



## **The Last of His Kind**

**Presented by Per Runesson**

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

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# The Last of His Kind

*Presented by Per Runesson*

A Swedish Radio programme on Isaiah Berlin, broadcast on Kulturradio, Sverigesradio P1, on 16 and 23 July 1998. Translation of Swedish by Niklas Magee Mateluna, Henry Hardy and Per Runesson. In the broadcast Runesson either translates the remarks of his English-speaking interlocutors into Swedish after they have spoken (in which case his translation is omitted here), or summarises them without including the remarks in their original English form (of which no record survives). The original broadcast may be listened to here: [part 1](#) | [part 2](#).

## *Part 1*

*[Schubert impromptu No. 1 in F minor from D935, played by Alfred Brendel]*

ISAIHAH BERLIN You see, I realised that they administered a considerable blow to the central philosophy of the West, namely, that to all genuine ... [*fade*].<sup>1</sup>

PER RUNESSON In two programmes, we shall get to know a man who became very old and very wise. A man who loved Schubert (here played by his good friend Alfred Brendel), as well as talking about ideas with others. How they listened! He was incomparable, the last of his kind, according to those we will hear in this programme, two of whom are writing biographies of him – of Sir Isaiah Berlin, who was born in Riga in 1909, died last autumn, and worked in Oxford. It was typical that when in 1978 the BBC was to broadcast a TV series about today's philosophies, a series that was later published in book form, Isaiah Berlin was chosen to

<sup>1</sup> From a filmed interview with Göran Rosenberg on 3 February 1997, broadcast on Swedish Television on 21 May 1998.

introduce the programme. The series presenter was a philosopher used to journalism, Bryan Magee, newly appointed professor.<sup>2</sup>

BRYAN MAGEE Well, there were two main reasons. One is that he was an almost universally known figure, at least in the English-speaking world, and I wanted the introduction to be done by somebody who was already known to the public who would be listening to it. The other reason is that he was an exceptionally attractive talker. He may have had an accent that was difficult to understand, but the content of what he said was nearly always entertaining as well as intelligent, and I wanted the introduction to philosophy to be entertaining as well as intelligent.

RUNESSON At one point, you talked about the art of philosophy as the art of putting questions like a child. There's something childish, in a good sense, in doing philosophy?

MAGEE That's right. Children ask questions like 'What is time?' Or perhaps, in a more specific way, they say things like 'I'd like to meet Napoleon', 'Why can't I meet Napoleon?' And these are very fundamental ... [*fade*].

RUNESSON It seemed to amuse Berlin to talk about such things. I myself have produced a series of radio programmes about philosophy and I've found that the really big names in philosophy do not mind simplicity at all – being simple, direct and available. It's the others that are afraid, afraid of losing status among their colleagues. Bryan Magee himself is a hardworking philosopher who is on the go: he has been a Member of Parliament for ten years.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan Magee, 'An Introduction to Philosophy', BBC2 Television, 19 January 1978; published as 'Sir Isaiah Berlin on Men of Ideas and Children's Puzzles', *Listener*, 26 January 1978, 111–13, and as 'An Introduction to Philosophy: Dialogue with Isaiah Berlin' in Bryan Magee (ed.), *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 1978: BBC), 1–27. It is not clear what professorship is referred to here.

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Isaiah Berlin seems to have combined the best of two worlds, the academic and the non-academic. He was sociable, took part in dinners in Oxford and in London, enjoyed people, and linked ideas to people. Ideas are not abstractions floating around like mathematics or scientific laws. They are entertained by people, and change people's lives. In my view there must have been a few things that set Berlin apart between 1965 and, say, 1980: his belief that ideas were tied to people may perhaps be such a thing. The belief was very different from the outlook of the Althusser-influenced Left in the *New Left Review* and the British universities, where abstractions and incomprehensibilities were taken partly from the aforementioned Frenchman, Louis Althusser, and partly from the German nineteenth century, which was like life-vows that one breathed in daily. An independent thinker and non-dogmatic spirit such as Isaiah Berlin must have seemed out of place in this company, in this atmosphere.

Most philosophy teachers, Professor Magee says, such as myself for example, can explain what the ideas of the Frenchman Descartes or the German Leibniz ideas were. We can explain them in broad terms.

MAGEE But Isaiah Berlin didn't just do *that*. What he conveyed to you was what it was like to have these ideas; what it was like to have your life pervaded, and perhaps even governed, by these ideas. And then even a step further than that: what the rest of the world looked like from the standpoint of somebody who held these ideas. How does reality look to you if you're a Cartesian or a Spinozan or a Leibnizian?

RUNESSON Isaiah Berlin had tremendous knowledge, and he could talk about ideas from any century in the past 2,500 years. He combined the talents of the philosopher, the novelist and the historian. Bryan Magee continues ...

MAGEE Almost all thinkers in the past, whether about politics or religion, have tended to believe that all ideals are ultimately, at least,

compatible. And that even if they're not compatible in this world, then they'll be compatible in the next world. Religious people in particular have tended to say: Well, even though we can't have perfection here, we'll have perfection in heaven. We will have absolute truth, absolute freedom, absolute equality, absolute kindness, absolute truthfulness: they will all coexist.

RUNESSON What Isaiah Berlin always pointed out was that some of these ideals are logically incompatible and there is no universal understanding. Berlin held that if these ideals can't coexist in this world, they won't coexist in the next world either. For him, justice was incompatible with kindness, perfect liberty with complete equality. Rousseau was one of those who believed that equality is a prerequisite for freedom – first equality, then freedom. Berlin pointed out to people who wanted to be liberals and believed in freedom that they had to choose, and in certain circumstances their choices could be tragic, because they had to give up ideals. You can't have everything. This is a very important insight, and one that people with a liberal orientation have always have had difficulty in accepting, says Professor Magee.

Why is this provocative idea so relatively little noticed in the research community and among those interested in such things?

MAGEE Well, a lot of great ideas have this characteristic: that they seem obvious once they are stated, but they weren't obvious before anybody stated them. You see, you don't have to look back far to realise that it's actually been very common for human beings to hold political beliefs according to which an ideal society is attainable.

RUNESSON Communists, for example, have believed in such a society, and millions of intelligent socialists have thought it possible to implement an ideal society. This was also what some eighteenth-century liberals believed. It has been a very common opinion that if you just acted in the right way, if you followed the right path, the ideal, perfect society would be possible. Most of the

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famous philosophies have been variants of this doctrine or idea – the ideal society. The really great attack Berlin mounted was to say that such a society isn't possible even in theory, which has been hard for people to swallow, Professor Magee says. Wishful thinking is a big deal in political philosophy, as in religion. People have had a pronounced ambition to think what they want to think. If they want an ideal society, then they imagine that it's possible. But does this insight mean that we have to refrain from social reforms, for instance against poverty? No, not at all. Isaiah Berlin was a leading liberal philosopher who belonged to the moderate Left and believed in social reforms.

What's the reason for such an insight, such a vision of life as his? Well, Berlin deeply understood that humans are different from one another, that it's hard to unite human wills. He understood this on the basis of his three identities, the three traditions he belonged to: Russian, Jewish and British.

MAGEE And he was, you might say, a third Jewish, a third Russian and a third English. I suspect what would have been typical of his way of describing it would have been to say: I'm half Russian, half Jewish and half English. That would have been a typical Isaiah Berlin joke. But that he was all those things. And they were all very deeply important to him, and he took them all seriously. And he knew how they were important to other people in whom they didn't go together.

RUNESSON Isaiah Berlin's abhorrence of violence and cruelty can be explained by an incident in his childhood, when in 1917 he witnessed a lynch mob dragging away a soldier who had been in the service of the tsar. He never forgot the man's face, which he saw at a close range, white with horror.

Like others, Bryan Magee testifies to Berlin's exquisite English, his almost seventeenth-century tone, and his mastery of the Russian language, which he spoke to his mother. Sometimes, when they argued and Isaiah became too agitated, his mother shouted at him: 'Speak English!' Then he became more moderate in English,

one of his languages. Once Berlin was asked which author's books he would bring to a desert island. Berlin answered that it would be Pushkin's collected works in Russian.<sup>3</sup>

Because he was who he was, a leading intellectual, or, better, a leading man of letters, he was sometimes invited to meet visitors from the Soviet Union, and charmed them with his old-fashioned and beautiful Russian. He was good at languages. The fact is, according to Professor Magee, that many consider his literary-critical texts to be best he wrote, including those on Tolstoy and Turgenev. His famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox* is actually a study of Tolstoy. Many think that of Berlin's books the one about Russian thinkers, mostly about Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, is the best. Was it his reading of their work that gave him his tragic view of life, or was it the other way round? Well, there was a tragic element in his view of life because of his insight that you can't have everything in life, that one's ideals can't be realised.

MAGEE That meant that you had to give up some things to which you were deeply committed. There were always trade-offs. For example, in the political sphere, he was very conscious of the fact that you can have freedom only at the expense of equality, or equality at the expense of freedom. And somewhere in his heart he wanted both, but he knew he couldn't have both.

RUNESSON And that is what politics are for.

MAGEE Yes. Of course, the process of practical politics is the process of trading off.

RUNESSON Isaiah Berlin also believed that it was the task of the state or another authority to ensure equality. A large degree of

<sup>3</sup> 'The book I should like is the works of Pushkin in Russian in one volume, prose and verse. That is inexhaustible. With Goethe, he is one of the two greatest poets of the nineteenth century, and I say that in spite of Wordsworth, in spite of Shelley, in spite of Tennyson or anyone else you like to mention.'

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freedom for the individual, on the other hand, could lead to social conflicts and violent differences in society.

Were continental thinkers important for Berlin? Did he never fall for Heidegger, Sartre or people of that kind?

MAGEE Berlin tended to think that that tradition in philosophy, the tradition of continental existentialism, associated with names like Heidegger and Sartre, was really a sort of high-flown nonsense; that people talked in long sentences full of jargon words and technical terms; but when you analysed it down, more often than not they were either saying nothing at all, or what they were saying was actually something really rather ordinary, or simple. They were often platitudes disguised behind the obscurity of language. He thought that if you had something to say you should say it as clearly as you possibly could, and if possible entertainingly.

RUNESSON You have to remember Berlin's background, Professor Magee says. His starting point was analytic philosophy, which he admittedly distanced himself from. There is a principal idea, which is this: to clarify, to ask 'What's going on?' – that you analyse arguments and concepts. 'What kind of statement is this?' and 'How can I decide whether or not this statement is true or false?', and so on. It seems that thinkers such as Heidegger want instead to mystify rather than clarify, and some continental philosophers, in addition to Heidegger, Berlin believed, wanted to make an impression by obscurity: their work should be difficult to read, and profound. No, British empiricism was his tradition, from John Locke to Bertrand Russell.

MAGEE He really identified himself intellectually with the tradition of British empiricism – that's why he was at home in this country – the tradition of philosophy that runs through Locke, Berkeley, Hume, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell – that tradition of empiricism is something that he actually did identify with. It reflected his true beliefs.



[*More Schubert*]

RUNESSON Isaiah Berlin seems to have been loved by his Oxford students, of whom Aileen Kelly was one at the end of the 1960s. Today she is a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. She meets me by the Porter's Lodge: she comes running across the lawn – she is allowed to run across the lawn because she is a Fellow.

KELLY The first conversation I had with Isaiah Berlin was when I had become a graduate student at his college, and I was working on Russian history of ideas, which I knew was a subject on which he had written a great deal. But I was very nervous to talk to him about it, because I knew this was a very great man, and I was a student who was beginning to work on this subject, and I would have nothing of interest to say to him. And he asked me a couple of times to come and talk to him, and I always found an excuse not to do it. And then one day he saw me at lunch and he said 'Come now', and he dragged me off to his office and sat me down, and I emerged from his office about three hours later, after an amazing afternoon in which ...

RUNESSON [*translating Aileen Kelly's further remarks*] My nervousness was softened by the fascination of his ideas. All of us who talked to him were, to start with, aware of the situation: we were talking to a great man. But this awareness quickly disappeared because he became so engaged with the subject. No matter who you were, he talked to you as if you were his equal, which was quite unusual in Oxford at that time. There was a lot of give and take, and he listened too, which was also unusual when talking with older academics. Berlin was interested in both human beings and ideas, which was again unusual at a time when the political climate was concerned with the abstract ideas that were circulating. He knew everything and everyone, and those three hours at his office were amazing. He gave a strictly logical exposition, combined with such a warm atmosphere. He himself was happy about the conversation we had. So few people were as interested in Russian

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thinkers. This was a consequence of the Cold War. Some liberals at the universities considered Alexander Herzen, Belinsky and Berlin's other favourite thinkers as precursors of the Russian Revolution and the Communism that followed. These nineteenth-century thinkers were considered suspicious because they were absorbed in ideas, and worked intensively on these ideas. In England in the 1960s it was considered odd if someone was preoccupied with ideas: one was seen as a fanatic. For Berlin, the question was what ideas one was interested in. He thought it was necessary to study ideas – for example, as a defence against totalitarian doctrines. The lack of interest in ideas in England was also an expression of a lack of understanding of Europe, and what Europe had suffered. In England all foreigners were considered a bit strange.

KELLY They really didn't understand the moral roots of the experience of Europe in the twentieth century. And I think one of his great achievements was to convince the English that it is important to understand ideas, because ideas move human beings to do both very good and very bad things. And so it's an exercise in moral discrimination – to understand and to discuss ideas and to realise how ideas move individuals. And I think he chose the Russian intelligentsia because of his own Russian background and his interest in Russia.

RUNESSON The example of Russia showed how ideas could get people to develop in different directions. Turgenev became liberal, Tolstoy became extreme in the other direction, and then there were a lot of radicals. I think this was something new for many British academics, and I want to say that Isaiah educated the British people in the importance of ideas and the history of ideas during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1955 he introduced the great Alexander Herzen to

British and European intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> One of history's most important philosophers, says Dr Kelly, who talks about Herzen at the same time as she talks about Nietzsche, another of the nineteenth century's geniuses. No one knew about Herzen before Isaiah Berlin's essay was published, one of many examples of his contribution. Dr Kelly talks about the difference between Russian and British intellectuals. Russia didn't have any real philosophers during the nineteenth century: the Russians weren't interested in theories as such, they wanted to attach theories to everyday Russian life, to morality, to poverty and the country's backwardness. The intellectuals were engaged in the solution of these problems and therefore there were no 'pure' philosophers engaged in abstract matters as their colleagues in the West were and have been since the days of Plato. In Russia this sort of philosophy was despised.

KELLY So I think as far as academic philosophy or theory is concerned, people like Russell or Wittgenstein would have found absolutely nothing of interest in Russian thought, Russian philosophy and Russian literature – again, because of this practical interest in the way people behave in specific situations. That's why it's very hard to draw a dividing line between philosophy and literature: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are regarded as great Russian thinkers, but they're also Russian novelists.

RUNESSON And Isaiah Berlin wrote one of his most popular essays about Tolstoy. Berlin thought that Oxford philosophy had become boring, and what estranged him from it wasn't just the fact that he found his colleagues' ideas doubtful, for example on the question of how to decide if a statement about the world is true or false, but also their unconcern with the history of philosophy and with the real world – politics, fascism. As a historian of ideas he was interested in humans, and not only as carriers of ideas. He was

<sup>4</sup> 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', in Ernest J. Simmons (ed.), *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955: Harvard University Press), 473–99.

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interested in people from all conceivable social backgrounds and every walk of life. He wanted to get to know the individual. ‘Once when I had lunch with him at his traditional club, the Garrick, in London,’ Kelly says, ‘he briefly sketched the different backgrounds of those around us in the room – all very lively, with telling details. His conversation could often seem incoherent, but it was actually full of matter.’ To this I add that when in 1957 the British prime minister Harold Macmillan proposed Isaiah Berlin for an honour, it was for his conversation.

BERLIN [*continuing his opening remarks*] ... that to all genuine questions there must be an answer. If there is no answer to the question, the question cannot be real. That there can only be one true answer to any question. All the other answers must be false. One good, many bad: you’ll find that in Spinoza, Plato and anybody else you like to think of.

RUNESSON One of the paradoxes of Isaiah Berlin, Dr Kelly says, is that most of his conversations were for fun. but afterwards you realised that you had learned a lot. For example, we had a conversation in which I pointed out that play, or non-intentional action, was an important matter for the German thinker Schiller. For Schiller it was morally formative: the Russian thinker Alexander Herzen seemed to have the same thought, and Berlin agreed. Berlin really loved the idea, and meant that what is most serious is what is improvised. Berlin, of course, had a very serious attitude to life and possessed great wisdom. In that manner he was quite different to most of the academics, who believed in their own importance, and many of them cared about the time they spent: they wrote books, or taught, and if you got half an hour of their time for a visit, then it was strictly half an hour. With Isaiah you never got the feeling that he measured his time. If something was interesting, then it had to take its time, even though he had a lot to do. He seemed to live for the present, and this really charmed many people. Most of the significant academics were men, and women were treated condescendingly, but Isaiah never did this.

KELLY You never had the feeling that because you were a woman you weren't quite as important as a man or as serious as a man. And that was also very important in Oxford at that period; it was very unusual that you could feel relaxed with him when you wouldn't with another 'important' man.

RUNESSON [*translating Aileen Kelly's further remarks*] What made one get to work on Alexander Herzen, Isaiah Berlin's favourite? Well, it was his scepticism, his undogmatic attitude, even though he was a socialist. Of course I did not know him before I read Isaiah's essay, published in 1955, which was about the destructive Bakunin versus Herzen. Marx and Lenin described Herzen as a spokesman for utopian socialism, which is not correct. Berlin considered that there were three great moral philosophers in nineteenth-century Russia: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Herzen. I couldn't believe that there had been such a great person, dead for eighty years, who would now remain forgotten: so I decided to write my doctoral dissertation about him. He was also famous for being a wonderful memoirist. Herzen also reminded me of Isaiah, who also believed ...

KELLY ... that one's own moral beliefs can't be universal, that one can't prescribe them to other people: they can't be prescribed, they can't be in any sense universalised. But at the same time if one if one simply says OK, well, then they're relative, then they aren't beliefs any longer. And Isaiah believed that the most difficult position was to combine a complete commitment to one's own moral beliefs with the understanding that one could not ascribe any universal and permanent significance to them, and that is the most difficult of all moral positions.

RUNESSON To find a path between dogmatism and relativism was what Berlin succeeded in doing, and what he felt Herzen did so admirably. I bring up the fact that Berlin was sometimes accused of relativism or, if you like, 'value nihilism'. But, Dr Kelly says, how

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could he stand for something like that, a Jew whose friends were murdered in the Holocaust? How could he have been a relativist?

Here a minor development is needed, based on the last essay Berlin wrote, at the age of eighty-six. It's the view of eighteenth-century Romanticism that the world is not discovered, it's created – that's what it's about. That was what the Romantics said in their polemic with the French Enlightenment. What was essential, according to the Romantics, was the unique, not the universal. A German poet writes in German, a language he, in a sense, creates during the process of writing. This applies to German painters and dancers, and, of course, to other practitioners in other cultures as well. Alexander Herzen asked the question: 'Where is the song before it is sung?'<sup>5</sup> Nowhere, is the answer. It was created at the same time as someone sang it, or when it was composed. In the same way, life is created by those who live it, step by step. This is an aesthetic interpretation of morality, not an application of eternal models. Creation is everything here. From this all different projects and movements have arisen: anarchism, Romanticism, nationalism, fascism, hero-worship. The subject, the 'I', could be, as for Byron, the outsider, the adventurer who follows his own values. This 'I' could at other times be a collective such as a Church, a class, a nation and so on. From this German nationalism was born, as well as modern existentialism: I create my own life which I thereafter take responsibility for. This denial of general values and the acceptance of these superegos is a dangerous movement in the history of Europe, Berlin writes. He understood those who subscribed to these views, but he couldn't accept them. And now this remarkable man is gone, and ...

KELLY ... I couldn't say to my students, 'Well, I hope you'll meet someone like him', because I'd know that they wouldn't. One feels

<sup>5</sup> This version of Herzen's question was given wide currency by Berlin. What Herzen wrote was 'What is the purpose of the song the singer sings?' 'From the Other Shore', chapter 1, 'Before the Storm': A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66), 33.

with most people's deaths that it's terribly sad that they've died, but they're not unique, and so it's not such a terrible loss. But I think with him – it's very odd the sense that his students had that we were terrified that he would die sometime, but we also felt that in some sense he was immortal: he couldn't die, because there was nobody to replace him.

RUNESSON The whole university life of today works against his kind. Today, specialists are created. Berlin was a bit of everything who also published very little. Wisdom doesn't count, personalities are smoothed out and we end up with mediocracy at last, according to Dr Kelly.

One of the few Swedes who has studied Berlin is Svante Nordin, a historian of ideas in Lund. Let him sum up the importance of Berlin.

SVANTE NORDIN I would say that there are three very important and central things in Isaiah Berlin, if you talk about his theses or way reasoning, because he was of course and foremost a historian and he didn't think like most philosophers, in terms of abstract reasoning and arguments. He always thought through some kind of discussion with great thinkers from the past, such as Machiavelli, John Stuart Mill or Karl Marx. But if one were to highlight a few theses or thoughts that can be formulated in a general way and disconnected from their historical context to some extent, there would have to be three things: pluralism, his analyses of two types or concepts of freedom, and his critique of teachings about the inevitability of history and predetermination. His pluralism, repeated in everything he wrote, is the idea that one can see and evaluate the world and reality in many different ways. And these different ways of evaluating don't have to be united with each other: in other words, there are different views and different priorities, different value systems that are mutually exclusive, and one can't say that one of them is better than another. The easiest way to illustrate this is to retrieve examples from literature or music. One can say that Mozart and Beethoven are very different,

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and one can't write music as Mozart did and as Beethoven did at the same time, but they are both still very great composers and it's possible for a music-lover to like both of them. The same applies if you compare Dickens and Dostoevsky, for example. But one can also transfer such reasoning to interpretations of life, lifestyles and different ways of thinking of society. Maybe there is no social model that is the best model, but some societies might better realise some types of values and other societies different types of values. Equality and liberty might be hard to unite: some types of societies realise more equality and others more individual freedom. One can think that both equality and liberty are values, and at the same time one can see that they sometimes come into conflict with each other.

RUNESSON They are both good values?

SVANTE NORDIN They are both good values. One can say that there is an anti-utopianism here: there is no utopia, there is nothing that could be the absolutely best society, realising all good things at the same time. All good things in social life, as well as in private life, often come into conflict with each other, and then you have to choose or compromise. I should say that he is partly a realist, but also that there is some sort of optimism in him, in the sense that he actually believes in liberty and pluralism as values. It's not just this, perhaps boring, finding that all good things can't be realised, but also the thought of that there might be something valuable in the plurality as such – that in the best of societies we 'Let a hundred flowers bloom', that many different lifestyles appear at the same time. There might be something positive in this: plurality in itself might be a positive value. One might talk about his relation to the Enlightenment and Romanticism and say that as an historian of ideas he is very unusual in the way that he can embrace important elements from both the Enlightenment and Romanticism: that is, he relates positively to modernity and to rationalism, even though he doesn't believe that there is a rational social model that is best for all of us. He is also positive about the



Romantic thought that there are a number of forms of life and outlooks that all have their justification, that there might not exist any kind of Anglo-Saxon normality that is the only valid option. Different times and different people might have their contributions to give.

RUNESSON Svante Nordin, historian of ideas in Lund, who will talk about Berlin's two concepts of freedom in the next part of this programme.

### *Part 2*

RUNESSON Welcome to the second part of our programme about Isaiah Berlin, a man who became very old, wise and important as a philosopher, historian of ideas and educator. He died in November last year aged eighty-eight and was praised all over the world as one of the great inspirers. A beautiful obituary was published in the *New York Review of Books* by his good friend Alfred Brendel, whom we hear playing Schubert in the background: Schubert, a composer to whom Berlin felt very close. So far, during its thirty-five-year history, the *New York Review of Books* has published more about Berlin after his death than it has done about anyone else after their death. He himself, of course, published several wonderful essays in it.

The most essential points in the first part of this radio programme will be repeated here, for example Berlin's idea regarding incompatible ideals.

Today there are many women and men who belong to ethnic minorities, for instance in America, and they cannot understand the idea of universal values. They will say to the elite that dominates politics and the media that 'We don't want to know about your model, your outlook. You say you talk about values that are valid for everyone, such as freedom, equality and so forth, but all you have in mind, all you are planning for, is based on your own ideals. The only human being you can imagine is a white middle-class

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man, especially a Protestant.’ So we have universal values valid everywhere at all times on the one hand, and understanding of cultural idiosyncrasy on the other. No one has thought about this more sharply than Berlin.

Today we will hear from two people each of whom has recently finished a biography of Berlin. First we shall listen to Michael Ignatieff, a Canadian author and journalist living in London.

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF The question of how you reconcile faith in moral universals – that is the idea that certain values are true in every culture, in every time and place – how you reconcile that with the idea that each culture, each historical period has its own centre of gravity, its own particular values: that question was the essential question that Isaiah thought about all his life. It’s the question of questions. It’s what his whole intellectual biography was attempting to explain. His view, his answer, to simplify radically, was that human culture was deeply historical. He learned that from Vico, and from Herder, and from the German Romantics. Every culture had what I think Herder called *Schwerpunkt*, its centre of gravity.

RUNESSON [*translating Michael Ignatieff’s further remarks*] But he also thought there were certain facts about humans that were universal. We all have the same kind of body, we all have the same ability to feel pain and suffer physically. Berlin talked a lot about this similarity, the human horizon as he called it, within which our values are created, and which exists in every culture. It is considered wrong to kill, to steal and to treat other people cruelly, wrong in every known culture. This human horizon settled the limits within which humans could act in a meaningful way. In this way Berlin managed to create a theory that united two requirements: universal morality, which applies equally to all humans in all societies, and the idea of cultural variety, namely that there can exist moral values valid in one country but not in another, in one time but not in another.

Berlin's texts made an enormous impression on me because in the pretty confined – 'parochial' is the word – climate that prevailed within Anglo-Saxon philosophy, Berlin was almost the only person who thought seriously about nationalism and the passions that nationalism could arouse. He was also alone in assigning nationalism some sort of respect. Because he was a Jew and a Zionist, he knew what it was to be homeless. He knew why people become nationalists: because they are oppressed minorities, because they have been exposed to racial or religious oppression.

IGNATIEFF His Jewishness was the core of his concern with nationalism and his sympathy for nationalism. And it meant that he believed that it was a kind of fatuous parochialism for liberal-minded philosophers to say from the safety of a place like Britain or the United States: 'Oh, these nationalists are such fanatics.' The point that Berlin kept making is that people become nationalists in order to possess the securities, the safeties and the dignities which we take for granted. And that's what's unjust about calling nationalism a form of fanaticism.

RUNESSON But we still owe nationalism the duty to understand, 'the duty of understanding', Berlin meant. He was for the most part alone in that opinion, says Ignatieff, who followed in Berlin's footsteps and has written many books about nationalism. More of that later.

Yes, Isaiah was alone in other ways as well, says Ignatieff, but still underlines the man's sociability.

IGNATIEFF People don't realise: he was the most convivial person in the world. If he walked into a room he'd soon be talking to twenty people. It didn't matter where he was, if it was in Stockholm or Milan or anywhere, he would be at the centre ...

RUNESSON Or St Petersburg: he spoke Russian.

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IGNATIEFF And he spoke Russian, he spoke English, he spoke Hebrew. He was at home in lots of places. But intellectually he was very solitary.

RUNESSON There was almost no philosopher who had such a sense of history, and conversely there was no historian who had his philosophical gifts. He lived between disciplines and became one of a kind. I point out that the American critic Edmund Wilson mentions Berlin in his memoirs – in the volume called *The Sixties*. Well, in terms of intellectual friendship Edmund Wilson was very important because he too was an original who, moreover, curiously enough, spoke Russian. Wilson had recently married a Russian. He was not an academic, and Isaiah was fascinated by his great knowledge of different things, self-taught as he was. So, for example, he learned Hebrew in order to be able to study the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls. Wilson was also very fearless. He could challenge anyone, and Berlin admired this fearlessness.

Berlin could write well about those whom he found alien to him, whose ideas and temperament were unlike his. His first book, published in 1939 was about Karl Marx, I point out. Yes, Michael Ignatieff says, liberalism was for him also a form of understanding and required empathy – the ability to penetrate another person's way of thinking. An example is the book about Marx, who was very different from Berlin, as one can imagine. Marx was dogmatic, systematic, energetic and a great thinker. Berlin was unsystematic, sceptical, undogmatic and liberal, and yet he succeeded in penetrating Marx's cast of mind, and did the same later with, for example, the German Johann Georg Hamman and the Frenchman Joseph de Maistre. These were all people he didn't really like. An editor at the *New Republic* once said that Berlin was a reasonable spy in the house of the unreasonable – his whole life was like this. He penetrated inside the skin, not of liberals, who confirmed his own views, but of those who didn't think as he did. Some of these were real reactionaries, absolute royalist zealots, and others, later, fanatics. He believed liberalism should grow in strength if one started an serious dialogue with its opponents.

By the way, has anyone heard Per Ahlmark say something about a dialogue with Edward Said, for example? Did anyone hear the old professor Herbert Tingsten say something sympathetic about something outside of his limited world? Berlin's dialogue with his opponents was an unusual procedure. Liberal philosophers, says Michael Ignatieff, usually stay inside their boundaries. They write about Mill or John Rawls, a contemporary American philosopher, and about liberal democracy in societies they know.

IGNATIEFF Isaiah spent his time making these forays out beyond the stockade of liberalism into the jungle of irrationalism, and I think that was a very unusual aspect of his mind, and one of the reasons why some of his stuff is so interesting.

RUNESSON An explanation, among others, of Berlin's popularity in England might be that he gave the British people an image of themselves that they appreciated seeing, that is, as tolerant and unprejudiced, and of England as a home for refugees, which it partly isn't and partly is.

The conversation then passes to people that are contemporary with Isaiah Berlin. Hannah Arendt is a name I pick up. Michael Ignatieff points out, as have many others I interviewed, that Berlin really disliked her. In some respects he thought she was a charlatan. He might have been unfair, Michael Ignatieff says, but Berlin's suspicion derived from his opinions on German philosophy. He didn't feel at home there. He liked the Romantics, as we know, but he thought that the trio of Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt were mostly purveyors of Hegelian nonsense. He didn't feel on their wavelength. There was also a specific reason why he didn't like Hannah Arendt – because of her book on the Eichmann trial, published in 1963. He thought it was indecent of her to speculate about why the Jews didn't show greater resistance during the war and the Holocaust. Berlin meant that one simply couldn't judge people by their actions when their lives were at stake. He thought that all her judgements were illegitimate and arrogant. So much for Hannah Arendt ...

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IGNATIEFF The question whether he will survive is another matter. There's some people who think he will just be remembered as an essayist and a historian of ideas. But if you look at what's happening in the Anglo-American debate about liberalism, the central philosophical issue is moral pluralism. That is, how does a society maintain a systemic and unified set of moral values in a world in which moral principles disagree and are in conflict? That is, when liberty conflicts with equality, when justice conflicts with mercy. Now that issue was at the centre of Isaiah's thought. And his insistence was that there was no science of politics capable of making those choices.

RUNESSON He didn't agree with the American John Rawls, who held that one could construct a logical method, which was free from contradictions, and create priorities, that is, this much equality, this much liberty, this much justice. Berlin thought that such schemes were just a series of illusions. No, we are forced to make tragic choices, he said, because we don't know how to choose, just that we have to. If you ask what Isaiah Berlin gave to the liberal tradition, then it's the feeling of tragedy, Michael Ignatieff says.

Did he believe in the possibility of a good and just society? Well, I don't think he thought a just society was possible. He always thought that society could be more just than it was. He was not a quiet conservative, he thought that the state could and should play a role in the country's business. He was very interested in politics. Some accused him of being a relativist or a value-nihilist, that is, claiming that one thing is as good as another. Part of the answer to the question whether he was that or not was given in the first part of this programme, so what follows will partly be a repetition.

IGNATIEFF Cultural and historical worlds *are* different. But because all of these worlds deal with human beings, there's a human horizon within which there's a range of values which are continuous to all societies. And he held to that, and it meant that

he didn't feel he was a relativist. And I think he can be acquitted of that charge.

RUNESSON Postmodern relativism: not an etiquette for him?

IGNATIEFF No, he would have said he was pre-modern, not post-modern. He hated postmodernism in all its forms. And he also hated relativism. He absolutely hated relativism. He thought that human life was impossible if all moral standards were relative.

RUNESSON Then Michael Ignatieff confirms the story which made Isaiah Berlin famous in 1944. It was when Winston Churchill found out that an 'I. Berlin' was in London and Churchill invited this I. Berlin to lunch. Isaiah worked for the British government in Washington at this time. At the lunch Churchill asked what was the most important work for American democracy and liberty that this person, Berlin, had done. The guest answered '*White Christmas*', and eventually one of the lunch guests – but not Churchill – understood that this was actually the other Berlin, namely Irving Berlin. It's a famous story, and Michael Ignatieff, who knows a lot about Berlin, vouches for it. Michael Ignatieff is to publish a biography of Berlin; his books about nationalism and ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe have titles such as *The Warrior's Honor* and *Blood and Belonging*, and they can't be sufficiently recommended, influenced as they are by Isaiah Berlin and his thought.

Berlin's strength lay in his familiarity with what he attacked and distanced himself from, namely analytic philosophy. Berlin himself, when he was aged eighty-six, wrote in a flashback of his life that what interested Oxford philosophers in the early and mid 1930s were problems of meaning: sense, meaning, truth, falsehood. How could one test whether a statement was true or false? The great names were Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, Carnap and Wittgenstein. If there was no possibility of verifying whether a statement was true or false, then this statement was not factual, and was therefore meaningless as a statement about the world. Berlin became doubtful about this idea, and thought that the whole

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business was a bit too academic, given the big issues that piled up in 1930s Europe – fascism, for example. These philosophers looked down on the questions of everyday life. Berlin also thought that one could find meaningful and interesting statements that weren't strictly verifiable. If one says that all swans are white, which is a popular example, then it's clear that the statement becomes false if I see a black swan. But to say that it's a true statement is more difficult, because one doesn't know about all the swans that exist in the whole world. What Berlin started to doubt was the possibility of absolute certainty. Were there answers one couldn't doubt?, he wondered. He didn't think so and the insight that a large part of philosophy rested on an illusion became dominant, and very important for his later thinking.

ROGER HAUSHEER Now what exactly was this type of discourse that Berlin felt had some kind of claim to serious attention; and, indeed, which he came to feel was at the centre of our human concerns in general? Well, it is the most general concepts and categories that organise our experience in the social, the artistic and the political realms.

RUNESSON So says Roger Hausheer, university teacher in Bradford, a man who has been working on Berlin for over twenty years, spent time with him, read about him and wrote a long and beautiful introduction to Berlin's book *Against the Current*. He is also writing a biography of Isaiah Berlin.

HAUSHEER And it was dissatisfaction with this aspect of analytical philosophy, this contempt for certain vital concepts and categories that permeate our ordinary everyday experience, that led him to turn to the history of ideas and to study the general frameworks in which we think and move, and which have been very largely neglected by the English analytical tradition.

RUNESSON Now he turned to less recent, forgotten philosophers, some of whom were interested in language, and now even



Berlin and his colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein began to be interested in language, namely the function of language. Then he ended up with a figure by the name of Johann Georg Hamann in the early eighteenth century, a reactionary thinker and a correspondent and contemporary of Kant. Hamann did not ask the question ‘What is philosophy?’ but ‘What is language?’, and then appears (I point out) to be a modern philosopher.

HAUSHEER Exactly so. This was Hamann’s great criticism against Kant. He rounded on Kant furiously and said: ‘Look, you spend your time talking about eternal reason, you and the philosophers; you’re barking up the wrong tree. What you should be doing is asking about language: language is the *logos*, language is what organises and structures reality.’

RUNESSON And that is what people use every day.

HAUSHEER And it’s what people use every day, and what you will find is that there are as many languages as there are groups of human beings, or indeed as there are human beings themselves. And he says: Language, language, that is the bone on which I have gnawed all my life. This is what Hamann says. And Hamann actually is a direct precursor of the later Wittgenstein, of J. L. Austin, and even to some degree of people like Searle.

RUNESSON It was Berlin who launched this unknown pietist from East Prussia, whose credo was that it wasn’t reality that structured language, but language and our actions that structured reality. Hamann was the first to point this out. This idea did not agree at all with what the French Enlightenment asserted at the end of the seventeenth century, a tradition that would come to be alive even in our own time. I asked Hausheer about Isaiah Berlin’s usefulness today and he answered: ‘Those who today revolt against the forces that want to reduce human beings to computer-usable units that can be calculated and made into objects, those who want to attack these tendencies in our time, might very well use Isaiah

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Berlin as a platform.' Well, Berlin has more to offer than any other modern philosopher I'm aware of, Hausheer says. His usefulness in our time is extraordinary, and that is something I hope will be made clear in my book about Berlin when it is published. Oppressed minorities all over the world can also make use of him, he who really reaches out to the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder underlined what a fundamental need it is to belong to a group. Usually it's the nation, but it might also be minor groups, minor societies. If this need isn't satisfied, we know today what the result can be. Herder also stressed that most human activities are expressions of something, a form of language: you say something with your actions. Herder is the first to illustrate this particular view.

HAUSHEER Human beings in their activities cater for their needs, they engage in all sorts of modes of production. But the important thing to remember is that while this is so, every single human activity is also a form of expression, and that it is trying to say something.

RUNESSON It's a language.

HAUSHEER It is a language, precisely so; it is a kind of text; it is a language; so that in performing any function in your life, in your community, you are at the same time saying something to other people, you are expressing yourself, your group, and indeed the entire community and its vision and outlook on life. And this is something which again is a fundamental human category. We can't think it away when we think about human beings. It's not to say that it didn't exist in the remote past: it certainly did. But Herder is the first person to have hit upon it, to have brought it to light and clarified it and made use of it.

RUNESSON For most people Herder is probably just a name, maybe a gloomy precursor of Nazism, in other words German nationalism at its worst, but that's another matter. It's because of

him that Nietzsche and Marx got their gloomy interpreters. If in our time, and throughout history, there exist many different cultures and civilisations, all with their own systems of value, their own way of understanding the world, so that you cannot put any world-view beside another and compare them, well then, Herder means (and Berlin is largely with him) that it is also impossible to imagine eternal truths, visions of life valid for all times and all peoples. There couldn't be only one path to human perfection. This seems fair when I put it like this, and this is what led Berlin to his pluralism. But in fact, as Berlin points out, the idea that there is only one answer, the correct answer, one truth, is dominant for 2,300 years, from Plato until our own time, and the exceptions are those misunderstood philosophers that Berlin saved from oblivion. I think, Roger Hausheer says, it's for this, his pluralism, that Berlin will be remembered in the future.

RUNESSON On the subject of pluralism: what is it that makes it so difficult for modern, average at least, liberals to grasp the provocative side of Berlin?

HAUSHEER Well, I think that many modern liberals have still not broken with the fundamental presuppositions that Berlin describes as being the tripod upon which the whole of Western thought rests. This tripod consists of the three ideas, first, that there is a sort of objective structure to reality, *rerum natura*, which it is possible to investigate and come to know by rational methods.

RUNESSON This order, this *rerum natura*, is timeless, unchangeable and objective. The knowing intellect, the knowing mind, doesn't change when it gets to know this reality. Point two says that this reality can basically be discovered, you can find answers to all questions, answers that are the same – either they are about the cosmos, the organisation of society, or our own individual lives. Point three says that when you've found the answers to all the questions, then these answers fit together and will together make the total body of knowledge even bigger.

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But what has liberalism to do with these rigid ideas?, I ask. The answer is conditional, in other words the answer contains an *if*. So if you are a liberal of the classic sort who hasn't got rid of one of those three points in your view of the world, and you are a logical thinker, well, then you will have oppressive views about society, the individual and politics. Given such a view, there is only one answer, one correct view, and my, not Roger Hausheer's, contribution here would point at the colonisation of foreign continents, a cruel politics, as an example of the consequences of such an oppressive worldview.

HAUSHEER There has been – and I think John Gray makes this point in his book – an enormous resistance on the part of intellectuals to Sir Isaiah's ideas. And it is partly because, deep down, I think they know that the foundations upon which their position rests are seriously threatened by it. Indeed, if he's right, they are blown to pieces.

RUNESSON Roger Hausheer emphasises that Isaiah Berlin doesn't let go of the problem with incompatible values. Berlin wasn't against compromises, and that's how it works in politics and everyday life. His point is that it's about principles that are incompatible for the philosopher, for logic or whatever you want, to solve. Mr Hausheer addresses the problem of the opposition between liberty and equality. You can't have both fully: you have to balance them against each other. If the individual's liberty increases then it will be at the expense of equality, and vice versa. All this is found in Berlin's famous lecture from 1958, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. It's a tragic predicament he offers us, not an easy solution. Here, Mr Hausheer stresses that not all of Berlin's thinking about the future was tragic, if that's the right word for a man who was so against utopias. At least he didn't exclude the possibility of a relatively harmonious and reasonably organised society, though this would need effort. But, Mr Hausheer adds, towards the end of his life Isaiah Berlin believed less and less in this idea.

Isaiah Berlin didn't understand only the Russian, but he also had a sense for the Jewish. And one of his most delightful essays is about two Jewish personalities, the British prime minister and Tory politician, Disraeli, and Karl Marx. Berlin was also well acquainted with Karl Marx's person. He had written a book about Marx: it was his first published work, and it was published in 1939. For the many interested members of the Swedish left, it appeared conveniently in a Swedish translation with a prologue by Sven-Eric Liedman in the mid 1960s. For Berlin, Disraeli and Marx suffered so-called neurotic distortions: they were neurotic in their Jewishness, if you will.

HAUSHEER So what did they do? Well, both, according to Berlin, hit on very different solutions. Disraeli by a brilliant sleight of hand, and many years of hard work on himself and his character, transformed himself into an English aristocrat and the leader of the reactionary Tories against the Whigs. He became more English than the English, in effect. And all the romanticism of empire, imperialism, was really a product of Disraeli's imagination. So Disraeli's solution was to transform himself into a member of the most powerful class of what was then one of the most powerful nations, if not the most powerful nation, on earth.

Karl Marx chose another path, to be the spokesman of the dispossessed. He chose a role that was a fantasy as much as Disraeli's connection to aristocracy. In both cases they were strangers in their environments. As you know, Marx didn't know any workers, he was unfamiliar with their world. So they sought out their identities in different ways, these two. This essay is taken from the book *Against the Current* – history of ideas at its best. In addition to the piece about Disraeli and Marx, there is an essay about Machiavelli and Berlin's reading of this Renaissance prince's works *The Prince* and the *Discorsi*, which are very different from Machiavelli's other works. He is not an immoral cynic, but a man who sets two moral systems against each other, both with their merits, but incompatible. On the one hand Christianity's virtues: mercifulness and so forth. On the other hand the requirements

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made by the republic: strength, power and ruthlessness. In other words, Christian morals didn't fit the prince's political practice. If he wanted to be a good prince, promoting welfare in the state, then it didn't work to turn the other cheek. It was an insight that provided the foundation for Berlin's later thinking. The common belief that the public life of human society could develop towards unity and harmony had been undermined. That belief was cherished by the French Enlightenment from the eighteenth century. It has characterised liberals and socialists into our time, and no one has been better able to point out its hollow contradictoriness than Berlin. It wasn't just his reading of Machiavelli that enabled Berlin to see this, but also his encounters with the seventeenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico, and the German Romantic J. G. Herder, and the odd and today forgotten nineteenth-century Romantics who fascinated him.

RUNESSON Finally, let us listen to one further opinion about Berlin, on a large matter which we have dealt with only briefly. It's about the two concepts of liberty found in the volume *Four Essays on Liberty*. Svante Nordin in Lund can enlighten us.

SVANTE NORDIN It's about the two concepts of liberty, positive and negative. The negative concept of liberty concerns your individual freedom to do what you want to do as long as you don't harm other people or break the law and so on. Positive liberty would be some kind of collective liberty, the liberty of a people to do what they have decided in a collective consensus. Berlin warned about the risk that collective liberty could be an enemy of individual liberty. He defends liberty in its simple sense – freedom to live as one would like to do. Of course, there is a polemic against, among other things, the Communist and Marxist definitions of liberty, according to which liberty is seen primarily as a class's collective liberation.

RUNESSON But also a polemic with a traditional social democracy, you might say?

SVANTE NORDIN Yes, there are at least elements in a traditional social democracy that stress that the more decisions that are made in a democratic order, the more democratic we become. So the ideal would be for democracy to make decisions about what to eat for lunch. No one goes that far, but there might be a conflict between collective democratic decisions on the one hand, and everyone's opportunity to live in his own way on the other. It is the latter aspect that Berlin defends, without in any way being an extreme advocate of market liberalism. That's not the core issue for him: rather it's the personal liberty to live the way you want to live, to choose your own values.

RUNESSON So says the historian of ideas Svante Nordin. He has written about Berlin in the Swedish daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* and in the book *Det pessimistiska förnuftet: filosofiska essaer och porträtt*.<sup>6</sup> A very informative summary of Berlin's ideas by Göran Rosenberg is available in *Moderna tider*, August 1997.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [*Pessimistic Reason: Philosophical Essays and Portraits*] (Nora, 1996: Nya Doxa)

<sup>7</sup> 'Isaiah Berlin och hålet i vår nya vilsna värld' ['Isaiah Berlin and the Hole in our New Perplexed World'], *Moderna tider*, August 1997, 43–8.