousseau seem to have been comparatively more heated at the same time that they were less influential. Berlin often explained the fervency with which people reacted to Rousseau as a sign of some special, powerful, and enduring insight even as he insisted that Rousseau was not all that innovative or unique at the level of “technical” philosophical ideas. What then made Rousseau such a crucial figure in Berlin’s understanding of the history of political thought?

Berlin’s fullest treatment of the relevant intellectual history was developed as a series of lectures for Bryn Mawr College, prepared and delivered between 1951 and 1952 during his second extended visit to the U.S. These lectures, only four of which survived, were drawn from writings that would later become *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. In Henry Hardy’s preface to the volume, he suggests that it “may be seen as Isaiah Berlin’s *Grundrisse*, the ur-text or ‘torso’, as Berlin called it, from which a great deal of his subsequent work derived.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Ian Harris comments that this text “shows very clearly that...Berlin wrote a history that was formed by, and which was a vehicle for, his philosophical views.”⁵⁵ Why Berlin never himself published these lectures remains a puzzle, especially because he would continue to refine the

⁵² Isaiah Berlin to Jacob Talmon dated December 30th, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 354.

⁵³ Marilyn Berger, “Isaiah Berlin, Philosopher and Pluralist, Is Dead at 88,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1997.

⁵⁴ Henry Hardy, “Editor’s Preface: A Tale of a Torso” from *Isaiah Berlin Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. ix.

⁵⁵ From personal correspondence with Henry Hardy, “Editor’s Preface: A Tale of a Torso,” p. xix.

ideas and present them, again in lecture form, on BBC Radio's Third Programme in late 1952. And in the last decade of his life, he was supposedly still planning to write a book on Romanticism, although at that point it was likely to look more like his A.W. Mellon Lecture series from 1965 on the topic (transcribed and published after his death under the title *The Roots of Romanticism*). In any case, his biographers and critics are nearly unanimous in suggesting that in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* one can see the development of arguments central to what, in 1958, would become the Chichele inaugural lecture.

The opportunity to present the Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr was fortuitous, arriving as it did at an important moment of transition in Berlin's intellectual trajectory. He was about to return to All Souls as a historian of ideas instead of in philosophy, which had previously been his appointment. When he accepted the offer to deliver the lectures, Berlin wrote Katherine McBride, the President of Bryn Mawr College to propose a topic, which he provisionally described as "Six (or however many) Types of Political Theory." He said his reason for choosing this project in particular was that "these seem to me to be the prototypes from which our modern views in their great and colliding variety have developed,"⁵⁶ and in a later letter, in which he shifted the proposed title to "Political Ideas in the Romantic Age," he clarified that he wanted to avoid the term "origins" in the title because he felt that would force him to talk about thinkers "like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, etc., who may be the fathers of all these things, but are definitely felt to be predecessors and precursors and, certainly as far as mode of expression is concerned, altogether obsolete."⁵⁷

This description certainly tracks with Berlin's understanding of many of the authors he discusses, and Rousseau in particular. Throughout his writings and letters, Berlin would emphasize that, whatever might have been unique or original about Rousseau's view of liberty, his impact ultimately was a result not of his innovation in ideas (which had mainly occurred

⁵⁶ Isaiah Berlin to The President of Bryn Mawr College (Katherine McBride) dated June 13th, 1950, *Enlightening*, pp.182-183.

⁵⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Mrs Samuel H. Paul (Assistant to the President of Bryn Mawr College) dated November 20th, 1951, *Enlightening*, pp. 257-258.

earlier, via philosophical “technicians”⁵⁸) but rather, his “words and imagery.”⁵⁹ What seemed to have grabbed and troubled Berlin about Rousseau was what he understood to be the impact of his language on the moral imagination of Western civilization. He writes years later, “he obviously said things, and said them in a fashion which, for the first time, touched chords, and brought into the open feelings and self-images which have, no doubt, in some sense always been there, but which no one had articulated so vividly and passionately.”⁶⁰ Berlin thought Rousseau hit on something that both exposed and exploited a feature of human psychology with which liberalism had to contend. For this reason, perhaps the most revealing context for understanding how Rousseau would shape Berlin’s famous division of liberty appears in a letter in which Berlin does not mention Rousseau at all.

In May of 1950, George Kennan wrote to Berlin, commenting on the latter’s “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century.” Kennan offered a more psychological analysis of totalitarianism than Berlin had put forward, to which he added this emotional appeal against what he took to be the heart of the phenomenon:

I really believe that this that the totalitarians have done – this taking advantage of the helpless corner of man’s psychic structure – is the original sin. It is this knowledge which men were not supposed to develop and exploit. [...] For when a man’s ultimate dignity is destroyed, he is killed, of course, as a man. This exploitation of his weakness is therefore only another form of taking human life arbitrarily and in cold blood, as a result of calculation and not of passion. [...] The success of civilization seems somehow to depend on the willingness of men to realise that by taking advantage of this Achilles’ heel in

⁵⁸ In a letter to Richard Crossman, dated February 11th 1963, he writes, “It seems to me that what happens is that advance, at least since the Renaissance, was always made by what must have seemed to be abstruse and technical in its own day – Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, Hegel, and even Berkeley and Hume must have seemed so to the best-educated & clearest-headed ‘practical politicians’. The revolutions occur by piecemeal advances by ‘technicians’ of this kind, and then are popularized by the Lockes and Voltaires, the Rousseaus, Carlyles, Laskis, etc., who may or may not be original themselves but certainly build on the comparatively abstruse writings of their predecessors or contemporaries[...].” *Enlightening*, p. 145.

⁵⁹ Isaiah Berlin. *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Isaiah Berlin. *Isaiah Berlin: Building Letters 1960-1975*, ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013), p. 512.

man's moral composition, they shame themselves as well as others; on their readiness to refrain from doing so; and on their sticking to the rational appeal which assumes – perhaps in defiance of the evident – that in the long run each man can be taught to rise above himself.⁶¹

When Berlin at last responded in February of 1951, he began by saying that he had many times attempted to write back but had felt that he had not been capable of a worthy response, and even now felt that what he had to offer was chaotic and scattered. This sentiment might be chalked up to Berlin's tendency to self-deprecate, often protectively so, except for the intensity and length of the letter that followed, in which Berlin ranged over many topics, including the Holocaust, the Soviets, Hegel, and Marx, grouping them together under a common, central problem. "I must begin by saying that you have put in words something which I believe not only to be the centre of the subject," Berlin writes, "but something which, perhaps because of a certain reluctance to face the fundamental moral issue on which everything turns, I failed to say; but once forced to face it, I realise now that it is craven to sail round it as I have done, and moreover that it is, in fact, what I myself believe, and deeply believe, to be true."⁶² Moreover, Berlin suggests that it is likely that a person's attitude on this question determines the entirety of their moral outlook.

The question that Berlin identifies at the heart of Kennan's observation comes down to nothing less than what it means to be a human being, and therefore, the true "evil" involved in denying a person that status. For Berlin, this turns on a specific interpretation of the Kantian imperative to treat people as 'ends in themselves' based on the consciousness of choice, however narrowly constrained or tortuous that choice may be; and "that all the categories, the concepts, in terms of which we think about and act towards one another [...] 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."⁶³ In this view, what made the

⁶¹ George Kennan to Isaiah Berlin from May 26th, 1950, *Enlightening*, pp. 212-213.

⁶² Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan dated February 13th, 1951, *Enlightening*, pp. 213-214.

⁶³ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, p. 214.

Nazi (and Soviet) practices so horrifying was not just the deeds themselves, but more importantly the deception that accompanied them:

Why does this deception, which may in fact have diminished the anguish of the victims, arouse a really unutterable kind of horror in us? The spectacle, I mean, of the victims, marching off in happy ignorance of their doom amid the smiling faces of their tormentors? Surely because we cannot bear the thought of human beings denied their last rights – of knowing the truth, of acting with at least the freedom of the condemned, of being able to face their destruction with fear or courage, according to their temperaments, but at least as human beings, armed with the power of choice.”⁶⁴

Berlin thought even in desperate, impossible circumstances, even facing degrading, certain death, a human being could still make choices about how to respond to his or her fate, and what mattered was not that one’s deeds would be witnessed or remembered by others (as it would for Arendt), but rather that, from one’s own perspective, “the possibility of goodness...is still open.”⁶⁵ Without this ability and willingness to choose, Berlin suggested, “there are no worthwhile motives left: nothing is worth doing or avoiding, the reasons for existing are gone,” and there remained no framework for moral evaluation of self or other, and therefore, no moral identity as such.

For Marx and Hegel, Berlin argues, the moral question “what is good?” has a correct answer, and therefore being irrational coincides with being immoral. In this view, success comes to define the good and failure comes to define the wicked. In contrast to the Hegelian/Marxist view, the morality of the 19th century, and “in particular in the romantic period,” suggests that a person’s motive to serve an idea or “bear witness to something which he believes to be true,” separate from whether one agrees with the aims or how one evaluates the consequences, is something always to be admired. Berlin uses Don Quixote to bring out the contrast. From a Hegelian or Marxist perspective on morality, Quixote is both absurd and immoral, whereas for the liberal, Quixote can be admired even when he is somewhat ridiculous.

⁶⁴ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, p. 216.

⁶⁵ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, p. 217.

Yet while Berlin thought this moral outlook lay “at the heart of all that is most horrifying both in utilitarianism and in ‘historicism’ of the Hegelian, Marxist type,”⁶⁶ he hardly thought it was limited to that. He agreed with Kennan that the phenomenon was psychological in origin, but he resisted Kennan’s view that it was some perversion or manipulation specific to the Soviets. Instead Berlin saw 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.”⁶⁷ For this reason, Berlin also doubted that the West would win this ideological war through moral purity and commitment to its principles and institutions alone, or that its triumph would be absolute, and that it would not turn into “inverted Marxists” in the process of triumphing. The battle for the modern soul was larger, deeper, and older than the conflict between the West and the Soviets.

III. Freedom’s Insecurity

Berlin’s exchange with Kennan over psychology and freedom provides a useful framework for viewing what Berlin’s concern with freedom really was – and why its division into positive and negative varieties would have seemed so illuminating and useful to both him and his contemporaries. He saw positive freedom, or at least the variants of it that were likely to gain traction in real politics, as posing dangerous threats to the freedom of choice that he prized. The danger was not merely that proponents of positive freedom typically traffic in monistic conceptions of the good life which must be embraced for anyone to be genuinely free. In politics, the more serious danger was these monistic conceptions would be imposed on others in the name of making them “genuinely” free.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, p. 217.

⁶⁷ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan, p. 219.

⁶⁸ Commentators have noted that Berlin tended to slip from the plausible claim that positive libertarianism permits the endorsement monistic conceptions of the good to the more debatable one that positive libertarianism requires such a commitment. On this subject, see Gina Gustavsson, “The psychological dangers of positive liberty: Reconstructing a neglected undercurrent in Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Two concepts of liberty,’” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (2014), pp. 276-91; George Crowder, “Why we need positive liberty,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 77, (2015), pp. 271-78; and Gina Gustavsson, “Reply to Crowder,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 77 (2015), pp. 279-84. We do not pursue the issue here, but we are inclined to think that Berlin might have conceded that positive liberty need not require a commitment to a monistic conception of the good, yet still have insisted that the variants of positive liberty that are likely to gain purchase in real politics would involve monistic conceptions. For the same reasons, discussed

But a simple blanket condemnation of freedom's positive varieties would not be a viable avenue of attack. Berlin was convinced that the vision of freedom at the heart of liberalism had both positive and negative aspects, and thus could not be meaningfully reduced into its fully negative form without losing a considerable part of its moral force. Indeed, what Berlin found so puzzling and enchanting about the romantics, and Rousseau in particular was that they seemed, through exactly the same central moral insight, to be the locus of both liberal democratic moral sensibilities and the moral justification driving the Soviet political project. Berlin sees both as admiring dramatic visions of people sacrificing themselves to an idea higher and greater than themselves, but for the former, this can only happen on the individual level through conscious choice, whereas for the latter, it can instead be enacted and justified through, if not positively requiring, a collective political project.⁶⁹

In Rousseau, Berlin finds this tension over the moral identity of the human being – and the logic that serves both strands – at its muddled, contradictory apex. Rousseau's conception of freedom was original because it was absolute, and because, in a way similar to how Berlin himself would come to understand liberty, it was precisely what made the human being human. "His concept of freedom was not at all clear," Berlin argues, "but it was very passionate: human freedom was to him what the possession of an immortal soul was for orthodox Christians, and indeed it had an almost identical meaning for him.[...] To rob a man of his freedom was to refuse him the right to say his word: to be human at all; it was to depersonalise him, to degrade or destroy his humanity, in other words those characteristics to maintain and promote which was the sole justification of any action; justice, virtue, duty, truth, the morally good and bad, could not exist unless man was a free being capable of choosing freely between right and wrong, and therefore accountable for his acts."⁷⁰ It was the passion, intensity, and absoluteness in how Rousseau conceived of freedom which made him unwilling to make the trade off that other

below, that he worried that negative freedom would prove insufficiently alluring to survive, particularly in times of great insecurity, he would also have been skeptical that pluralistic conceptions of positive freedom would endure.

⁶⁹ In his introduction to *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Joshua Cherniss remarks that this distinction, which he describes as "humanistic and non-humanistic conceptions of liberty" may have been the more crucial distinction for Berlin than the positive and negative conceptual divide which is more commonly and enduringly associated with his name. See Joshua L. Cherniss. "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas" in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. xxxiv.

⁷⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 114.

liberal forefathers were willing to make: to limit or curtail freedom of the individual in any way for the sake of social existence.

Because Rousseau's conception of freedom was so absolute, Berlin argued, limiting liberty in any way was essentially cutting into the individual's very humanity. Even the most basic of social contracts, insofar as it involved this tradeoff, could never be justified. Therefore, Berlin argued, Rousseau required that any solution to the difficulties of social and political organization must necessarily include "the total preservation of absolute human freedom – the freedom from invasion of one human personality by another, the prohibition of all coercion and violence, of the crushing of one human will by another or the maiming of one will to make it serve another's egoistic purposes."⁷¹

The flip side of embracing such an absolute conception of freedom is that any political authority, if it is to be coherent with protecting that freedom, must also be absolute. Rousseau's solution in the general will was, for Berlin, "the mysterious, the unique point of intersection of the two scales of value. Men must freely want that which alone is right for them to want, which must be one and the same for all right-minded men."⁷² As for why Berlin thought Rousseau's solution required consensus on one correct solution, rather than a process of persuasion and approximation, his explanation seems to be that Rousseau shared the view common to eighteenth-century thinkers of there being a correct solution, but he thought the solution could be found through introspection rather than empirical observation. Whereas Helvetius and Condorcet expected that natural sciences would provide the definitive answer, Rousseau thought the correct answer could be found by those able to "hear the voice of nature."⁷³ And because, Berlin argued, nature for Rousseau implied uniformity, it was precisely nature herself who guaranteed that all who listened correctly would converge on the same answer.

Rousseau thus evinced two failings that ultimately led liberty's most avid defender to become its worst enemy, but only one of these seemed to Berlin a viable object for attack. His issue with Rousseau is on one hand, the intensity of desire for freedom, and on the other hand,

⁷¹ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 115.

⁷² Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 116.

⁷³ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 119.

the idea that in being truly free we must necessarily arrive at the same, universal answer (Berlin emphasizes this second feature more heavily in *Freedom and Its Betrayal* than he did in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*). But the intensity is exactly what Berlin saw as lying at the heart of the Western moral imagination, and to attack it threatened to leave one without solid moral ground on which to stand. Intensity of commitment with regards to liberty was something that had to be both protected and checked. It was therefore the second failing of Rousseau, a failing Berlin saw as common to thinkers in the romantic age, that was the true target of his critique. Liberty for Berlin, like Rousseau, was basic to the human condition. And indeed, Berlin could describe events like the Holocaust as depriving people of their humanity, not only or even primarily because they were interfered with by others, but because they were deprived of the ability to act and make choices in light of this interference. Deception, a perversion of communication about and recognition of one's situation, was the ultimate liberty-denying evil.

Berlin was keenly aware of the danger that this argument could morph into an unappealing claim about higher and lower human natures. In the way that one can argue that those deceived victims of the Holocaust might have chosen to act differently had they known the truth about how they were being manipulated and sacrificed, it might be argued that all of us might choose to act differently if structural conditions were different, or if we knew more or had a different education. But Berlin worried that this insight, taken to its logical conclusion, would lead to a situation where the choices one makes were taken for granted, and the only questions that remained were questions of means – what was the best way to get there. Criticizing the Soviets was, for Berlin, a practice that threatened two possible unsavory outcomes. The first was a Kennanite fear that the West would, in the process of seeking to combat the enemy, fall into the same search for the “correct” answer and become the very thing it was fighting. The second was that the enterprise would collapse into debates merely over empirics, when Berlin thought nothing less than the moral soul of Western Civilization was at stake.

This presents a paradox: Berlin seems to have wanted to defend the absolute value of human liberty, at the same time that he thought the only way this liberty could be defended

required viewing it as a choice among others. But how can liberty both be an absolute value and also be available for the logic of political tradeoffs?⁷⁴

This paradox might have been resolvable as a philosophical matter for Berlin, and indeed, his own attempts to wrestle with Kant's legacy show how he thought this possible. Berlin contends that Kant's vital innovation was to sharpen Rousseau's distinction between humanity's "rational and 'animal' nature" by granting us some metaphysical distance from nature such that our moral identity cannot be reduced or collapsed entirely into whatever unity is believed to exist in our empirical nature: "That is Kant's specific contribution and the basis of the romantic doctrine of man, who stands, in Herder's words, intermediate between nature and God, beasts and angels, touching at one extremity the mechanical world of the sciences, and at the other the spiritual realm revealed only in moments of the special illumination peculiar to spiritual beings."⁷⁵ In other words, our spiritual nature (and the domain of our freedom) could only be revealed in the act of choice; and even if it was supposed to be a rational choice for Kant, it could never be dictated to us without infringing on the specifically human quality of our action.⁷⁶ Indeed, Berlin's conception of what it means to treat others as 'ends in themselves' emphasizes the respect for choice over self-actualization: "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."⁷⁷ Respect for choice certainly does not promise self-mastery, but it also does not preclude this possibility.

⁷⁴ For discussion of Berlin's attempt to blunt the tension that give rise to this paradox by distinguishing pluralism from relativism, see Steven Smith, "Isaiah Berlin on the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment," this volume, manuscript pp. 25-28.

⁷⁵ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 148.

⁷⁶ The rational universalism of Kant's thought and the ease with which it translated into the logic that propelled romantic nationalism does seem to have made Berlin wary about wholeheartedly endorsing him. For instance, responding to Noel Annan's drafted introductory essay to *Personal Impressions*, Berlin clarified his views on Kant as follows: "I am deeply pro-Kantian on certain issues, e.g. his obscure but epoch-making doctrine of freedom of the will, his concept of the moral autonomy of the individual, his doctrine of human beings as ends in themselves, and of moral values as constituted by human commitment to them... So I am not to be taken as an opponent of Kantian morality *tout court*... I think that if I am described as wanting to throw doubt on any moral or political system which is founded on, or includes, an unalterable hierarchy of values binding on all men at all times in all places, capable of providing an objective and unalterable solution to every moral and political (and aesthetic) problem, this would be true. But not much more than this." Isaiah Berlin to Noel Annan dated October 2nd, 1978, *Affirming*, p. 89.

⁷⁷ Isaiah Berlin to George Kennan dated February 13th, 1951, *Enlightening*, p. 214.

But the psychological problem remained. For Berlin, the danger with regards to freedom seemed to be that its double nature makes it easy to rally for some political goal in the name of freedom, even if in the process of realizing that goal it might seem necessary or expedient to sacrifice one's capacity for individual choice. Freedom rallies us, but choice often confronts us as a burden. This is not simply because choices usually appear to us only in uncertain light, where information is incomplete, and the impact of our action as yet unknown. It is also because choices are often quite tragic, and their tragic nature issues specifically from the fact that not all good things go together, everyone cannot be made happy at once, and perhaps, everyone cannot truly be free at once. The great challenge and great importance of freedom, he writes, "is that it is involved in the necessity for these hideous choices, the making of which liberals should certainly regard as an end in itself."⁷⁸ In short, what some varieties of positive liberty, particularly in the Marxist form, offer is emancipation from having to make those of tragic choices, which Berlin saw as a possibility that could be particularly attractive and powerful in a world otherwise caught in the frequently inefficient and often unromantic demands of pluralism.

This raises the question whether Berlin was concerned with freedom as such or whether his true target was our psychological vulnerability of which he saw Rousseau as both a culprit and a victim. Writing to Karl Popper in 1959, several months after the "Two Concepts" first appeared, Berlin insisted that "the whole of my lecture, in a sense, is an attempt at a brief study[...] of the way in which innocent or virtuous or truly liberating ideas ([know yourself] or *sapere aude* or the man who is free although he is a slave, in prison, etc.) tend (not inevitably!) to become authoritarian & despotic and lead to enslavement and slaughter when they are isolated & driven ahead by themselves."⁷⁹ Did Berlin think this phenomenon was unique and limited to freedom, or did he think freedom merely constituted a clear, identifiable example of a larger feature of human psychology? The answer seems to fall between these options: Berlin thought the psychological vulnerability was larger than freedom, but freedom was a particularly dangerous and malleable trigger of that vulnerability.

⁷⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Stephen Spender dated November 18th 1958, *Enlightening*, p. 656.

⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper dated March 16th, 1959, *Enlightening*, p. 682.

In the midst of the Cold War, to claim that Anglo-American democracy and Soviet communism were, philosophically speaking, two sides of the same coin would have been a difficult proposition, even if some of what Berlin said might seem to imply this. Berlin was too often asked to distinguish, distance, and criticize. Western Europe seemed to stand, wearied, in some condition of political, economic, but also *spiritual* existential threat as the Soviets encroached on Eastern Europe. On a more personal level, Berlin perhaps, as others have noted, just wanted too much to please others and to be liked and regarded by them.⁸⁰ In any case, the lasting impact of “Two Concepts” speaks to the idea that it at least touched a nerve or hunger in the broader intellectual culture, regardless of Berlin’s own intellectual trajectory. When Karl Popper first read the work, he wrote to Berlin, “I am delighted by your clear distinction between what you call negative and positive freedom; in your own confession of faith – even though it is only implicit, it is no less open and forceful – for negative freedom; by your exposition of the dangers of the ideology of positive freedom [...]”⁸¹ Yet traces of Rousseau remained in Berlin’s conviction that freedom is a primary value. However much he objected to this desire in others, it seems that Berlin wanted to believe in something simply and passionately, without reservation. It was almost as if his commitment to freedom both required and prohibited such abandonment.

At the age of eighteen, Berlin wrote an essay on freedom, which was the subject assigned for that year’s Truro Prize at St. Paul’s School. The assignment was to assess this claim: “In the present century, more than ever before, it is true that men called themselves free but are everywhere in chains.” The youthful Berlin agreed, characterizing our modern condition as one of two great camps, far removed from each other, but “equally bound with chains.” On the one hand, there were those who, “be they Russian Communist, American industrialist, or Italian Fascist, work to achieve an essentially collectivist State, whose dominant characteristics shall be equality and impersonality, who must be opposed to individual freedom as being, in a *mechanical* world, a disruptive, because centrifugal, force.” And on the other side would be

⁸⁰ Christopher Hitchens, “Moderation or Death,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 20 No. 23. Nov. 26, 1998, pp. 3-11.

⁸¹ Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin dated February 17th, 1959, *Enlightening*, p. 680.

those who “strive at all costs to preserve their personal spiritual ego, even though it should mean a total abdication of their rights as citizens of any human polity and a willful self-blinding to their actual condition.”⁸²

Two years before his death, Berlin wrote to Michael Walzer that he truly believed that there were two types of liberty other than those of positive and negative liberty. One type of liberty, the kind that the positive and negative varieties mostly fit into, is the kind of liberty that exists as a value among other possible values that a society might choose to promote or curtail. “But,” he clarifies, “there is another more basic sense of liberty, which is the ability to choose *telle quelle* – as such.”⁸³ He suggests this distinction between basic human liberty and liberty as a political value arises largely because he thinks others do not tend to value liberty in a primary or absolute sense: “I was terribly impressed by a passage in my hero Herzen’s book *My Past and Thoughts*, in which he says that men do not really all seek liberty – security, yes, but liberty? [...] all men seek security, only some seek liberty. And even if Rousseau denounces the former as a disgraceful choice of slavery, they still are as they are. I cannot pretend that human beings as such (even if I do) put liberty as a primary value, with a special status. I think that simply as a fact is not the case.”⁸⁴ Perhaps then, it was so important to Berlin that people be “free from” rather than “free to” precisely because, in the end, he did not trust the majority of people to choose freedom at all.

As Henry Hardy notes,⁸⁵ the passage which Berlin incorrectly attributes above to *My Past and Thoughts* seems to appear instead in *From the Other Shore* (1850), where Herzen writes, “The masses want to stay the hand that impudently snatches from them the bread they have earned – that is their fundamental desire. They are indifferent to individual freedom, to freedom of speech; the masses love authority.”⁸⁶ But the insecurity that Berlin feared was as

⁸² Isaiah Berlin. “Freedom.” In *Isaiah Berlin: Letters 1928-1946* (v. 1), ed. Henry Hardy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 637.

⁸³ Isaiah Berlin to Michael Walzer dated October 17th, 1995, *Affirming: Letters 1975-1997*, Ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (Chatto & Windus, 2015), pp. 517-518.

⁸⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Michael Walzer, p. 518.

⁸⁵ *Enlightening*, p. 518, note 1.

⁸⁶ Herzen, Aleksandr. *From the Other Shore*. Trans. Moura Budberg. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1956), p. 133.

much, if not more, a state of mind as it was any particular political or material condition; and the type of insecurity that worried him most was the human vulnerability to manipulation, to being shaped by some grand planner or inspiring vision of political order. This threat could appear at any time, but in particular during those times when it was easiest to feel lost, displaced, or torn by conflicting impulses. Writing to a friend shortly after the publication of *Four Essays on Liberty* in 1969, Berlin remarks that he doubts his message will register with the students of the present, lamenting, “I have a feeling that the Gods of yesterday have failed the young, that just as the Soviet Union can no longer be believed in with that utter and guileless faith which so many found so easy to hold in the 1930s, so that the Welfare State, prosperity, security, increasing efficiency etc. do not attract those young who feel the need to sacrifice themselves for some worthy ideal [...] and that they are desperately searching for some form of self-expression which will cause them to swim against some sort of stream and not simply drift in a harmless way, too comfortably, with it.”⁸⁷ Negative liberty was, for Berlin, a rare and precious human accomplishment which humanity might prove incapable of sustaining.

Berlin was wrong to suppose that his work would fail to register with the new students of political philosophy, as negative liberty’s staying power attests, but his insight runs deeper than its predictive power. In the 1930s, he suggests, there were enemies, yet there was also hope. But by 1969, Berlin worried that the lack of concrete prospects, of figures and projects to rally around and adversaries to fear, was perhaps a more dangerous breeding ground. Between the ills of fear and ennui in the surrounding political landscape as he perceived it, Berlin concluded that fear may be the better option. After all, fear can be tempered, met with calls for moderation and skepticism; but ennui only stirs the longing to find a cause for which to sacrifice oneself.

IV. Conclusion

⁸⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Dorothea Head dated June 13th, *Enlightening*, p. 392.

We suggested at the outset that negative liberty's staying power was buttressed by the Cold War, both for Berlin and for those who attended to his arguments in the 1950s and '60s. Evidence adduced from his correspondence, forays into the media, and other ancillary writings supports this contention. Berlin was acutely sensitive to being perceived or portrayed as soft on Marxism in any of its forms, and he was gratified when voices on the left began criticizing the USSR. He shared the antipathy of Cold War liberals like Popper, Hayek, and especially Kennan for the Soviet Union's virulent oppression, and he welcomed the elective affinities that they and others discerned between his views and theirs.

Yet Berlin's account was distinctive nonetheless. Ironically, perhaps, in view of Kennan's reputation as a hardboiled political realist, Berlin found his outlook too sanguine. Kennan believed that the Soviet experiment was bound to fail because its economic model was unsustainable and its imperial ambitions would lead it to become overextended. All the West had to do was contain it behind the iron curtain, rebuild visibly prospering Western democracies, resist the McCarthyist temptation to emulate authoritarian practices in the ostensible defense of freedom, and wait.⁸⁸ Patience and resolution would be enough for the West to prevail.

Berlin was not convinced. Despite sharing Kennan's attitude toward the Soviets and his hostility to McCarthyist impulses in the West, Berlin was doubtful that Kennan's recipe was a sufficient guarantor of the kind of freedom – geared to protecting pluralism – that they both prized. He agreed that fear and insecurity made people all too easily manipulated by the Soviets, but, because he saw that fear and insecurity as deeply rooted features of the human condition rather than artifacts of the Cold War confrontation, Berlin saw no reason to believe that malevolent variants of positive freedom would cease to be threats in the future.

By the same token, Berlin could never have endorsed Hayek's view that "spontaneous order" would be the blossoming byproduct of human interaction if government simply got out of the way.⁸⁹ Indeed, one helpful byproduct of bringing the Cold War lens to bear on Berlin's account of negative liberty is to dispatch the distortions that result from reducing it to a

⁸⁸ Ian Shapiro, *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror* (Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 32-36, 42-46.

⁸⁹ Friedrich. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 160.

possessive individualist ideological creed. In this respect, Berlin is a useful ally in Skinner's quest to rescue negative freedom from Hobbes and his successors, if not in a civic humanist idiom.

Berlin saw people's instinct for freedom as halting and fragile, not a coiled spring that would regain its natural form if only the compressing impediments were removed. Commentators like Gina Gustavsson emphasize Berlin's worry that people who see freedom as self-mastery can become dangerous partisans of positive liberty, committed to obliterating freedom in the name of preserving it.⁹⁰ Here we have sought to illuminate the corollary of this concern that worried Berlin just as much: that champions of negative freedom would continue to find it difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to get traction for their view because it lacked positive liberty's mesmerizing potential.

Monistic conceptions of human purposes that give positive freedom this allure threaten human freedom, but when push comes to shove people might not care – particularly when their sense of security is in doubt. Berlin believed that we have to take that possibility seriously, revealing a Hobbesian streak – at least – in his view of the human psyche. The Hobbesian solution was no more available to Berlin than was Rousseau's oxymoronic dictum that people should be forced to be free. What appealed to Berlin about Rousseau was his passion for freedom, but Berlin doubted that it could be pressed into the service of sustaining negative freedom through the temptations and vicissitudes of real politics.

The Cold War was an incubator for Berlin's defense of negative freedom, but he discerned threats to it that ran deeper than the particular malevolent brand of positive freedom at the heart of Soviet communism. They are rooted in human insecurity and he feared that they would likely become more serious in circumstances where that insecurity increases. From our post-Cold War vantage point it seems obvious that Berlin's concerns were prescient and well-founded. Since the collapse of Soviet communism, fundamentalisms that submerge the human agency Berlin valued in totalizing ideologies have flourished to a degree that would likely have surprised even him. And insecure voters in western democracies have been all too willing to

⁹⁰ Gustavsson, "Psychological dangers of positive liberty," pp. 276-91. For discussion see not 68 above.

throw their support to leaders who show open contempt for negative liberty and the institutions on which it depends. A Berlinian moral of this story is that unless the champions of negative liberty find ways to diminish the insecurity that feeds people's susceptibility to such appeals, all bets are off.