

Isaiah Berlin's Key Idea

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Most people have heard of Isaiah Berlin, but knowledge of what he was and did is more patchy, and every now and then, when it emerges that I am at work on his papers, I am asked to explain about him – preferably, no doubt, in a brief soundbite. Sometimes the enquirer wants me to start from scratch, but sometimes there is a preconception at stake, and then it tends to be a question of responding to the implication that Berlin (1909–97) is a superseded Cold-War figure who belonged to his own century more than to the one to come. This view seems to me absolutely mistaken.

No short account could do justice to the many-faceted significance of this remarkable man. As a thinker and historian of thought, as a teacher and talker, as a consummate essayist, as an exemplar of liberalism and a clear-headed enemy of totalitarianism – and as a sheer human being – he had a presence and made a contribution that will be remembered, rediscovered and analysed from many vantage-points for years to come. Several books have already been written about him, and more will follow. But if I was forced into a corner and told to select a single insight with special staying-power, I should choose his insistence, against the mainstream of Western thought, that there can be no universal right set of principles by which we should live, and that all attempts to discover a unique solution to the moral questions that face mankind are based on a profound mistake about the nature of human values.

The usual technical name for this doctrine is 'pluralism', unfortunately rather a characterless word that tends to make what is in fact an exciting, liberating and radical view of human values sound like a sterile philosophical backwater. Nevertheless, the term does capture Berlin's essential starting-point, which is that ultimate human values – those values we adhere to for their own sakes, not as means to an end – are plural. That is to say, there are many of them, all perfectly genuine, and their distinctness – their plurality – is irreducible: they cannot be redefined or translated in such a way that they all turn out to be different manifestations of one super-value such as happiness or utility or obedience to some alleged supernatural dispensation.

What makes this multiplicity significant, Berlin believed, is that our values are also often incompatible and at times incommensurable – that is, not jointly measurable on a common scale. To take only the simplest examples, more justice means less mercy, more equality less liberty, more efficiency less spontaneity; and there is no objective procedural rule that enables us to balance one value against the other in such a conflict and decide where to draw the line. Each value is its own yardstick, and there is no independent measuring-rod that can be used to referee clashes between them.

One of the most important results of this state of affairs is that the systems of value that we find embedded in different cultural traditions are also plural, like the separate values that contribute towards them. This means that there can be many different value-structures, many different moralities, without it being possible to rank them in an order of approximation to some ideal blueprint for human life. And this is crucial for the understanding and management of differences between cultures, nations, traditions, ways of life. Aggressive, triumphalist nationalism and most mainstream forms of religion (especially but not only in fundamentalist form) have to be rejected, on this basis, as radically wrong-headed, built as they are on the anti-pluralist (or 'monist') assumption that there is only one right way, superior to all other candidates.

This doesn't mean that we must go to the other extreme and say that any aspirant code of values is as respectable as any other: a position of that kind is sometimes called 'relativism', though this is a dangerously slippery and ambiguous word. Pluralists are natural advocates of the maximum of toleration and variety, certainly, but they also recognise that human nature sets certain definite limits to what is desirable, and makes certain key requirements that any decent, civilised culture will need to satisfy. Cruelty is out, for instance, as is the arbitrary use of force. So, probably, although this is more controversial, is the kind of neglect of basic human rights characteristic of some modern regimes, for all that they sometimes urge different cultural traditions as the rationale for their conduct.

Berlinian pluralists also believe that the values between which we make choices are a real part of human nature, not subjective inventions unrelated to our shared needs (which is the strong relativist view). That is why Berlin himself sometimes described his view as 'objective pluralism', to make clear that it occupied a genuine third position between monism and relativism.

Seven years ago, Berlin was asked to provide an endorsement for the published proceedings of a conference on this pluralist view of human values. In his response he wrote: 'I have for many years thought the problem of the incommensurability, and still more the incompatibility, of some values to be central to all ethical, social, political and aesthetic issues.' He was surely right, and indeed an enormous and enthusiastic academic literature about his kind of pluralism has grown up in recent years, much of it of the greatest interest and importance, even if it is sometimes presented in the rather opaque, formalistic, jargon-ridden prose too often found in professional scholarly publications.

If some of the concerns dealt with in this literature are rather technical, most of the issues discussed should preoccupy any intelligent person who tries to think about how political matters should best be arranged, whether internationally – between different States, nations, cultures – or internally, within a large political unit of this kind, especially if it is multicultural, as is increasingly the case. Indeed pluralism applies with full force right down to the level of individual people and how they should regard one another's differing outlooks on life. Spouses or partners, parents and children, siblings, friends, neighbours all confront daily problems of coexistence on which pluralism can throw a revolutionary light.

This strong claim may sound absurd, and I ought to try to justify it. The basic point is very simply stated. If I am in the grip of a monist view of morality and politics, then it will be natural for me to think of my own moral and political outlook as not only right for myself, but as equally right for everybody; it will be an essential part of my moral personality that I

regard my moral priorities as applying universally. My moral views will have built into their foundations the assumption that they are, or at any rate should be, in no way idiosyncratic.

This will colour my attitude to others in obvious ways. If others differ from me in the moral arena, I shall tend to regard them as mistaken or flawed rather than as having an equally valid take on life, and this in turn will tend to generate conflict, resentment, suspicion, rejection rather than tolerance, accommodation, receptivity, compromise.

But if I am a pluralist I will accept or welcome different moral conceptions rather than feeling threatened by them. I shall view life as enriched rather than corrupted by the simultaneous existence of a wide variety of moral and political outlooks – provided always, of course, that the minimum indispensable requirements of any humane morality are respected. My attitude to and relations with those who differ from me will be analogously transformed. Pluralism turns a missionary into an explorer. Just as biologists celebrate biodiversity, so pluralists find a world of ethical diversity richer than a world dominated by ethical conformism.

All this may sound very banal and commonplace. Proverbially, after all, it takes all sorts to make a world. But this saying refers to varieties of taste and aptitude rather than to variety in life-forming moral values. There is a welter of evidence (if any were needed), from family quarrels and neighbour disputes to racism and ethnic cleansing, that the pluralist outlook is the exception rather than the rule. Most people and most ideological groups behave as if they and they alone are in the right, not as if they share the world with those whose values and traditions, though very different, may be no less valid.

I am not, of course, espousing the absurd view that all disputes and disagreements are between parties that are equally in the right: such a view would deny human fallibility and ill-nature, both of which are in permanent and plentiful supply. What I am saying is that the substitution of a basically pluralist for a basically monist outlook has the potential to defuse some kinds of conflict and revolutionise relationships at every level of social life, from the personal to the international. Pluralism is by no means a panacea, but it is nevertheless an instrument of great transforming power. And if that is true, the relevance of Isaiah Berlin's key insight is assured for at least the next millennium.