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## The Bed, the Map and the Butterfly

*Isaiah Berlin's Grand Strategy of Grand Strategy*

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### I

Space on college syllabi is severely constrained. For every text included, there are usually ten more, equally worthy, that get left out. This is particularly true of courses with broad sweep: 'Modern Philosophy since Descartes', or 'Intellectual Life in the Italian Renaissance'. The limits of the semester force professors to decide which thinkers are essential to understanding a course's subject. The rest are pruned.

Isaiah Berlin's place on the syllabus of Yale's 'Studies in Grand Strategy' course therefore deserves note. In a semester-long tour of grand strategic thought since the ancient Greeks, more pages are assigned from Berlin than from Plutarch, Gibbon or even Machiavelli. Yet Berlin was not a theorist of military strategy, like Sun Tzu or Clausewitz. Neither was he a historian of grand-strategic scope, like Thucydides or Polybius. Still less was he a practitioner of strategy on the world stage, like Metternich or Bismarck. Among such prestigious company, Berlin fits uneasily – a Jew from Riga, who spent his life inside cloistered academic walls, writing about liberty and pluralism, Romanticism and the Enlightenment, logical positivism and Russian literature. What can this Oxford don teach us about Grand Strategy?

This was the question I spent my 2011 summer trying to answer. Over the course of eight weeks at Oxford University, I conducted a systematic investigation of Berlin's life and thought. I read through his corpus, interviewed his friends, toured his haunts and plumbed his archive at the Bodleian library, where yellowing notebooks, crumpled letters and original drafts of famous papers sit in the grey boxes of the Special Collections department. Throughout these investigations, my goal was simple: to

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understand the grand strategic implications of Berlin's ideas, his personality and his conduct. This paper is a distillation of my findings.

Such a distillation is necessarily incomplete. Whole papers could be written on Berlin's strategic approach to Zionism, or on his grand strategy for founding Wolfson College, or on his social and academic manoeuvring at Oxford and abroad. Such papers would undoubtedly be rich and fascinating, but they would do little to justify Berlin's place among the likes of Clausewitz and Bismarck. My focus is therefore on Berlin's broader intellectual vision – where, in my opinion, his true grand strategic significance lies.

In this vision, I argue, it is possible to discern what I call a 'Grand Strategy of Grand Strategy' – that is, a nuanced and dynamic approach to strategic judgement in any context. The first two sections of the paper outline my interpretation of the genesis and nature of this approach. In the first section, I argue that much of Berlin's disparate corpus can be seen as animated by a central principle: his opposition to Procrustean violations of the world's complexity. In the second section, I show how his vision of strategic judgement emerges out of a tension between this principle and the strategist's need for an operable, holistic perspective. The resolution to this tension, for Berlin, comes from the 'sense of reality' – an integrative receptivity to the world that combines the best of both the fox and the hedgehog, while avoiding the drawbacks of each. In the third section, I analyse the implications of this strategic vision, and I draw on Clausewitz to suggest three ways it could be improved.

## II

It has become fashionable, among scholars of Berlin, to try to situate him within the dichotomy he made famous. Was Berlin himself a hedgehog, or a fox? Given his disparate corpus, the latter seems more immediately plausible. As Michael Ignatieff (1997) puts it, 'no other major figure in twentieth century Anglo-American letters made contributions across such a range of disciplines: in analytical philosophy, in the intellectual history of Marxism, the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, and in liberal political theory' (10). Certainly, Berlin tended to portray himself as a fox – he resigned the Chichele Chair at Oxford

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because he claimed to have no ‘doctrine’ to teach (Collini 1) – and he spent his life railing against the sins of the hedgehog: monism, dogmatism, simplification, ideology.

Yet despite these fox-like credentials, or perhaps because of them, scholars have been eager to unearth Berlin’s inner hedgehog. John Gray, for example, bases his entire monograph on the claim that ‘all of Berlin’s work is animated by a single idea of enormous subversive force’: namely, value pluralism (1). Other scholars follow Gray’s diagnosis, but they disagree about Berlin’s ‘one big thing’. For Ignatieff, it is the theme of freedom and its betrayal (201); for George Crowder, it is the intellectual origins of totalitarianism (2); for Steven Marcus, it is fox-hood itself (1).

Berlin would likely have objected to such an exercise. Indeed, he began warning against over-use of his formula immediately after coining it (PSM 437). Yet there is value in the search for underlying patterns in Berlin’s thought, if only as a way of framing further investigation. For this reason, I should like to offer my own interpretation of Berlin’s ‘one big thing’ – an interpretation that I believe can lend insight into his vision of Grand Strategy.

In 1930, while Berlin was still an undergraduate at Oxford, he wrote a short paper in the *Oxford Outlook* called ‘Some Procrustations’. In it, he bemoans contemporary critics who apply standards successful in one discipline to all others – in particular, critics who apply ethical standards to art, or aesthetic standards to metaphysics. Thirsty for a single, universal method, such critics forget that ‘each activity evolves out of itself, and involves conformity to its own private standard, and therefore requires the critical use of its own peculiar criterion’ (8).

The paper is interesting in itself, but it is the mythic image invoked by the title that I think most important to understanding Berlin. Procrustes, we are told, was a Greek robber, who tied his victims to an iron bed. If they were too short for the bed, Procrustes would stretch them; if they were too long, he would cut their legs to fit. The analogy to Berlin’s targets in ‘Some Procrustations’ is obvious, but the usefulness of this image in interpreting Berlin’s thought extends much further. Indeed, I would like to suggest that Berlin’s opposition to Procrusteanism can be seen as his ‘one big thing’ – or at least, as the underlying motive behind much of his disparate corpus. In Berlin’s universe, the central sin is the attempt to impose a rigid or simplistic

framework onto the world's complexity. Almost all of his writings aim to expose this sin in one form or another, and to protect humanity from its consequences.

Here I am taking a cue from Jonathan Allen (1998), but going further than he does. Allen sees Berlin's anti-Procrusteanism as standing alongside his value pluralism – one of 'at least two sets of commitments at the heart of Berlin's political thought' (35). I see Berlin's anti-Procrusteanism as much more fundamental. As I will attempt to show, Berlin's value pluralism is a *function* of his anti-Procrusteanism, as is his view of language, his view of politics and, most importantly for our purposes, his view of Grand Strategy.

Let us begin, briefly, with language. Berlin spent the first part of his illustrious career at the centre of a small group of Oxford philosophers – A. J. Ayer and J. L. Austin prominent among them – who were building the foundations for a philosophy of language known as 'logical positivism'. The project of logical positivism was to bring philosophical discourse into alignment with the natural sciences. Its central claim was simple: all meaningful statements must be verifiable – either by deductive logic, or by empirical observation.

Berlin's rebellion against this doctrine was perhaps his first substantive philosophical contribution, and it provides a perfect illustration of the anti-Procrustean motivation that would characterise his later thought. As he watched logical positivism develop in the course of discussions with Ayer, Austin and the rest of 'the Brethren', Berlin was one of the first to notice exceptions to the rule. In his 1939 paper 'Verification', for example, he offers a slew of statements that are meaningful but not directly verifiable – general propositions like 'All  $s$  is  $p$ ' (CC 18), hypothetical propositions like 'If I had looked up I would have observed a blue patch' (CC 22), and propositions about other minds like 'My toothache is more violent than yours' (CC 28). Logical positivists, on Berlin's view, have to resort to a Procrustean dismissal of such statements to make their single standard work.

Indeed, by the time Berlin was writing one of his last analytic essays, 'Logical Translation', he was explicitly invoking Procrustes to criticise deflationary linguistic projects like logical positivism. The attempt to translate all sentences into a single form, or to judge them all by a single standard of meaning, was a 'Procrustean

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programme' (CC 75), which entailed either 'lopping off' ethical, aesthetic, political and historical judgements with a 'ruthless axe' (CC 69), or 'stretching the basic propositions to cover (as we are told Procrustes did with the legs of his shorter guests) whatever one required to say' (CC 75). Like Berlin's opponents in 'Some Procrustations', linguistic reductionists thirst for a single, comprehensive theory; the variety of language reveals their naiveté.

This anti-Procrustean approach to language is paralleled by Berlin's later and more famous work on value and politics. Here, Berlin's opponents are what he calls the 'moral monists' – a class of thinkers stretching throughout Western history, all of whom Berlin thinks wedded to three doctrines: (1) that every genuine question has a single true answer, (2) that these answers are in principle discoverable, and (3) that all true answers must be compatible, unified and harmonious (PSM 5). In this sense, like the logical positivists, the moral monists believe in and search for a single, comprehensive theory – not of language, but of the Good.

Berlin offers two critiques of this doctrine, both anti-Procrustean in character. The first is conceptual. It is a logical truth, Berlin argues, that 'some among the Great Goods cannot live together' (PSM 11). To substantiate this claim, he cites a long list of incompatible values: liberty and equality, mercy and justice, spontaneity and organisation, honesty and kindness, artistic commitment and familial devotion (PSM 10–11). Indeed, not only are these values incompatible, but they are also incommensurable – that is, they cannot be ranked or weighed according to a single standard. The notion of an ultimate, harmonious solution is thus incoherent. 'We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss' (PSM 11). This line of argument parallels Berlin's critique of logical positivism; Berlin's opponent proposes a unifying theory, and Berlin cites examples to show how this theory cannot accommodate the world's diversity.

Berlin's second critique of moral monism is similarly anti-Procrustean, but in a more political sense. Monism, says Berlin, leads quickly to an imposition of a rigid political ideal on to the complexities of individual human lives. Once again, Berlin's language invokes Procrustes. Certain that he has discovered the single true standard, the monist attempts to 'force empirical selves into the right pattern' (PSM 219), despite their rebellion against the process. Indeed, the monist may even feel justified in sacrificing

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hosts of concrete human beings in pursuit of his abstract ideal – a tendency Berlin sees at the root of totalitarian ideologies like Communism and Fascism. In this sense, Berlin’s practical critique of monism is the foundation for his vision of liberalism in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. Monistic conceptions of positive liberty slip too easily into Procrustean coercion. Recognising the plurality of genuine values, we should protect our negative liberty to choose among them.

Berlin’s writings on language, value and politics are only the most prominent examples of his anti-Procrusteanism. Scratch one of Berlin’s myriad critical essays – on scientific history, on the Enlightenment, on determinism – and you will likely find an attack on some violation of the world’s complexity, some attempt to smooth over reality’s rough edges so that it fits into a theoretical box. The scientific historians ignore the inextricable tangles of historical causation (CC 103); the Enlightenment *philosophes* neglect the irrational in human nature (PSM 243); the determinists ride roughshod over moral experience (CC 173). Almost always, Berlin’s intellectual movement is away from unity, from theory, from reduction, and towards reality in all its richness and multiplicity. His mental gifts made such a movement easy. Like Tolstoy, he had an astonishing sensitivity to the uniqueness of each particular; unlike Tolstoy, however, he delighted in it. ‘I don’t want the universe to be too tidy’, Berlin told Beata Polanowska-Sygulska late in his life, and he devoted much of his work to opposing those who wished to make it so (UD 125).

This, then, is my interpretation of Berlin’s ‘one big thing’: Berlin’s opposition to Procrusteanism can be helpfully seen as the central principle animating his thought. Of course, there are aspects of Berlin’s work (for example, his writings on collective identity) that do not fit this interpretation readily, but we need not be Procrustean in applying it. Rather, let us use it as Berlin suggests we use his own famous dichotomy: as a way of framing further investigation.

III

How does this interpretation of Berlin apply to Grand Strategy? At the most basic level, it seems that the Berlinian strategist must be relentlessly aware of the world’s teeming complexity, and must

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remain constantly on guard against oversimplifying it or forcing it to fit into tidy, unifying theory. This, in itself, is surely a valuable lesson to learn.

Yet it also creates a deep tension. After all, does not every form of strategic thought require some violation of reality's complexity? We need some distance from the particular, some capacity to abstract and to compare, in order to cognise the world at all, and this distance will necessarily involve cutting out some of the details. The image of Borges's map serves well to illustrate this point. In his one paragraph short story 'On Exactitude in Science', Borges imagines an empire whose cartographers 'struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations [...] saw that the vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters' (Borges 325). The message of this story is clear: to represent reality helpfully, you need to be selective. This is particularly true for the grand strategist, who seeks the kind of holistic perspective necessary for coordinating large-scale operations. So the dilemma for the Berlinian strategist is: can you be holistic without becoming Procrustean? Can you have the map, without the bed?

Berlin's answer is yes, and it is out of this tension that his full vision for Grand Strategy emerges. Even as he warns against the dangers of Procrusteanism, Berlin consistently opposes those who would renounce the intellect altogether. 'I do not wish to say or hint, as some romantic thinkers have, that something is lost in the very act of investigating, analysing, bringing to light [...] this I believe to be a false and on the whole deleterious doctrine' (SR 48). Berlin has no tolerance for mystical intuition, for obscurantism or for the aspiration towards unmediated contact with reality. Indeed, the best passages in 'Some Procrustations' are devoted to ridiculing the Bergsonian philosopher Professor Le Roy, who writes of a state in which 'distinctions have disappeared. Words no longer have any value [...] I am dissolved in the joy of becoming. I give myself over to the delight of ever-streaming reality' (quoted in SP 2). For Berlin, writers like this 'represent a willful betrayal of the intellect [...] a complete loss of that desire which gives thought whatever value it possesses' (SP 8).

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Intelligence itself is not the problem; we must not give up on the map for fear of the bed.

Rather, to navigate the world while avoiding the sin of Procrusteanism, we need a special sort of intelligence – practical rather than theoretical, synthetic rather than analytic, specific rather than general, qualitative rather than quantitative. Berlin calls this type of intelligence ‘the sense of reality’, and it sits at the centre of his vision of effective strategic thought. He spells it out most explicitly in his short essay, ‘Political Judgement’.

The gift we mean entails, above all, a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labeled like so many individual butterflies. To integrate in this sense is to see the data as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically – that is, in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you (46).

Equipped with this ‘sense of reality’, the strategist eschews Procrustean impositions of rigid theories, responding instead to minute fluctuations in his environment. He perceives the significance of such fluctuations via metaphorical ‘antennae of the greatest possible delicacy’, which allow him ‘direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data’ (46).

Such antennae allow the strategist to solve the problem of Borges’s map. His intellectual engagement is selective, certainly, but his sense of reality – ‘of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what’ (46) – helps him know which features of his situation are crucial to his considerations, and which are irrelevant. Here we hear echoes of Clausewitz. Like Clausewitz’s military genius, the Berlinian strategist ‘easily grasps and dismisses a thousand remote possibilities an ordinary mind would labour to identify’ (Clausewitz 112). In this way, the sense of reality can be seen as a form of long-term *coup d’oeil*; not a flash of insight, but a sustained sensitivity to the overall texture of a situation, which allows the strategist to remain responsive to complexity, without getting bogged down by unnecessary details.

In my view, Berlin’s conception of the sense of reality is his most important contribution to grand strategic thought. Indeed, I

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would go so far as to suggest that Berlin's short essay 'Political Judgement' should be included on the Grand Strategy syllabus, as a complement to our reading of 'The Hedgehog and the Fox'. The lessons to be drawn from it are numerous. 'Political Judgement' reminds us of the importance of the personal qualities in historical life; it makes the case for a recovery of common sense, tuned to its highest pitch; it prompts scepticism towards the role of models and specialists in political decision-making; and it empowers individual decision-makers as opposed to administrations, bureaucracies or vast, impersonal forces (Cherniss and Hardy 5.1).

Most importantly, however, 'Political Judgement' resolves the central strategic dilemma raised by 'The Hedgehog and the Fox'. The latter essay does much to frame the tension between unity and plurality, the big picture and the details, the universal and the particular, but it does little to help the strategist negotiate this tension effectively. To someone faced with the difference between the fox and the hedgehog, it is not enough to say, 'You must be both.' The chasm is too wide, the modes of engagement too distinct. Indeed, it is precisely the impossibility of being both a fox and a hedgehog that animates the tortured philosophical personalities of Tolstoy and Maistre. The essay ends with Tolstoy dying in agony, crushed by his failure to reconcile the one and the many – a tragic and beautiful image, perhaps, but hardly an instructive strategic exemplar.

In my view, 'Political Judgement' should be seen as picking up where 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' leaves off, proposing a new type of strategic decision-making, based on the sense of reality, that is neither wholly fox nor wholly hedgehog. Berlin repeatedly describes the sense of reality via the metaphor of 'antennae', so at the risk of irreverence, let us refer to this new category as 'the butterfly'. Like the fox, the butterfly retains an exquisite sensitivity to the multiplicity of the world. Unlike the fox, however, the butterfly's thought is not 'scattered or diffused' (PSM 436) but integrated and comprehensive. Where the fox perceives the particular in itself, the butterfly perceives the particular in relation to the larger pattern. In this sense, the butterfly shares the hedgehog's capacity for synthesis and overarching vision. The butterfly diverges from the hedgehog, however, in the flexibility of this vision. Where the hedgehog seeks a single, unshakable framework, the butterfly seeks a temporary, pragmatic orientation.

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It is therefore equipped to register changes in the environment and to adjust its perspective accordingly.

Here I am diverging from standard interpretations of Berlin's 'sense of reality', which view it primarily as an attribute of the fox. Berlin's own presentation makes such a misunderstanding easy. In his essay on Roosevelt, Berlin distinguishes between two types of statesmen: the first 'is essentially a man of single principle and fanatical vision. Possessed by his own bright, coherent dream, he understands neither people nor events' (632); the second, by contrast, is equipped with a vivid sense of reality, 'a naturally political being [...] possess[ing] antennae of the greatest possible delicacy [...] able] to integrate a vast multitude of small evanescent unseizable detail' into a single, coherent picture (632). To the first category, Berlin assigns Churchill, Wilson, Trotsky, Hitler, Lenin and de Gaulle; to the second, he assigns Roosevelt, Bismarck, Lincoln, Lloyd George and Chaim Weizmann.

The parallels with Berlin's distinction between the hedgehog and the fox are obvious here. Indeed, Ryan Patrick Hanley goes so far as to label members of the first category 'Political Hedgehogs' and members of the second 'Political Foxes' (334). But such a reading is too simple. There is a crucial distinction between the fox of 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' and the second type of statesman discussed in 'Franklin Delano Roosevelt'. The former is scattered and all over the map, whereas the latter is distinguished precisely by its capacity for synthesis and integration. Indeed, Berlin's depiction of the sense of reality in 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' makes this difference clear. In that essay, it is precisely the 'sense of reality' that Tolstoy, the consummate fox, cannot achieve. He believes in its existence, 'but he has not, himself, seen it face to face; for he has not, do what he might, a vision of the whole' (491). Those wishing to understand the sense of reality solely as an attribute of the fox – or, for that matter, of the hedgehog – are thus put in an interpretative bind; Berlin seems to associate aspects of it with both.

My own interpretation solves this problem. Statesmen equipped with the sense of reality should not be seen as foxes, or as hedgehogs, but rather as a separate category, which combines the best aspects of the other two – the fox's flexibility and awareness of diversity, the hedgehog's synthetic capacity and holistic vision –

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while avoiding the faults of each – the fox’s mental diffusion and fractured perspective, the hedgehog’s rigidity and blindness to complexity. This, I think, is Berlin’s ideal statesmen, and the one from which aspiring Grand Strategists can learn the most.

Of course, strictly speaking the sense of reality is an ethically neutral quality. ‘The distinction I am drawing’, says Berlin, ‘is not a moral one, not one of value but of one of type’ (PSM 632). Bismarck, for example, had the sense of reality in abundance, even though he was, in Berlin’s view, a ‘far from admirable man’ (SR 49). Churchill and Wilson, by contrast, both lacked the sense of reality, but they were, nevertheless, ‘great benefactors’ (632). Despite such gestures towards neutrality, however, Berlin’s language makes his preference clear. Berlin describes the statesmen without a sense of reality, the visionary ‘possessed by his own bright, coherent dream’, as ‘blind’, ‘arrogant’ and ‘fanatical’ (PSM 632). He is strong only where his populace is ‘weak’, ‘vacillating’ and ‘insecure’ (632), and he sees the world in the black and white shades that Berlin, in one of his final essays, labels ‘forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human’ (PSM 11). Most importantly, though, the visionary commits Berlin’s ultimate sin – Procrusteanism – by trying ‘to bend events and men to his own fixed pattern’ (PSM 632). It is no accident that Berlin’s list of visionaries includes his greatest political foes – Hitler, Stalin, Robespierre. ‘We rightly fear those bold reformers who are too obsessed by their vision to pay attention to the medium in which they work’, he writes. ‘We are rightly apt to put more trust in the equally bold empiricists [...] because we see that they understand their material’ (PI 51).

Berlin’s laudatory profile of Churchill might seem an exception to this rule, but it is not. Even as Berlin praises Churchill’s achievements, he warns of the dangers inherent in Churchill’s way of thinking. The Prime Minister’s lack of political antennae is ‘what is most frightening in him’ (PSM 616), and it results in the kind of leadership ‘by which dictators and demagogues transform peaceful populations into marching armies’ (PSM 620). The circumstances of the Second World War made such blindness effective, for a time, in ‘creating the necessary illusion’ to transform ‘cowards into brave men’ (PSM 620), but Berlin seems to hope that the era requiring such romantic leadership is fading. ‘Churchill is one of

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the diminishing number of those who genuinely believe in a specific world order' (PSM 612) – an anachronism, necessary during a dire hour, fascinating in mythic stature, but dangerous as a general political ideal.

When Berlin writes about responsive, sense-of-reality statesmen, by contrast, he is much more wholehearted. He describes Weizmann, for example, as the 'fullest, most gifted and most effective representative' of his people (PI 41), 'naturally attuned to the often unspoken, but always central, hopes, fears, modes of feeling of the vast majority of the Jewish masses' (44). In this sense, Weizmann was the opposite of Procrustean; he realised the deepest interests of his people, 'without forcing them into a preconceived social or political scheme' (44). Roosevelt, too, became 'the crystallisation, the raising to great intensity and clarity, of what a large number of [his] fellow citizens were thinking and feeling' (PSM 633). They trusted him precisely because he did not try to impose on them a rigid standard, but rather reflected the complex currents of the society he governed.

Whether these descriptions are, in fact, accurate is beside the point; what matters is the way they reflect Berlin's own vision of strategic leadership. The Berlinian strategist, it seems, is neither a theorist nor a visionary. He is sceptical towards social science, suspicious of specialists and confident in his own holistic judgement. He scorns utopia. He knows his people intimately. He thrives on detail, but he sees a larger synthesis. Above all, he is exquisitely sensitive to the unique pattern of unfolding events, moving 'along the grain' (PI 44), rather than attempting a Procrustean enforcement of his own will. He thus respects both the complexity of the world he lives in and the freedom of the individuals who share it.

I call this a 'Grand Strategy of Grand Strategy' because it remains too distant from concrete events to define actual policy. Berlin does not give us solutions to particular strategic problems; rather, he presents a vision of the sensibility he thinks best suited to formulating effective strategy in any context. This vision can inform and structure strategic deliberation, even without dictating specific outcomes.

## IV

Having presented my interpretation of Berlinian Grand Strategy, I will now suggest a few ways in which I think Berlin's view could be improved. The first problem is that Berlin underestimates the legitimate role that theory can play in cultivating the sense of reality. In 'Political Judgement', for example, he suggests that the gift of holistic perception is 'a talent to which [...] the power of abstraction and analysis seems alien, if not positively hostile' (SR 50). In complicated situations, particularly human interactions, 'theories [...] are not appropriate [...] It is as if we were to look for a theory of tea-tasting, a science of architecture' (SR 50). Berlin is being strangely dismissive here, especially given that Chinese aristocrats used to be schooled in tea-tasting protocol, and modern architecture students spend years learning about architectural theory. Indeed, in other parts of the essay, he gestures towards the fact that theories can 'sometimes help', but only on a small scale. A scientist can analyse a particular phenomenon and suggest a course of action, but she will not be able to predict, using science, the implications of that action for a complicated and dynamic system. For such a task, she would need a sense of reality – something wholly different from scientific expertise (51).

The problem here is that Berlin is blending all of his opponents together. The essay begins as an attack – justified, in my view – on those who wish to abstract from human behaviour a set of scientific laws that can be used to predict political outcomes. By the end of the essay, however, his target has expanded – from predictive science to theory and analysis in general. Such an expansion fails to account for the forms of theory that attempt to structure and distil past experience rather than to predict and control future events.

In this sense, Berlin would do well to complement his critique of political science with some of Clausewitz's insights from book 2, chapter 2, of *On War*. Like Berlin, Clausewitz complains about the Procrustean nature of previous strategic theories: 'efforts were made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules or even systems [...] but people failed to take adequate account of the endless complexities involved' (134). Like Berlin, Clausewitz dismisses those who seek a theory that will make their decisions

for them. Unlike Berlin, however, Clausewitz identifies a different, more useful type of theory, ‘meant to educate the mind of the future commander [...] not to accompany him to the battlefield’ (141). Analysis and abstraction are not ‘alien’ to this type of theory, but essential to it. The theorist works to ‘distinguish precisely what at first sight seemed fused’, to distil the tangles of history into a comprehensible framework, and thus to ‘train the judgement’ of the aspiring strategist (141).

Clausewitz here displays greater awareness than Berlin of the extent to which theoretical frameworks – whether consciously applied or gradually absorbed – structure and facilitate the sense of reality that Berlin so cherishes. Clausewitz would want to complicate Berlin’s claim that such a sense is ‘specific rather than general’ (SR 46). The sense of reality is responsive to unique particulars, certainly, but in order to integrate those particulars into a larger pattern it must abstract from them, compare them with others and fit them within a more general picture. Effective theory facilitates such a process, helping to pick out the significant features of a given particular and to guide its placement within the larger pattern. This guidance need not be conscious: Berlin is right that most statesmen cannot articulate exactly why they understand a situation in the way that they do. Yet such statesmen have nevertheless internalised slews of theoretical structures – overlapping, refracting and ultimately producing the holistic judgements Berlin praises so highly. Berlin’s wholesale dismissal of theory is therefore misguided – theory is not a separate tool of limited scope, but rather an integral part of strategic cognition itself.

Clausewitz’s conception of effective theory also solves another problem of Berlinian strategy: Berlin provides no guidance for how to *develop* the sense of reality. For Berlin, such a sense is ‘inexpressible’ (PSM 489), and cannot ‘literally be taught’ (SR 45). He thus leaves aspiring strategists in the lurch: either you’ve got the magic eye, or you don’t. Clausewitz’s picture is more encouraging. While strategic judgement cannot be learned directly, it can be honed and developed through rigorous engagement with a combination of history, theory and first-hand experience. Clausewitz thus provides the aspiring strategist with an actual

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educational programme, where Berlin gives only examples and general descriptions.

The final major problem with Berlinian strategy is that he spends too much time exposing the dangers of being too rigid and visionary, and not enough time addressing the potential drawbacks of being too flexible and responsive. This asymmetry can be partially explained by his historical circumstances. Berlin, like many intellectuals writing after the Second World War, was reacting against the horrific impact of visionary dictators and rigid ideologies on the global landscape. Hitler and Stalin, Communism and Fascism, the death camps and the Gulag – these are the threats most vivid in his mind, and he devotes much of his work to exposing their intellectual underpinnings.

In doing so, however, he underplays the danger of falling off the other side of the horse. The targets of Berlin's criticism are almost always rigid, myopic and blind to the views of others; rarely are they pliable, scattered and unable to hold their own ground. Yet these latter sins are just as perilous – indeed, they are the threats the Berlinian strategist must take most care to avoid. Think, for example, of Berlin's laudatory attitude towards working 'along the grain' (PI 44). What happens, we might ask, if the grain takes a wrong turn? In such circumstances, it is the statesman of strong and inflexible principle, the statesman willing to stand up and push back, who will do the most good. This, indeed, was one of Churchill's great virtues, but we see it in almost all acts of political courage – Sam Houston's opposition to Texas secession, Robert Taft's criticism of the Nuremberg trials, Russ Feingold's lone vote against the Patriot Act. These men did not simply 'reflect a contemporary social or moral world in an intense and concentrated fashion' (PSM 616); rather, they held fast to their own ideals, even at the risk of unpopularity. Whether or not we agree with the positions they took, we can see the value in this type of conduct. Berlin, however, does little to remind us.

Indeed, Berlin's own personal struggles illustrate some of the strategic weaknesses his writings tend to neglect. Accusations of over-flexibility and cowardice, for example, followed him throughout his career. Even Bryan Magee, one of Berlin's great friends and admirers, writes critically of Berlin's unwillingness to take a stand on behalf of an unpopular candidate for election to All Souls (40–55), and Berlin was famously two-faced about A. L.

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Rowse's failed campaign for the Wardenship of the College. Indeed, Berlin himself bemoaned his cowardice in letters to friends. To Jean Floud he wrote, 'I wish I had not inherited my father's timorous, rabbit nature!' (27 August 1969); to Morton White: 'it may be natural cowardice in my part, but I get a sense of nightmare a little too quickly, and hate fights perhaps too much' (22 March 1973).

This timorousness sprang in part from what Berlin called his 'eagerness to please', and in part from his capacity to see both sides of every issue. Berlin had close friends at both ends of the political spectrum; he empathised with their positions, and he hated to provoke their criticism. Take, for example, the two articles Berlin wrote in late 1949: one on Winston Churchill, and the other on the difference between British students and American students. In response to negative feedback about his work, Berlin experienced intense anxiety, and he started writing legions of apologetic letters to friends of all stripes whom he hoped not to offend – acknowledging counter-arguments, fussing about misunderstanding, claiming contempt for what he had written. In a fit of despair, he wrote to Arthur Schlesinger in December 1949, 'clearly, one mustn't have political positions at all, except for purely private purposes'. Indeed, for a time, Berlin retreated within his academic cloister. Such an option remains open to the don, but not to the statesman, whose position demands that he is comfortable with taking a stand and receiving criticism for doing so.

In this sense, Berlin himself occasionally displayed some of the weaknesses that threaten to afflict the Berlinian strategist: the sins of being *too* responsive, *too* sensitive to the external world, and thus thin-skinned, scattered, lacking in backbone. Effective strategists must be more willing to make enemies than Berlin himself was. They must be conscious not just of the dangers of rigidity, but also of the dangers of flexibility. Berlin, despite his own struggles, places insufficient emphasis on the latter.

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For all these flaws, however, Berlin's vision of strategic leadership remains both instructive and compelling. Motivated by a desire to avoid Procrusteanism, yet aware of the need for holistic synthesis,

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Berlin presents us with a fox–hedgehog hybrid: responsive to complexity, sensitive to diversity, but able to integrate that diversity into a flexible, pragmatic view of the larger pattern. Such an ideal calls us away from reliance on abstract theories and protocols. It asks us to renounce the desire for certainty, for order, for prediction, and to learn the subtle talent of big-picture judgement. In an era obsessed with measurable outcomes and systematic decision-making, such a vision remains as relevant as ever.

Even if Berlin's conclusions are ultimately rejected, however, there is still profound value in studying his work. Berlin's thought revolves around a nexus of tensions at the core of Grand Strategy – tensions between unity and plurality, theory and practice, synthesis and analysis, insight and uncertainty, the abstract and the concrete, the is and the ought. Engagement with such tensions will not dictate strategic protocol, but it can train our judgement, clear our minds and give structure to our thinking. From something on a syllabus, this is the best we can hope for.

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