Isaiah Berlin and the Problem of Counter-Enlightenment Liberalism

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the complex relationship between Isaiah Berlin’s liberalism and his work in the history of ideas. While Berlin’s explicitly political thought reads like a scion of the Enlightenment, albeit with a pronounced Cold War inflection, his work in the history of ideas appears to indict the Age of Reason as partially responsible for the rise of totalitarianism. As a liberal thinker, therefore, Berlin seems Janus-faced. He appears to charge the Age of Reason with complicity in the rise of totalitarianism, yet continues to defend the most legitimate child of Enlightenment thought: liberalism in a negative form. As some of his critics have observed, notably Mark Lilla and Zeev Sternhell, Berlin seems intent on divorcing liberalism from the its foundation in the Enlightenment. This project, they are united in charging, is philosophically incoherent and politically ill-judged.

The thesis will present an alternative reading of the relationship between Berlin’s liberalism and his intellectual history. Instead of interpreting Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment as an assault on the Enlightenment and a blow against his own liberalism, his interpretation of the Counter-Enlightenment, especially the proto-fascist work of Joseph de Maistre, will be read as a search for a ‘lens’ with which to examine the nature of totalitarian thought. In this context, Berlin’s lengthy and neglected essay on Maistre is of greatest importance: the darkly prescient thought of the reactionary and ultramontane Savoyard – strikingly out of place in his own time, yet an intellectual contemporary of the twentieth century – provides an analytical ‘window’ onto the presuppositions and character of totalitarianism. Berlin’s turn away from the Age of Reason, therefore, is guided by an overarching methodological conviction: it is Maistre, rather than Voltaire, who is the better guide to the twentieth century’s most shockingly original contribution to political thought and practice, totalitarianism.
Plagiarism Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Mark Bode and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Acknowledgements

As this thesis has taken shape over the years, a few more than I care to remember, I have incurred many personal and intellectual debts, all of which I would like, were I able, to acknowledge individually. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, I simply do not have sufficient space. I hope that the lack of correspondence between my many reasons for gratitude and the actual number of people thanked will signal the overall scope of my debt – too large to easily express – lest it be seen as a hierarchy of importance, or as the first sign of a faulty and fading memory.

My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Paul Corcoran, who has accompanied the sometimes rocky development of this work with a combination of patience, sage counsel and moral support. Its completion owes a great deal to him. As a supervisor, Paul has been, as I knew that he would be, a source of sound advice and unfailing support. On a more intangible and human level – which is no less important, in many ways – he has contributed just as much, for which I am more than merely grateful. Paul is, as my father would have said, ein Mensch.

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On a more mundane level, I would like to point out, at the risk of stating the obvious, a risk that I am happy to take, that I am solely responsible for the argument advanced in this work. All of its limitations are mine: some of the strengths that it might be said to possess have a decidedly more mixed parentage.
Introduction

Since the publication of *Two Concepts of Liberty* in 1958, Isaiah Berlin’s work has come under increasing critical scrutiny. With the overwhelming majority of his essays now published in edited collections – a project overseen, since 1978, by Henry Hardy, his long-time editor – Berlin’s interpreters now have access to the full range of his thought. Since his death on November 5th 1997, four collections of his occasional essays have been published, along with the first two volumes of his collected correspondence, part of a projected series of three, which has added even greater depth and comprehensiveness to the central themes of his thought. 1 Although Berlin’s work was often initially published in the hermetic pages of minor journals, his posthumously published oeuvre gives no inkling of the fragmented character of its original composition.

The exhaustiveness of Hardy’s editorial project is matched by the secondary literature on Berlin’s thought, which has largely focussed on two themes: firstly, his argument against positive liberty; and, secondly, his defence of liberalism, conceived in negative terms, on the basis of value-pluralism. In the wake of Gerald MacCallum’s hostile assessment of Berlin’s critique of positive liberty, the critical response to the argument developed in *Two Concepts of Liberty* – that positive liberty provides philosophical succour to totalitarian thought – has grown significantly. 2 In the rough half-century since its initial publication, criticisms of Berlin’s case against positive liberty, along with less frequent defences of his argument, have been launched from a number of scholarly

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directions. They range from mildly critical reviews by fellow liberals, such as Alan Ryan’s early contribution to the debate, to attacks on the foundations of Berlin’s argument, such as C.B. Macpherson’s broadly Marxian analysis, *Berlin’s Division of Liberty*.3 Unsurprisingly, the debate that followed Berlin’s indictment of positive liberty as a handmaiden of totalitarianism reached its apogee during the vertiginous years of the Cold War. In the nearly two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarly interest in Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty has continued, albeit with less ideological ardour.

The end of the Cold War, however, did not leave Berlin’s thought bereft of scholarly interest for want of a defining historical context. Largely beginning in 1995, with the publication of John Gray’s *Berlin*4, the centre of scholarly critical gravity has shifted from a focus on Berlin’s defence of negative liberty to an examination of his foundational contribution to the debate on the relationship between value-pluralism and normative political philosophy.5

For some critics, such as Ernest Gellner, Berlin’s attempt at basing liberalism on

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5 The predominant arena of interest, however, has been on the relationship between liberalism and value-pluralism, a reflection of the fact that the debate has been largely engaged in by political theorists with a scholarly interest in liberal political thought.
the foundations provided by value-pluralism is marked by a combination of philosophical ambition and conceptual anaemia.\(^6\) In Gellner’s judgement, Berlin’s defence of a connection between value pluralism and liberalism, with the former grounding the priority of the latter, remains too underdeveloped to bear the full weight of the responsibility that is bearing down upon it.\(^7\) This flows from the brevity of Berlin’s case for a mutually sustaining relationship. His only extended effort to reconcile the competing demands of liberalism and value pluralism comes in the brief and final section of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, ‘The One and the Many’. More a statement of principle than a rigorous conceptual argument, the section serves as an elegant coda to Berlin’s philosophical convictions, but does not demonstrate the priority of negative liberty over other values, some of which might be incompatible or even incommensurable.

Despite these critical reservations, the centrality of pluralism in Berlin’s work has ensured that his thought is generally appraised as an example of liberalism with a value-pluralist face. For many of Berlin’s critics\(^8\), the tension between value pluralism and liberalism in his work, with the former threatening to undermine the latter, constitutes the originality and the source of continuing philosophical significance of his thought.\(^9\) The


\(^{7}\) Ibid., p. 14.

\(^{8}\) George Crowder has produced some of the most detailed and incisive commentary on the philosophical adequacy of Berlin’s attempted reconciliation of liberalism and value pluralism, arguing that, although Berlin’s position ends in conceptual incoherence, the competing demands of pluralism and liberalism, as a normative form of political philosophy, can be reconciled. For Crowder’s work, see, amongst other contributions, the following: ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’, in *Political Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1994), pp. 293-305, which elicited a critical reply from Berlin and Bernard Williams, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 306-309; *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), as well as Crowder’s critical study of the achievement and limitations of Berlin’s thought, cited *op. cit*.

pressing scholarly question, therefore, revolves around the strength of Berlin’s union of value conflict with liberal theory. In a moral universe marked by value incompatibility and incommensurability, why should the demands of liberalism triumph over its rivals? This is a basic conceptual problem that Berlin cannot avoid. For the many of his interpreters, it is also a dilemma that he answered with greater rhetorical strength than philosophical precision. While attempts have been made to defend the coherence of Berlin’s union of liberalism and value-pluralism, the years since his death have seen academic interest harden into a scholarly consensus: Berlin’s pluralism finally defeat his liberalism. The majority of Berlin’s critics are allies on this decisive judgement: the priority of negative liberty, to which Berlin is committed in Two Concepts of Liberty, is deprived of its foundation by the potential for incommensurability to undermine the rational judgement of rivalrous values. Notwithstanding his intention of defending liberalism in the context of an escalating Cold War, therefore, Berlin cannot arrest a slide into philosophical incoherence and political paralysis.

The charge of incoherence brought against Berlin by some of his critics brings us to the fundamental aim of this thesis. Instead of examining the character of Berlin’s liberal political thought through the prism of its fractious relationship with value-pluralism, however, we will examine the tensions in Berlin’s political thought from a different


10 For a nuanced defence of Berlin’s political and philosophical enterprise, see, for example, Hans Blokland, ‘Berlin on Pluralism and Liberalism: A Defence’, in European Legacy, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1999), pp. 1-23.

11 In their otherwise dissimilar interpretations of Berlin’s thought, especially in relation to the conceptual coherence of his attempt at providing liberalism with pluralist foundations, Crowder and Gray are united in their judgement that Berlin’s argument in favour of a contingent union between liberalism and value pluralism collapses under the weight of the same dilemma: how can one derive the priority of liberal principles from the inherently rivalrous and often incommensurable character of moral experience? In essence, the weight of recent scholarly opinion, despite occasional defensive readings, has not deviated substantially from this judgement. For the majority of his interpreters, a fully coherent value-pluralist liberalism, even if it is susceptible to a convincing development, requires weightier philosophical armaments than Berlin was able to provide.
direction: namely, the relationship between Berlin as a liberal thinker, and thereby an implicit defender of Enlightenment thought, and his work as an historian of ideas, where he seems to view the Age of Reason, the foundation of his own liberal thought, as implicated in the rise of totalitarianism. In short, the following argument attempts to resolve a basic problem: why does Berlin, otherwise an eloquent and passionate defender of liberalism, seem intent on undermining the foundations of his political thought by aligning himself, in his role as an intellectual historian, with some of the most implacable enemies of the Age of Reason, especially Joseph de Maistre?

As some of his critics have argued, notably Mark Lilla and Zeev Sternhell, Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment through the prism of Counter-Enlightenment thought threatens to destabilise his liberal political thought.\(^\text{12}\) His intellectual history erodes the foundations of his liberalism. For Sternhell and Lilla, Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment discloses a delusive project: the construction, philosophically flawed and politically incoherent, of a chastened Post-War ‘liberalism of fear’\(^\text{13}\) on the foundations provided by Counter-Enlightenment thought.\(^\text{14}\) Lilla and Sternhell are adamant: liberalism cannot be divorced from the sustaining presuppositions that form its philosophical bedrock, such as an empiricist construal of reason and an affirmation of the possibility of historical progress.

For these two critics, Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment allows incoherence to corrode the foundations of his political thought. As the most legitimate heir of the Enlightenment, liberalism cannot be sustained by the philosophical resources of anti-modern thought. Liberalism and the Enlightenment are inextricably connected by a shared


\(^{13}\) The idea of a ‘liberalism of fear’, whose basic aim is the prevention of cruelty and suffering, rather than the promotion of the ‘good’, is the work of Judith N. Shklar, and is developed in her seminal essay of the same title: see Judith N. Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, in Stanley Hoffmann (ed.), *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* [foreword by George Kateb] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 3-20.

philosophical foundation. The anti-modern animus of Counter-Enlightenment thought, which has few more virulent exponents than Maistre, is their shared enemy. And yet, Lilla and Sternhell maintain, Berlin is philosophically sympathetic and politically committed to a substantive appropriation of the Counter-Enlightenment’s attack on the Enlightenment’s rationalism. This attempt at translating enmity into amity, they maintain, can only have one consequence: philosophical incoherence and political misjudgement, both as inevitable as classical tragedy. This judgement stands at the core of the charge that Lilla and Sternhell bring against Berlin.

This thesis will construct an alternative reading of Berlin’s apparent turn away from Enlightenment. In particular, our argument is founded on two entwined contentions: firstly, that Berlin turned to the Counter-Enlightenment, principally the thought of Maistre, as a consequence of his analysis of the presuppositions that sustain totalitarianism; and, secondly, that his interest in Maistre’s forbiddingly anti-liberal thought is based on his conviction that only a thinker like the ultramontane Savoyard, who inhabits a proto-fascistic intellectual world, can illuminate the character of totalitarian thought.

The argument will achieve this by showing that Berlin’s interest in the one of the most virulent opponents of his own liberal humanism is motivated by his conviction that Maistre provides an analytical window onto totalitarian thought and practice. This window onto a desolate vista is unusually clear and distinct, despite its remoteness in space and time, in virtue of Maistre’s philosophical sensibility and outlook, which is more at home in the twentieth century than in its predecessor. At its base, therefore, Berlin’s interpretation of the Maistre discloses a methodological principle. It does produce a substantive imbibing of anti-modern hostility, which both Sternhell and Lilla mistakenly discern in his critique of the Enlightenment. For Berlin, it is Maistre, rather than a partisan of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, who is the better guide to the totalitarian thought that disfigured the twentieth century.

At this point, a methodological caveat is required. The primary concern of our
argument is also the basis for its necessary demarcation: the central focus of this thesis is on Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment in the form of Maistre’s full-blooded attack on Enlightenment thought. Our aim is not to produce a comprehensive overview of the many aspects of Berlin’s work in the history of ideas – which includes disparate themes like Herder’s expressivism and the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century – but to counter the charge, associated most powerfully with Lilla and Sternhell, that Berlin is committed to an appropriation of Counter-Enlightenment thought as the only possible foundation for liberalism in the wake of World War, Totalitarianism and the Holocaust.

By reading Berlin’s turn to Maistre as disclosing a methodological principle, the aim of our interpretation is solely to undermine the charge that Berlin is a partisan of Counter-Enlightenment liberalism. Since the proto-fascist intellectual world of the ultramontane Savoyard represents the greatest challenge to his liberal humanism, showing that Maistre’s anti-modern hostility does not infect Berlin’s own liberalism – since his interest is methodological, not substantive – delivers a blow against the contention that Berlin’s work in the history of ideas only succeeds in undermining his liberal political thought. While this interpretative method cannot address other important aspects of Berlin’s work on the Counter-Enlightenment – such as, for example, his view of J.G. Hamann’s prescient theory of language – its delineated character allows for a more precise examination of Berlin’s apparent turn away from the Enlightenment.

The argument will proceed according to the following structure. Chapter one will develop a largely biographical perspective. It will stress the paradox of Berlin’s position at the apex of British intellectual and cultural life and his contention, powerfully expressed Jewish Slavery and Emancipation, that the basic condition of Jewishness in the modern world, at least before the creation of the State of Israel, was one of homelessness and exile. Berlin, it will be argued, was the quintessential insider who saw himself as a something like a foreigner among full citizens, whose entry ticket to the heart of the

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Establishment could be withdrawn at will. On the basis of this biographical paradox, chapter one argues that Berlin saw the emancipation of modern Jewry, largely brought about by the Enlightenment and premissed on a form of assimilation, as morally and politically bankrupt in the wake of the Final Solution.

Berlin’s analysis of the ‘Jewish problem’ under the aegis of the modern world, it will be argued, must be read in relation to, because it flows from, the wider challenges posed by the legacies of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. Berlin’s reflections on the position of European Jewry in the modern world, which forms the foundation of his Zionism, illuminates the centrality of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment in his thought. In a biographically resonant sense, Berlin’s analysis of the place of Jews in the modern world – a quintessentially post-Enlightenment predicament – provides a biographical and historical basis for his examination of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought.

Chapter two will explore the relationship between Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment and his liberal political thought. The overarching aim of this chapter is transitional: it will explore the character of Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment, especially his contention that the Enlightenment’s monism bears some responsibility for the rise of totalitarianism, before moving on to a consideration of his liberalism. The chapter will conclude with an examination of Lilla’s critique of the philosophical coherence and political judgement of Berlin’s apparent attempt to base a chastened liberalism on Counter-Enlightenment thought. For Lilla, Berlin is not a quintessentially liberal thinker, the heir of Constant and Mill, but a far more complex and ambivalent figure: a defender of Counter-Enlightenment liberalism.

Chapter three examines the philosophical presuppositions that sustain Berlin’s work as an intellectual historian. As an historian of ideas, it will be argued, Berlin is committed to a form of historical inquiry that affirms the possibility of reading earlier thinkers, including Maistre, from the perspective of the present. For Berlin, contemporary
concerns are central to historical interpretation. In order to illuminate the character of Berlin’s historical methodology, his approach to historical interpretation will be compared with the contextualism of Quentin Skinner, for whom Berlin’s conception of historical scholarship descends into little more than ahistorical philosophical speculation.

Chapter four will explore Berlin’s implementation of his guiding historical method. Special attention will be paid to his contention that the central concepts and categories of Enlightenment thought can no longer be affirmed in a Post-War world. Our argument will focus on one of Berlin’s most neglected essays, *The Sense of Reality*, in which he maintains that the events of the twentieth century have left Enlightenment thought, especially the idea of historical inevitability, devoid of a coherent foundation. The chapter will conclude with an examination of a closely related aspect of Berlin’s argument: namely, that Marxian thought, as a consequence of its commitment to the unity of theory and practice, produced a secularised form of neo-Calvinism, which justifies the expendability of entire sections of humanity. For Berlin, the rise a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism, with its commitment to a vision of history in which some are elect and others are damned, forms a necessary presupposition of totalitarianism.

The final chapter will examine Berlin’s interpretation of a second bulwark of totalitarian thought. Alongside the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism, the twentieth century also witnessed, Berlin maintains, a drive towards the destruction of the perennial questions of political thought, such as, *inter alia*, the nature of liberty and equality, the character and aims of the State, and the nature of political obligation. In Berlin’s judgement, the destruction of the questions and the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism not only underlie totalitarian thought and practice, but together make necessary a turn to Maistre. Importantly, Berlin turns to Maistre for methodological reasons. The desolate thought of one of the least recognised apostles of Fascist and totalitarian thought, Berlin believes, can provide insights into the presuppositions that sustain totalitarianism: a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism and the drive towards the destruction of the
perennial questions of political philosophy. Out of place in his own time, yet decisively at home in the twentieth century, it is Maistre, rather than his enlightened nemeses, Voltaire and the *philosophes*, who can assist the Post-War analyst of totalitarian thought to understand the events that convulsed the twentieth century. It is this conviction that underlies Berlin’s turn to one of the most implacable enemies of his own liberalism.

**A Note on the Text:**

The numbering of footnotes begins anew at the beginning of every chapter.
Chapter One:

*The Insider’s Outsider: Berlin, Zionism and the Enlightenment*

I

Introduction

Given the close relationship between Berlin’s life and his thought – something that a number of his critics, not least his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, have taken seriously – this chapter will examine an important connection between Berlin’s life and thought: the relationship between his status as a cultural insider, an intimate of the cultural and political elite in Britain, Israel and the United States, and his reflections – seemingly incongruous, given his place at the heart of English cultural life – on the exilic character of modern Jewish experience after the emancipation brought about by the Enlightenment.

For Berlin, one of the hallmarks of the Jewish experience of the modern world, the experience of a permanent exile, was only brought to an end by the creation of Israel. This judgement is closely tied to one of Berlin’s most historically ambitious and politically significant contentions: the ideal of emancipation that made its way into Jewish life in the wake of the Enlightenment, based on the idea of cultural assimilation, was not merely inadequate, but stands at the epicentre of the seismic changes in European life and thought that ended in the Holocaust. While there is nothing unusually radical in Berlin’s historical judgement, his concern with Jewishness under the aegis of modernity, as well as one of its political corollaries, the Zionist project – highlights the centrality of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment in his work.

The illumination produced is partly biographical, partly substantive. On the one hand, Berlin’s reflections on Jewishness and Zionism, to which he devotes some of his most intellectually substantial essays, serve to underscore the importance of the Enlightenment in his thought. On the other hand, Berlin’s attack on the assimilationist
project – in many ways, of course, the child of the Enlightenment – helps to throw his sceptical interpretation of the Enlightenment, an unusual position for a liberal thinker to adopt, into sharper historical relief. It forms an important biographical and philosophical background – sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit – to the central aim of this thesis: the fraught relationship between Berlin’s turn away from the Enlightenment and his liberal political thought.

The chapter will proceed on the basis of the following structure. In order to bring the biographical significance, as well as apparent incongruities, of Berlin’s reading of the Jewishness in the modern world to the surface of analytical attention, the chapter will open with an overview of Berlin’s place within the highest echelons of the cultural and political Establishment, a position that was already well established by the time that he delivered his famous inaugural lecture as the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory in 1957. Following this largely biographical excursus, the chapter will turn, after a brief consideration of Steven Aschheim’s reading of the relationship between Berlin’s cultural rootedness and his Zionism, to Berlin’s interpretation of the Jewish exile in the modern and post-Enlightenment world. The chapter will conclude with Berlin’s judgement that the assimilationist project – and, in a wider sense, the Enlightened thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – did not survive the ravages of the twentieth century, and even bears some responsibility for the events of that culminated in the Final Solution.

II

The Insider

Born in 1909 in Riga, then within the borders of the Russian Empire, and dying in 1997, Berlin was a witness to an age marked by extremes. Although many significant twentieth century thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Leo Strauss, confronted the legacy of world war, totalitarianism and the Holocaust, Berlin, almost alone
among his generation, lived to see the formal end of the *Age of Extremes*\(^1\), which was marked, both symbolically and politically, by the collapse of the Soviet Union. A child on the streets of St. Petersburg when the feudal remnants of Tsarism were swept away by the February revolution – which itself succumbed, a few months later, to Lenin’s tactical brilliance – Berlin’s life was affected by three of the defining events of the short twentieth century: the rise of the Soviet Union, the battle against Fascism and Nazism, and the hot peace of a Cold War. Without yielding to the temptation of retrodiction with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that Berlin’s life was lived in the afterglow of recent desolation.

This is significant and suggests a further point. At home within the highest echelons of English, American and Israeli society, Berlin’s network of acquaintances, friends and opponents reads like a veritable ‘who’s who’ of the mid to late twentieth century: the epistolary interlocutor of figures as diverse as David Ben Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, Felix Frankfurter, McGeorge Bundy, Charles ‘Chip’ Bohlen, Arthur Schlesinger, Katherine ‘Kay’ and Philip Graham, Virginia Woolf, E.H. Carr, George Kennan, Richard Crossman and Lauren Bacall, Berlin managed to stand at the intersection of the major currents of twentieth century intellectual, social and political life. That he rarely lost his ‘balance’ is a testament to his capacity for social sensitivity and nuance, even if it has led some critics to question his integrity.\(^1\) With the passage of the decades, many epithets have attached themselves to Berlin’s name: ‘the most learned man in England’, ‘the century’s greatest

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\(^1\) See, in this respect, Christopher Hitchens’ lengthy essay, published just after Berlin’s death, and appropriately entitled ‘Goodbye to Berlin’, in his *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 138-164. For Hitchens, Berlin misspent his influence on the Anglo-American Establishment by helping to bolster, always behind the scenes, the resolve of members of the foreign policy elite, such the brothers Bundy and Charles ‘Chip’ Bohlen’. Their enthusiasm for an escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, Hitchens maintains, was supported by Berlin, at a time when his opposition might have cooled the political and martial ardour of the ‘best and the brightest’. Despite his critical ire, however, Hitchens’ assessment of Berlin’s life and legacy – which he succinctly expresses in his judgement that Berlin, the lionised liberal, remains “part mangy, part magnificent” – is marked by a degree of admiration, which explains why his study of Berlin appears in a subsection entitled ‘In Spite of Themselves’, reserved for those ‘unacknowledged legislators’ whose achievements never lived up to the promise of their potential.
talker’, ‘a lecturer and raconteur of genius’, ‘the most important liberal thinker of the twentieth century’, ‘an intimate of the Establishment’, yet the terms that most succinctly express his formal roles, academic and scholar, are rarely mentioned. If they are, it is in a generally implicit sense: the description of essayist, often employed to define Berlin’s style and achievement, suggests a degree of impressionism and even imprecision that sits awkwardly with the connotations of scholarship.

Although one of his best known collections of essays is entitled Against the Current – a title that he chose with philosophical intent\(^{18}\) – Berlin was so much in ‘the swim of things’ that his life seems to loom as large as his thought. This biographical fact helped to cement an unusual situation, which followed Berlin throughout much of his life. Unlike other major twentieth century thinkers, Berlin became known for what he said and for who he was, rather than, in the first instance, for what he wrote. The suspicion of significance beyond thought continued to shadow Berlin until the late 1970s, when his dedicated Boswell, Henry Hardy, began the process of collecting and publishing his many essays and lectures.

Most major twentieth century philosophical thinkers are closely identified with their thought, in an almost hermetic sense. Indeed, in the case of Martin Heidegger, thought seems to have overwhelmed life.\(^{19}\) The names of Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, John Rawls and Jacques Derrida call to mind the titles of great works, but they do not suggest lives lived in close proximity to the centres of cultural, social and political influence. The attribution of a wholly scholarly identity – one that is bereft of the complex tapestry of cultural life on both sides of the Atlantic – seems largely implausible in Berlin’s case, in a way that does not apply to Karl Popper. If Heidegger was overwhelmed by the weight of his struggle after Being, Berlin’s thought never seems to have overrun his life. As the flow of his correspondence attests, he was too busy being to worry unduly about Being.

With the publication of the first volume of Berlin’s letters, which provides a chronicle of his life until 1946\(^{20}\), the impression of significance beyond scholarly achievement received an apparent confirmation in the minds of some critics. Spanning a relatively short eighteen years in roughly eight hundred tightly packed pages, the collective impression made by Berlin’s letters on some reviewers was of a man more bedazzled by the intricacies of English high society than he was by the complexities of Hegelian phenomenology (or even the less exalted mysteries of logical positivism, for that matter). Given the provincial austerities of Oxford’s philosophical curriculum at the time, this is possibly not surprising. Whatever the limitations of Berlin’s undergraduate education, however, his election to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls College, at the age of only 23, does not appear to have had a significant effect on the character of his correspondence.

The six years that Berlin spent at All Souls, from 1933 until 1938, were a social and cultural awakening. The title of the first volume of Berlin’s letters expresses and compresses the decisive influence of these years into a single word: *Flourishing*. His fellowship at All Souls provided an introduction, replete with impeccable references, to the complex and hermetic world of the pre-war Establishment. As Clive James observes, in the course of a biographically incisive review of Berlin’s letters:

> The contemplative life, however, is largely absent [from the first volume of letters], which is probably the reason why some of the reviewers reacted as if to the diaries of Chips Cannon, or of Harold Nicolson at best. Certainly there is an awful lot about grand houses, dinner parties whether in London or in Washington, and – this above all – academic politics in all their bitchy intricacy, as if recorded by a less ponderous and more cultivated version of C.P. Snow. But “cultivated” is the operative word. Although the letters might give the impression that Berlin was always at least as interested in the power struggles going on within Balliol and All Souls as in those going on within the Foreign Office, the US State Department, the Wilhelmstrasse, or the Kremlin, the knowing gossip is enriched by the intensity of his enthusiasm for the arts and civilized institutions…He was right to demand that none of his early letters

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should be left out, because they registered all the different ways that he could function, as a free and thoughtful human being, in the full and complicated texture of a historically continuous society, an order which he thought needed no fundamental reordering. If he failed to notice some of its failings, it was only because he was enjoying so many of its virtues. The Jew out of nowhere was in demand everywhere, and he can be excused for loving every minute of it. To call him profoundly conservative hardly meets the case. He thought even the frivolity was part of the bedrock. The ideal guest, a fountain of scintillating chatter to match the fountain in the courtyard, he would gladly have revisited Brideshead every weekend.  

When Berlin was elected, in 1957, to the Chichele Professorship in Social and Political Theory, one of Oxford’s most prestigious chairs, previously occupied by G.D.H. Cole, his ascension to high academic honours seemed unsurprising on the level of cultural renown. Few Oxford or Cambridge dons could lay claim to Berlin’s reputation as a major cultural figure, and only a small elite were as frequently referred to as dazzlingly brilliant. While this shared cultural and social assumption was unremarkable by the 1950s, its origins are inflected by the interplay of more worldly factors. One of these factors was decidedly unusual, yet its curious and serendipitous character cannot overshadow its deeper cultural significance.

During the war, while he was attached to the British Embassy in Washington, Berlin, as part of his duties as a junior diplomat, compiled weekly dispatches on American public opinion towards the European war, which were eventually read by Winston Churchill and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. Despite their subject matter, Berlin’s reports, some of which were published in 1981, were rarely marked by the bureaucrat’s leaden touch. Unusually, given Berlin’s lack of seniority, his weekly dispatches soon became unusually influential and remarked upon within Whitehall circles.  

As the renown of his dispatches began to permeate the inner reaches of Whitehall, something that happened with remarkable speed, Berlin became involved in an event whose comedic character does not

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mask its wider cultural significance. Impressed by the author of the dispatches, Churchill decided that he wanted to meet Berlin over lunch at Number 10.

A suitable date was arranged, Mr. I. Berlin was summoned to London, and a highly successful meeting seemed poised to occur. Sadly, as a result of a misunderstanding between Clementine Churchill and her husband, the invitation to lunch was extended to Irving Berlin, the American songwriter, who appeared at Number 10 at the requested hour, genuinely impressed and duly nervous. Churchill bombarded the hapless Irving with a series of questions, which received only evasive and unimpressive replies. Becoming ever more frustrated with the lack of correspondence between Berlin in person and Berlin in print, Churchill demanded to know what, in Berlin’s opinion, was the most significant piece that he had written while in America. When Irving replied that, if forced to choose, he would have to say ‘White Christmas’, Churchill stormed out of the lunch in anger and frustration. As Michael Ignatieff observes, this case of mistaken identity – despite its bizarre nature, or possibly because of it – helped to forge the cultural steel of Berlin’s reputation:

Soon the story was circulating in Whitehall and from there it leaked into the press, appearing in Time magazine in April 1944. Isaiah was in London at the time and, having heard the story from Jock Colville, realised that he had become a minor celebrity by mistake. ‘The Irving-Winston-Isaiah affair’ was going the rounds. In London, Lord Beaverbrook rang up to ask Isaiah to dinner, and to offer him a column on his newspapers. Formerly stand-offish All Souls grandees now sought his opinion. Whitehall colleagues wrote to him to say that his Washington dispatches equalled the achievements of the great memoirists and diarists of the past: Creevey, Saint-Simon, Clarendon and Greville. His own chief, Lord Halifax, was heard delightedly shopping the story of the two Berlins around Washington.

When Berlin returned from his last war-time posting, at the British Embassy in

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Moscow, his reputation had undergone a decisive shift in substance and outward appearance. Confirmation of this change came quickly and in varying forms. As Ignatieff points out, one of the most significant was Churchill’s decision, based on the recommendation from William Deakin, his chief assistant, to ask Berlin to comment on the first six chapters of the great man’s memoir of the 1930s, *The Gathering Storm*.²⁵

Now a member of this select group of trusted readers and advisors, Berlin partly owed his preferment to his friendship with Deakin, whom he had met during his time in New York in the early years of the war. In this case, as in many others, his myriad and varied connections, many of them forged during his war-time service, opened the way to the highest echelons of the interconnected and rarefied world of the Establishment. Acting as an unofficial advisor on Churchill’s memoirs was only one of the more visible markers of his increasing renown and position. Others soon followed: in 1951, Berlin was considered for the Wardenship of All Souls, and, two years later, he was offered the Wardenship of Nuffield. He rejected the position, yet his refusal does not diminish the significance of the offer.²⁶

After he resumed his New College fellowship in 1946, Berlin began, throughout the 1950s, to confirm his role as an ever more prominent figure within the interconnected worlds of Oxford, Cambridge and London, the ‘triangle of influence’. As his influence spread and his reputation developed, it became a conditioned reflex within the hermetic world of the Establishment to seek Berlin’s judgement about matters of intellectual and cultural significance:

…for years, it would seem, when the Establishment wanted legal advice it asked Arnold Goodman and when it wanted a cultural committee chaired it asked Noel Annan; similarly, when it wanted judgement about intellectual quality its reflex was to ‘ask Isaiah’.²⁷

As Stefan Collini observes, in an illuminating comparison, it is difficult to imagine Ernest Gellner, whose scholarly brilliance and wide academic influence easily matched Berlin’s own, being the subject of a similar cultural consecration.\(^{28}\) It would also require a prodigious stretch of the imagination to envisage George Steiner – a central European polymath with more than a passing resemblance to Berlin, not least in their shared proclivity for ‘high altitude’ scholarship – being elected to the presidency of the British Academy, a position Berlin held between 1974 and 1978.\(^ {29}\)

Throughout the immediate Post-War years, Berlin’s standing continued its seemingly inexorable rise towards eminence, and he began to collect the various and requisite accoutrements of life within the Establishment. As Collini points out, the fact that Berlin was a member of the Athenaeum requires relatively little explanation. For an Oxford scholar of Berlin’s standing, this was unremarkable.\(^ {30}\) The character of the Athenaeum, especially its cautious embrace of non-conformist intellectuals ever since the nineteenth century, makes it less surprising that Berlin, the child of Baltic Jews, was granted membership. Within the confines of London’s club land, the Athenaeum was something approaching a meritocratic anomaly:

The Athenaeum was (and to some extent still is) distinguished among London clubs by the fact that whereas most of these institutions primarily catered to those who had inherited their wealth and social position, the membership of the Athenaeum included a far higher proportion of writers, bishops, judges, senior public servants, and such like…Under Rule II…the committee could elect a certain number of men who were considered as being ‘of distinguished eminence in Science, Literature, or the Arts, or for Public Service’… Election did, needless to say, imply a kind of social acceptance, but that way of putting it reveals in turn that such figures may have been in need to this acceptance; it was not necessarily something to which they were born.\(^ {31}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 207.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 197.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 196.

Far more telling is the fact that, after being rejected for membership of St. James’s, because some members refused to elect a Jew to their number, Berlin was accepted at Brooks’s, an even more august institution, which was hardly known for its willingness to welcome the uninitiated.\(^{32}\) As Collini points out, “membership at Brooks’s, an institution not overflowing with philosophers and historians of ideas (‘ideas, eh?’), bespeaks social acceptance of a quite different order”.\(^ {33}\)

Although Britain, in the immediate aftermath of Fascist dominance in much of Europe, provided a refuge for many European intellectuals, full social and cultural acceptance seems to have been relatively rare at the highest levels.\(^ {34}\) Although Karl Popper became a commanding figure within English academic life, and his wider cultural standing was eventually confirmed by a knighthood, it would be odd to cast him in the role of the cultural insider. Despite his high academic honours, the venerable members of Brooks’s might have felt that a knighthood could not conceal the fact that Sir Karl was not ‘one of us’, and might even be ‘one of them’: a decent fellow, no doubt, but not really suitable membership material. Popper could never hope to be a pillar of our ‘Our Age’. Berlin’s credentials were unimpeachable.

As the 1950s wore on, Berlin came to assume the stature of an undisputed Oxford grandee: the most visible sign of this veritable cultural consecration came with his knighthood in 1957. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, his elevation to the order of knights bachelor occasioned some less than flattering commentary and discussion. After his knighthood was formally announced, he received, along with the obligatory missives of congratulation, a barbed letter from a former lover, Patricia Douglas, in which she suggested that the knighthood must be in recognition of his outstanding services to conversation.\(^ {35}\) As


\(^{34}\) For an incisive history of European émigrés on British intellectual and cultural life, see Daniel Snowman, *Hitler’s Émigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2002).

Michael Ignatieff observes, the letter made a surprisingly deep impression on Berlin:

This barb stuck in his flesh. Throughout 1957 he was troubled with ailments – a flickering eyelid, an arrhythmic heartbeat – which indicate psychic distress. He loved quoting the stern admonition that he had read on a grave in an English Churchyard: ‘Avoid shame.’ Now Sir Isaiah, he wondered whether he had avoided it. He remained neurotic about press coverage. He had already broken off relations with Robert Kee after an article of his in Picture Post made much of Berlin’s size and volubility. During the 1960s icy letters were sent to the New Yorker, The Sunday Times and the Daily Telegraph, complaining about articles which, even though laudatory, made him feel ashamed that he had permitted them.36

Although Berlin’s reaction suggests a significant level of self-doubt, it also highlights a more general sense, whispered throughout the quads and cloisters of Oxford, and even audible within the porous walls of the Establishment, that Berlin’s renown was based on a foundation inadequate for the weight of recognition being heaped upon it.37

When Berlin put his name forward for the Chichele Professorship in Social and Political theory, his three academic supporters, Gilbert Ryle, Richard Pares and Charles Webster, while praising his intellectual and scholarly qualities, also sounded a note of concern and caution. Webster suggested that Berlin had not yet produced a “larger work of synthesis”, although this was, Webster felt sure, surely still forthcoming. But Webster’s prediction remained unfulfilled. In spite of Berlin’s best efforts, which continued into old age, he never succeeded in weaving the myriad thread of his prodigious learning into the scholarly work of synthesis that many believed was on the verge of appearing. He remained an essayist, and once memorably described himself as the scholarly equivalent of a taxi: if an editor wished to hail his services, Berlin was happy to accept the commission. While rarely made public, quiet notes of criticism and concern continued to waft through the rarefied atmosphere of Oxbridge and Establishment London, even after Berlin’s appointment to the Chichele Professorship. A background sense of unjustified elevation

37 Ibid., p. 224.
seems to have plagued Berlin throughout his life, even after his scholarly achievements began to outshine, rather than simply complement, his sterling reputation on both sides of the Atlantic.

A sense of reputation outrunning achievement was given a very public expression, albeit in a typically Oxbridge *bon mot*, when Berlin was introduced by Michael Oakeshott, before giving the first version of *Historical Inevitability* as a lecture at the LSE, as the “Paganini of the lecture platform”.*38* While neither Berlin’s theme, the problem of historical determinism, nor his treatment of it, could be described as the equivalent of light opera, the sense that he was a ventriloquist of genius, but not an original mind, was a judgement that struck a melancholy chord with his own self-doubt. Oakeshott’s barbed compliment about his popular intellectual standing, as Michael Ignatieff observes, only increased Berlin’s anxiety about delivering a major public lecture before an audience comprising intellectual luminaries like Oakeshott and Karl Popper.*39*

When he was awarded the Order of Merit in 1971, an honour within the personal gift of the sovereign, Berlin’s place at the heart of ‘Our Age’ received its highest official confirmation. While principally an acknowledgement of his contributions to academic and intellectual life, the OM also gives an indication of the nuanced and ambivalent relationship between Berlin’s cultural standing and his contributions to an easily definable field of scholarship. Until edited collections of Berlin’s essays began appearing in the late 1970s, which led to an intellectual renaissance in his scholarly reputation, Berlin was viewed as a gifted essayist and raconteur, a talented expositor of the thoughts of others, and even as the most brilliant man in Oxford, but, fundamentally, as someone more at home in the evanescent medium of talk and conversation than in the austere realm of pure scholarship. Allowing for the acidic overtone, Maurice Bowra’s clever witticism gives comedic expression to a general sense: “though like Our Lord and Socrates, he does not publish much, he thinks and says a great deal, and has had an enormous influence on our

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*38* Ibid., p. 205.
*39* Ibid., p. 205.

However, lest it seem that Berlin’s Post-War eminence was the result of nothing more than a series of serendipitous events, based on sterling connections and a stream of well received official reports, it is worth considering some of the purely intellectual sources of his eventual place of honour among the luminaries of ‘Our Age’.\footnote{The phrase ‘our Age’ is the title of Noel Anna’s intellectual and ‘familial’ history of the generation, Berlin’s own, that came of age in the 1920s and rose to influence and pre-eminence in the 1940s and 1950s. See Noel Annan, \textit{Our Age: A Portrait of a Generation} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990).} After receiving an invitation from Bryn Mawr College to deliver their annual Mary Flexner lectures, one of many American guest lectureships that he accepted throughout his career, Berlin was approached by Anna Kallin, a producer for BBC Radio’s Third Programme, with an offer whose significance was disguised by its seemingly esoteric nature. As part of the Third Programme’s commitment to cultural broadcasting, Kallin urged Berlin to revise his Flexner lectures into a series of six hour-long broadcasts on the same topic.

Surprisingly, given his general aversion to the public spotlight, Berlin agreed to make the necessary amendments, and the lectures were broadcast over a six week period between October and November 1952.\footnote{Michael Ignatieff, \textit{Isaiah Berlin}, p. 204.} While this series of broadcasts was not Berlin’s first foray into public intellectual debate, his previous talks on the Third Programme – on the Russian critic Belinksy and on the emerging relationship between Britain and America – had passed into the ether without much public comment or notoriety. Berlin’s series of lectures on liberty and its betrayal, by contrast, bestowed upon him the title of public intellectual, a situation that seems to have caused him a mixture of pleasure and chagrin.\footnote{Henry Hardy, ‘Editor’s Preface’, in Isaiah Berlin, \textit{Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty} (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. x.}

On the other side of the Atlantic pond, Berlin was offered the opportunity to write for \textit{Foreign Affairs}, the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations. In Ignatieff’s judgement, the two articles that Berlin published in \textit{Foreign Affairs}, especially his analysis of Stalin’s practice of government by periodic and cyclical repression, \textit{The Artificial
Dialectic: Generalissimo Stalin and the Art of Government⁴⁴, provided the cultural adhesive that increasingly bound him to the intellectual and political elite in the United States.⁴⁵ After the publication of his article on the Stalinist ‘artificial dialectic’, Berlin was increasingly recognised as an expert on Russian and Soviet Affairs, something that his frequent stays at Harvard’s Russian Research Center, a stronghold of the totalitarian school of Sovietology, only served to confirm. For nearly forty years, he also was one of the doyens of Russian Studies at Oxford. His voluminous correspondence with figures like Adam Ulam, Martin Malia, Richard Pipes and E.H. Carr, among other notable figures within the Russian studies community, bear witness to his role as an eminence grise within the Cold War riven discipline of Sovietology.

Now considered eminently sound by the Establishment, Berlin was asked to lecture by Chatham House. He addressed summer schools run by the major political parties. The Foreign Office, perhaps with the memory of his Washington dispatches in mind, asked him to comment on various reports and memos from Moscow.⁴⁶ No less significant as a marker of eminence was an anecdote later recalled by A.J. Ayer. When he was introduced to a fellow guest at a party as the ‘cleverest man in England’, Ayer’s new acquaintance exclaimed: “Oh, so you must be Isaiah Berlin”.⁴⁷ Berlin’s rise to eminence had a significant consequence. When he stepped on to the podium of the Schools Building to deliver his inaugural lecture as the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, he had already achieved, before uttering the opening sentence of Two Concepts of Liberty, a position of unusual influence within the landscape of Post-War Britain’s cultural life.⁴⁸

As we shall see below, however, Berlin’s place within the highest reaches of the Establishment stands in marked contrast to his conviction that the Jewish experience of a post-Enlightenment world – including, by extension, his own experience as an émigrés Jew

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⁴⁵ Michael Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin, p. 171.
⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 171.
⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 170.
in Britain—was one of homelessness and even exile. This analysis, which is given its most sustained and powerful expression in *Jewish Slavery and Emancipation*, forms the keystone of Berlin’s commitment to a liberal form of Zionism. It also illuminates the centrality of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment in his work.

### III

**The Insider as Outsider: Berlin’s Zionism**

Berlin’s influential position within the Anglo-American Establishment, which saw him equally at home in Oxford, London, Washington and New York, would be relatively insignificant for an interpretation of his thought—an interesting biographical detail, but nothing more—were it not for one overriding point: the connection between Berlin’s analysis of the Jewish predicament in a post-Enlightenment and post-Holocaust world and his work as an historian of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought.

As a way of approaching this theme, we will briefly consider Steven Aschheim’s contention—made in the course of his recent study of German-Jewish émigrés intellectuals, *Beyond the Border*—that Berlin was unusually embedded within the diaspora. Aschheim observe, Berlin’s sense of being at home in Britain—safely ensconced within the walls of the liberal Establishment, as it were—stands in sharp contrast to figures like Adorno, Arendt, Rosenzweig, Strauss and Scholem. While the latter figures were moulded by the experience of persecution and exile, Berlin became one of the patron saints of Anglo-American liberalism precisely because he occupied a stable position within the upper echelons of British society. Berlin, Aschheim maintains, never

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49 As Ignatieff observes, Berlin’s rejection, for reasons of anti-semitism, by the members of St.James’s Club re-enforced his sense that Britain, while unusually welcoming of its Jewish population, was no less prone to latent forms of anti-semitism, which could even strike someone as prominent and eminent as Berlin: “...several members were ‘determined to have no one of Jewish extraction in the Club’. Berlin immediately withdrew his name...But his rejection at the St.James’s reminded him that there were still invisible doors barring entry into the Gentile world”. See Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 176.


had to fight for a sense of home. He never had to struggle for the experience of unforced belonging. It found him.

Although Berlin was a passionate and committed Zionist, the historical context of his Zionism differs substantially from that of his émigrés contemporaries. Moreover, as Aschheim points out, Berlin’s relationship with his contemporaries was marked by a degree of personal and philosophical distance, which bordered on outright hostility:

It was in a private letter (to Jean Floud) that Berlin expressed his real opinion and gut feelings about many of the Weimar-bred exiled intellectuals and the milieu that had produced them: “the terrible twisted Mitteleuropa in which nothing is straight, simple, truthful, all human relations and all political attitudes are twisted into ghastly shapes by these awful causalities who, because they are crippled, recognize nothing pure and firm in the world.”

In Aschheim’s study, the vagaries of individual biography are central. The title of the first volume of Berlin’s letters, *Flourishing*, Aschheim observes, could never be applied to the correspondence of thinkers like Adorno, Benjamin, Scholem or Arendt. When compared with the epistolic records left behind by these thinkers, which are marked by a sensibility politicised by the force of necessity, Berlin’s letters stand out for their relative distance from such agonised territory. Although the events of the twentieth century, and especially the Holocaust, form the inescapable historical context of Berlin’s liberalism, his letters rarely address these themes, nor are they treated in greater detail in his essays and lectures. For the child of Russian and Jewish refugees from Soviet communism, bereft of a sure-footing within the labyrinthine confines of British society in the early 1920s, this suggests an unusually secure position:

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Berlin, that “amiable sage” (as Clive James has aptly described him), is an icon because he so neatly seems to fit and represent our open and liberal sensibilities. If our intellectuals [the thinkers explored in Aschheim’s study] are displaced “casualties,” people who render “displacement” at the center of their projects, Berlin – that Riga-born Jewish refugee from the Bolshevik revolution – is (or at least appears to be) in both literal and cognitive ways deeply at home. Ensconced and revered in his cozy, beloved Oxford he would have found Adorno’s dictum – “Dwelling, in the proper sense is now impossible. The traditional residences we have grown up in have grown intolerable...[T]he house is past, over...It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” – exceedingly distasteful.56

Despite the sensitivity Aschheim’s historical and biographical analysis, his characterisation of Berlin as quintessentially ‘at home’ is subtly misleading. While he is correct to observe, following Simon Schama, that Berlin was that most unlikely of twentieth century figures, “a seriously happy Jew”57, Berlin’s place within the Anglo-American Establishment is marked by greater ambivalence than is apparent at first glance.

Although Berlin never experienced the precarious marginality suffered by Arendt, Strauss or Scholem, his life and thought bear the mark – not always prominently displayed, yet deeply felt – of a specifically Jewish sense of exile in a Gentile world. This is reflected in, and is central to, his writings on Zionism. Moreover, Berlin’s analysis of Jewishness and exile in the modern world is intimately connected with the complex and ambiguous legacies of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. For Berlin, the complex and ultimately tragic place of European Jewry in the modern world is closely connected with the Age of Reason itself. Although only a few of his essays are devoted to the question of Jewishness in the modern era – and never wrote on themes like the Haskala, the Hebrew Enlightenment58 – the relationship of European Jewry to the modern world is frequently implicit within Berlin’s essays in the history of ideas, whether on individual

56 Ibid., p. 115.
57 Quoted in Ibid., p. 115.
thinkers, such as his unusual comparative treatment of Disraeli and Marx, or on broader historical themes, such as the rise of nationalism.

In a manner that is biographically resonant and philosophically significant, Berlin’s most forthright analysis of Jewishness in the modern world comes in an aptly titled essay, *Jewish Slavery and Emancipation*, which was initially published in *The Jewish Chronicle* in 1951, but not re-issued, on Berlin’s instructions, until its posthumous re-publication in *The Power of Ideas*. In a sense, Berlin’s reluctance to countenance its re-publication is understandable, for his argument is marked by a central contention that angered many within, and even some outside of, the Jewish community: the assimilationist project – a child of the Enlightenment, embodied by Jewish paragons of the Age of Reason like Heine and Mendelssohn – must be judged a failure. It is beyond the possibility of resurrection in a post-Holocaust world. In Berlin’s judgement, controversially, this is also for the best.

Berlin begins his essay by approvingly echoing Lewis Namier’s definition of the Jewish ‘problem’. The position of European Jewry after emancipation, Namier maintained, is best compared with the effects of the sun beating down on a hitherto darkened and frozen glacier. As the first warming rays of the sun touch the glacier, the outer crust begins to evaporate, but the inner core remains as frozen as it had been for millennia. Despite the resilience of the glacier’s frozen heart, however, a significant portion of the huge mass eventually melts away, forming a torrential flood that sweeps into the valleys below, creating new streams and rivers, thereby moulding a new landscape:

...but a great portion melted into the turbulent flood of water which inundated the valleys below, some flowing on in rivers and streams, while the rest collected into stagnant pools; in either case the landscape altered in a unique,

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and at times revolutionary, fashion.\textsuperscript{63}

One of these streams became the movement for gradual assimilation into Gentile society, which was embraced, with considerable and considerable passion, by many newly emancipated Jews. As both a cultural movement and a philosophical conviction, the assimilationist project was especially fervently pursued by German Jews. For Berlin, the failure of the assimilationist project received one of its most tragically resonant expressions in the eventual fate of German Jewry.

Despite the fact that full assimilation into Gentile society ended in tragedy, its antithesis – the strict maintenance of traditional Jewish life, divorced from the main body of society – is also no longer a possibility.\textsuperscript{64} Berlin is adamant on this point. Moreover, the failure of assimilation along the universalist lines advocated by the partisans of the Enlightenment, along with the impossibility of maintaining traditional forms of Jewish life in a post-Holocaust world, both have their origins in the anomalous position of Jews within the borders of the modern nation-state. For Berlin, the position of European Jewry in the modern world is akin to a small group of anthropologists who have stumbled across a strange tribe.\textsuperscript{65} As strangers in a community at ease with itself, the anthropologists, much like Jewish citizens of Gentile nations, must learn the habits and beliefs of the tribe, a process that requires an acute sense for the nuances and complexities of social life. Despite their sensitive understanding of the host culture, however, there remains an inescapable sense of artificiality about Jewish claims to embededness within their adopted homeland. They are foreigners in an alien land: some are honoured, other are despised, yet they all share in the same condition of exile. This is central to Berlin’s analysis of the Jewish predicament in a world ushered in by the Enlightenment, and stands in marked and illuminating contrast to his own position at the apex of British society.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 163.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 166.
The sustained effort to retain a sense of Jewishness and become ‘natural’ members of Gentile societies, Berlin believes, was a barren hope for the majority of European Jews. Isolated and important successes cannot conceal this melancholy fact. Notwithstanding their often sincere commitment to the assimilationist ideal, the charge of being foreigners within a cohesive society, Berlin maintains, was impossible for Jews to refute. In a saddening irony, the perceived need for refutation only re-enforced the sense that there was a need for justification in the first place. Precariousness helped to produce a permanent condition of exile:

The more desperately the strangers argue, the vividly their differences from the natives stand out; indeed, the anxiety to deny the differences is itself a barrier to its disappearance...But the strangers we speak of are unique in retaining their peculiar attributes, especially their religious views, while stoutly denying that these peculiarities are of crucial importance, or relevant to their relationship to the society in which they dwell. This attitude rests on an illusion which is nevertheless, for the most part sincerely and honourably, accepted as a reality by both sides, but which, being half felt as delusive, communicates a sense of desperate embarrassment to those who seek to examine it: as if a mystery were being approached to the belief in the non-existence of which both sides are pledged, yet the reality of which both at least suspect.66

The Jewish position in a Gentile world, consequently, is marked by a degree of ambiguity and exile that left it mired in ambiguity. The sad case of Walter Rathenau, Berlin believes, is altogether emblematic. A committed advocate of the assimilationist ideal, to which his life bore eloquent testimony, Rathenau, who served as Foreign Minister in the Weimar Republic, was assassinated by two ultra-nationalists in 1922. His passionate self-identification with Germany, while entirely sincere, only succeeded in convincing some of his fellow Germans that he was a dangerous stranger in their midst.67 In Berlin’s judgement, Rathenau was committed to a position that, at least from the perspective of 1951, verged on the incoherent: no sensitive person – particularly if he is a German – can

66 Ibid., pp. 168-169.
67 Ibid., p. 170.
read this [Rathenau’s identification with Germany] without embarrassment". The harshness of Berlin’s judgement is an indication of the depth of his conviction.

This brings us to the core of Berlin’s analysis of the specifically Jewish predicament in the modern world: the idea of naïve belonging, which Jews have conspicuously lacked. The Jewish people have had altogether too much history and not enough geography. They deserve to be ‘at home’ in their own state, Berlin maintains, which is merely another way of saying that they have a right to be as normal as any other national community. For Berlin, the ideal of an unforced relationship to the nation-state – a form of natural belonging – receives one of its most resonant and important developments from an unusual and unexpected quarter: the artistic sensibility of Verdi, one of the last truly naïve artists in the modern world. Berlin’s use of the term naïve is unrelated to its idiomatic meaning in English. He deploys it in the sense originally employed by Friedrich Schiller, who contrasts the naïve with the sentimental. In his celebrated essay *On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature*, Schiller, Berlin observes, maintained that fully naïve poets are at ease with their wider social and cultural background, which provides them with a primordial sense of unity. For sentimental artists, by contrast, an unforced experience of unity is impossible. Painfully aware of their exile from the naïve, they seek to restore a primordial and sensuous experience of unity through the medium of art, which the rise of the modern world has reduced to an ideal. As Berlin points out:

The naïve artist is happily married to his muse. He takes rules and conventions for granted, uses them freely and harmoniously, and the effect of his art is, in Schiller’s words, ‘tranquil, pure, joyous’. The sentimental artist is in a turbulent relationship to his muse: married to her unhappily. Conventions irk him, although he may defend them fanatically. He is Amfortas and seeks peace, salvation, the healing of his own or his society’s secret and patent wounds. He cannot be at rest...Hence the effect of the sentimental artist is not joy and peace,

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68 Ibid., p. 170.
70 Ibid., p. 287.
71 Ibid., p. 288.
but tension, conflict with nature or society, insatiable craving, the notorious neuroses of the modern age, with its troubled spirits, its martyrs, fanatics, and its angry, bullying subversive preachers, Rousseau, Byron, Schopenhauer, Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Wagner, Marx, Nietzsche, offering not peace, but a sword.\textsuperscript{72}

In a manner that moves beyond the purely metaphorical, the experience of European Jewry under the conditions created by the Enlightenment closely resembles the cultural predicament of the sentimental artist. Divorced from an unconsciously accepted cultural background, modern Jewry, no less than the sentimental artist, is committed to a continuous and inescapable search for naïve belonging.

Under the conditions created by the Enlightenment, however, this is a delusive project, with only the experience of permanent exile as its ultimate reward. For Berlin, only the state of Israel can offer the Jewish people the possibility of an unforced relationship to a sustaining and implicit cultural background. It makes possible the creation of a naïve polity, no longer constrained by the unrequited striving that is the fate of a sentimental relationship to an adopted homeland. In a philosophical sense, this constitutes the ground of Berlin’s life-long commitment to Zionism, an ideal that he never implemented personally, yet always defended as a political necessity. As he observes in the concluding pages of \textit{Jewish Slavery and Emancipation}:

This situation [the ‘artificial’ situation of modern Jewry] is now at an end. Most of those who feel the discomfort of their situation to be too great, and those, no less, who, whatever their feelings about life amongst their neighbours, wish for religious, or national, or any other reasons to live the full life of the members of a majority and not a minority of a modern nation, have today a reasonable hope of reaching Israel and living its life.\textsuperscript{73}

In a manner that unites the biographical with the philosophical, Berlin’s analysis of the Jewish predicament in a world largely created by the Enlightenment, the parent of

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{73} Berlin, ‘Jewish Slavery and Emancipation’, p. 179.
emancipation, suggests, against Aschheim, that he did not view the Jewish condition – nor his own position as a Jew, for that matter – in an entirely sanguine way. Berlin was not as ‘at home’ in the diaspora as his influential position within the British Establishment might suggest.

Few critics have examined this aspect of Berlin’s thought with greater nuance than Ira Katznelson.\textsuperscript{74} The centrality of Berlin’s reflections on the Jewish predicament after emancipation – when the first entry tickets to the modern world were extended to Europe’s Jewish population – is incisively parsed in Katznelson’s analysis, and we can do little better than to echo his judgement. As Katznelson observes, Berlin not only explored the Jewish predicament in the wake of emancipation, but also lived its many opportunities and limitations.\textsuperscript{75} Even in the relative safety from virulent anti-semitism provided by Britain, Berlin was aware that, although the modern and enlightened world held out many opportunities to an emancipated Jew, it did not view him as “an authentic modern man”.\textsuperscript{76} Emancipation left a bifurcated reality in its wake: opportunity and limitation jostled for dominance. Berlin’s position as the uneasy beneficiary of the Enlightenment’s offer of emancipation coloured his engagement with the Age of Reason in shades of ambiguity. Berlin’s view of the inescapably exilic character of the Jewish condition in the wake of the Enlightenment stands at the historical core of his ambivalent relationship to the Age of Reason.\textsuperscript{77} As the outsider’s insider, Berlin was well aware – much more than full insiders or outsiders are likely to be – that the ambivalence that marks the Jewish experience of a post-Enlightenment world contains a lesson of universal significance. Berlin was convinced that “...all citizens of modernity are as exposed and assailable as the Jews”.\textsuperscript{78} As Katznelson observes:

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 1088.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 1088.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 1092.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 1092.
Full insiders and outsiders find it difficult to see what Berlin revealed to us all: that we cannot do without the legacies of Enlightenment if we are to fight cruelty and lead a decent life, but that credulous, thin versions of Enlightenment, versions that do not take the full range of human psychology and aspiration into account, can be, often are, deeply dangerous. Berlin’s enlightenment and Berlin’s modernity are dark, perilous, menacing, places... In consequence, it is Berlin, the outsider-insider, self-aware Jew who stands at the center of modernity’s, and academic modernism’s, most important conundrums...Condemned to inhabit the charged universe of a differentiated modernity, humankind, he cautioned, must learn to live, in effect, with the same kinds of challenges that vex the experience of the modern, emancipated Jew.  

Berlin’s conception of emancipation afforded by the Age of Reason, consequently, decisively influences his conception of the Enlightenment’s legacy in a Post-War world. This suggests something of great importance: namely, Berlin’s engagement with the entwined legacies of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought would make little sense without his exploration of the Jewish experience of a world living in the wake of the Enlightenment and its critical shadow, the Counter-Enlightenment. Berlin’s analysis of the Jewish predicament in the modern world, therefore, makes an examination of his interpretation of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment a matter of philosophical and biographical importance.

79 Ibid., p. 1092.
Chapter Two:

Monism and Berlin’s Critique of the Enlightenment

I

Introduction

Given the significance of Berlin’s engagement with the connected problems of emancipation and Zionism, which are both lent their context by the rise of the Age of Reason, his account of the Enlightenment becomes a necessary area of interpretation. Nowhere is this need more obvious, nor of greater philosophical importance, than in the relationship between Berlin’s work in the history of ideas, in which his critique of the Enlightenment has received most attention, and his contribution to political philosophy, especially his defence of liberalism in a negative key.

Apart from the strict philosophical cogency and historical accuracy of Berlin’s work in political philosophy and intellectual history – where the latter, especially, has come under concentrated attack from critics, who point to a number of serious failings in Berlin’s scholarship1 – the connection between these areas of his thought suggests a further question: namely, does Berlin, in his guise as historian of ideas, undermine his own liberal thought by an excess of largess towards the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment? For some of his critics, such as Mark Lilla, this question can be answered unequivocally: the two wings of Berlin’s thought are locked in an irreconcilable conflict for philosophical pre-

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eminence and political dominance. Philosophical coherence is impossible, while political incoherence is unavoidable.

As Lilla has observed, an ominous lacuna is stalking Berlin’s political thought – in the menacing form of the Counter-Enlightenment’s attack on modernity – and it threatens to strike a blow against the deepest foundations of his work. Its lineaments are clear and potentially devastating: Berlin’s apparent indictment of the Enlightenment as implicated in the rise of totalitarianism cannot be reconciled, Lilla argues, with his commitment to liberalism. His intellectual history undermines his liberal political thought. Lilla’s critique is founded on a foundational question: how can Berlin defend liberal political morality, as he does in *Two Concepts of Liberty*, by attacking the Age of Reason itself? Whatever its philosophical faults and political lacunae, the Enlightenment forms the necessary historical ground and philosophical foundation of liberalism. As the quintessence of Enlightenment thought, liberalism cannot overcome the slow corrosion – from the inside out, as it were – of its philosophical foundations. Lilla is adamant on this point. Berlin’s forthright and impassioned defence of liberalism in *Two Concepts of Liberty* and *Historical Inevitability* cannot survive his apparent sympathy – always carefully qualified, yet seemingly avowed – for the anti-Enlightenment animus of the Counter-Enlightenment. Liberalism is inextricably tied to the philosophical resources that grew to strength during the Age of Reason, and were developed and refined by nineteenth century liberal thinkers with whom Berlin shares a political sensibility, such as Constant and Mill.

For Lilla, the slow decay of Berlin’s liberalism is a consequence, unavoidable and eventually devastating, of his illiberal turn to the Counter-Enlightenment. The thinkers of

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the Counter-Enlightenment, Lilla suggests, are wolves baying at the walls of the liberal keep. In an excess of liberal zeal, Berlin opened the gates and welcomed them in. Faced with the material and cultural desolation of the Post-War years, Berlin placed his trust in an intellectual tradition that, while it seemed to offer the possibility of rescuing liberalism from the maw of totalitarianism, repaid his philosophical commitment by undermining the foundations of his liberalism.

Despite Berlin’s frequent assurances to the contrary – unimpeachable in their sincerity, but vacuous in their substance – the tradition of Counter-Enlightenment thought can never be fully domesticated. The wolves of the Counter-Enlightenment, Lilla avers, remain what they were from birth: the enemies of liberal reason. Inexplicably, Berlin failed to recognise the vehemence and depth of their animosity, which allowed him to misunderstand their nature: predatory and ready to strike at the first sign of weakness or irresolution. That stands at the core of the charge that Lilla levels at Berlin, perhaps the most serious accusation that can be brought against a liberal thinker.

It is one of the ironies of recent intellectual history, Lilla maintains, that Berlin became an enemy of the liberal tradition that he set out, in the hottest years of the Cold War, to rescue from complete destruction. Unlike Anthony Blunt or Kim Philby, whose political treachery possessed rationality by virtue of its intent, Berlin never set out to undermine the liberal tradition. Lilla does not discount this line of possible defence, but points to a different case for the prosecution: given the hollowness of good intentions in the face of their unintended consequences, Berlin can be convicted of a different crime: inflicting a much graver blow, no less devastating for being unintentional, upon liberal thought than some of its most implacable opponents. They can only attack from without; Berlin was able to undermine from within. A sincere and committed liberal who witnessed the ruin of Enlightenment thought in the face of twentieth century reality, Berlin mistook his true enemies for his best friends. This makes him, in Lilla’s judgement, one of the most dangerous and insidious critics of liberal modernity: he is a blind and sincere traitor.
That brings us to the question of structure. In order to broach its main elements, our argument is organised into three inter-related steps. Firstly, without providing an exhaustive exposition of the myriad strands Berlin’s work on the Enlightenment, we will examine the central aspects of his of critique of the Age of Reason, especially his contention, which runs like a guiding thread throughout his essays in the history of ideas, that the Enlightenment is continuous with the older tradition of Western monism. Secondly, flowing from the historical back into the philosophical, the chapter will consider the character of Berlin’s liberalism, as it develops in the course of his critique of positive liberty, with a particular focus on one of the more neglected aspects of his argument in *Two Concepts of Liberty*, his brief but decisive examination of the ambiguous relationship between liberty and sovereignty.

Drawing on this aspect of Berlin’s thought, the argument will consider a third point, the most philosophically important, which has already been alluded to above: the apparent paradox lurking at the core of Berlin’s liberalism, which threatens to undermine its coherence by corroding its foundations. Given the scope and complexity of this question, we will focus our attention, in the interests of concision and precision, on Lilla’s critique. Although other critics have questioned the philosophical coherence of Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment as a defensive bulwark for liberalism in the twentieth century, Lilla has launched the most substantial broadside against the political perspicacity and philosophical judgement of Berlin’s apparent turn away from the Enlightenment.

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II

Berlin’s Enlightenment

Berlin’s interpretation of the Enlightenment presents his interpreters with an unusual dilemma, the character of which stands at an oblique angle to the usual problems of obscurity of meaning or contradiction in purpose. The problem is something approaching scholarly silence: Berlin wrote comparatively little – certainly nothing of any great length – on the Enlightenment as an independent movement or ‘moment’ in European history. Although the recent publication of one of his manuscripts from the 1950s, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, goes some way towards qualifying this lacuna, the work does not constitute, nor was it intended to stand in for, the significant work of synthesis that Berlin never produced during his lifetime. While the intellectual terrain covered in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* is comprehensive, it does not substantially alter the shape of Berlin’s previous reflections on the Enlightenment and its rancorous sibling, the largely German Counter-Enlightenment.

Within the circuitous confines of Berlin’s work in the history of ideas, the Enlightenment receives cursory attention and almost cavalier disregard. He only examines the Age of Reason in one essay – ‘The Philosophers of the Enlightenment’ – but does not advance a clear interpretation of the age. Rather, his focus is on some of the philosophers who helped to shape Enlightenment thought, such as Berkeley and Kant, but he does not

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4 For the genesis and intended scholarly contribution of the manuscript’s publication, over fifty years after Berlin wrote it, see Henry Hardy’s preface to Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Influence on Modern Thought*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

consider the Age of Reason as a unified movement. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Berlin’s interpretation, one point is clear. For reasons of scholarly interest and personal predilection, Berlin had a pronounced tendency to read the Enlightenment through the ‘lens’ of some of its most ardent and implacable critics. His engagement with the thinkers and thought of the Enlightenment was inflected by his interest in the largely German thinkers of the first wave of Counter-Enlightenment thought. When we flick through the indexes and contents pages of Berlin’s works, we find myriad references to some of the great and quixotic figures of the Counter-Enlightenment: names like Giambattista Vico, Niccolò Machiavelli, Joseph de Maistre, Johann George Herder, Johann Georg Hamann, Moses Hess, Carl Gustav Jacobi, Johann Gottlieb Fichte jostle for attention in Berlin’s essays.

By contrast, some of the great enlighteners of the eighteenth century, such as Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and d’Alembert, appear with much less regularity, and he rarely examines their thought in isolation from the Counter-Enlightenment. Moreover, much like Jacob Talmon7, his close contemporary and ideological comrade, Berlin regards the Enlightenment, in the historiographical tendency of the time, as a single and united movement, largely French in character and rationalist in orientation, led by the most influential thinkers of the French eighteenth century. In an illuminating and characteristic judgement, Berlin describes Voltaire as the most redolent thinker of the Age of Reason, at once a central protagonist in, and the chief curator of, the victories of enlightened thought over reaction and obscurantism: “Voltaire is the central figure of the Enlightenment, because he accepted its basic principles and used all of his incomparable

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wit and energy and skill and brilliant malice to propagate these principles and spread havoc in the enemies camp”.

While Berlin never denies that the ‘part of humanity’ could be fractious, with significant sources of disagreement often pitting the philosophes against each other – Condorcet, after all, was hardly the mirror image of Rousseau – he is adamant that the Age of Enlightenment forms what the phrase suggests: a self-conscious age of revolutionary change, largely united and coherent, with Voltaire as its most characteristic and charismatic figure. Importantly, Berlin never viewed the Enlightenment as differentiated by defining national contexts, at least in anything more than a geographical sense. The Age of Reason, Berlin avers, is resolutely French in character, and soars above all geographical and cultural boundaries. Its most ardent and incisive enemies, with some notable exceptions, such as Vico, came from the small German states, especially the pietist stronghold of Prussia. Berlin, in a manner that resembles a form of high-altitude scholarship, paints the Age of Reason in the colours of the French tricolour. While the Enlightenment might possess a number of derivative manifestations, such as its weaker analogue in the German states, its dominant current is as French as the Seine.

The diametrically opposed interpretation of the Enlightenment – advanced in a seminal revisionist work like The Enlightenment in National Context, in which the Age of Reason is interpreted as a series of smaller and nationally specific movements – finds no discernible echo in Berlin’s thought. We can define Berlin’s view of the Enlightenment, therefore, in the following philosophical and historical shorthand, which is undeniably schematic, but manages to express the sweep of Berlin’s interpretation: the Age of Reason

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10 As one of the first works to question the idea of a unified, and largely French, Age of Enlightenment, the contributions to The Enlightenment in National Context make an interesting point of comparison with Berlin’s ‘unitary’ interpretation, which denies that the Age of Reason is multifarious and national in character, with each ‘local’ Enlightenment developing its own nationally specific forms and inflections. For an elaboration of this influential historiographical argument, see Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich (eds.), The Enlightenment in National Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
is a French thesis, quickly followed by a German antithesis, without the clash of the two producing a resultant synthesis, despite the best efforts of thinkers like Hegel and Marx.\footnote{For this interpretation of the Counter-Enlightenment – that is, as itself a modern movement, coeval with the rise of modern thought, and therefore inseparable from the Age of Reason – see Mark Lilla’s contribution to \textit{Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment}, ‘What is Counter-Enlightenment?’, p. 1} Although the Enlightenment is shadowed by the Counter-Enlightenment in Berlin’s historiography, both movements are distinct and discrete, even if the latter is dependent on the former for the identity of its contrarian perspective.\footnote{For a powerful critique of Berlin’s idea of a separate and inherently hostile tradition of Counter-Enlightenment thought, see Robert E. Norton, ‘The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment’, pp. 635-658.} For Berlin, the differences that separate the partisans of the Enlightenment – such as the divide between those, like Rousseau, who defended a form of primitivism, and those who looked upon the advancement of the arts and sciences without great concern, such as d’Alembert – are outweighed by the common ground upon which the \textit{philosophes} built their attacks on the \textit{Ancien Régime} and its secular and theistic lieutenants.\footnote{For an overview of the shared presuppositions and principles that, in Berlin’s judgement, transformed the often fratricidal tendencies of the \textit{philosophes} into the fraternal form of a united movement, see Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism’, in Henry Hardy (ed.), \textit{Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder} (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 243-364, at p. 277.}

In a manner that flows from his historiographical perspective, Berlin maintains that a thinker as heretical as Rousseau, frequently a powerful critic of his fellow \textit{philosophes}, should not be described as an enemy of the ‘party of progress and civilisation’, at least in the same manner as Vico or Hamann. Intent on denying Rousseau’s heterodoxy, Berlin maintains that the great Genevan is a member in good standing of the ‘party of humanity’, not in spite of the arguments advanced in his major works, but because of them. For Berlin, this is fundamental to a sound interpretation of Rousseau’s thought: not only intrinsically, in the interest of philosophical rigour, but also to illuminate his decisive influence on the ‘betrayal of freedom’ in the twentieth century.\footnote{For Berlin’s exposition and critique of Rousseau’s thought, which links him with the betrayal of freedom in the twentieth century, in manner that echoes Talmon’s argument in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy}, and which possesses more than a tangential philosophical connection with the critique of positive liberty undertaken in \textit{Two Concepts of Liberty}, see his lecture on Rousseau, initially broadcast on the BBC’s Third Programme in 1952, and now published as part of a collection of his radio lectures from that series, entitled \textit{Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty} (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002). The chapter on Rousseau, eponymously titled, forms chapter two, pp. 27-49.} As Robert Wokler observes, the
The heterodoxy of Rousseau’s work is neatly circumvented in Berlin’s account of the Counter-Enlightenment:

In casting as profoundly radical two provincial and, in certain respects, reactionary figures of the eighteenth century – each largely unappreciated by his contemporaries in the international republic of letters – Berlin managed to pluck from the peripheries of the age of Enlightenment the seeds that would subsequently come to transform it, without ever having to channel a course through the ideological swamps that other commentators interested in the same subject associated above all with the influence of Rousseau.15

Significantly, Berlin’s interpretation of Rousseau illustrates his contention that the Enlightenment, notwithstanding its political and intellectual radicalism, is largely continuous with wider currents of Western rationalism, a judgement that shares some common ground with Talmon’s contention that Rousseau stands close to the epicentre of the intellectual earthquake that gave rise to totalitarian democracy. In an oblique sense, therefore, the Cultural Cold War hovers over Berlin’s philosophical and political engagement with the Age of Reason.

We must now consider the philosophical character of Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment, which is founded on his contention – made explicit in Two Concepts of Liberty – that Enlightenment thought is closely tied to the philosophia perennis of Western rationalism, the idea of monism. This forms the philosophical spine of Berlin’s conception of the Age of Reason: the idea of monism constitutes the fissure that separates the Enlightenment from its critical shadow, the first wave of largely German Counter-Enlightenment thought.

If Berlin’s disparate work in the history of ideas possesses a philosophical leitmotif, then it is the idea of monism. No other concept influences his approach to the Enlightenment in a similarly overarching and decisive way. Always ready to employ a

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binary opposition in the cause of philosophical clarification – positive and negative liberty, foxes and hedgehogs spring to easily to mind – Berlin’s essays on the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment are situated between two poles of tension: monism and pluralism, with the latter forming the distinctive intellectual contribution of Counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Vico, Herder and Hamann. In Berlin’s historiography, the philosophical reign of monism—stretching from Platonic metaphysics to eighteenth century materialism—was ended by the rise of the Counter-Enlightenment. Although he never precisely dates the first stirrings of Counter-Enlightenment opposition to the central current of the Western tradition, Berlin’s historical thesis is clear: beginning with Machiavelli, and continuing with thinkers like Vico, Herder and Hamann, before ending in the largely German waters of early nineteenth century Romanticism, the Counter-Enlightenment made a return to the presuppositions that sustain monism a philosophical impossibility.\footnote{16 For Berlin’s extended development of this foundational historiographical and philosophical contention, see the posthumously published text of his A. W. Mellon lectures of 1965, entitled *The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999), especially chapters one and six, pp. 1-20 and 118-147, respectively.} This is its greatest and gravest historical achievement.

Since the idea of monism is central to Berlin’s contention that the Enlightenment is a united movement, in which even heretical figures like Rousseau are fully shaded by the umbrella of the *philosophia perennis*, we must consider the presuppositions that Berlin attributes to all forms of monistic thought. Its central aspects, Berlin maintains, can be compressed and expressed in the three propositions:

1. The first proposition is this: to all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer...If there is no correct answer to it, then the question cannot be a genuine one. Any genuine question must, at least in principle, be answerable, and if this is so, only one answer can be correct... The second assumption is that a method exists for the discovery of these correct answers. Whether any man knows or can, in fact, know it, is another question; but it must, at least in principle, be knowable, provided that the right procedure for establishing it is used. The third assumption, and perhaps the most important in this context, is that all correct answers must, at the very least, be compatible with one another.
That follows from a simple, logical truth: that one truth cannot be incompatible with another truth; all correct answers embody or rest on truths; therefore none of the correct answers, whether they are answers to questions about the what there is in the world, or what men should do, or what men should be... can ever be in conflict with one another. At best, these truths will logically entail one another in a single, systematic, interconnected whole; at the very least, they will be consistent with one another...  

Reality possesses a structure, whose secrets are amenable to human reason. A knowledge of reality must disclose the only correct way of being in the world, as long as the Truth has been correctly discerned amongst the myriad forms of philosophical chaff. This entails a decisive corollary: anyone who comprehends the nature of reality, yet fails to live by the light of reason, is not only irrational, but also immoral, and probably insane. In one of his last essays before his departure from the shores of analytical philosophy, Logical Translation, Berlin defines monistic thought as the ‘Ionian fallacy’: the conviction that, somewhere and somehow, reality must constitute a rational whole. The entire monistic tradition, therefore, is founded on an original sin in the form of an original fallacy. All suffering in this world is caused by ignorance of reality as it is in itself: the truth will liberate, and absolute truth, if it were ever attained, would liberate absolutely. As Berlin observes:

‘Virtue is knowledge’ means that if you know the good for man, you cannot, if you are a rational being, live in any way other than that whereby fulfilment is that towards which all desires, hopes, prayers, aspirations are directed: that is what is meant by calling them hopes. To distinguish reality from appearance, to distinguish that which will truly fulfil a man from that which merely appears to promise to do so, that is knowledge and that alone will save him.

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18 Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West’, p. 28.
19 Ibid., p. 28.
21 Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West’, p. 29.
22 Ibid., p. 29.
If we were to understand reality as it is in itself, so that no truth contradicts another, then the road to the fulfilment of our natures is open. To refuse to follow it is akin to a crime. In Berlin’s judgement, these fundamental convictions, which together form the core of monistic thought in all of its manifestations, constituted, for approximately two millennia, the spine of philosophical steel that held together the tradition of Western thought. As a set of interlocking presuppositions, monism, whether in the work of Plato, Descartes or Voltaire, is committed to the contention that the Truth is One, while error is manifold. All the provinces of knowledge must, at least in principle, eventually form a perfect whole. This assumption forces a further conclusion, which is logically unimpeachable if one accepts the initial premiss: a comprehensive knowledge of reality is equivalent to a liberation from our slavery to the given. Rational understanding and liberation are coextensive: knowledge is freedom.²³

While references to monism – sometimes as a substantive tradition of thought, sometimes as a convenient neologism – are frequent in Berlin’s essays in the history of ideas, its most significant development occurs in Two Concepts of Liberty. In the course of his argument, the monistic tradition is indicted as one of the necessary bulwarks of totalitarian thought. By linking monism with the eruption of totalitarianism – and, by implication, with the Final Solution itself – Berlin lays his philosophical cards on the table: monism provides a foundation for inhumanity in the name of false liberation, not only in the twentieth century, which saw its most horrific manifestations, but throughout human history.²⁴ A more philosophically ambitious and politically sweeping charge is difficult to imagine, even in the early years of the search for the origins of totalitarianism, when myriad putative pathologies of occidental thought were diagnosed by Post-War thinkers.


As Berlin observes in the final section of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, ‘the One and the Many’, the philosophical dominance of monism eventually erupted into the political sphere – in a circuitous process, the character of which Berlin never defines – in the course of the twentieth century:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail, one another. ‘Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together by an indissoluble chain,’ said one of the best men who ever lived, and spoke in similar terms of liberty, equality and justice... To admit that the fulfilment of some of our ideals may in principle make the fulfilment of others impossible is to say that the notion of total human fulfilment is a formal contradiction, a metaphysical chimera. For every rationalist metaphysician, this abandonment of the notion of a final harmony in which all riddles are solved, all contradictions reconciled, is a piece of crude empiricism, abdication before brute facts, intolerable bankruptcy of reason before things as they are, failure to explain and to justify, to reduce everything to a system, which ‘reason’ indignantly rejects... It is, I have no doubt, some such dogmatic certainty that has been responsible for the deep, serene, unshakeable conviction in the minds of some of the most merciless tyrants and persecutors of history that what they did was fully justified by its purpose.  

It is surely not unconscious that Berlin defines the drive to unify competing, incompatible and possibly incommensurable values, such as justice and mercy, as the desire for a final solution. As a Jew who escaped the Holocaust by dint of childhood exile, and who lost most of his extended family when the *Einsatzgruppen* marched into Latvia in late 1941, Berlin’s use of the phrase ‘a final solution’ encapsulates the moral gravamen of his

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critique. In Berlin’s judgement, the belief in the desirability and possibility of a final solution, no matter how terrible the cost might be, is vouchsafed by monism. The ancient faith that all values must be compatible with each other, or even entail one another, as a matter of conceptual definition, means that no moral price can be too high. The ultimate salvation of humanity depends on a willingness to countenance a terrible cost in blood spilt and lives lost. This is the core of Berlin’s charge against monism, whose pervasive influence reverberates throughout the Western tradition, and finds a powerful echo in the thought of the enlightened *philosophes*. Although it was a powerful and humane movement of political liberation, the Age of Reason never emancipated itself from the commanding grip of monistic thought. That charge is central to Berlin’s interpretation.

When Berlin describes Condorcet – although “one of the best men who ever lived” – as a monistic thinker, as he does in the previous quote, the nature of his critique becomes clearer. While deeply sympathetic to Condorcet’s liberal humanism, Berlin is highly sceptical of his metaphysics. This leads him to a far-reaching judgement: despite the historical significance and fundamental humanity of the Enlightenment’s revolt against ossified injustice, it, too, is implicated in the rise of totalitarian thought. Rationalistic monism forms the point of connection in Berlin’s historiography between the hopeful and humane thought of the *philosophes* and its inversion into the totalitarian thought and practice that disfigured the twentieth century. The Enlightenment provided a philosophical foundation for totalitarian democracy, Berlin suggests, in a manner that echoes, even if it does not mirror, Talmon’s thesis in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*.26

Berlin’s critique of the enlightened *philosophes* – politically counter-intuitive, given his defence of liberalism in a negative key – raises a number of exegetical difficulties, the most important of which centres on the relative superficiality of Berlin’s

26 Berlin and Jacob Talmon share a significant acreage of common ground, with each holding the Enlightenment responsible, in an oblique but decisive sense, for the development of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. While Berlin’s analytical and historical focus is on the tradition of monism, as it finds expression in the thought and political project of the enlightened *philosophes*, Talmon’s indictment is more specific: it is Rousseau, rather than the majority of his fellow enlighteners, who is responsible for introducing the contagion of totalitarian democracy into modern thought and political practice. The historical idealism of both thinkers is made manifest in their respective charges.
direct engagement with the Age of Reason as an independent intellectual and political movement. In a biographically telling sense – which can be pushed too far, given the significance of Enlightenment thought in his biography of Marx – Berlin often appears to read the Enlightenment as an unmodulated backdrop to the rise and influence of Counter-Enlightenment thought. While there is some truth to this reading, which receives textual support because of a lack of actual text, it has the potential to obscure an important point. Despite its breezy brevity, Berlin’s interpretation of the Enlightenment deserves to be read as an expression of substantive intent. Within Berlin’s oeuvre, there are few more important statements of his ambivalent relationship to the Enlightenment than a tangential aside made in his interview with Ramin Jahanbegloo. When he is questioned about the influence on his own thought of Vico and Herder, Berlin responds both obliquely and tellingly: he has no hesitation in affirming his commitment to the political legacy of the enlightened philosophes, but criticises the narrowness, even the outright one-dimensionality, of their common metaphysic:

Why am I interested in Vico and Herder? Fundamentally, I am a liberal rationalist. The values of the Enlightenment, what people like Voltaire, Helvétius, Holbach, Condorcet, preached, are deeply sympathetic to me. Maybe they were too narrow, and often wrong about the facts of human experience, but these people were great liberators. They liberated people from horrors, obscurantism, fanaticism, monstrous views...So I am on their side. But they are dogmatic and too simplistic. I am interested in the views of the opposition because I think that understanding it can sharpen one’s own vision, clever and gifted enemies often pinpoint fallacies or shallow analyses in the thought of the Enlightenment.27

Berlin reiterates his ambivalent relationship to the Enlightenment – politically sympathetic, yet philosophically sceptical – in the course of his only foray into autobiography, a short essay, written late in life, simply entitled My Intellectual Path.

Posthumously published in *The Power of Ideas*, it provides a brief summary of his work, and was to be translated into Chinese and included in a primer on contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. As Berlin surveys the development of his thought over roughly half a century, he addresses, once again obliquely, the question of his view of the Age of Reason. He posits a close connection between the thought of the enlightened *philosophes* and the legacy of Marxism, which he sees as one of the philosophical sources of totalitarian thought. The source of his ambivalent relationship to the Age of Reason has one overriding source: its commitment to the idea of monism connects it, however unintentionally, to the totalitarian politics of the twentieth century:

I acquired an admiration for the great task which the thinkers of the French Encyclopaedia had set themselves, and for the great work which they did to liberate men from darkness – clerical, metaphysical, political and the like. And although I came in due course to oppose some of the bases of their common beliefs, I have never lost my admiration for and sense of solidarity with the Enlightenment of that period: what I came to be critical of, apart from its empirical shortcomings, are some of its consequences, both logical and social; I realised that Marx’s dogmatism, and that of his followers, in part derived from the certainties of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.  

Setting aside the biographical in favour of the philosophical, we must now accord greater attention to a defining aspect of Berlin’s critique of the *philosophes*. It defines every aspect of his engagement with Enlightenment thought: namely, his judgement that the Age of Reason is a continuation, albeit in politically radical dress, of monistic thought.  

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of Reason did not produce a seismic shift in the basic concepts and categories of the Western tradition. For Berlin, such a conceptual shift is a basic criterion of philosophical and historical significance, whose importance far outstrips all other changes in the character of an intellectual tradition. The radicalism and power of Enlightenment thought – which Berlin never denies, and frequently lauds – is based on ancient foundations. In their attack on the Ancien Regime, the enlightened philosophes, Berlin maintains, deployed a conservative philosophical armoury in the service of an radical political revolution.

As is occasionally the case in Berlin’s work, his development of this contention appears in an essay unpublished during his lifetime, The Birth of Greek Individualism. Initially planned as the first part of a study of the three decisive turning points in the history of Western thought, but later abandoned with only the first part completed, Berlin’s argument is founded on a central claim: the Western tradition has seen only three shifts in the conceptual structure of philosophical thought, in which the concepts and categories in terms which human experience is understood has undergone a revolutionary change:

The three crises in Western political theory, when at least one central category was transformed beyond redemption, so that all subsequent thought was altered, occurred in the fourth century BC, during the Renaissance in Italy, and towards the end of the eighteenth century in Germany.

Despite its transformative power and iconoclasm, the Enlightenment does not constitute a radical disjuncture in Western thought, but is connected – on the ‘subterranean’ level of philosophical continuity – to the monism at the core of the Western tradition. For better and for worse, Berlin maintains, the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment swam against the current of Western rationalism. It is no accident that one of his major essay collections, which contains some of his most comprehensive essays on the Counter-Enlightenment, is

31 Ibid., p. 290.
entitled *Against the Current*. The Enlightenment swam with the monistic current of Western thought. This forms its originary fault, which connects it to the development of totalitarian thought and practice, despite the innocence of its original intent. Berlin’s central philosophical contention is founded on the idea of inversion: the Age of Reason contributed to the rise of its antithesis.

Significantly, one of the philosophical and historical keystones of Berlin’s engagement with the Counter-Enlightenment – especially his interpretation of one of its decisive forms, the Romantic revolt against the modern world – rests on a diametrically opposed contention. Unlike the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, as one of the most powerful forms of Counter-Enlightenment hostility to the modern world, produced a revolutionary change in the concepts and categories in terms of which human experience is conceptualised. It is one of the three great and transformative crises of Western thought, in the aftermath of which, Berlin is convinced, the landscape of the Western tradition was irrevocably altered, in a way that is neither an unalloyed good nor an unmitigated calamity. However one might judge the consequences of the romantic revolution – one of the few moments in Western history where the phrase ‘a transvaluation of values’ is appropriate – its seismic character, Berlin maintains, cannot be seriously doubted. This forms the nodal point of his interpretation of Romanticism as a movement:

It appears to me that a radical shift of values occurred in the latter half of the eighteenth century – before what is properly called the romantic movement – which has affected thought, feeling and action in the Western world. This shift is most vividly expressed in much that seems most characteristically romantic in the romantics: not in all that is romantic in them, nor in what is romantic in all of them, but in something quintessential, something without which neither the revolution of which I intend to speak, nor the consequences of it recognised by all those who have acknowledged that there was such a phenomenon as the romantic movement – romantic art, romantic thought – would have been possible... For I hope to show that this revolution is the deepest and most lasting of all the changes in the life of the West, no less far-reaching than the three
great revolutions whose impact is not questioned – the industrial in England, the political in France, and the social and economic in Russia – with which, indeed, the movement with which I am concerned is connected at every level.\textsuperscript{32}

For Berlin, the radical disjunction in the consequences of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought – the former continuous and evolutionary, the latter revolutionary, an intellectual complement to the three other great revolutions in modern history – forms the cornerstone of his critique of the Age of Reason.

\textbf{III}

\textbf{The Defence of Negative Liberty}

Now that we have a clearer sense of Berlin’s conception of the Enlightenment as a continuation of Western monism, we must consider the character of Berlin’s liberalism, as he develops it in \textit{Two Concepts of Liberty}. Although Berlin addresses a large number of individual themes within the discursive pages of his most famous contribution to political thought, including his most sustained defence of value pluralism, the most significant aspect of his argument is its classically liberal character. Despite its affirmation of value pluralism as an ineradicable feature of moral experience, which introduces a note of tragedy into the fabric of life, Berlin’s position is quintessentially liberal in character – strongly coloured by the cultural influences of the Cold War, of course – but otherwise a largely classical defence of freedom as non-interference.

Although Berlin acknowledges the internal complexity of the idea of liberty, he maintains that two senses, the positive and negative, are of central importance, not only for a philosophical understanding of so protean a concept, but also as a matter of political urgency. At a time when the Cold War was intensifying, Berlin’s argument is a blow for a basically New Deal liberalism, and a defence of the individual against the claims of

\textsuperscript{32} Isaiah Berlin, \textit{The Roots of Romanticism}, pp. xii-xiii.
totalitarian politics in the form of Soviet practice. The characteristic features of totalitarian thought and practice, Berlin maintains, possess the clarity of genuine horror: one group of individuals, because of their putative rational or racial superiority, determine the fate of millions, most of whom are ignorant of the horrors to be inflicted upon them. This denial of the basic human capacity to choose is a unique form of debasement, Berlin argues.

Within both Nazi and Soviet totalitarian societies, the bulk of humanity is reduced to the status of human material, to be used as a ‘superior’ minority see fit. For Berlin, the ultimate horror is the sight of concentration camp inmates, the majority of them Jewish, whose only crime was their existence, being led to the gas chambers on some apparently benign pretext, such as a ‘disinfecting’ shower. This significant and decisive ‘moral source’, which remains tacit in the published lecture, is given its fullest expression in a letter to George Kennan, the American diplomat and strategic thinker, in 1951, fully seven years before Two Concepts of Liberty was first published:

What horrifies one about Soviet and Nazi practice is not merely the suffering and the cruelty, since although that is bad enough, it is something which history has produced too often, and to ignore its apparent inevitability is perhaps Utopianism – no; what turns one inside out, and is indescribable, is the spectacle of one set of persons who so tamper and ‘get at’ others that the others do their will without knowing what they are doing; and in this lose their status as free human beings, indeed as human beings at all. When armies are slaughtered by other armies in the course of history, we might be appalled by the carnage and turn pacifist; but our horror acquires a new dimension when we read about children, or for that matter grown-up men and women, whom the Nazis loaded onto trains bound for gas chambers, telling them that they were going to emigrate to some happier place. Why does this deception, which may in fact have diminished the anguish of the victims, arouse a really unutterable kind of horror in us? The spectacle, I mean, of the victims marching off in happy ignorance of their doom amid the smiling faces of their tormentors? Surely because we cannot bear the thought of human beings denied their last rights – of knowing the truth, of acting with at least the freedom of the condemned, of being able to face their destruction with fear or courage, according to their temperaments, but at least as human beings, armed with the
power of choice. It is the denial to human beings of the possibility of choice…

the destruction of their personality by creating unequal moral terms between the
goaler and the victim, whereby the goaler knows what he is doing, and why, and
plays upon the victim, i.e. treats him as a mere object and not as a subject whose
motives, views and intentions have any intrinsic weight whatever… that is what
cannot be borne at all.\(^{33}\)

This essentially Kantian argument, which identifies the capacity for choice as basic to our
humanity, is central to Berlin’s argument that positive liberty – while legitimate and
necessary in many of its forms – is implicated in the betrayal of freedom on the level of
philosophical foundation and historical experience. Although he never wrote directly about
the Holocaust, Berlin’s defence of negative liberty is embedded within an implicit response
to modernity’s greatest moral catastrophe. Along with his defence of liberalism in the face
of the ideological maelstrom of the Cold War, this constitutes one of the most decisive
‘tacit’ presuppositions of Berlin’s passionate defence of liberalism in the face of Nazi and
Soviet totalitarianism.

Given the limitations of space, we will only briefly rehearse his argument against
positive liberty in this section. After exploring the character of Berlin’s charge against
positive theories of liberty – that they perpetrate an inversion of liberty, turning freedom as
non-interference into a justification for despotism – we will examine a largely overlooked
aspect of Berlin’s argument, contained in section VII of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, ‘Liberty
and Sovereignty’, where he sharply distinguishes individual liberty from democratic self-
government. This, it will be argued, highlights the classically liberal character of his
political thought.

For Berlin, positive and negative liberty, although at no great logical distance from
one another, are separated by the questions that they pose and seek to answer. The central
question posed by negative liberty stands at the heart of classical liberalism: “what is the
area within which the subject – a person or a group of persons – is or should be left to do

or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" By contrast, positive conceptions of liberty, whether in their liberal or anti-liberal manifestations, seek to answer a no less fundamental question: “what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” At its core, the concept of negative liberty affirms the principle of non-interference: it is concerned with a sphere of conduct in which individuals may act as they wish, regardless of the possible opprobrium that their actions might produce.

When Berlin’s argument turns to the positive conception of liberty, his concern shifts to the question of underlying presuppositions. On the basis of its rationalist metaphysic, positive liberty as self-realisation – the form of the concept that most concerns Berlin – possesses the latent potential for a transformation, by almost insensible steps, into a justification for unlimited despotism. As Berlin observes in the early stages of his argument, the desire for self-direction, the quintessence and hallmark of positive liberty, is intimately connected with a particular construal of rationality. For the proponents of positive liberty, such as Kant and Rousseau, it is our reason that places us above nature, in which causal necessity, rather than free will, is the criterion for explanation. Moreover, positive liberty implies another significant consequence: the correct exercise of reason becomes the necessary condition for genuine freedom. The absence of this basic precondition condemns a person to heteronomy. In this form, the demand for autonomy is one of the central presuppositions of liberal humanism, and stands as the greatest political legacy of the two thinkers most closely identified with it, Kant and Rousseau.

It is the place of reason, Berlin argues, that allows the potential for despotism latent within positive liberty to manifest itself in political practice. It is the translation of the individual search for autonomy into a political theory, which attempts to order our political experience, that marks the beginning of Berlin’s argument that positive liberty is

36 Ibid., p. 187.
37 Ibid., p. 185.
vulnerable to totalitarianism. As a newly minted political doctrine, no longer focused on
the individual’s liberation from inner servitude, positive liberty is transformed, Berlin is
convinced, into its most philosophically dubious and politically sinister form: liberty as self-realisation.\(^{38}\)

For the proponents of self-realisation, the solution to the dilemma of political
organisation requires education for \textit{future} autonomy.\(^{39}\) Given the heteronomous nature of
most human beings, improving the human condition presupposes that people understand
their real interests, which only reason can reveal. This contention discloses an important
assumption behind all theories of positive liberty: the correspondence of autonomy and
rationality.\(^{40}\) At the heart of liberty as self-realisation, Berlin maintains, stands the
assumption that irrationality prevents humanity from realising its highest end: self-
direction through reason. As a consequence, the rational must educate the purblind
majority. The historical perversion of positive freedom, Berlin suggests, would be
impossible without the conflation of knowledge and liberty. Berlin is unequivocal and
unapologetic about the ground of his critique: the claim that knowledge always liberates,
which verges on an article of rationalist faith, is the basis for the great impersonation
perpetrated by the defenders of liberty as self-realisation:

\begin{quote}
It is one thing to say that I know what is good for X, while he himself does not;
and even to ignore his wishes for its – and his – sake; and a very different one to
say that he has \textit{eo ipso} chosen it, not indeed consciously, not as he seems in
everyday life, but in his role as a rational self which his empirical may not know
– the ‘real’ self which discerns the good, and cannot help choosing it once it is
revealed. This monstrous impersonation, which consists in equating X with
something that he is not, or at least not yet, with what X actually seeks and
chooses, is at the heart of all political theories of self realisation. It is one thing
to say that I am being coerced for my own good, which I am too blind to see…

It is another to say that if it is for my good, then I am not being coerced, for I
have willed it, whether I know this or not, and am free (or ‘truly free’) even
\end{quote}

\(^{38}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 191.
\(^{39}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 196.
\(^{40}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 195.
while my earthly body and foolish mind bitterly reject it, and struggle with the greatest desperation against those who seek, however benevolently, to impose it.\footnote{Ibid., p. 180.}

The severely rationalist philosophical foundations of positive liberty underlie its transformation into a justification for authoritarian politics: it is the political equivalent of Dr. Jekyll’s degeneration into Mr. Hyde. This contention forms the sustaining core Berlin’s argument against positive liberty, and also provides the basis for his qualified defence of its negative cousin. Since the latter does not rest on the same foundations as its positive counter-part, the tradition of negative liberty has not suffered the same terrible and specious reversal. That much, Berlin maintains, is disclosed by the record of history.\footnote{Isaiah Berlin, ‘Introduction’, in Ibid., p. 37.}

We must now consider Berlin’s liberalism in greater detail, which requires a turn to the penultimate section of \textit{Two Concepts of Liberty}, ‘Liberty and Sovereignty’. Given the sound and fury that greeted Berlin’s argument upon its publication in 1958, it is hardly surprising that much of the critical reception has focused on the conceptual strength of Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty. His philosophical broadside against liberty as self-realisation acted like a powerful magnet, repelling some and attracting others, for reasons that are historically mediated and philosophically telling. From our perspective, however, the adequacy of Berlin’s distinction is of less significant than a question that sits at an oblique angle to the rest of his argument: the relationship between liberty and sovereignty.

The importance of Berlin’s examination of the relationship between individual liberty and collective sovereignty rests on the connection that it provides between \textit{Two Concepts of Liberty}, usually considered a classic document of Cold War liberalism, and an older tradition of nineteenth century liberalism, more redolent of Benjamin Constant than Karl Popper.\footnote{For two excellent accounts of the French accent of Berlin’s liberalism, see Claude Galipeau, ‘Berlin and}
remain sceptical of any presumed symmetry between freedom from interference, the touchstone of liberal thought, and democratic self-government. Berlin’s argument is a warning against the identification of popular sovereignty with freedom from interference. Democratic tyranny is not a contradiction in terms, despite Rousseau’s protestations to contrary, but a possible consequence of conflating two conceptually exclusive goods: democracy and liberalism. This is a basic tenet of Berlin’s argument.

Of course, the philosophically tense relationship between liberalism and democracy, which requires a perpetual balancing exercise in all liberal democratic societies, has been extensively explored from a wide variety of perspectives. The comparative unoriginality of Berlin’s position, however, should not blind us to its importance for the nature of his liberalism. Despite the philosophical radicalism of his commitment to value pluralism, Berlin’s demarcation of negative liberty from collective sovereignty places him within the wider ambit of liberal thought in the nineteenth century. He is a fellow-traveller of Mill, Constant and de Tocqueville. As we shall see below, this is decisive for the relationship between Berlin’s liberalism and his work in the history of ideas: it throws into sharper relief the putative contradiction, identified by Lilla, between Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment, where he seems to accuse the philosophes of proto-totalitarian tendencies, and his liberal political thought, which sees him defend the political child of Enlightenment thought: liberalism in a classical key. Politically, Berlin was a liberal; philosophically, Lilla maintains, he adopted a fundamentally incoherent position, Counter-Enlightenment liberalism, whose force is the devastation, from within, of his political thought.

Liberty as non-interference, Berlin maintains, is compatible with some forms of autocracy, in which autonomous self-government is denied, although the individual is left with a small area of free action. A guaranteed sphere of non-interference, granted by an

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enlightened despot, does not require the rule of the majority. At least in theory, a tyranny of one is compatible with the negative liberty of the many. For the proponents of the negative freedom, Berlin observes, the source of power is less important than the area of control itself. The aim of negative liberty is not autonomous self-government according to the dictates of reason, but the creation and maintenance of a significant area of non-interference:

Just as democracy may, in fact, deprive the individual citizen of a great many liberties which he might have in some other form of society, so it is perfectly conceivable that a liberal-minded despot would allow his subjects a large measure of freedom. The despot who leaves his subjects a wide area of liberty may be unjust or encourage the wildest inequalities, care little for order, or virtue, or knowledge; but provided he does not curb their liberty, or at least curbs it less than many other regimes, he meets with Mill’s specification.44

Liberty as non-interference is not logically connected with self-government, whether in its individual and Kantian form or in its collective and democratic versions. Despite the heroic efforts of Rousseau to harmonise individual liberty with the demands of the general will, there is no necessary connection between democracy and individual liberty. The correlation is purely empirical and contingent. Berlin is adamant on this point. While democratic government might provide a stronger bulwark against the suppression of basic human rights, this is a matter of ‘constant conjunction’: a merely contingent connection in practice, precarious and marked by conceptual tension, but never logical necessity. As Berlin observes, the central question troubling the defenders of negative liberty – “how far does government interfere with me?” – is the moral and logical antithesis of the concern animating proponents of self-government, whose fundamental point of orientation is the question: “by whom I am ruled?”45

45 Ibid., p. 177.
In a judgement that echoes, with the self-consciousness of philosophical intent, nineteenth century liberal thinkers like Constant and Mill, Berlin maintains that the rule of majorities should never be confused with a more basic conception and experience of freedom: liberty as non-interference. Like all the great philosophical and political edifices of modern thought, the ideal of democratic self-government will only swear unbending allegiance to its own aims and principles. All democracies, without sinning against their central convictions, can suppress the negative liberty of the individual, all the more swiftly and brutally if that freedom swims against the tide of majority opinion.\footnote{Ibid., p. 210.}

The posthumous echo of John Stuart Mill, no less than warnings Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville, are manifest in the pages of Berlin’s argument. Making common cause with these defenders of individual liberty against the claims of both tyrants and empowered majorities, Berlin observes that no society should be considered free unless it is founded on two interrelated conditions: firstly, that only rights can be considered absolute, with power enjoying nothing more than a contingent claim to precedence; and, secondly, that there must exist political frontiers, guaranteed against all invasion, within which the individual is free to act unhindered. The character of these barriers, therefore, is provided by their sanctity.\footnote{Ibid., p. 211.} For Berlin, as for the wider tradition liberal thought, freedom as non-interference is basic to liberal practice. It must be jealously guarded against the claims of self-government. In Berlin’s judgement, this is the lesson of nineteenth century liberalism to its twentieth century successor, whose importance can only be ignored at the cost of imperilling individual liberty itself:

This [the principle of non-interference] is almost at the opposite pole from the purposes of those who believe in liberty in the ‘positive’ – self-directive – sense. The former want to curb authority as such. The latter want it placed in their own hands. That is the cardinal issue. These are not two different interpretations of the single concept, but two profoundly divergent and
irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life. It is as well to recognise this, even if in practice it is often necessary to strike a compromise between them. These claims cannot both be fully satisfied. But it is a profound lack of social and moral understanding not to recognise that the satisfaction that each of them seeks is an ultimate value which, both historically and morally, has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind.\footnote{Ibid., p. 212.}

This judgement, with which Berlin concludes his argument in ‘Liberty and Sovereignty’, forms one of the deepest moral sources of Berlin’s own liberalism, no less significant than his affirmation of value pluralism, which enjoys a much more tense relationship with the otherwise quintessentially liberal character of his political thought.

We must now examine the relationship between Berlin’s liberalism, which sees him defend the liberalism in a classical key, thereby aligning him with the thought and legacy of the Enlightenment, and his apparent turn away from the Age of Reason, as explored above. Given the sceptical tone of his engagement with the Enlightenment, Berlin seems to be marching out of step with the historical and philosophical foundation of his own liberalism. This brings us to Lilla’s charge against Berlin’s thought: that he is a committed liberal in full flight from the philosophical ground of his own political tradition, much like a man trying desperately to escape his own stubborn shadow. For Lilla, this unusual political project, more akin to a philosophical contortion act than an exercise in political theory, founders on the shoals of incoherence and confusion. We must consider Lilla’s indictment in greater detail below.

\section*{IV}

\textbf{Berlin as Counter-Enlightenment Liberal: Lilla’s Critique}

When we read Berlin’s defence of negative liberty, we are witnesses to a liberal mind defending a quintessentially liberal credo. Throughout his most politically engaged
essays, such as *Two Concepts of Liberty* and *Historical Inevitability*, Berlin writes in the shadow of the great classical liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century. His defence of negative liberty and condemnation of historical inevitability bear the distinctive hallmarks of a liberal legacy in a classical key. His empiricism, scepticism and nominalism, which together form the foundation of his defence of the individual against the claims of history, are an inheritance from a time when liberal thought, largely inchoate until the nineteenth century, achieved its greatest philosophical expression and attained some of its most notable political victories. This is the point in Berlin’s work, a philosophically telling one, where an apparent contradiction complicates the smooth transfer of a proud legacy.

Despite its philosophical significance, its lineaments can be stated with some economy. Although Berlin defends classical liberalism in the face of totalitarianism, his work in the history of ideas, as we saw above, seems to produce a resounding critique of the philosophical foundations of liberalism. Berlin’s essays and lectures in intellectual history, most of which are devoted to Counter-Enlightenment thought, seem to indict the Enlightenment as complicit in the rise of totalitarianism. In certain moods, at different times, Berlin accuses the Age of Reason of being latently monistic, inflexible, authoritarian, doctrinaire, intolerant and blindly universalising. Notwithstanding their humane and liberating intentions, the enlightened *philosophes* laid the foundations for the siren call of totalitarian thought. Berlin seems to affirm a paradoxical and troubling conclusion: the foundations of liberal thought, both historically and philosophically, were

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49 Within the winding and disparate corpus of Berlin’s work, there are a number of essays that can be, and often have been, read as a critique of the Enlightenment as a necessary, if unwitting and paradoxical, foundation for the implosion of liberal institutions in the face of totalitarian thought. Among these can be counted the following, which are not listed in an order of significance: ‘Vico and Herder’, in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 1-168; *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993); ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, ‘The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities’, all in Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (eds.), *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), pp.243-269, pp. 269-326 and pp. 326-359; ‘The Pursuit of the Ideal’, ‘The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West’, ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’, all in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 1-20, pp. 20-49, pp. 91-175 and pp. 207-238. This is not, and is not meant to be, an exhaustive list of the essays in which Berlin appears, either directly or obliquely, to be tarring the Enlightenment with the brush of totalitarianism, yet together they serves as an excellent example of the ubiquitous nature of this theme in his essays.
complicit in the downfall of liberal practice. In Berlin’s writings, composed at a time when the hopes of the Enlightenment seemed to be little more than a mocking dream, the Age of Reason appears to stand accused of a bewildering crime: preparing the ground for the murder of its most faithful child, liberal thought. In a philosophical and political sense, this is a tragedy to rival Lear. A more poisonous inheritance is difficult to imagine.

Few critics have developed a more powerful and nuanced critique of Berlin’s apparent turn away from the Enlightenment than Mark Lilla. The philosophical weight of Lilla’s varied and incisive work touches on the many of issues that flow from Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment, the most significant of which is also the most difficult: how must we, the heirs of the modern project, understand the legacy of the Age of Reason, its pitfalls and possibilities, in the light of our allegedly postmodern condition? Given the character of Berlin’s work, it is hardly surprising that he, that most liberal critic of the Enlightenment, should figure prominently in Lilla’s thought.

In his contribution to The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin, which he initially delivered at a conference in New York to mark the first anniversary of Berlin’s death, Lilla begins his critique by embedding it within a wider theme, for which the admonition ‘man can be wolf to man’ provides a descriptive shorthand. Simply entitled ‘Wolves and Lambs’, Lilla’s essay is focused on a central point: despite Berlin’s deeply-felt liberalism, he allowed himself to forget, or simply failed to recognise, that the thinkers of the Counter-

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Enlightenment, especially Maistre, are wolves in sheep’s clothing. The anti-modern animus of the Counter-Enlightenment, especially its implacable hostility to the basic presuppositions, cultural sensibility and political aims of liberalism, make it an effective enemy of all liberal ideals. It can never be a genuine friend to the liberal impulse, Lilla maintains, neither within the life of the mind, where it breeds confusion, nor in the life of action, where it provides a foundation for political inhumanity.

This leads to an important and inescapable question: why would a thinker of Berlin’s political sensibility, Lilla wonders, allow himself to be seduced, and even traduced, by the blandishments of the Counter Enlightenment? For Lilla, the answer is clear. Like many liberals in the aftermath of 1945, Berlin looked upon the vistas of material and cultural destruction presented by the Post-War world and concluded, not unreasonably, that there could only be one over-riding question for Post-War thought: how do the hopes and ideals unleashed in 1789 relate to the events that culminated in 1945? As Lilla parses Berlin’s historical sensibility:

the puzzle [for Berlin] is this: how did the optimistic and progressive spirit of eighteenth-century Europe give way to the dark and terrifying world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? How did the Europe that produced Goethe and Kant, Voltaire and Rousseau, Tolstoy and Chekhov, also produce the Lager and the Gulag?51

Importantly, Berlin’s orienting question produces an implicit conception of history. The need to explain the slide from Enlightenment hope into totalitarian desolation, Lilla argues, led Berlin to the conviction that the ‘power of ideas’ in history – the claims of historical materialism notwithstanding – could no longer be ignored or significantly qualified. The events of the twentieth century, Berlin came to believe, showed that ideas, when translated into practice by human action, can mould reality to a far greater extent than materialist thinkers had believed:

Berlin believed that history – or at least modern history – is driven by ideas; he also knew that modern history gave birth to unprecedented forms of suffering. He therefore presumed that the history of modern thought must bear at least indirect responsibility for the disasters of our time, and that researching that history could help us establish culpability. He proceeded in a novel way, separating the major modern thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes, monists and pluralists, and the results were surprising. By reading Berlin we discover that the Enlightenment was not simply about establishing the idea of human rights, limited secular government, the rule of law, and empirical science. In Berlin’s narrative, the Enlightenment was an extremist movement of hedgehogs, a *Walpurgisnacht* of philosophical monism that foreshadowed the rise of a new race of despots.\(^2\)

For Lilla, Berlin’s idealist conception of modern history is an example of the liberal sensibility coming face to face with the ‘radical evil’ of totalitarianism. This is vital, for one overriding reason. Berlin’s turn away from the Enlightenment, like a man turning his back on a friend with a Janus face, was never a rejection of liberalism, whether philosophically or politically, but a critique of the Age of Reason in the name of liberalism itself. That is central to Lilla’s argument.

Berlin’s judgement that modern thought must bear some of the responsibility for the destruction of its own greatest hopes, Lilla maintains, forced him to view the rationalism of the Enlightenment – that veritable ‘*Walpurgisnacht* of philosophical monism’ – as the foundation of a deformation of the European mind that would culminate in Nazism and Stalinism. The rationalist failings that Berlin discerned within the Age of Reason persuaded him of two interconnected propositions from which he never wavered: liberalism must be saved – that much is a *sine qua non* of Post-War politics – yet the Enlightenment project is beyond salvation. This pushed Berlin, Lilla maintains, towards a radical conclusion: since the Enlightenment is complicit in its downfall, no matter how innocent its collaboration might have been, the salvation of liberalism must be sought

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\(^2\) *Ibid.*, p. 34.
outside of Enlightenment thought. Liberalism must be divorced from the Age of Reason. From the shocked vantage point of the Post-War years, Lilla avers, it seemed inconceivable to Berlin, as it did to some of his contemporaries, such as Jacob Talmon, that a return to the Enlightenment could save liberalism. From here, Lilla suggests, it was but a short step to the contention that the Counter-Enlightenment, despite its anti-modern and anti-liberal animus, could provide the philosophical resources for a liberalism chastened by the experiences of the twentieth century.

In Lilla’s judgement, Berlin seems intent on straddling, with greater conviction than justification, a treacherous philosophical gulf. As a political thinker, Berlin divorced philosophy from politics. For Lilla, this forced divorce, carried out against the best interests of both parties, is one of the causes of the contradiction that threatens to overwhelm Berlin’s liberalism, which has its origin in a clash of disciplines within Berlin’s thought. His work in the history of ideas undermines his political thought. Berlin’s defence of liberalism against the legacy and continuing reality of totalitarianism is on an a collision course with his critique of the Enlightenment.

Berlin’s thought, consequently, is an example of a unusual political project, whose humane aim is not matched by its philosophical acumen: he is a liberal intent on basing his commitment to liberal politics on the foundations provided by the enemies of liberal reason. Berlin’s thought is an extended attempt at yoking together the political thought and sensibility of de Tocqueville, Constant and Mill to the anti-modern hostility of Vico, Herder, Hess and Hamann.\(^5\) This does not yield a new and stronger synthesis, Lilla suggests, but produces the philosophical and political equivalent of Frankenstein’s

monster: a tragic creature whose form and character have little in common with its creator’s hopes.

For Lilla, this is Berlin’s cardinal error. He did not sufficiently appreciate that politics and philosophy are locked in an intimate and always dangerous embrace. This returns us to the substance and title of Lilla’s essay: ‘Wolves and Lambs’. By turning to the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment for an alternative to the compromised legacy of the Enlightenment, Berlin overlooked, in an excess of liberal zeal, that the critique of the Age of Reason was often written by the wolves. Although Herder was no Maistre, as Lilla readily admits, the idea that the Counter-Enlightenment critique of Enlightenment thought can provide a foundation for a new ‘liberalism of fear’ founders on the shoals of its own liberality. Convinced that the Enlightenment contained the seeds of its own devastation, Berlin was blinded to a more fundamental truth: the philosophical critique of the modern world is inimical to liberalism, the quintessence of Enlightenment thought. Although Berlin saw them as subtle and insightful foxes, the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment were the intellectual parents, Lilla argues, of the wolves that would, two centuries later, destroy the hopes and achievements of the Age of Reason:

The distinction between wolves and lambs goes to the very heart of the liberal tradition. *Homo homini lupus*: because man can be wolf to man, Enlightenment liberals worked for a political order that would protect basic human decencies, and they demolished justifications for arbitrary cruelty that rested on appeals to revelation and tradition. Isaiah Berlin himself joined this effort in 1950s, when he took on those modern justifications of cruelty based on historical necessity or utopian visions of positive liberty. But Berlin, like many liberals today, was also haunted by the worry that liberalism’s attachment to universal principles, discovered through reason, somehow rendered it less liberal and tolerant than it ought to be…So although Berlin credited the Enlightenment with fathering modern liberalism, he repeatedly laid the charge of monism at its feet, describing it as absolutist, deterministic, inflexible, intolerant, unfeeling, homogenizing, arrogant, and blind. This is indeed a weighty charge…Isaiah Berlin convinced himself that the Enlightenment had pushed the principle of reason too far, and that there might be something to the Counter-Enlightenment
claim that, seen in cultural perspective, black deeds are not really as black as they appear.\textsuperscript{54}

Berlin’s liberalism, Lilla maintains, rests on the intellectual foundations that helped to destroy liberal Europe between 1914 and 1945. Acutely aware of the wolves baying at the door of liberalism, and committed to preventing their entry a second time, Berlin attempted to bar the door, yet inadvertently left it ajar. Infused with the anti-modern impulses of the Counter-Enlightenment, yet committed to a defence of liberal political thought, Berlin’s political philosophy, Lilla argues, undermined his political judgement.

This represents the philosophical and historical crux of Lilla’s charge. Berlin’s political thought, despite its honourably liberal intentions, commits a form of \textit{la Trahison des Clercs}:

That liberalism, like any political doctrine, needs to be applied with moderation and prudence was self-evident to all the great liberal thinkers. But it is an error to think that the Counter-Enlightenment’s attack on reason, individualism, and modernity were merely inspired by fox-like cunning or by sceptical appreciation of humanity’s crooked timber. And it is an even greater error to think that their ideas are compatible with liberalism and can make it more decent. Though they spoke with the tongues of foxes, their words only provide comfort to the wolves, who gain strength in the twilight. A wise liberal will study such thinkers, and learns by studying their passions and obsessions. But friendship? That is impossible.\textsuperscript{55}

Berlin’s philosophical sympathy for some Counter-enlightenment thinkers, Lilla suggests, overwhelms his political judgement. It is significant that Lilla attacks Berlin’s thought as a betrayal of liberalism by an otherwise sincerely liberal thinker, writing from within the tradition of orthodox liberalism. Berlin’s defence of political liberalism, Lilla is convinced, can never hope to escape the consequences of its underlying presuppositions. His intellectual project is founded on the misguided attempt to graft a poisonous branch onto

\textsuperscript{54}Lilla, ‘Wolves and Lambs’, pp. 36 and 40-41. The italics occur in the original.

\textsuperscript{55}Mark Lilla, ‘Wolves and Lambs’, pp. 41-42.
the liberal tree. In attempting to seek refuge within the pluralist, historicist and anti-rationalist world of Counter-Enlightenment thought, Berlin mistook the wolves for the lambs. As Lilla observes, in a striking metaphor, Berlin welcomed the stray puppies of the Counter-Enlightenment into the keep of liberal political thought, only to realise, when it was too late, that they had grown into the wolves of reactionary and even totalitarian thought and practice.56

In spite of his passionate commitment to the cause of liberalism in an illiberal century – or possibly because of it – Berlin is a liberal with a Janus-face, part Enlightener, part fellow-traveller of Counter-Enlightenment reaction. The fact that he appears unaware of his own compromised identity – a fellow-traveller in ignorance of his destination, as it were – does not change the character and danger of Berlin’s thought. For Lilla, Counter-Enlightenment liberalism is a philosophical and a political contradiction in terms.57 Berlin’s philosophical commitment to the anti-modern hostility of the Counter-Enlightenment, albeit it in a qualified form, undermines his political thought. As one of the most incisive appraisals of Berlin’s intellectual project, which closes in on the presuppositions that sustain his political thought, Lilla’s sharply judged analysis provides an indispensable context for our interpretation of Berlin’s thought. A more damning case for the prosecution, made by a disappointed and concerned friend, is difficult to imagine.

Chapter Three:

*Philosophy by Other Means: Isaiah Berlin, a Philosopher Writing the History of Ideas*

I

Introduction:

Given the dispersed character of Berlin’s work in the history of ideas, which covers the three most productive decades of his life, this chapter will serve an intermediary and analytical purpose: it will bring the philosophical presuppositions of Berlin’s interpretation of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought to the surface of attention. Although Berlin left the shores of analytical philosophy for the history of ideas, both by his own admission and by the general assent of the secondary literature, he never wrote intellectual history *qua* history. Berlin remained a philosopher. His work in the history of ideas, this chapter will argue, issues in an unusual approach to historical scholarship. It produces a form of philosophy by other means, where the ‘means’ are historical and the ‘ends’ are philosophical. On the foundations provided by his conception of historical inquiry, as we shall see in chapter five, Berlin interprets Joseph de Maistre’s thought as a clear and sharp lens for the analysis of totalitarian thought.¹

While Berlin’s work in the decades following his departure from analytical philosophy is ‘painted’ on the canvas of modern intellectual history, the medium and idiom of historical scholarship, especially the rigorous tracing of intellectual formation and

¹ Like a number of other influential Post-War thinkers – the names of Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Jacob Talmor spring readily to mind – Berlin was an historical idealist, for whom the presuppositions and principles of historical materialism are something approaching anathema. Berlin’s skirmishes with E.H. Carr in the letters’ pages of the *Listener*, which began to approach the status of a regular feature in the mid 1960s, and were conducted in tones of icy politeness and political animosity, bear ample witness to Berlin’s view of the ‘power of ideas’. Although not the sole locomotive force of world history – ideas, Berlin maintains, always bear the stamp of a complex paternity – his work in the history of ideas and the philosophy of history are built on strongly idealist foundations.
influence, was never his preferred métier. His contribution to intellectual history issues in a form of historicised philosophy, and does not conform to the methodology, idiom or sensibility of historical interpretation in the strictest disciplinary sense of that term. As David Pear’s points out, Berlin left analytical philosophy without abandoning the mindset of a philosopher:

It is widely believed that Berlin abandoned analytic philosophy around this time [the early 1950s] and that his simultaneous publication of his final criticism of phenomenalism and of another article, ‘Logical Translation’, which questioned the programme of logical analysis, was a kind of clearing of his desk. He himself said, later, in his preface to the first volume of his selected writings, that he left philosophy for the history of ideas, and that the impetus for this idea came from a conversation with H.M. Sheffer, the logician. He meant that he left 

analytic philosophy, because his interest in the philosophy of history, which started with his book on Marx in the middle 1930s, was something that he never abandoned... I remember him telling me that he had contemplated the move while he was flying between London and Washington during the war. The planes were Dakotas, a successful transport with a very unreassuring appearance, and thin air just did not seem to offer enough resistance to keep them flying (like Kant’s Dove), and that, he realised, was what he felt about analytic philosophy.²

Revealingly, the disclaimer “I am not an historian”, with which he often prefaced his work in the history of ideas, was one of Berlin’s most frequent autobiographical and scholarly claims. While he often adopted a tone of self-deprecation in the course of self-judgement – partly out of modesty, perhaps, or from a sincere sense of scholarly limitation – there is no sound a priori reason for his interpreters to second guess his judgement. Whether self-deprecating, simply paradoxical or revealingly sincere, we should take Berlin at his word.

If we accord Berlin the right to pass judgement on himself, we can see that, although his turn to the history of ideas greatly expanded the historical scope of his work,

his guiding intellectual method – conceptual analysis of earlier thinkers and thought – remains that of a philosopher writing the history of his subject (even if his interests lie in the more quixotic byways of the Counter-Enlightenment, rather than within the canonical highways of modern thought). Unlike historical writing in its traditional form, Berlin’s essays on the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment are works of philosophical analysis, concerned with excavating presuppositions and judging arguments. They are not exercises in purely historical interpretation and reconstruction.

This distinction will shadow the argument developed in this chapter. Berlin must be read as a thinker for whom intellectual history is a stage for philosophical analysis across the boundaries of geography and history. Given this presupposition, he is hostile to the claims of contextualist history, as put forward by members of the Cambridge School, such as Quentin Skinner. This scholarly divide will form a significant point of comparison. In opposition to the methodological principles of the Cambridge School, Berlin’s practice of philosophy by other means is marked by a transhistorical sweep and a commitment to writing about the past from a perspective of contemporaneous concern. The exploration of contemporary dilemmas through an engagement with significant thinkers of the past as if they were our contemporaries forms the bedrock of Berlin’s intellectual method. That is the central contention of this chapter. Our argument will proceed through the following steps.

Firstly, we will explore an apparent paradox in Berlin’s work, whose relative philosophical superficiality is outweighed by the light that it shines on his approach to the history of ideas. It rests on a foundation of biographical fact. While Berlin left the austerely

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3 When one considers Berlin’s early essays in epistemology, which date from the mid 1930s to the early 1950s, with his later contributions to the history of ideas, the difference in scholarly range and intellectual sensibility is stark: the curious reader need only consult the biographical and scholarly gulf separating works like ‘Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements’, published when Berlin was a member in good standing of Oxonian philosophy after its radicalisation by logical positivism, and his study of Johann Gottfried Herder, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’, which was published in 1976, in book form. Although a continuous authorial sensibility is discernible in both essays, their divergent content decisively alters their form: while the characteristic cadences of Berlin’s essays in the history of ideas, sweeping the reader along in waves of subordinate clauses, are evident in his purely philosophical work, only his essay on Herder, both understandably and justifiably, comes close to a portrait in prose, in which Herder’s thought and sensibility seem to reassemble themselves on the pages of Berlin’s interpretative study.
conceptual vistas of Oxonian philosophy in an ordinary language key for the history of ideas, his thought retains the unmistakable ‘accent’ of his education and early intellectual formation. In Berlin’s essays in the history of ideas, the demands of philosophical analysis outweigh the need for historical contextualisation.

This contradiction in a minor key – which sees Berlin abandon the scholarly world of A.J. Ayer and J.L. Austin, but also allows him to approach intellectual history as historicised philosophy – highlights the grounding presupposition of Berlin’s work in the history of ideas. Problems of pressing contemporary concern, such as the origins and nature of totalitarianism, can be explored through an engagement with the history of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. The past can be explored from the perspective of, and has the power to illuminate, contemporary philosophical and political dilemmas: philosophy outstrips history. For Berlin, history is the medium; philosophy is the substance.

The philosophical base and bias of Berlin’s approach to intellectual history leads the argument to its comparative phase. This will involve exploring Quentin Skinner’s defence of contextualist intellectual history, developed in his seminal contribution to the philosophy of history, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*. By applying the philosophical resources of speech act theory to the history of ideas – thereby allying himself with Austin, Searle, Wittgenstein and Grice, who provide the philosophical armoury for an historical critique – Skinner develops a philosophy of interpretation that is antithetical to Berlin’s approach to history. For Skinner, a contemporaneous historical perspective, in which the past is read for insights into the present, produces little more than historical distortion in the service of barren philosophical analysis. Anachronism is the child of contemporaneity.

The reasons for this comparison are entirely philosophical, and are confined to the realm of meta-historical analysis. Our concern is with the philosophical foundations of Berlin’s historical scholarship. By exploring Skinner’s critique of historical interpretation
on the basis of contemporary concern, we will be able to highlight the method that underlies, and lends coherence to, Berlin’s work on Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought, which is indebted to Oxonian philosophy in the 1930s, but is warmed by a greater historical range and sensitivity.

Moving from the related perspectives of biographical paradox and historiographical comparison, the argument will conclude with an examination of the philosophical grounds of Berlin’s approach to history as philosophy by other means. The unusual shape of Berlin’s work in the history of ideas – philosophical in substance and historical in medium, while hostile to the assumptions of contextualism – is derived from two related sources. Firstly, Berlin relies on a reading of Kant in a radically empiricist vein, which dismantles transcendental idealism, and thereby leaves only a Kantian conception of philosophy standing in its wake. For Berlin, philosophical analysis is an examination of the concepts and categories in terms of which, not about which, we think. Philosophers must lay bare the subjective presuppositions of experience. This is the nature of their subject and the source of their scholarly utility.

As we shall see, Berlin’s philosophical debt to Kantian thought – which underlies his conception of philosophy, and produces an analytical Kantian form of empiricism, more Humean than strictly Kantian – is similar to Peter Strawson’s re-interpretation of the critical project in an analytical key. Berlin’s work also draws on the pervasive influence, imbibed in his philosophical youth, of the deflationary scepticism at the core of Oxonian philosophy in the afterglow of logical positivism. These philosophical legacies are base: all else is superstructure. Strongly analytical in character, stripped of transcendental idealism, and committed to the analysis of the presuppositions of experience, Berlin’s neo-Kantian conception of philosophy is the foundation of his practice of history as philosophy by other means.

At this point, however, we must enter an important caveat. While Berlin cleaves to an analytical Kantian conception of philosophical analysis, his historical work also evinces
the guiding influence of historical interpretation as empathetic recreation, which he derives from both Vico and Herder. For Berlin, drawing on the historicist thought of Vico and Herder, historical scholarship demands that historians seek to recreate the self-understanding of the societies or individuals under consideration. This is especially significant, of course, when the objects of their historical curiosity are far removed in space and time.

Although an exhaustive portrait of a thinker – let alone of an entire society – is beyond the capacity of even the most learned and sensitive historian, historical interpretation cannot abjure the need for imaginative sympathy and empathetic recreation. Anything else will turn historical scholarship into scholarly dust, which would be of interest only to antiquarians, and even they might baulk at its desiccated lifelessness. Significantly, the major elements of Berlin’s philosophy of history do not issue in internal incoherence or logical contradiction, for they occupy different positions within his thought: his analytical Kantian conception of philosophy functions at a deeper level of abstraction. It is foundational.

As an approach to historical understanding, Berlin’s empathetic method presupposes a transhistorical conception of history, for which his understanding of philosophy provides the foundation. In its absence, the call to imaginative recreation would be left without a sustaining philosophical foundation. As a necessary and foundational basis for their interpretative labours, historians must assume that they possess some form of access to the past, more or less clear and distinct in character, which allows them to transcend historical particularity. Without the foundation provided by his neo-Kantian inflected empiricism, therefore, Berlin’s critique of the Enlightenment on the basis of an apparently sympathetic reading of the Counter-Enlightenment would lapse into philosophical incoherence. History and philosophy are inextricably linked. Since this constitutes the foundation of his approach to the history of ideas, we must now enter the deeper philosophical layers of Berlin’s thought.
II

The Philosopher as Historian of Ideas

For Berlin, the great thinkers of the past can be studied for their insights into contemporary dilemmas. The illumination of the present through the analysis of the past, which elevates to literal seriousness Santayana’s admonition that only understanding the past can prevent recidivism in the present, becomes a basic aim of historical inquiry. A less Skinnerian position is possible, but difficult to imagine, unless one moves into the American and continental waters of Straussianism in an esoteric key. No more Straussian than he is Skinnerian, Berlin’s position is straightforward: historians need not confine themselves, for fear of anachronism and incoherence, to the task of detailed historical reconstruction, where the focus is solely on the recovery of meaning moulded by context.

The possibility that the post factum character of this approach might undermine its historical incisiveness, along with its philosophical insight, does not deter Berlin. Historical insight and philosophical illumination can flow from a reading of the past from the perspective of the present. At the core of Berlin’s approach to stands his conviction, moulded by the insights of Vico and Herder, that ideas can only be understood in terms of their development in history. As we shall see, however, Berlin’s conception of the historical character of philosophical thought has few, if any, points of contact with Skinner’s approach to the recovery of thought from the contextual boundaries of history.

We must now briefly consider the biographical background to Berlin’s conception of intellectual history. In a manner that pays superficial tribute to Skinner, yet will see us stray from the contextualist fold, we must begin our exploration of Berlin’s philosophically inflected work in the history of ideas by considering the context of his transition from analytical philosophy to the history of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. Before we can begin to enter upon this task, however, we are confronted by a puzzling

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situation. Although Berlin has often been hailed as one of Britain’s finest historians of ideas, an immediate question presents itself: can he be described as an historian in the fullest sense of the term?\textsuperscript{5}

The events surrounding Berlin’s departure from analytical philosophy, much like the mythology that grew up around his ‘impersonation’ by Irving Berlin at the lunch-table of Winston Churchill, has passed into something approaching intellectual folklore. We only need to rehearse it briefly here. Increasingly oppressed and depressed by his work at the Foreign Office – especially by the necessity of suppressing his Zionist sympathies within the largely pro-Arab atmosphere amongst his colleagues and superiors – Berlin had come to feel “like an opera singer who had sung one too many mad scenes”.\textsuperscript{6} Ever more affected by an inner crisis of confidence and belief, defending the department’s position in public, while despairing of its policies in private, Berlin came to the conclusion that he possessed a tendency to see the “pattern in the carpet – the larger shape of events”.\textsuperscript{7} While this might be a critical flaw in a bureaucrat, committed to administration rather than to speculation, it might be described as the hallmark of the intellectual. As Michael Ignatieff points out, working in the Foreign Office, although it had come as a liberation at the beginning of the war, had come to resemble a carousel of frustration and self-censorship.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} Berlin must be accorded some of the blame for this unusual situation, which does not apply, at least with such immediacy, to many of his contemporaries and rivals. Although their thought is the source of continuing debate and animosity, it would be eccentric to suggest that thinkers like Michael Oakeshott, Jacob Talmon, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin are not barons of defined scholarly territories. Unwilling to commit himself, Berlin never gave a clear indication, in word or in print, of his own sense of his scholarly identity. Berlin’s predilection for the moniker ‘intellectual taxi – available for hire by any editor in need of an article – discloses a tendency towards self-deprecation, but also leaves students of his work without further enlightenment. Only Hannah Arendt, for whom Berlin felt little sympathy and sometimes expressed outright antipathy, seems to share a position of similar scholarly ambivalence, albeit for different reasons. For Berlin’s view of Arendt’s work, expressed in a tone approaching outright dislike, an unusual register for him, see his interview with the Iranian philosopher and political activist Ramin Jahanbegloo, in Conversations with Isaiah Berlin (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), pp. 81-85.

\textsuperscript{6} The best description and analysis of Berlin’s critical change of scholarly direction, as so often in the secondary literature, is Michael Ignatieff’s nuanced and sensitive biography, which discusses the best-known aspect of Berlin’s ‘conversion’ to intellectual history, his meeting with the Harvard logician Harry M. Sheffer, as part of the chapter on Berlin’s experience of the war, which he spent largely in New York and Washington. This occurs on pp. 131-132. The chapter, of course, also places Berlin’s decision to abandon analytical philosophy, as he conceived and practiced it in the 1930s, within a wider biographical and historical context. See Michael Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin: A Life (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). The above quote occurs on p. 130.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 130.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p. 130.
Well aware that he was an intellectual by nature and a bureaucrat by happenstance, Berlin became increasingly convinced that a Post-War career in the Foreign Office, would be a grave mistake. A working life without the ‘pattern in the carpet’ did not appeal to him, and he began to long for the quadrangles of Oxford, where, as he joked in letters to friends, he could write a “vast work on European history in at least twenty-five volumes, which would keep him occupied in blameless drudgery for the rest of his life”. A way out had to be found.

The preceding biographical detail is more relevant than it might appear, for it leads us to a moment in Berlin’s life that illuminates – partially but insightfully – his turn to the history of ideas. In early 1944, Berlin found himself at Harvard, where he met the mathematical logician Harry M. Sheffer, whose philippics against the scientific pretensions of logical positivism, delivered over lunch at the Harvard Faculty Club, made a lasting impression on Berlin. Although Sheffer’s attack on logical positivism struck Berlin as too sweeping, the gravamen of the logician’s charge – that scientific progress could not be made in philosophical subjects, but only in deductive fields like logic or empirical fields like experimental psychology – seems to have further convinced Berlin that he could not return to philosophy as he had practised it in the 1930s. For Berlin, it seems, ordinary language philosophy could no more identify the ‘pattern in the carpet’ than could the Foreign Office.

Although hindsight can endow moments in the past with undue significance, Berlin’s discussion with Sheffer, whether literally decisive or redolently symbolic, marks a turning point in his life and intellectual development. As he later wrote about his decision,

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9 Ibid., p. 130.
10 Ibid., p. 131. Although Berlin formally abandoned the philosophy of his Oxford youth, and was never a champion of logical positivism like A.J. Ayer, even in the 1930s and 1940s, when he published a number of articles critical of the epistemological consequences of that school, he retained a sympathy for its deflationary and anti-metaphysical spirit throughout his life. His work in political theory and the history of ideas, though it repudiates the ahistorical bias of logical positivism, is marked by the sceptical spirit of the Vienna circle in an Oxonian accent. It was formative, but not foundational: the sensibility remained after the substance had waned.
half ironically, half in earnest: “I gradually came to the conclusion that I should prefer a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one’s life than when one had begun.” It was on this basis, almost more personal than purely scholarly, that he decided to leave philosophy for the history of ideas. Michael Ignatieff, sensitive biographer that he is, manages to impress upon the reader the intellectual import and emotional resonance of Berlin’s decision:

In the spring of 1944 he found himself on an interminable transatlantic flight to London. In those days the cabins were not pressurised and travellers had to spend the long hours in the dark, breathing through an oxygen tube. Unable to sleep – for fear that the tube would slip out of his mouth – Isaiah remained awake throughout the night in a dark, cold, droning aircraft, with nothing else to do but think. He always hated thinking alone, and this journey was singularly disagreeable. He went over what Sheffer had said and began to see pure philosophy as a field like criticism or poetry, in which it was not possible to add to the store of positive human knowledge... When he landed the next morning, rumpled and bleary, he had decided to leave philosophy for the history of ideas.

Berlin’s road to Damascus in a Dakota is a decisive moment in his intellectual development. His abandonment of the ordinary language tradition as it developed in Oxford, along with a heavy dose of Wittgenstein, throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s helps to unite the biographical with the philosophical. We must now consider this reconciliation in greater detail.

In a manner typical of Berlin as a thinker, his oblique relationship to the history of ideas is clarified in an essay that sits furthest from the disciplinary borders of intellectual history. Succinctly entitled Philosophy and Government Repression, it repays a brief biographical and philosophical reading. Its focus of inquiry – the inability of philosophy in a key of genius to flourish in the absence of negative liberty – is of less significance than

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12 Ibid., p. 131.
13 Ibid., p. 131.
one of Berlin’s central contentions, which is of only subsidiary relevance to the essay as a whole, but is of far greater significance to us. For Berlin, philosophy occupies an unusual position within the humanities, which is a direct consequence of its subject-matter and the methodological requirements that it imposes. Philosophy does not repay the sort of industrious and painstaking research that is the life-blood of subjects like history or classical philology, mainly because it does not involve research in a formal sense of the term.\textsuperscript{14} As he observes: “that is why many virtues are of little use in philosophy: patience, industry, capacity for taking pains, a retentive memory, skill in ordering material; all these excellent qualities which are needed by historians, logicians, natural scientists sometimes tend to become enemies of truth in philosophy”\textsuperscript{15}

As might be expected, Berlin’s view of the uniqueness of philosophy within the firmament of the humanities – a subject without a defined area or method of research, in the strictest sense of the term, in which patient research carries no reward – carries a decisive corollary: philosophy cannot advance in the same manner as other subjects, either those within the orbit of the natural sciences or the humanities. The reason for this scholarly exceptionalism is equally clear, Berlin maintains. An advance in philosophy, as opposed to one in history, for example, can only be achieved by the transformation – usually the destruction – of what came before. This is not a necessary feature of other disciplines. Conservation and consecration in philosophy – Christian Wolff’s careful husbanding and development of Leibniz’s legacy comes to mind – is one of the surest ways of stifling the subject. This is not necessarily the case in history or in physics. Therein lies the exceptionalism of philosophy. It is worth quoting Berlin’s extended discussion of this point. It is central to his conception of intellectual history from a philosophical perspective:

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 71.
Because philosophy at its most effective consists in radical transpositions of this type [the destruction of previous models of reality] – and the more fundamental, that is to say the less liable to normal self-examination, the categories or concepts transposed in this way are, the profounder we think a philosophy to be – its effect is necessarily in the direction of wider freedom, of upsetting of existing values and habits, of destroying boundaries, transforming familiar contours, which is at once exhilarating and disturbing...Men of genius may be creative or destructive, may be liberating or enslaving, or both in one; it is only among philosophers that men of authentic genius are necessarily to a large degree destructive of past tradition. Great philosophers always transform, upset and destroy. It is only small philosophers who defend vested interests, apply rules, squeeze into procrustean beds, try to desperately fit a great many incompatible, conflicting, contradictory notions into some formal and schematic orthodoxy which is a misapplication of some original and revolutionary vision. And when I say misapplication I mean that all attempts to construct orthodoxies out such visions are necessarily ipso facto misapplications.16

From our exegetical perspective, it is Berlin’s charge against the small philosophers, whose currency is orthodoxy and evolution, that is of greatest importance. Their contribution is one of suffocating confinement. Minor historians can add to the total sum of historical knowledge and understanding, if only in a manner that corresponds to their relatively slight gifts. A minor philosopher can make no such contribution. Berlin is adamant to the point of intransigence on this point. Even at their best, the heartfelt labours of minor philosophers, even if their work is marked by scholarly rigour, a commitment to clarity and assiduity, fairness and prodigious commitment, can do nothing more than hold back a future tidal wave. Philosophy needs Immanuel Kant more than it needs Christian Wolff. At their worst, such philosophers are a threat to their own subject, albeit a well-meaning one. Their best course of action, Berlin suggests, is to abandon their labours.

What, then, does this contribute to an illumination of Berlin’s approach to the history of ideas, from the twinned perspective of the biographically significant and the philosophically decisive? The most obvious answer is relatively unflattering to Berlin. By

16 Ibid., pp. 70-71.
his own definition and admission, he never belonged to the Olympian heights of the great philosophical revolutionaries. The pantheon of modern philosophy – Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Russell and Wittgenstein – cannot be said to include Berlin. Aware that he lacked originality of the highest order, which we can oppose to his depth of understanding and breadth of learning, Berlin decided to leave philosophy to those of genius. Although there was very little within the winding corridors of analytical philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century that he did not understand – with the immediacy of a founding architect, from the inside out – Berlin’s role was largely critical, not primary and revolutionary. He held no illusions on this point. Berlin did not fulfil his basic criterion for philosophical genius: “...in philosophy only the first-rate are of use, only the bold, uncommon intellects which possess what Russell once called the capacity for the dissociation of ideas – for dissolution of concepts which have traditionally travelled tied in bundles – for the questioning of truths so familiar, so thoroughly taken for granted, that the mere suggestion that they could be questioned, that they could be analysed, that their ingredients could be taken apart, send electric shocks through the frame of ordinary common sense or traditional philosophical thought”.

As Bryan Magee observes, in his contribution to a recent celebration to mark Berlin’s centenary, Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin, Berlin should be described as a “near genius”. While such judgements are beyond any conclusive form of justification or falsification, Magee’s contention expresses something significant about Berlin and his thought: his contribution to twentieth century thought clarifies and illuminates, but does not possess the revolutionary character of full-blooded genius. Philosophical and historical clarity, of course, are scarcely contributions of an insignificant character, yet they do not

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18 Philosophy and Government Repression, pp. 71-72.

satisfy Berlin’s own definition of philosophical thought of the very highest calibre. Berlin quietly left the fold of analytical philosophy in its Post-War form, leaving the terrain to those of the very first rank of revolutionary genius. His destination was the history of ideas.

His chosen terrain of scholarship – the major source of his renown – provided the possibility of an exploration, in an historicised but still philosophical idiom, of eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectual history. At the risk of downplaying Berlin’s historical sensitivity and achievement, historical scholarship provided the canvas for a work of the philosopher’s art. Intellectual history provided the patina – never fraudulent, but also never more than a surface layer – for an examination of inherently philosophical questions: pluralism, monism and the character of totalitarianism; the problem of positive liberty in relation to its negative cousin; and the complex and fraught relationship between freedom and knowledge, to name but three significant areas of Berlin’s concern. The history of ideas allowed Berlin to address philosophical questions historically, without engaging in a direct scholarly conversation with analytical philosophers in the strict sense of the term. Berlin might not have been a ‘pure’ philosopher of the absolute highest rank, and the history of ideas made it possible for him to explore aspects of modern thought from a perspective that lies somewhere between philosophy and history. As a consequence, Berlin did not turn to intellectual history to refashion himself as a ‘pure’ historian of ideas. He turned to the history of ideas to explore philosophical questions in an historicised manner, without thereby contributing to the discipline of ‘pure’ philosophical analysis, in the same manner as A.J. Ayer, for example. That is the necessary biographical and philosophical ground for his contribution to intellectual history. As an historian of ideas, Berlin practiced philosophy by other means: he wrote history from the perspective of a philosopher. We must now consider the sustaining presuppositions of Berlin’s approach to the history of ideas as a form of philosophy by other means.
III

Quentin Skinner and the Priority of Context

In the immediate aftermath of 1945, the experience of ultimate inhumanity left many Western intellectuals reeling in a state of almost silent shock. The moral equilibrium of an entire age had been lost, so it seemed to many, and there appeared to be good reason to fear that it would never return.\footnote{For a more detailed examination of the sense of shock that assailed many Post-War thinkers – redolently expressed in Adorno’s despairing claim, made in the course of his haunted reflections on ‘damaged life’, Minima Moralia, that there can be no more poetry after Auschwitz – see Ira Katznelson’s nuanced and incisive study of political knowledge in the wake of 1945, Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), especially chapter one, pp. 1-47.} For the majority of significant Post-War thinkers, including Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, all of whom were to rise to prominence as analysts of the European ‘Season in Hell’\footnote{George Steiner uses this phrase, at once redolent, incisive and literal, as the title for chapter two of his long essay on the intimate relationship between culture and barbarism that, in his judgement, marked and marred the twentieth century: see George Steiner, In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 27.}, recent desolation demanded an answer to an overriding question: how had the triptych of totalitarianism, the Holocaust and total war swamped the seemingly high and impervious levies of modern thought and practice? In its shortest and most striking formulation, this question can be reduced to a useful historical shorthand: how had the Ages of Reason and History succumbed to the Age of Totalitarianism?

This politically charged and philosophically disorientating question, marked by its ambition and difficulty in roughly equal measure, suggests a seemingly necessary historical methodology: the totalitarian contagion must be traced to its origin within the circuitous confines of European history. With the notable exception of Hannah Arendt, who often stood at an oblique angle to the intellectual tendencies of her time, many Post-War thinkers approached the problem of totalitarianism in a manner strongly coloured by the idea of a history of origins. This led to the further contention that ideas have a ‘locomotive effect’ on historical development, which must be traced to its original point –
on which there was no agreement, unsurprisingly – within the confines of Western thought. Thinkers like Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, Theodor Adorno, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Leonard Schapiro, to list some of the most significant proponents of this view maintained that a study of intellectual history, when conducted from the perspective of contemporary concerns, will illuminate the current situation.  

The origins of totalitarianism, these thinkers maintained, must be sought within the transformations of the *vita contemplativa*. For the analyst of the totalitarian contagion, the history of ideas is the terrain historical knowledge. For thinkers like Strauss, Voegelin, Talmon and Popper, political and institutional analyses might be valuable – this much was never seriously in doubt – but a concentration on the phenomenal world of politics could never, they believed, descend to the depths of first causes. Since it was from there, these thinkers averred, that the totalitarian virus ascended into the upper regions of political and cultural life, only a history of its origin would be able to provide the most important of antidotes: a history of its beginnings in the pathologies of European thought. This had to be the historian’s central task, one whose importance for a sound understanding of modern history and contemporary politics could hardly be overstated.

As an approach to historical interpretation and judgement, however, this raises significant difficulties, including, most notably, the justifiability of taking a fully-formed political concept like totalitarianism, and constructing a linear history of its development from the nascent to the complete. The spectre of teleology seems to hover in the wings, just out of sight, but always threatening to leap onto centre stage. Few thinkers have done more

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to undermine the historical and philosophical lustre of this approach to historical understanding, which seemed to verge on the axiomatic in the immediate Post-War decades, than Quentin Skinner, who, along with J.G.A. Pocock and John Dunn, stands as one of the three founding patriarchs of the ‘Cambridge School’ of contextualist intellectual history. By exploring the grounds of the Skinnerian critique, we will be able to illuminate the presuppositions that underlie Berlin’s practice of philosophy by other means. As we shall see in chapter five, Berlin’s historical methodology moulds the character and conclusions of his approach to the presuppositions that underlie totalitarian thought, a project that he conducts through the prism of Maistre’s darkly prescient thought.

Although Skinner’s work is almost forbiddingly wide-ranging – encompassing highly influential contributions to the philosophy of history and studies of Hobbes and Machiavelli, which translate philosophical reflection into historical scholarship – we can confine ourselves to one aspect of his thought: his critique of the ‘great ideas’ approach to the history of ideas, in which the great thinkers of the past, conceived as members of a static Parthenon of philosophical insight, are studied for their contribution to a set of supposedly perennial problems of political philosophy. Some examples of these continuous themes of Western political thought, proposed by Skinner, include the idea of the separation of powers and the problem of the basis of political obligation.

It is of the greatest significance that Skinner’s development of contextualist history grew out of a his response to the two dominant ahistorical approaches to the history of ideas. Mutually exclusive but equally damaging, in Skinner’s judgement, these two meta-historical doctrines, the canonical and the epiphenomenal, together formed an intellectual pincer movement, which left intellectual history surrounded: an outflanked discipline, condemned by both sides as a subject without a subject-matter. At the time of Skinner’s initial contribution to the historiographical debate, the late 1960s, the more dominant of these critical schools was the epiphenomenal, which is simply another term for Marxism,
especially in the form of the Annales school. In the greatest example of this historiographical school, Ferdinand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, intellectual life was subsumed within a *histoire totale*, which maintained that economics determines social and political life. More originally, Braudel extended the purview of a thorough-going materialism to the material world itself, making geography the determining ground of economics: “mountains come first.” Whatever the truth of the historical priority of mountains over economics, one conclusion was clear to Braudel: the history of ideas can have no independent life of its own.

This is the first of the two schools – the less enduring, as it has turned out – that provided the intellectual tension from which Skinner’s contribution to historiography developed. The second school, which has proven itself to be more enduring, albeit more circumspect in its scope, is defined by Skinner as the canonical approach to intellectual history. In terms of words expended and ire expressed, it stands at the centre of Skinner’s critical project. For the proponents of this outlook – which continues, Skinner maintains, to exert some influence today – there is only one purpose in studying the history of philosophy and the history of ideas: something approaching intellectual edification. The canon of Western philosophical thought, this school maintained, must be studied for its insights into relevant, which is another way of saying contemporaneous, philosophical questions and dilemmas. The history of ideas is conceived as a sprawling philosophical catalogue, from which only the those items that are of enduring and universal significance need to be studied – in isolation, shorn of their context – by historians of ideas.

Within the space left between these two methodological juggernauts, Skinner produced his defence of contextualist history, which is equally opposed to both the epiphenomenal and canonical approaches. We must now leave context and turn to

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substance, which requires an exposition of Skinner’s argument in his most famous and forthright statement of contextualist historical method, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*. First published in the pages of *History and Theory*, and recently republished as part of a two volume study, *Visions of Politics*, Skinner’s central contention can be expressed with economy: historians of ideas, even the most textually sensitive among them, have been committed to a form of ahistorical scholarship. The ahistorical foundation of much scholarship in the history of ideas – which affirms, in the very act of interpretation, that past thinkers can be studied in defiance of their historical position – has remained unquestioned, Skinner maintains, because of the implicit presuppositions that guide the authorial pens of influential intellectual historians. This contention forms the basic ground of Skinner’s argument.

As a way of exploring the complex imbrications of ordinary language philosophy in Skinner’s historiography, in which the philosophical legacies of thinkers like Austin and Grice melt into historiographical method, we must firstly consider one of the central aspects of his argument in *Meaning and Understanding the History of Ideas*. As conceptual short-hand, Skinner unites the historiographical assumptions and the scholarly conclusions of much intellectual history under the pejorative heading of ‘the mythology of doctrines’. His claim is unambiguous: by interpreting earlier thinkers from the perspective of contemporary concern, with a consequent disregard for historical particularity, intellectual historians, Skinner argues, have succeeded in producing distinguished historical mythology, but not hermeneutically sound scholarship.

In one of its forms, Skinner maintains, the ‘mythology of doctrines’ consists in interpreting an incidental remark within a classic text as the author’s doctrine on a theme that is of significance in contemporary political thought, such as the idea of equality or the separation of powers. In its second and related form, a classic theorist is criticised for

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failing to address a theme that is considered to be of vital importance to the subject.\textsuperscript{29} Both of these sins against historical knowledge, Skinner argues, are given their foundation by the inescapable fact of the observer’s mental ‘set’, which can predispose unwary historians to expect to discover, within texts that are distant in space and time, concerns that are closely linked with their own.\textsuperscript{30}

In Skinner’s judgement, the unrecognised presence of a prior ‘mental set’ at work in the minds of historians, even the most textually scrupulous among them, forces their work out of the realm of historical interpretation and into the rather different, and largely ahistorical, waters of contemporary political philosophy. Philosophical argument overpowers, even bludgeons into submission, historical insight. Scholarship has been sacrificed to the incessant demands of the ‘mythology of doctrines’.

One of the fundamental dangers of historical interpretation – the attribution of motive on the basis of our subjective expectations, which is especially salient within the history of ideas, where authorial intent and achievement are vital aspects of scholarship – has not only gone unrecognised by generations of intellectual historians, Skinner maintains, but has become a founding presupposition of the discipline. Intent on discovering the deepest meaning of a great text, influential intellectual historians have defended the conviction, often \textit{inter alia}, that the aim of scholarship in the history of ideas is the elucidation of the ‘timeless’ insight and universal wisdom of the great works of moral, political and religious thought.

The great and timeless themes of Western political thought form an unbroken ‘chain’ of historical continuity: a transhistorical philosophical ‘conversation’ is a permanent possibility. For Skinner, this general historiographical outlook – which is usually implicitly affirmed, rather than explicitly stated – rests on a series of linked elements:

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 58-59.
This...suggests that the best way to approach these texts must be to concentrate on what each of them says about each of the ‘fundamental concepts’ and ‘abiding questions’ of morality, politics, religion, social life. We must be ready, in other words, to read each of the classic texts ‘as though it were written by a contemporary’.  

The founding sin of intellectual history, consequently, is the implicit and guiding assumption that, no matter how distant in time or space a work might be, we can read it as part of an ongoing ‘conversation’. Regardless of the circumstances of its production, it can be fitted, neatly and without residue, into the great and discreet edifice of Western thought. For Skinner, by contrast, reading a canonical text in the history of political thought as essentially contemporaneous becomes a necessary foundation for historical distortion: it is a doorway into the ‘mythology of doctrines’.

As a foundational historiographical principle and an implicit guide to historical practice, the ‘mythology of doctrines’ pushes historians, even the most textually scrupulous and philosophically sensitive amongst them, Skinner maintains, into searching the highways and byways of history for an hypostasised entity. Armed with an ideal type of a doctrine – such as liberty, equality, or a more circumscribed idea, like the separation of powers – the historian as ‘myth-maker’ begins to treat the doctrine as if it possessed an immanent existence, already fully developed, like Pallas Athene, within the stream of history. If various thinkers fail to articulate the doctrine or idea, then it remains hidden or only imperfectly developed, until someone, much like an explorer stumbling onto a hitherto undiscovered island, brings it into the full light of philosophical analysis. As Skinner observes, political ideas and doctrines, once subjected to this interpretative filter, begins to resemble a growing organism, rather than what they are: abstract concepts, whose development in history is not amenable to an ‘organic’ interpretation.

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31 Ibid., p. 57. Emphasis added.
32 Ibid., p. 62.
33 Ibid., p. 62.
34 Ibid., p. 62.
The reification of a ‘unit idea’, Skinner argues, reduces historical explanation to a series of interconnected searches, different in their foci and emphases, but united in their intent, for the first intimation of the doctrine under consideration. The ideal of historical explanation, consequently, collapses into a quest for historical anticipation. The great thinkers of the past are praised or criticised for the degree to which they foresaw – or were blind to – the development of a later doctrine, such as the social contract or the idea of progress, which, in the judgement of the historian, is of signal historical importance when viewed from the perspective of the present.

When a philosophical judgement, made with the double benefit of hindsight and a contemporaneity of perspective, is allowed to determine the character of historical interpretation, then the essentially hermeneutic task of the historian is unjustifiably shunted aside: historians entrapped by the lure of cotemporaneous significance do little more than fix their “owns prejudices onto the most charismatic names under the guise of innocuous historical speculation”.35 In these cases, historical understanding is sacrificed to post facto political and philosophical judgement.36 As Skinner points out, in a judiciously phrased metaphor – one part effective rhetoric, one part withering substantive critique – the ‘great ideas’ approach turns the writing of intellectual history into “a pack of tricks that we play on the dead”.37 Historical meaning is overwhelmed by the largely extraneous, as well as contemporaneous, task of philosophical judgement with the benefit of hindsight.

We must now consider one of Skinner’s examples in greater detail, since it lays bare the connective thread of logical and historical absurdity that, in his judgement, ties together historical scholarship produced under the broad banner of the ‘great ideas’ approach. Towards the beginning of his essay, Skinner considers the claim that Marsilius of Padua anticipated, even if he did not single-handedly develop, the idea of the separation of powers. As he observes, the scholarly debate occasioned by these interpretations, while

36 Ibid., p. 64.
37 Ibid., p. 65.
marked by significant substantive disagreement amongst those involved, proceeded along resolutely textual lines. Various efforts were made, on the basis of close readings of the texts, to show that Marsilius either did or did not, depending on the proclivities of the historian, develop an early version of the doctrine. The debate focused on the issue of probability – considered as a problem of textual interpretation – and entirely circumvented the prior question of possibility. The historians who weighed into the interpretative fray, regardless of their position on the question, assumed that a close textual reading would reveal, if enough interpretative ingenuity were expended, the high probability of one interpretation being the most historically plausible. Yet their historical gaze was misdirected: the problem of probability must be set aside in favour of the prior question of possibility.

This is central to Skinner’s critique. Marsilius of Padua could not have anticipated the idea of the separation of powers, in any significant sense, Skinner maintains, for he did not possess – nor could he have come to possess – any knowledge of an idea that would not develop until roughly two hundred years after his death. When the historical stress is placed on the possibility of a thinker anticipating a doctrine, then the logical impossibility, as well as historical anachronism, implicit within the question becomes evident. Since the ‘vocabulary’ required for a contribution to a debate on the separation of powers was unavailable to Marsilius – in a logical sense, irrespective of contingent circumstances – the question of anticipation is historically void. To saddle Marsilius – the pejorative tone of the verb is apposite – with a view on the separation of powers – and then to maintain, in a judgement that heaps injustice onto anachronism, that his putative contribution is misconceived – is to cross the borders of history into a foreign country. Anachronism hoves into view and historical knowledge disappears beyond the horizon. For Skinner, consequently, “the only histories of ideas to be written are histories of their uses in
argument”. This short and constructive dictum manages to express the core of Skinner’s historiographical method.

As we shall see, the locus of Skinner’s critical perspective – the ahistorical character of much intellectual history – provides Berlin with his implicit historiographical method. Although at some distance from the ‘linear’ histories of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss and Jacob Talmon, Berlin’s methodological commitments place him four-square within the range of Skinner’s critique. This fundamental point of difference, at once philosophical and historical, will prove central to our interpretation of Berlin’s engagement with Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought.

IV

A Philosopher By Other Means

We must now consider, on the levels of guiding principle and underlying presupposition, Berlin’s attack on the ideal of contextualist history, which will disclose the philosophical character of his practice of philosophy by other means. He develops his sceptical stance in the course of a wide-ranging interview – conducted in 1992, towards the end of his life, after his scholarly engagement had waned – with the Iranian philosopher and political activist Ramin Jahanbegloo. It is an interview in a register of introspection and retrospection. This is of considerable importance from our perspective. The maxims of the Cambridge School represent an ex post facto attack on the foundations of Berlin’s thought. Although he and Skinner are separated by the variables of age and intellectual context – with Berlin the senior by thirty-one years, and an established scholar by the time that Skinner began his attack on orthodoxy – the challenge of the Cambridge School did not go unnoticed by Berlin. His critique of Skinner is simultaneously a defence of his own legacy.

38 Ibid., p. 86.
The target of Berlin’s critical ire, although no school of thought is named, is an approach to the history of ideas that proceeds on the basis of contextualisation in a Skinnerian vein. Indeed, the spectre the Cambridge School is almost manifest in the pages of the interview, hovering in the background, the target of Berlin’s critique and the source of intellectual friction. Significantly, his attack on contextualist history is bound up with his response to Jahanbegloo’s question about the character of his own work: does he consider himself a philosopher or an historian? Not for the first time, Berlin explicitly disavows the identity of historian, despite the fact that he self-consciously abandoned analytical philosophy for the wider uplands of intellectual history. The distinction between the fields, Berlin claims, is almost impossible to make. No insightful history of ideas can be written, in anything more than an expository manner, the scholarly equivalent of a stock inventory, by someone who has never been either a student of philosophy or a philosopher. Would-be historians of ideas must have felt, before their turn to history, the full force of philosophical problems on their own skins. For Berlin, they must have experienced, and must continue to experience, a combination of intellectual puzzlement and sleepless nights when confronted by a philosophical problem or by its purported solution. Nothing short of this intellectual ‘immediacy’ will produce anything more than a catalogue of names, dates and hollowed out theories. All of these strictures, of course, are as much autobiographical as they are methodological. Berlin must have been aware of this fact. He was outlining, as well as defending, his own approach to his chosen field.

39 For an explicit refusal to cloak himself in the mantle of the historian, see Berlin’s essay – one of his most historical, interestingly enough – on the power and significance of nationalism in the twentieth century: ‘Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power’. One of two major essays on the development of nationalism in the nineteenth century, when it began its rise to future significance and went largely unrecognised, even by the great historical prophets of the age, Marx, Saint Simon, Comte, before unleashing a devastating effect on the twentieth century, it was first published in the pages of Partisan Review, in 1979, and has been republished in two essay collections, initially in Against the Current, and subsequently in The Proper Study of Mankind. Berlin’s disavowal of an historian’s identity is brief but unqualified: “I am neither a historian nor a social psychologist, and do not volunteer an explanation of it [nationalism]: I should merely like to throw out a suggestion which may cast some light on this odd phenomenon”. The avowedly unsystematic character of Berlin’s approach, along with his denial of a clear scholarly identity, is altogether characteristic, and the former might even be inseparable from the latter. The quote from Berlin occurs on p. 589, in ‘Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power’, in Henry Hardy & Roger Hausheer (eds.), The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

Historians, Berlin continues, must be able to enter into the mental and emotional world of the thinkers about whose thought they are writing. They must be empathetic in a Vichian or Herderian manner. As Berlin describes his position, in one of the clearest single statements of his guiding methodological principle:

Some histories of philosophy throw very little light on it because, unless the writer is or has been a student of philosophy himself, unless he has thought about philosophical problems as such, he cannot have any idea of what it is that made someone else think these thoughts or be tormented by these problems. He cannot truly grasp what questions philosophers have attempted to answer or analyse or discuss. He will simply transcribe... That is all quite dead. Unless you have yourself spent sleepless nights about philosophical problems, you cannot possibly tell that there exists such a subject... To write a good illuminating history of philosophy you must try to see these problems from the “inside”, so far as you can. You must try to enter into what the ideas meant to those who entertained them, what were the kinds of things that were central to them. Without that there can be no history of ideas

Berlin’s distance from the contextualist maxims of Skinner is already evident in the preceding quote, albeit in an inchoate form. A philosopher’s sense of the ineradicably philosophical character of a philosophical problem is a fundamental prerequisite for an insightful work in history of ideas. The guiding assumptions of the ‘great ideas’ school, especially its contention that past thinkers can be read for their contribution to problems that are still of contemporary concern, the Skinnerian bête noire, looms large in Berlin’s account of scholarship in the history of ideas.

His answer to Jahanbegloo’s follow-up question only widens his distance from Skinner and the Cambridge School. When pressed by his interviewer about the character of his scholarly identity – historian, philosopher, political theorist, or all of the above – Berlin responds in a circuitous manner. Neatly side-stepping Jehangeloo’s suggestion that he might be a philosopher in historian’s clothing, Berlin responds with a defence of his

Ibid., pp. 23-24.
methodological conviction. As much a critique of Skinnerian contextualism as an endorsement of the ‘great ideas’ school of historiography, Berlin’s position rests on two entwined contentions. The central currents and thinkers of the philosophical canon – from Plato to NATO, as it were – have produced the guiding thread that provides a path through a maze of two millennia of thought. This continuous line of connection can be described as possessing “a certain life of its own”. It is transhistorical in a sense that Skinner – that committed analyst of a circumscribed linguistic context – would see as anachronism in the service of speculation. It is worth quoting Berlin’s conception of intellectual history in full. Nowhere in the winding corpus of his work does he address the question with greater clarity and directness:

The questions Plato asked can still be, and indeed are, asked today. The questions which Herder and Vico asked are still debated. Aristotle is a direct influence on present-day philosophy, not only on Thomas Aquinas...The major ideas, outlooks, theories, insights remained the central ideas of philosophy. They have a certain life of their own which is trans-historical. Some people disagree. They say you can only understand questions and ideas in terms of their historical environment in which they occur. How can you understand Machiavelli without accurate knowledge of events in Florence, life in Italy, in the fifteenth century?...There is some truth in that, but only some. Historians who have never been philosophers say that people who take an interest in Machiavelli must absorb themselves in the Renaissance. No doubt this helps. If you understand the circumstances of the questions he was asking, and why they occupied his thoughts, you will certainly understand him better...Central ideas, the great ideas which have occupied minds in the Western world, have a certain life of their own – we may not understand precisely what they meant to Athenians, we may not know how Greek or Latin were pronounced, we may not understand the inflections, nuances, references, allusions – but the major ideas survive in some sense despite the ignorance of the material aspects or historical details of the world in which they were born and exercised influence.43

42 Ibid., p. 25.
Although Berlin’s defence of the transhistorical character of the Western tradition comes in the form of a statement of conviction, rather than as a fulfilled argument in a philosophical register, its centrality to his approach to the history ideas is difficult to overstate.

Its significance, however, also highlights something approaching a paradox of substance. At the very least, it suggests a resonant aspect of Berlin’s thought, already alluded to above: no longer willing to follow analytical philosophers in hunting down the confusions lurking in our use of ordinary language, Berlin abandoned the subject of his youth, adopted the history of ideas as his chosen métier, but never departed from his conviction that only a philosopher, writing with an interior understanding of a philosophical problem, can produce intellectual history that is lifted above mere description by a shared sense of philosophical puzzlement. As Berlin observes in his introduction to *Vico and Herder*, one of his most sustained and significant contributions to the history of ideas, which was published in 1976, the significance of past ideas rests on their contemporaneous character, which secures their importance and their *post-facto* intelligibility:

Accurate knowledge of the social, political and economic situation in England in the second half of the seventeenth century is certainly required for a fuller understanding of a particular passage in Locke’s *Second Treatise* or of a letter to Stillingfleet. Yet what Voltaire (who did not go into such details), or the Founding Fathers of the American Republic, supposed him to mean, nevertheless derives from his writings, and solely, or even mainly, from their own minds and problems...If the ideas and basic terminology of Aristotle or the Stoics or Pascal or Newton or Hume or Kant did not possess a capacity for independent life, for surviving translation, and, indeed, transplantation, not without, at times, some change of meaning, into the language of very disparate cultures, long after their own worlds had passed away, they would now, at best, have found an honourable resting place beside the writings of the Aristotelians of Padua or Christian Wolff, major influences in their day, in some museum of historical antiquities. The importance of historical hermeneutics has been greatly underestimated by historically insensitive British thinkers in the past –
with the result that the swing of pendulum sometimes makes it appear an end in itself.\textsuperscript{44}

The historian of ideas must feel the nature of a philosophical problem, in a manner more resonant of Vico and Herder than Skinner and Pocock. He or she must understand its capacity to obsess and possess a thinker, or an entire school of thought. Context is secondary. The capacity for sound philosophical judgement is primary.

We must now turn to the philosophical foundations of Berlin’s historical methodology. This will require an examination of his essays in the philosophy of history – one of his main intellectual concerns in the 1950s and 1960s – alongside a consideration of his view that philosophy is a subject without intellectual peers. All of these essays were published in the years following Berlin’s departure for the history of ideas, appearing between about 1954 and 1965, and were composed by a newly minted intellectual historian reflecting on the presuppositions of his subject. By considering Berlin’s contributions in greater detail, we will be able to illuminate the philosophical presuppositions of his approach to the history of ideas. This will complete our examination of the foundation and character of Berlin’s historiographical methodology.

Berlin’s practice of philosophy by other means – in which his identity as a philosopher remains ‘hidden’ under the traditional garb of an historian – produces a significant corollary, which decisively inflects his approach to European intellectual history in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This effect, philosophical in character, can be summed up in one phrase, laden with an anti-Skinnerian bias and already alluded to above: a contemporaneity of perspective. History can be written from the perspective – the concerns and the needs – of the present. Totalitarianism can be understood through its history, a position that was shared by a number of prominent Post-War analysts of the totalitarian contagion, most notably Arendt and Talmon.

The preceding sections of this chapter suggested that Berlin, for reasons of biography and philosophical conviction, turned to the history of ideas in his own idiosyncratic fashion, but retained the outlook and sensibility of a philosopher. When we move from Skinner’s contextualist historiography to Berlin’s conception of history, contextualism begins to fade into something much closer to the ‘great ideas’ tradition. The emphasis on linguistic analysis, often within a limited intellectual terrain, such as the interlocking political and social worlds of Thomas Hobbes, gives way to the conviction that philosophical relevance and contemporaneous significance are basic criteria for historical significance.

This is not sufficient, however. Most seriously, the foundation of Berlin’s position remains shrouded in considerable exegetical fog. We must therefore turn to the philosophical ground of Berlin’s approach to intellectual history. The remainder of the chapter will seek to show that Berlin’s approach to the history of ideas – its contemporaneity of approach, which contravenes all contextualist bulwarks against anachronism – has as its foundation his conception of philosophy, especially his understanding of its disciplinary character and aims. By writing intellectual history with both the sensibility and methodological commitment of a philosopher, Berlin is committed to viewing historical scholarship as the medium for a largely philosophical, albeit historicised, exploration of present concerns within the terrain of the past. In short, therefore, Berlin’s understanding of philosophy sustains his contemporaneous approach to historical scholarship.

The philosophical foundation of Berlin’s historiography, which was merely stated, without much intervening argument, in the Jahanbegloo interview, is developed in his defence of the inescapable and necessary character of political theory, a judgement made against the cultural and intellectual trends of the 1950s and early 1960s. He develops his argument in one of his most philosophically illuminating essays, Does Political Theory Still Exist?, in which a defence of political theory as a discipline seamlessly melts into a
normative defence of liberal thought. In passing, it is worth noting that the clearest defence of Berlin’s approach to the history of ideas should come in an essay devoted to defending the necessity and independence of normative political theory: the preponderance of the philosophical over the historical is again palpable.

In the development of his argument, Berlin observes that, far from being little more than relics of past prejudices and sundry philosophical failures, the great models of political thought – Platonic and Aristotelian, Judaic and Christian, Kantian liberal and Romantic, to give a few of Berlin’s examples – still contend with each other, as well as with newer doctrines, in the contemporary world. Although they might have been changed and inflected by the passage of the centuries, their basic lineaments are with us still. In itself, Berlin suggests, this is provides *prima facie* evidence for the continuity of the Western tradition, and suggests a degree of precipitousness on the part of those who wish to consign the doctrines of the past to an hermetically sealed linguistic context. The doctrines of the great thinkers of the Western canon, from Plato to the present day, still possess the power to enthuse and outrage in equal measure, something for the decades immediately following WWII provide ample evidence. Karl Popper’s attack on Plato’s political thought, Irving Babbitt’s hostility to Rousseau, or Simone Weil’s condemnation of the morality of the Old Testament find no corresponding echo in the histories of the natural sciences: who feels the motivating power of indignation or impassioned commitment, Berlin asks rhetorically, for the errors of Cartesian physicists or medieval mapmakers? Only the great conceptual frameworks of the Western tradition, which organise and colour our understanding of the natural and social worlds, remain almost immovable features of the contemporary intellectual landscape. Their contemporary power corresponds to their transhistorical character:

...It is true that if the general characteristics of our normal experience had altered radically enough – through a revolution in our knowledge or some natural upheaval which altered our reactions – these ancient categories would
probably by now have been felt to be as obsolete as those of Hammurabi or the epic of Gilgamesh...But the spectacles would long ago have caused as to blunder and stumble and would have given way to others, or have been modified out of recognition as our physical and biological and mathematical spectacles have been, if they had not still performed their task move or less adequately: which argues for a degree of continuity in at least two millennia of moral and political consciousness.\textsuperscript{45}

The final sentences of Berlin’s argument are of greatest importance from our perspective, for they disclose, and are themselves expressions of, his conception of the unique subject matter and character of philosophy. To phrase the matter baldly, Berlin’s conception of philosophy is moulded by an anglicised neo-Kantianism, and has significant affinities with Peter Strawson’s defence of analytical Kantianism\textsuperscript{46}, although it is deployed at a far lower level of abstraction and philosophical comprehensiveness. If one were to reduce Berlin’s position to a definitional shorthand, then his perspective is best defined as an admixture of Humean empiricism, leavened with an anglicised logical positivism, with the significant addition of Kantianism shorn of its commitment to transcendental idealism. Nowhere near as ungainly in practice as it sounds in theory, Berlin’s understanding of philosophy, especially its unique character, unassimilable to any other branch of knowledge, must now become the focus of our concern.

For Berlin, the Kantian critical project can only be saved from the morass of metaphysical speculation, from which there is no possibility of return or rescue, by excising transcendental idealism from its philosophical armoury. Despite its violence to the critical project, such an exercise in reduction leaves a significant contention in its wake: the aim of philosophy is the elucidation of the subjective presuppositions of experience, which is a project that is compatible with, and has been at the heart of, the empiricist


\textsuperscript{46} For Peter Strawson’s interpretation of Kant’s critical philosophy – perhaps the single most influential work of exegesis, reconstruction and philosophical engagement with the Kantian critical project in the Anglo-American tradition – see his seminal work, \textit{The Bounds of Sense}, in which he develops and defends, amongst other aims, an analytical interpretation of Kant’s critical thought, which denies Kantian metaphysics, but retains a commitment to the analysis of the subjective presuppositions of experience. The latter is a core element, contrary to the tenets of transcendental idealism, of analytical Kantianism: Peter J. Strawson [1966], \textit{The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason} (London: Routledge, 2004).
tradition in an Anglo-Saxon register from Hobbes into the twentieth century. One of the central aspects of transcendental idealism – that the subject helps to constitute its phenomenal experience – is dismissed as a piece of unsupportable metaphysics, little more than a barrier to analytical precision. Since the aim of philosophical theory must be the analysis of the structure of experience – which does not require the active participation of the subject for its constitution, as it does for Kant himself – analytical Kantianism denies what transcendental idealism affirms: philosophy becomes, in manner not unrelated to an expansive logical positivism, the open-ended analysis of the presuppositions that constitute our subjective structure of experience. This is the foundation of Berlin’s conception of, and approach to, philosophical analysis, which he applies to the realm of social and political experience, thereby expanding the original and somewhat austere epistemological focus of analytical Kantianism. When Berlin maintains that he was formed by “Anglo-American philosophy and Kant”, as he does in his interview with Jahanbegloo, the latter part of his inheritance came in the form of the analytical interpretation of Kant, shorn of its metaphysical content, and translated into an Anglo-American philosophical idiom.47

This exercise in translation, which includes significant doses of Viennese logical positivism, combined with a nativist residue of empiricism from Hobbes to Mill and beyond, leads Berlin to one of his most philosophically basic and historically decisive contentions: all social and political thought, regardless of whether our exegetical aim is purely analytical or inflected by historical concerns, is founded upon the analysis of our structure of experience. All political philosophy is based the exploration of the concepts and categories in terms of which, not about which, we think. The Kantian vocabulary, albeit denuded of metaphysical content, is decisive. For Berlin, the presuppositional structure of experience is the terrain upon which a continuous philosophical battle has raged for over two millennia, with rival schools of thought producing divergent, and

47 Berlin’s definition of his formative philosophical influences is on p. 49 of Conversations with Isaiah Berlin. For a brief summary of the differences between analytical Kantianism and the transcendental idealism of Kant and his more ‘faithful’ interpreters, see Sebastian Gardner, Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason (London: Routledge, 1999),p. 30-33.
usually mutually antagonistic, interpretations of the same underlying structure. On a
philosophically basic level, for example, this is what separates the political thought of
Rousseau from that of Benjamin Constant. Both thinkers saw the same ‘furniture’ within
the world – the empirical facts of existence did not change – yet their respective
interpretations of the categorical structure in terms of which we engage with the world,
which forms the subject matter of philosophy, differed radically.

The sharp and often unbridgeable disagreements that constitute the history of
political philosophy, Berlin maintains, are necessarily about the adequacy of the models in
terms of which human beings – their nature and their institutions – are conceived.
Significantly, this is always an ultimately empirical matter.\textsuperscript{48} When Rousseau rejects
Hobbes’ account of political obligation, to employ Berlin’s example, his critique is not
based on purely empirical factors – for example, that Hobbes had omitted relevant facts
about the problem – but focuses on the adequacy of the Hobbesian model of human
nature.\textsuperscript{49} Rousseau does not mount a purely factual charge, but bases his argument on the
prior contention that Hobbesian model was “inadequate in principle; it was inadequate not
because this or that psychological or sociological correlation had been missed out, but
because it was based on a failure to understand what we mean by motive, purpose, value,
personality and the like”.\textsuperscript{50}

This form of inadequacy – which issues in phenomenological incoherence, a
distortion of human experience as it is lived – does not rest on mere definitional
deficiencies. These are changeable at will, as are all definitions. They are found at a deeper
philosophical level: our common framework of experience has been misrepresented, with
all the attendant violence that this implies to the resulting definition of human nature and

\textsuperscript{48} As Berlin observes: “These [the categories in terms of which we define the human and natural worlds] are
classically philosophical questions, since they are questions about the all but permanent ways in which
we think, decide, perceive, judge and not about the data of experience – the items themselves. The test of the
adequate working of the methods, analogies, models which operate in discovering and classifying the
behaviour of these empirical data (as natural science and common sense do) is ultimately empirical: it is the
degree of their success in forming a coherent and enduring conceptual system”. This quote occurs on p. 81 of
‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?”, in \textit{The Proper Study of Mankind}.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 80-81.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 81.
its needs. As Berlin observes, in one of the clearest and most comprehensive statements of his position:

When Kant breaks with the naturalistic tradition, or Marx rejects the political morality of Bentham, or Tolstoy expresses a low opinion of the doctrines of Marx, they are not complaining merely of empirical ignorance or poor logic or insufficient experimental evidence, or internal incoherence. They denounce their adversaries mainly for not understanding what men are and which relationships between them – or between them and outside forces – makes them men; they complain of blindness to the transient aspects of such relations, but to those constant characteristics (such as discriminating right from good for Kant, or, for Marx, systematic self-transmutation by their own labour) that they regard as fundamental to the notion of man as such. Their criticisms relate to the adequacy of the categories in terms of which we discuss men’s ends or duties or interests, the permanent framework in terms of which, not about which, ordinary empirical disagreements can arise.\textsuperscript{51}

For Berlin, our fundamental framework of experience – which is built out of the categories and concepts in terms of which we think – can never be arrived at by induction or hypothesis, for they make possible our thought about the social and natural worlds. They sustain all philosophical and scientific thought. This is the core of Berlin’s commitment to a form of analytical Kantianism: the concepts and categories that form the landscape of our thought, which include such notions as society, freedom, sense of time and change, suffering, happiness, productivity, good and bad, right and wrong, choice, effort, illusion\textsuperscript{52}, are permanent features of our common social and political worlds. They are, Berlin avers, “less stable and universal, perhaps, than in the physical one, but just as indispensable for kind any kind of intersubjective communication, and therefore for thought and action.\textsuperscript{53}

For Berlin, all philosophical reasoning is an examination, committed to analysis over metaphysical speculation, of the presuppositions that underlie our experience of the social and political worlds. Unlike Kant, and true to the character of the analytical

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 81.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 83.  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 82.
interpretation, which jettisons transcendental idealism in the name of presuppositional analysis, Berlin does not treat these categories as discoverable \textit{a priori}, but as “brute facts” about the world.\footnote{Ibid., p. 82.} These facts could have been different, and might conceivably change, if a sufficiently revolutionary force or event were to assail them. Speculating about the nature of such a force is largely idle: the imagination is almost certainly not up to the task of conceiving such a radical alteration in our sense of normalcy. Although the idea cannot be ruled out \textit{a priori}, it remains a question of mere logical possibility, and not something that we can easily comprehend, as things are now and have been throughout human history:

But if they [the categories and concepts that make up our conceptual framework] had been (or will one day be) other than they are now, our entire conceptual apparatus – thought, volition, feeling, language – and therefore our very nature would have been (or will be) different in ways that it is impossible or difficult to describe with the concepts and words available to us as we are today. Political categories (and values) are part of this all but inescapable web of ways of living, acting and thinking, a network liable to change only as a result of radical changes in reality, or through dissociation from reality on the part of individuals, that is to say, madness.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 82-83.}

Berlin’s invocation of the idea of madness as the most likely form that a dissociation from our common conceptual framework might take – on the part of an individual, at least – is a consequence of his analytical Kantian perspective. To define someone, whatever their individual characteristics, as a human being is to bring to bear the full apparatus of our conceptual framework to bear. This is fundamental, not a question of choice or judgement. It is not a question of philosophical judgement, which can be described as either incisive or barren, but is a prior necessity of all reasoning. One of Berlin’s examples will serve to further highlight this foundational point:
Thus, if I say of someone that he is kind or cruel, loves truth or is indifferent to it, he remains human in either case. But if I find a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family, since either would be an antidote to ennui or inactivity, I shall not be disposed, like consistent relativists, to attribute to him a merely a different code of morality from my own or that of other men, or declare that we disagree on essentials, but shall begin to speak of insanity or inhumanity; I shall be inclined to consider him mad, as a man who thinks he is Napoleon is mad; which is a way of saying that I do not regard such a being as being fully a man at all.\(^\text{56}\)

This returns us to the fundamental contention of this chapter: that Berlin, despite leaving the shores of analytical philosophy for the history of ideas, approached the writing of intellectual history with the mental set of the philosopher, and that this basic orientation, antithetical to Skinner and the Cambridge School, leads him to a engage with the past from the perspective of the concerns of the present.

As was pointed out above, Berlin maintains that “the spectacles [our conceptual apparatus] would long ago have caused as to blunder and stumble and would have given way to others, or have been modified out of recognition as our physical and biological and mathematical spectacles have been, if they had not still performed their task move or less adequately: which argues for a degree of continuity in at least two millennia of moral and political consciousness”.\(^\text{57}\) This judgement is founded on his conception of philosophy, as outlined above: the basic task of philosophical analysis is the elucidation of our common framework of experience, and this conceptual apparatus – a matter of ‘brute fact’, but no less decisive for that – has shown a high a degree of continuity throughout the history of Western thought. Plato’s conceptual world – the concepts and categories in terms of which he thought – are with us still. This judgement is anathema to Skinner and the Cambridge School: it suggests the lineaments of the ‘great ideas’ tradition, with its central and

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 83.

\(^{57}\) This quote is taken from an earlier, longer quote from Berlin’s interview with Jahanbegloo, which occurs above, on page 40.
sustaining emphasis on the transhistorical and contemporary character of the history of ideas. The history of political thought can be political philosophy by other means.

It is this fact of continuity, Berlin avers, that makes possible intersubjective communication, whether this is between two people in conversation, or between individuals remote in space and time. This makes possible, with a supreme effort of translation, a transhistorical conception of the history of ideas. Since we can posit, with some justification, a bridge between our own time and concerns and periods and concerns consigned to history, it is justifiable, Berlin is convinced, to explore the past from the perspective of the present. The concerns of the present and the concerns of the past are never fully estranged. This is Berlin’s claim and the foundation of his method. Tellingly, it receives a clear demonstration in the work of another philosopher writing the history of his subject, Roger Scruton, in his *A Short History of Modern History*.

Keen to distinguish the history of ideas from the history of philosophy – since only the latter is within his area of concern – Scruton suggests the following difference between the two fields. Although the disciplines are closely connected by a commonality of concern – the history of the Western philosophical tradition, say, or elements within it – the historian of philosophy engages with the works of earlier thinkers for their originality and capacity to awaken or heighten the spirit of inquiry in a contemporary reader. Philosophical depth, innovation and incisiveness are the criteria of historical significance. Unless it is accompanied by intrinsic philosophical significance, often a *post facto* judgement, historical influence is insufficient to warrant scholarly attention. For philosophers writing the history of their subject – as Scruton himself has done – social and political influence counts for very little if the work of a past thinker does not rouse a contemporary readership from its dogmatic slumber. Significantly, the criterion of importance in the history of philosophy is consonant with the principle of significance in its contemporary cousin: depth and originality, which together exert a transformative influence on the course of the subject. Given the methodological sympathy between Berlin
and Scruton, it is worth quoting the latter’s definition and delineation of the two subjects in full:

We are now in a position to make a preliminary distinction of the greatest importance, the distinction between the history of philosophy and the ‘history of ideas’...To be part of the history of philosophy an idea must be of intrinsic philosophical significance, capable of awakening the spirit of enquiry in a contemporary person, and representing itself as something that might be arguable and even true. To be part of the history of ideas an idea need only have an historical influence in human affairs. The history of philosophy must consider an idea in relation to the arguments that support it, and is distracted by too great an attention to it more vulgar manifestations, or to its origin in conceptions that have no philosophical worth...In conceding such points, we concede that the best method in philosophical history may be at variance with the practice of the historian of ideas. It may be necessary for the philosopher to lift an idea from the context in which it was conceived, to rephrase it in direct and accessible language, simply in order to estimate its truth. The history of philosophy then becomes a philosophical, and not an historical, discipline...Moreover, it is an undoubted fact that to approach the works of historical philosophers without the acquisition of some independent philosophical competence leads to misunderstanding. A purely ‘historical’ approach as much misrepresents the philosophy of Descartes or Leibniz as it misrepresents the plays of Shakespeare or the poetry of Dante...It seems almost a precondition of entering the thought of traditional philosophers that one does not regard the issues which they discussed as ‘closed’, or their results as superseded. To the extent that one does so regard them, to that extent one has removed them from any central place in the history of the subject.\(^58\)

There is nothing in Scruton’s definition and comparison that Berlin, a philosopher by other means, would have any cause to take issue with. Allowing for the intervening effects of a difference in style and emphasis, Scruton, an analytical philosopher writing the history of his subject, shares Berlin’s approach to intellectual history in a philosophical key.

For both philosophers, the question of contemporaneity is central. It is the

transhistorical character of a doctrine, or the work an individual thinker, that is of signal importance. It is the ground of contemporary relevance from the perspective of philosophical concern. Since philosophy, for Berlin, is the open-ended analysis of our structure of experience, the transformations of that presuppositional framework throughout history is the chief concern of a philosophically sensitive and incisive historian of ideas. In Berlin’s judgement, we are entitled to assume that the concepts and categories in terms of which we think are sufficiently continuous for us to posit, as a precondition of historical understanding, a connection with our philosophical inheritance that outruns its context. Although Skinner’s emphasis on contextualisation is never misguided as an ancillary tool, Berlin maintains, it does not form a sufficient basis for an exploration of ideas and their history. In this way, the biographical and philosophical oddity of Berlin’s practice of intellectual history as philosophy by other means is resolved by, and has its foundation in, his analytical Kantian conception of philosophy.
Chapter Four:

A Secularised Neo-Calvinism: Berlin and the Idea of Historical Rupture

I

Introduction

On the basis of Berlin’s neo-Kantian commitment to a philosophy by other means, we must now move from the largely presuppositional terrain of the previous chapter to Berlin’s work in the history of ideas. This chapter, consequently, will provide a transition from the analytical register of Berlin’s historicised philosophical perspective to an examination of his historical interpretation. Initially, we will examine Berlin’s contention, made in one of his least frequently cited essays, *The Sense of Reality*, that the concepts and categories of modern thought, especially the idea of historical inevitability, have been rendered inadequate by the assault of totalitarian thought and practice.

This forms the first strand of our interpretation. Berlin’s analysis of the condition of Post-War thought, which has significant structural similarities with the thought of other prominent thinkers, including Hannah Arendt and Jacob Talmon, provides a foundation for his engagement with the dual legacy of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. Moreover, in Berlin’s judgement, the underlying assumptions and consequences of Marxist thought, which only became clear in the course of the twentieth century, are one of the most significant aspects of this legacy. Berlin’s reckoning with Marxism, therefore, deepens the argument advanced in *The Sense of Reality*: the rupture between enlightened thought and twentieth century reality is closely related, Berlin maintains, to the philosophical and political legacy of Marxian thought. No less importantly, Berlin’s
judgement forms an example in practice of his commitment to a transhistorical and contemporaneous historical method.

We must now briefly consider these themes in greater detail. For a number of prominent Post-War thinkers, including Berlin, the legacy of desolation left by the sudden outbreak of totalitarian thought in the mid-twentieth century placed the Post-War world in an unprecedented position. Facing a world riven by totalitarian thought – with National Socialism only recently consigned to an early grave, and the Soviet Union continuing to cast its totalitarian shadow across the Iron Curtain – Post-War thinkers were faced with a challenge of almost ‘ontological’ proportions: how to understand the origins and nature of totalitarianism within the categories of modern thought, whose sustaining presuppositions were seemingly rent asunder by totalitarian realities. Much like the devastation inflicted upon Stalingrad, Dresden or Hiroshima, but without the corresponding hope of eventual restoration, the edifice of Enlightenment thought seemed as devastated as the landscapes of Europe and Asia.

This melancholy and pervasive conviction, expressed by thinkers as diverse and often mutually suspicious as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Jacob Talmon, Karl Polanyi and Eric Voegelin, led many influential Post-War thinkers to a decisive conclusion: as the twentieth century’s signal contribution to political thought and practice, the rise of totalitarianism demanded the construction of a new form of political knowledge. With Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the vanguard, many Post-War thinkers were united by a decisive judgement: a return to the presuppositions of modern thought could only come at the cost of delusion in the face of reality, the philosophical and political equivalent of Oedipus blinding himself at Colonus. As Ira Katznelson observes, many Post-War thinkers saw the eruption of totalitarian thought, including the perpetration of the final solution itself, as an event beyond precedent in Western history, which seemed to force a melancholy conclusion onto a materially and culturally shattered world: “a

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disoriented Western consciousness now seemed sentenced to abiding sorrow and pain”.2
This is also Berlin’s considered judgement.

Given these themes, we must now briefly address the question of structure. In order
to illuminate the defining context of Berlin’s reflections on the relationship between
Enlightenment thought and the devastation inflicted upon its sustaining concepts and
categories by the mid-twentieth century, the chapter will begin with a survey of the general
character of the Post-War intellectual atmosphere. This relatively ‘high altitude’ overview
provides the tacit background for Berlin’s reflections on the philosophical rupture that
separates nineteenth century thought from a totalitarian reality.

After an exposition of the context that provides the background to Berlin’s
reflections on the fate of Enlightenment thought, the chapter will bring his argument in one
of his most significant essays, The Sense of Reality into sustained focus. It provides the
locus classicus, it will be argued, of Berlin’s exploration of Enlightenment thought in the
aftermath of twentieth century reality. For Berlin, as he observes in The Sense of Reality, a
cardinal lesson emerges from the material and cultural rubble of 1945: the idea of historical
inevitability has been overpowered by the force of a changed reality. In Berlin’s
judgement, the outbreak of totalitarianism showed that very little is literally beyond the
realm of possibility. Law-like regularities are not discernible within the drama of human
history, unless one is prepared to abandon historically informed analysis in favour of
ungrounded metaphysical speculation. That forms the core of his argument in The Sense of
Reality, which is founded on his commitment to an analytical form of Kantianism, which is
also the ground of his commitment to a transhistorical and contemporaneous approach to
the history of ideas.

On the basis provided by Berlin’s argument in The Sense of Reality, the chapter
will move on to an examination of his contention that the twentieth century witnessed the
rise of a decisive phenomenon, whose influence extended beyond the philosophical and

2 Ibid., p. 6.
into the political: the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism, a thesis that Berlin develops in his lengthy reckoning with the legacy of Marxian thought, *Karl Marx and the International in the Nineteenth Century*. Committed to the idea of a necessary and unbridgeable division of humanity into proletariat and bourgeoisie, which is another way of demarcating the damned from the saved, Marxism produced a secularised form of Calvinist predestination. The affirmation of a secular variant of the idea of the damned and the elect, Berlin further maintains, produced one of the necessary elements of totalitarian thought: the literal expendability of entire sections of humanity. Based on the idea that the laws of historical development have doomed the bourgeoisie to ultimate destruction, Marxist thought struck a resounding blow against the idea a unified humanity. The universalism of the Enlightenment, Berlin maintains, was devastated by the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism, whose full force was only unleashed in the twentieth century.\(^3\)

After outlining this aspect of Berlin’s response to the impossibility of affirming modern thought in the face of a reality that undermines its deepest presuppositions, we will have assembled the core of Berlin’s response to the apparent implosion of enlightened thought in the face of twentieth century reality. On this basis, the argument will proceed, in the next and concluding chapter, to a examination of his seemingly contradictory turn to the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment, especially Joseph de Maistre, one of the most ferocious ‘wolves’ of Counter-Enlightenment thought. As we shall see, his unusual approach to the Counter-Enlightenment has its origin in his conception, made from a perspective of contemporary concern, of the dilemmas facing the Post-War world in the afterglow of totalitarianism and its progenies, total war and the Holocaust.

\(^3\) In a logically unrelated but politically central sense, Berlin’s contention, explored in chapter two, that one of the central horrors of the Holocaust was the fact that its victims were stripped of the dignity of foreknowledge, which deprived them of the right to face death with their eyes open, is closely linked with his critique of a ‘secularised neo-Calvinism’. The Holocaust, Berlin seems to have believed, put into genocidal practice the idea of the damned and the elect. This does not mean that Berlin places the responsibility for the Holocaust, in any causal sense, on the shoulders of Marxism. Rather, he identifies Marxian thought as one of the central streams feeding into the ever hardening division of humanity into the elect, chosen by history or the pseudo-scientific pronouncements of racial ‘science’, and the damned, whose fate is equally decided upon by the laws thought to govern history.
Berlin’s response to the apparent ‘muteness’ of modern thought when confronted with a reality that exceeded its conceptual resources is the necessary ground, it will be argued, for his turn to the sworn enemies of his own liberalism. For Berlin, the landscape of the Post-War world makes for the necessity of strange bedfellows. Travelling only in the company of one’s philosophical friends is a luxury that is no longer available in a world that has moved beyond the frontiers of enlightened thought. This forms the core of Berlin’s engagement with the legacy of Counter-Enlightenment thought, especially the work of Joseph de Maistre, which he conducts, for reasons that are philosophical, from a contemporaneous and transhistorical historical perspective.

II

Totalitarianism and Post-War Thought

Before we examine Berlin’s conception of a decisive rupture in recent European history, a brief excursus into the history of the idea of modernity will prove useful. As Mark Lilla observes, the critique of modernity is a phenomenon that arose with modernity itself: affirmation and condemnation are two sides of the same historical and philosophical coin. Ever since the confident predictions of the Enlightenment spread across Europe, opposition to the central strands of the modern project – usually in the form of an attack on its commitment to reason, secularism, and meliorative liberalism – has formed a central element in European intellectual history. Whether in the name of the Volk, the claims of tradition, ultramontane Catholicism, or even the primal call of Being, the modern world has been denounced as a radical break with the past. Its detractors are united, Lilla argues, in seeing the modern era as a self-conscious attempt at remaking the world in the image of its own philosophical constructions. Whether in the work of such antinomian thinkers like Vico, Herder and Hamann, or their twentieth century successors, such as Carl Schmitt and

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Martin Heidegger, the charges levelled at the modern world, thought to be the progeny of a revolutionary transformation of the European mind, have maintained remarkable constancy.

For its opponents, modernity is marked by a discontinuity with previous epochs; it forms a coherent philosophical and political project; and its consequences, even if unintentional, have led to a state of crisis, which forms the central problem of our time.\(^5\) Yet, as Lilla observes, at the core of this critique, running throughout its varied manifestations, is a central historical paradox: the very thinkers who question the validity of the modern project are themselves children of modernity, albeit with a strongly pronounced Oedipal tendency.\(^6\) The modern epoch is thus constitutively divided over its own legacy and worth.\(^7\) Moreover, the debate over the nature of the modern project, although it finds expression in diverse fields, reposes on a fundamental presupposition: namely, that the travails of the modern period are the result of, or at least have a symbiotic relationship with, the development of modern philosophy, especially since the eighteenth century.

As Lilla points out, for those thinkers who see the modern project as fatally flawed, the only justifiable response is one of opposition to the modern world, which, in their estimation, is the deleterious result of a self-conscious revolutionary project.\(^8\) Standing against the modern world, and forming its ‘dialectical’ shadow, is the tradition of Counter-Enlightenment thought, whose leading exponents are united in their determination to haul the modern mind before the bar of World History. The critique of modernity, therefore, is itself historical in character.\(^9\)

Not surprisingly, the calamities of the twentieth century, which found their culmination in two world wars and genocide, have only increased the urgency with which

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 3.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 1.
the legacy of modernity has been interrogated. Whether in the work of Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Leo Strauss or Hannah Arendt, the specifically modern character of twentieth century pathology has been a central occupation. How could the cherished hopes of the European Enlightenment give rise to, or fail to prevent, the moral insanity of totalitarianism, a form of rule hitherto unknown in the Western tradition? The harrowing reality of European high culture in a Faustian embrace with the inhuman, symbolised by Bach or Beethoven being played in the concentration camps forms one of the most poignant symbolic markers of the destruction of the Enlightenment hope that, with the rise of Reason, culture would finally banish barbarism. The world of the concentration camp marks an ‘ontological’ rupture with the past, in which the iconic image of Hell is made manifest.

Whatever the origins of twentieth century inhumanity, therefore, the sense of a permanent historical rupture faced Post-War thinkers as an inescapable reality. The legacy of the nineteenth century – the “imagined garden of liberal culture”, to borrow George Steiner’s typically incisive phrase – seemed to pale into insignificance when set against the millions killed between 1914 and 1945. For many twentieth century thinkers, including Berlin, a chasm seemed to separate the Post-War world from the ‘long peace’ of the nineteenth century. The end of WWII does not relate to the ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’ like a new era to its predecessor, but forms a decisive rupture in European history, which makes any claim to continuity incoherent. Moreover, the idea of a decisive breach

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10 On the specifically modern character of totalitarianism, see Hannah Arendt’s analysis in The Origins of Totalitarianism [1951] (San Diego: Harvest Books, 2005). It is certainly significant that, for Arendt, if not for the other thinkers mentioned, the search for the origins of twentieth century pathology in the development – or perversion – of the European intellectual tradition is a fundamental error of perspective and analysis. In short, Arendt rejects an idealist approach, in favour of a broader historical and social scientific methodology.

11 George Steiner, In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture (London Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 78.

12 Ibid., p. 48.

13 This striking phrase occurs on p. 5, Ibid., and is intended as a concentrated description of the idea – which is largely mythological, Steiner maintains, yet contains sufficient concentrated metaphorical insight to be significant – that the long nineteenth century, beginning somewhere in the 1820s and ending in 1915, was a period of unparalleled progress across the many fields of human endeavour, politically, culturally and socially.


is also misleading, for “the quiet of sorrow which settles down after a catastrophe has never come to pass”.\textsuperscript{16} Although the related horrors of the Holocaust and Nazi totalitarianism were relegated to history, the Post-War world was faced by a daunting challenge: how to explain the origin of dark times, especially their most emblematic and desolate feature, the concentration camp.\textsuperscript{17}

Perhaps the most symbolically resonant and horrific aspect of totalitarian rule, the death camp seemed to push European civilisation beyond a new frontier. The creation of dedicated ‘factories of death’, many Post-War thinkers argued, left the Post-War world silent in the face of ‘radical evil’.\textsuperscript{18} As an attack on the foundations of European ‘high’ culture, the Holocaust made clear that “things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction and therapy.”\textsuperscript{19}

As Hannah Arendt observes, the period before the WWI is separated from the twentieth century by an unbridgeable gulf:

The days before and the days after the first World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and the day after an explosion. Yet this figure of speech is as inaccurate as are all the others, because the quiet of sorrow which settles down after a catastrophe has never come to pass. The first explosion seems to have touched off a chain reaction in which we have been caught ever since and which nobody seems able to stop.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 267.
\textsuperscript{17} Although the concentration camp, as a political ‘tool’, was not invented during the WWII – and its origins stretch to the Boer War, and possibly to American actions in the Philippines – it forms the emblematic expression of totalitarian rule, especially in the case of Nazi Germany. For many Post-War thinkers, especially Arendt, the death camps – and the literal ‘pornography’ of death which they realised – forms the greatest challenge to our existing categories of explanation. The living reality of Auschwitz and Treblinka – as well as the horrors of Stalinist Gulags – vitiates a simple reaffirmation of the modern project.
\textsuperscript{18} Hannah Arendt, in her famous study of totalitarian rule, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}, provides one of the best examples of this judgement. More recently, George Steiner has made the ‘ontological’ challenge posed by the death camps central to his exploration of the role played by European high culture in the genesis and perpetration of the Holocaust. For an extended exploration of this theme, see his study of Martin Heidegger, simply entitled \textit{Heidegger} (London: Harvest Press, 1978), especially chapter four.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 446.
\textsuperscript{20} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}, p. 267.
Significantly, the issues raised by the original thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment re-surfac ed with a vengeance in the Post-War period, and formed one the major fault-lines of twentieth century thought.  

The conviction, as visceral as it was analytical, that the short twentieth century had placed the Post-War world decisively ‘beyond the common measure’ was shared by many Post-War thinkers. Whatever the myriad differences that often pitted them against each other, the dual intimations of recent desolation and contemporary dislocation created a powerful unifying force. In many ways, the resultant unity in diagnosis, which never extended to prognostic unanimity, was generational in character. The thinkers born into the early years of the twentieth century, as Berlin was, were members of the first generation to grapple with the legacy of recent desolation.

For many Post-War thinkers, including Berlin, the totalitarian experience led to a disturbing conclusion: if nothing else, the twentieth century proved that everything, no matter how seemingly beyond the human imagination, is possible in the modern world. The world of the death camp, although literally inconceivable for those who were spared, seemed to leave the concepts and categories of Enlightenment thought inapplicable to a post-Holocaust world. In the face of Auschwitz and Treblinka, the Enlightenment tradition seemed unable to bridge the chasm that separated the ideals of modernity from the reality of a ‘hell made immanent’. Writing during the most desperate years of the Second World War, Karl Polanyi, in his classic study, *The Great Transformation*, expressed the sense that an irreversible shift had taken place in Western consciousness: “Nineteenth century civilization has collapsed [and] a torrent of events is pouring in on mankind.”

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21 This is not to suggest, of course, that the response to twentieth century pathology was conducted solely on – let alone is best understood in terms of – a purely philosophical terrain. Numerous attempts have been made, encompassing virtually all domains of human thought, ranging from poetry to social scientific analysis.
22 The phrase ‘beyond the common measure’ is the title of the first chapter of Ira Katznelson’s *Desolation and Enlightenment*.
23 George Seiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, p. 47.
Of course, even prior to the twentieth century’s ‘festival of cruelty’, history has never lacked tragedy.²⁵ Although the scale of the horror went beyond previous conflicts, the pages of history are stained with similar bloodshed and cruelty, much of it no less horrific than the events that convulsed Europe between 1914 and 1945. Indeed, less than fifty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Europe witnessed – and failed to prevent – the genocidal violence that engulfed the Balkans. Sectarian, religious and ethnic violence has marred human experience for millennia. The Armenian genocide of 1915, still officially denied by Turkey, was marked by acts of inhumanity not out of place during the darkest hours of the Second World War. No less importantly, European imperialism exacted a terrible toll, both materially and culturally, on indigenous populations.²⁶ If nothing else, these events bear witness to a world riven by conflict. Placed in this wider context, it might be argued, the sense of crisis experienced by Post-War European thinkers, although undoubtedly real, is marked by a parochialism that distorts their understanding of, and response to, the ‘dark times’ they had lived through.

In some ways, this contextualisation of Europe’s ‘festival of cruelty’ is apposite. However, as a philosophical and historical judgement, a contextualisation risks missing the challenge posed by the Holocaust and successive world wars. As Katznelson observes:

Though “the killing of 6 million Jews was part of a wider Nazi project,” and although the globe has witnessed a good many other instances of mass killing and genocide on an extraordinary scale, the temporal elongation and comprehensiveness of the eliminationist program together with the enormity and meticulousness of its execution and continental scope…singles out this enterprise of desolation as the ultimate negation of the promise of Enlightenment.²⁷

²⁶ Indeed, especially in the context of the American and Australian colonial experience, the subjugation of indigenous peoples has been labelled as genocidal, perhaps not in original intent, but in its consequences.
The sheer scale and comprehensiveness of the Holocaust – its mobilisation of the vast resources of an industrialised society for mass extermination – was, for many Post-War thinkers, an unprecedented radicalisation of evil. Although violence, sometimes on a genocidal scale, has continually shadowed modernity, the sense that the deepest presuppositions of modern thought, such as its commitment to liberal knowledge, were left incoherent in the aftermath of Auschwitz became a pervasive aspect of much Post-War thought.

Most importantly, however, it is the image of the nineteenth century, no matter how idealised or distorted, that constitutes the crucial ‘point of orientation’ for Post-War explorations of the twentieth century catastrophe. For Berlin, as for many of his contemporaries, the nineteenth century represents the last and greatest flowering of the hopes of Enlightenment thought, which fell silent in the face of the industrialised violence that emerged in the twentieth century. Berlin’s thought, it will be argued, is shaped by his sense that the Holocaust, by undermining the ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’, has propelled European civilisation into a condition of uncharted post-modernity. It is within this historical context, which is structured by the gap separating the ideals of the European Enlightenment from the nadir of Auschwitz and Treblinka, that Berlin’s exploration of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought must be understood. The fundamental premiss of much immediately Post-War thought – that Western civilisation has entered a condition of ‘post-culture’, and is thereby literally postmodern – mirrors one of the central presuppositions of Berlin’s ambivalent engagement with the entwined legacies of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. As we shall see below, it forms part of the background to Berlin’s apparent turn away from the Enlightenment and towards a Counter-Enlightenment liberalism.

In this sense, the term post-modernity is used to mean moving beyond modernity without implying, importantly, that Berlin, or other Post-War thinkers, such as Arendt, were precursors or exponents of postmodern theory, as this has developed from the work of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, among others. In the context of this chapter, post-modernity is simply used to denote the contention, found in much immediate Post-War thought, including Berlin’s, that the twentieth century has made a return to modernity impossible. It does not imply that Berlin was sympathetic to, or exponent of, postmodern theory.
III
A Sense of Reality

Berlin’s response to the apparent devastation of Enlightenment hope is based on an analysis of what, if anything, within the tradition of Enlightenment thought has survived the triptych of World War, the Holocaust and Totalitarianism. His most sustained treatment of the consequences of the modern era – which, for Berlin, is synonymous with modern thought – is to be found in a long essay in the philosophy of history, *The Sense of Reality*. Although only published in 1996, as part of a collection of Berlin’s unpublished essays in the history of ideas, Berlin delivered the substance of the essay as a lecture at Smith College, Massachusetts, under the title of ‘Realism in History’. Written in the immediate aftermath of WWII, its central area of philosophical and historical concern is the foundation – the phenomenological basis, as it were – of our sense of reality, by which Berlin means our seemingly intuitive sense of what divides Realism from Utopia in historical explanation. Taking as his starting point our sense – which is inescapable, but appears unfounded – that some courses of action, like literally re-creating fourteenth century Florence in twentieth century London, are palpably absurd, Berlin argues against the idea that this sense of reality rests on laws of historical development:

When men, as occasionally happens, develop a distaste for the age in which they live, and love and admire some past period with such uncritical devotion that it is clear that, if they had their choice, they would wish to be alive then and not now – and when, as the next step, they seek to introduce into their lives certain of the habits and practices of the idealised past – we tend to accuse them of nostalgic ‘escapism’, romantic antiquarianism, lack of realism; we dismiss their efforts as attempts to ‘turn the clock back’, to ‘ignore the forces of history’, or ‘fly in the face of the facts’, at best touching and childish, at worst ‘retrograde’, or ‘obstructive’, or insanely ‘fanatical’, and, although doomed to

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failure in the end, capable of creating gratuitous obstacles to progress in the immediate present and future. This kind of charge is made, and apparently understood, easily. It goes with such notions as the ‘logic of the facts’, or the ‘march of history’, which, like the laws of nature (with which they are partly identified), are thought of as, in some sense, ‘inexorable’...\textsuperscript{30}

Although not an overtly political intervention, in the same vein as Berlin’s thesis in \textit{Two Concepts of Liberty}, his argument, with its implicit critique of Marxism, is deeply embedded within the network of concerns that helped to define the early years of the Post-War period. Writing at a time when recent desolation was still palpable – materially and culturally – Berlin’s argument in \textit{The Sense of Reality} forms a survey, the only extended example in his work, of the fate of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought in the face of then recent and redolent experience. From the vantage point of the mid-1950s, Berlin argues, the vista of destruction allows only one conclusion: twentieth century political experience decisively undermined the theories of the nineteenth century, including, most importantly of all, the Marxian theory of history.

Although he does not specifically consider historical materialism – and Marx receives no greater prominence than Hegel or Comte – Berlin’s argument represents, in its intent and method, a critique of the Marxian contention that ideas have only a derivative role to play in the historical drama. As early as 1939, in his biographical study of Marx, Berlin maintained that the political success of Marxism, especially its capacity to rally adherents to its cause, undermines its denial of the force of ideas in history:

\begin{quote}
It [Marxism] set out to refute the proposition that ideas decisively determine the course of human history, but the very extent of its own influence on human affairs has weakened the force of its thesis. For in altering the hitherto prevailing view of the relation of the individual to his environment and to his fellows, it has palpably altered that relation itself; and in consequence remains the most powerful among the intellectual forces which are today permanently
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 1.
transforming the ways in which men act and think.\textsuperscript{31}

At the philosophical core of Berlin’s argument in \textit{The Sense of Reality} stands a foundational proposition: in a ‘negative dialectic’ that would have mystified the Enlightened \textit{philosophes}, twentieth century reality undermined nineteenth century thought. Essential to Berlin’s argument is his view that idealism is as central to historical understanding as materialism. Implicit within this judgement, therefore, lies one of the sustaining presuppositions of Berlin’s engagement with the remnants of modern thought: namely, that ‘the power of ideas’, especially the allure of the irrational, downplayed by the Enlightened \textit{philosophes} and denied by Marx, proved decisive in the twentieth century’s collapse in the face of the totalitarian temptation.\textsuperscript{32}

Central to the multi-layered argument of \textit{The Sense of Reality} is Berlin’s ambivalent relationship to the Age of Reason, which was explored in chapter two. As was pointed out previously, the fundamental historical and philosophical axiom of Berlin’s interpretation of the Enlightenment is his conviction that the Age of Reason, contrary to its own self-understanding, formed an extension of the wider tradition of Western rationalism. Of course, as Berlin is well aware, this was not the self-understanding of the enlightened \textit{philosophes} themselves. For the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the rise of the modern era discredited the \textit{Weltanschauung} of the mainstream of Western thought, which they, with Voltaire in the lead, derided as little more than an accumulation of dogma, superstition and ‘interested error’. For the more rigidly materialist among them, such as Helvétius and d’Holbach, human society could be studied, and a science of human nature constructed, by reducing the human subject to a material object in space and time. Implacably hostile to any form of teleological explanation, the French materialist, as well as their disciples throughout Europe, believed that a science of society was within humanity’s grasp.

Moreover, the spectacular successes enjoyed by Newtonian in the natural sciences

could be replicated in the disordered jumble of half-truths that formed political thought. As Berlin observes, the *philosophes*, at least the more radical among them, believed that the lives of individuals, as well as the existence of entire societies, could be deduced form a relatively small number of mechanical laws, the interplay of which separated the possible from the impossible in human thought and behaviour. From this set of laws, a new science of history would develop, the laws of which would banish irrational dogma from human affairs, thereby allowing Reason to overcome barbarism.\(^\text{33}\) Moreover, the application of this new science of history would allow a competent social scientist to distinguish the realistic from the hopelessly anachronistic. Whatever was in opposition to the objectively necessary march of history was doomed to failure. It represents little more than a childish attempt at imposing a romantic fairy-tale where only science must rule:

Impressed (and to some degree oppressed) by true considerations about the limits of free human action – the barriers imposed by unalterable regularities in nature, in the functioning of human bodies and minds – the majority of eighteenth-century thinkers and, following them, enlightened opinion in the last century, and to some degree our own, conceived the possibility of a true empirical science of history which, even if it never became sufficiently precise to enable us to make predictions or retrodictions in specific situations, nevertheless, by dealing with great numbers, and relying on comparisons of rich statistical data, would indicate the general direction of, say, social and technological development, and enable us to rule out some plans, revolutionary and reformist, as demonstrably anachronistic and therefore Utopian – as not conforming to the ‘objective’ direction of social development.\(^\text{34}\)

For the leading thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment, it seemed self-evident that, even if a science of society could never achieve the precision attained by the physical sciences, the possibility that history formed no rationally discernable pattern was not only heretical, but verged on the incoherent.\(^\text{35}\) On this determinedly materialist basis, Berlin argues,

\(^{34}\) Ibid., pp. 7-8.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 2.
Enlightened opinion attempted to discern the laws that must, on pain of irrationality, govern the development of entire societies. For the majority of Enlightenment thinkers, it appeared self-evident that, if human societies were mysteriously exempted from the nexus of cause and effect, then the very intelligibility of historical explanation would be called into question. Historical inquiry, when conceived as more than a collection of anecdotes and traveller’s tales, demanded a mechanistic criterion of explanation.

The majority of Enlightenment thinkers, Berlin maintains, believed that they had discerned the foundation of our sense of what is ‘out of place’ and ‘out of time’.\(^{36}\) After all, on what foundation, save a mechanistic materialism, can our sense of what separates utopianism from realism possibly rest? If we are to maintain, as any competent historian must, that the fifteenth century possessed its specific character because of the intervening effects of the fourteenth century, then certain determinable factors must underlie our historical judgement. As Berlin observes, the mainstream of Enlightenment thought maintained that, for history to explain anything at all, antecedent causes must determine the course of historical development. If they did not, palpably absurd conclusions, such as ‘the fourteenth century had no effect on successive centuries’, would remain irrefutable. Such obviously bizarre judgements can only be dismissed as Utopian if we assume an ‘inexorable logic of events’. For the Age of Reason, Berlin argues, nothing else can justify, and therefore render rational, our sense of reality, which necessarily leads to the contention that:

\[\text{\ldots there is a pattern and it has a direction; it is not necessarily ‘progressive’, that is, we need not believe that we are gradually approaching some desirable goal, however we define desirable; but we are pursuing a definite and irreversible direction; nostalgia for some past stage of it is } eo ipso \text{ Utopian; for it is like asking for the reversal of the nexus of causes and effects; We may admire the past, but to try and reproduce it is to ignore this nexus\ldots Romantic hankerings after past ages are virtually a desire to undo the ‘inexorable’ logic of events. If it were possible to reproduce past conditions, historical causality would be}\]

broken, which, since we cannot help thinking in terms of it, is psychologically impossible as well as irrational and absurd. We may be told that such expressions as ‘anachronism’ are surely themselves sufficient to convey this truth…We do not much argument to convince us that there is something gravely deficient in a historian who thinks that Richelieu could have done what he did just as well in the 1950s…And this sense of what belongs where, of what cannot have happened as against that which could, is said to imply the notion of an irreversible process, where everything belongs to the stage to which it does and is ‘out of place’ or ‘out of time’ if mistakenly inserted in the wrong context.37

According to Berlin, this basic conviction formed a common horizon for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even if rival schools of thought understood this tacit assumption differently.38 While nineteenth century thinkers, such as Schelling and his romantic followers, might dismiss the eighteenth century as overly mechanistic, the underlying conviction – that history obeys laws, and that its secrets are discoverable, if only the correct ‘key’ is found – remained constant and unshakeable.39 As Berlin observes, the possibility that no law-like principle of change existed found few, if any, adherents among the philosophes and their successors. The very rationality of the universe seemed to require that history possess a rationally accessible meaning. On this basis, rationality demanded that laws of history must exist, and that these laws, in virtue of their rationality, must guide moral and political thought. To ignore this fact would condemn one to forever wander in darkness:

To understand how to live and act, whether in private or in public life, was to grasp these laws and use them for one’s own purposes. The Hegelians believed that this was achieved by a species of rational intuition; Marxists, Comtists and Darwinians, by scientific investigation; Schelling and his romantic followers, by inspired ‘vitalistic’ and ‘mythopoeic’ insight, by the illumination of artistic genius; and so on. All these schools believed that human society grew in a

37 Ibid., p. 4.
38 Ibid., p. 8.
39 Ibid., p. 8.
discoverable direction, governed by laws; that the borderline which divided science from Utopia, effectiveness from ineffectiveness in every sphere of life, was discoverable by reason and observation and could be plotted less or more precisely; that, in short, there was a clock, its movement followed discoverable rules, and it could not be put back.⁴⁰

For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *The Sense of Reality* implicitly suggests, theodicy proved more alluring than contingency. Yet the hopes vested in evolutionary or revolutionary progress, Berlin avers, proved delusive. The dreams of the European Enlightenment, which reached their apotheosis in the historical theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were exploded by the events of the twentieth century. For Berlin, the reality of twentieth century moral and political pathology destroyed the nineteenth century political order, crushing both liberal meliorism and Marxian radicalism. Significantly, however, Berlin’s argument in *The Sense of Reality* is not purely historical, which would transform it into a mere chronicle of recent devastation, written in a movingly elegiac mood, but with relatively little critical power. Rather, the central aspect of Berlin’s argument rests on his conviction that the collapse of the nineteenth century ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’ caused the destruction of a central category of enlightened thought: the belief in historical inevitability.

This returns us to the ground of Berlin’s political thought and intellectual history: his commitment to a form of analytical Kantianism, which provides the foundation for his practice of philosophy by other means, and also sustains his contemporaneous and transhistorical approach to the history of ideas. Berlin’s thesis in *The Sense of Reality* – which unites the philosophical and historical aspects of his work, thereby translating into scholarly practice his underlying adherence to philosophy by other means – is one of the signal instances of his analytical Kantianism at work. A brief re-capitulation of its sustaining presuppositions and contentions, with our focus trained on its role in the architecture of his argument, is useful at this point.

As was observed in chapter three, Berlin maintains, in an essentially analytical Kantian vein, that philosophy, as distinct from the natural sciences, which proceed by inference from observed data, or by deducing propositions from given axioms, investigates the permanent framework in terms of which, not about which, we think:

Philosophy, then, is not an empirical study: not the critical examination of what exists or has existed or will exist – this is dealt with by common-sense knowledge and belief, and the methods of the natural sciences. Nor is it a kind of formal deduction, as mathematics or logic is. Its subject-matter is to large degree not the items of experience, but the way in which they are viewed, the permanent or semi-permanent categories in terms of which experience is conceived and classified.\(^\text{41}\)

The failure of the enlightened *philosophes* to create an empirical science out of the confused wilderness of moral and political philosophy, Berlin argues, was not the result of faulty observation and inference, nor was it a consequence of deducing false propositions from a set of basic axioms, which a further refinement in the ‘science of politics’ would inevitably remedy. Rather, the conspicuous failure of a mechanistic ‘science of society’ to produce a set of clear propositions rests on an inescapable point: our political ideas are themselves part of, and would make no sense in abstraction from, our understanding of what constitutes a human being – in short, our conception of human nature.\(^\text{42}\)

This is neither a question of fact, as facts are conceived in the natural sciences, nor is it reducible to the discoveries of the social sciences, such as economics, sociology or psychology. Our understanding of the human subject, whatever this might be – and the answers are conspicuous by their diversity – requires the use of our central categories of thought, which we employ to perceive, order and interpret the data of experience.\(^\text{43}\) These basic categories of ‘social perception’ do not form the data of experience, but are part of


the fundamental framework in terms of which lived experience is conceptualised. Our fundamental categories, along with their corresponding concepts, are not open to scientific investigation, which is only applicable to the data of experience, rather than the conceptual framework itself:

To apply these models and methods [of the natural sciences] to the framework itself by means of which we perceive and think about them is a major fallacy, by the analysis of which Kant transformed philosophy... Kant supposed these categories to be discoverable a priori. We need not accept this; this was an unwarranted conclusion from the valid perception that there exist central features of our experience that are invariant and omnipresent, or at least much less variable than the vast variety of its empirical characteristics, and for that reason deserve to be distinguished by the name of categories. This is evident enough in the case of the external world: the three-dimensionality of (psychological, common-sense) space, for example, or the solidity of things in it, or the ‘irreversibility’ of the time-order, are among the most familiar and inalienable kinds of characteristics in terms of which we think and act. Empirical sciences of these properties do not exist, not because they exhibit no regularities – on the contrary they are the very paradigm of the concept of regularity itself – but because they are presupposed in the very language in which we formulate empirical experience.⁴⁴

Our experience of the moral, political and social worlds, like our experience of the natural world, is necessarily bounded by these ‘conceptual frameworks’, whose universality and stability, though less pervasive than in the natural world, remain indispensable for thought and action.⁴⁵ Although our conceptual frameworks are simply brute facts, which are marked by contingency, rather than a priori truths, which would hold with iron necessity, any alteration would render our experience radically different from anything that we have experienced, or can even imagine experiencing.

This has significant ramifications for Berlin’s understanding of intellectual history and political theory. When formerly pervasive conceptual frameworks, such as the

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 81-82.
⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 82.
theological and metaphysical Weltanschauung of the Middle Ages, give way to a competing set of ‘category spectacles’, this change in understanding does not touch the empirical data of experience, but radically alters the manner in which that experience is formulated and understood. The meaning given to empirical experience, including political experience, is fundamentally coloured by the framework through which it is apprehended. A conceptual world marked by theism and teleology is radically opposed to one dominated by atheism and materialism. Central to Berlin’s perspective, therefore, is the contention that, when a political theory is denounced as inadequate – as misrepresenting something essential about human experience – this charge does not focus on purely empirical shortcomings, but rests on the perceived inadequacy of its central categories, such as teleology or materialism. The charge focuses on the alleged distortion of central ethical and political concepts, such as liberty, value and truth, by the permanent framework in terms of which such concepts are understood.

In terms of Berlin’s conception of political theory, this is of great significance. As a body of knowledge, political philosophy is not a study of empirical facts, however these might be defined, from which a set of hypotheses is formulated. No matter how scrupulous and objective social scientists set out to be, their analyses of empirical data, Berlin maintains, will always be guided by some over-riding conceptual framework, frequently all the more pervasive for being largely implicit. For Berlin, therefore, the proposition that political ideas are founded on a wider conceptual framework, within which is embedded a grounding vision of ‘man and the universe’, is axiomatic.

This leads Berlin to an important corollary, one that features centrally in his work as a political theorist and historian of ideas. If political theory involves the examination of the ‘category spectacles’ in terms of which we understand experience, then the capacity for empathetic insight – for the imaginative recreation of whole conceptual worlds – is central to the sound practice of political theory. Although some of the central problems of political

46 Ibid., p. 84.
philosophy have been conceived in terms of ‘category spectacles’ so enduring that, even
know, centuries after their original formulation, they form a pervasive part of our common
tacit background, other frameworks have proved more evanescent, so that their central
categories appear alien and remote. Unlike any empirical or formal science – and because
of its nature as an exploration of the conceptual models in terms of which we think –
political theory requires a species of empathetic insight, which is akin to the practice of
novelists, rather than natural scientists:

No amount of careful empirical observation and bold and fruitful hypothesis
will explain to us what those men see who see the State as a divine institution,
or what their words mean and how they relate to reality...But unless we
understand (by an effort of imaginative insight such as novelists usually possess
in a higher degree than logicians) what notions of man’s nature (or absence of
them) are incorporated in these political outlooks, what in each case is the
dominant model, we shall not understand our own or any human society...Only
those who can to some degree re-enact within themselves the states of mind of
men tormented by questions to which these theories claim to be solutions, or at
any rate the states of mind of those who may accept the solutions uncritically
but would, without them, fall into a state of insecurity and anxiety – only these
are capable of grasping what part philosophical views, and especially political
doctrines, have played in history, at any rate in the West.

Berlin’s conception of philosophical inquiry has significant ramifications for his
understanding of the inadequacy of enlightened thought from the perspective of Post-War
reality. Whether conceived by eighteenth century mechanists or nineteenth century
metaphysicians, Berlin argues, the concept of historical determinism – which functioned as
a category of explanation, rather than as an empirical hypothesis – guaranteed a knowable
historical libretto, the discovery of which would separate the irrational from the rational.
Central to the underlying ‘architecture’ of Berlin’s argument, providing the philosophical
foundation of his historical judgements, is his contention that this category of thought,

47 Ibid., p. 85.
48 Ibid., pp. 85 and 87.
which partially defined two centuries, did not survive the twentieth century intact. Of course, as Berlin observes, attempts were made to regain the old confidence, and re-interpret recent history as conforming to a wider and rational pattern. Yet these attempts proved delusory. The destruction of a complete conceptual framework – in terms of which reality was conceived – defines the decisive rupture separating the twentieth century from the Age of Reason:

These beliefs [in historical inevitability] were rudely shaken by the evidence of the twentieth century. The notions, the ideas and forms of life which were considered to be inalienable from, ‘organically’ necessary to, the particular stage of historical evolution reached by mankind were broken or twisted out of recognition by new and violent leaders: Lenin, Stalin, Hitler. It is true that these acted as they did in the name of their own historical or pseudo-historical theories, the communists in the name of dialectical materialism, Hitler in the name of racial hegemonism. But there was no doubt that they achieved what had hitherto been regarded as virtually impossible, contrary to the laws of advancing civilisation – a breach of the inexorable laws of human history.

Central to Berlin’s argument, therefore, is his contention that it was the actions of leaders like Lenin, Hitler and Stalin, as well as their lesser and later epigones, that moulded the political experience of the twentieth century, rather than the prophecies of the great system-builders, whether materialists or metaphysicians. Contrary to the various theories of historical determinism, these leaders proved, to the permanent detriment of humanity, that history is marked by contingency. With a ruthlessness hitherto unimagined, actions that would have seemed a hideous nightmare in the ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’ were made manifest in the world. In opposition to the hopes of the previous two centuries, Berlin is adamant, the twentieth century showed that, provided individuals are ruthless enough, and acquire enough material power, then very little can stand in their way.

The moral paralysis induced by reality’s ruthless assault on idealism, Berlin further

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50 Ibid., p. 9.
51 Ibid., p. 11.
maintains, is related to the failure of Enlightenment thought to comprehend recent desolation. The grand theories of the nineteenth century did not deliver the key to historical and political understanding, but only provided various forms of political messianism. These new forms of secularised religion – to borrow Raymond Aron’s phrase, which Berlin never employs, but would not disavow – contributed to the rise of Fascist and Communist totalitarianism. Implicit within this judgement, once again, is Berlin’s hostility to Marxism, whose secular eschatology, he maintains, buckled in the face of twentieth century reality. As an unavoidable consequence of the implosion of modern thought when confronted by a totalitarian reality, the Post-War world was left in an uncharted ethical and political situation, whose only certainty lay in its ambiguity.

Despite this, attempts were made to re-interpret recent desolation within the parameters of nineteenth century thought, history was again cast in a “movement of shadows, indeterminate and insubstantial, describable only in terms of approximations, inspired guesswork, short-term conclusions from local phenomena, liable to be upset by too many unknown and unknowable factors”. As Berlin observes, in one of the most illuminating paragraphs in *The Sense of Reality*, which discloses his conception of the inadequacy of enlightened thought in a Post-War world:

> The great system-builders have in their works both expressed and influenced human attitudes towards the world – the light in which events are seen. Metaphysical, religious, scientific systems and attitudes have altered the distribution of emphasis, the sense of what is important or significant or admirable, or again of what is remote or barbarous or trivial – have profoundly affected human concepts and categories, the eyes with which men see or feel and understand the world, the spectacles through which they look – but they have not done the work of a science as they claimed, have not revealed new facts, increased the sum of our information, disclosed unsuspected events. Our belief that events and persons and things belong inevitably, inexorably, and per

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52 For Aron’s development of the idea of a secularised religion, which stands close to the core of his analysis of totalitarianism, especially in relation to its underlying character as a form of government, see ‘The Future of Secular Religions’. in Yair Reiner (ed.), *The Dawn of Universal History* [translated by Barbara Bray, with an introduction by Tony Judt] (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 177-202.

contra our sense of Utopia and anachronism, remain as strong as ever; but our belief in specific laws of history, of which we can formulate the science, is not too confident – if their behaviour whether as historians or as men of action is any evidence – even among the minority of those who pursue such topics. It is unlikely, therefore, that the first springs from the second; that our disbelief in the possibility of ‘a return to the past’ rests on a fear of contradiction some given law or laws of history…The theorists of history certainly supposed that they were providing historians with wings enabling them to span great territories rapidly, as compared with the slow pedestrian rate of the empirical fact-gatherer; but although the wings have been with us now for more than a century, nobody has, as yet, flown; those who, as Henri Poincare remarked in an analogous connection, tried to do so came to a sorry end…Meanwhile the wings and the machinery are gathering dust on the shelves of museums, examples of overweening ambition and idle fantasy, not of intellectual achievement.\textsuperscript{54}

From his vantage point in 1953, Berlin discerned in the rise of totalitarianism, in both its Nazi and Soviet guises, not only an attack on all forms of humane government, a virtual \textit{sine qua non} of Post-War thought, but also the devastation of the philosophical and political framework that lent internal coherence to the Ages of Reason and History. For Berlin, this is base: all else is merely superstructure

It is worth concluding this section with a concentrated recapitulation of the major strands of Berlin’s argument. In Berlin’s judgement, in which he was not alone, the implosion of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought under the onslaught of totalitarian thought left a ‘brave new world’ in its wake. In the aftermath of 1945, the intellectual and political remnants of the European Enlightenment seemed beyond the possibility of reattachment to the severed torso of modern thought, even with the aid of radical and ingenious philosophical surgery, the possibility of which seemed exceedingly remote. The interconnected worlds of Voltaire, Condorcet, Kant and Marx could no longer be affirmed as a vital inheritance. Closely related to epochal shift in the concepts and categories in terms of which reality is conceived, the experience of recent history also left the idea of necessary historical progress – the expression of an unfounded modern confidence, more

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., p. 6-7.
hubristic than incisive – as nothing more than an abandoned hulk in the river of Post-War thought.

As his argument in *The Sense of Reality* makes plain, Berlin is committed to the idea that a decisive historical rupture separates the Post-War world from the main currents of the European Enlightenment. Notwithstanding this conviction, however, he resolutely refuses, as every empiricist must, a metaphysical reading of the gulf that separates the Ages of Reason and History from the realities of the Post-War period. While Berlin never employs the image, he sees the position of Post-War thought as akin to that of passengers in a railway carriage that is suddenly decoupled from its engine. Deprived of their means of transportation and left stranded before their journey is complete, they can do little more than watch their source of locomotion recede into the distance. They must their own way home, no matter how arduous the journey might be, in whatever manner is available to them.

For Berlin, the tradition of Enlightenment thought, as well as its nineteenth century successor, is incapable of bringing the Post-War world to the relative safety of philosophical understanding. After the events that culminated in the destruction of Fascism in 1945 – and the outbreak, a mere two years later, of the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union – all claims to continuity are not merely flawed, but philosophically incoherent and politically futile. A new road to understanding has to be found, lest the survivors struggle and succumb in the wilds of an uncharted landscape.

In a concentrated form, this constitutes the foundation of Berlin’s reflections on

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55 Unlike other notable analysts and chroniclers of the collapse of modern ideals under the weight of twentieth century reality, such as the later Heidegger, who seems committed to a form of philosophically inflected theology, Berlin’s position does not rest on anything resembling an argument drawn from within the ambit of metaphysics, especially in its continental forms: the ontological is confined to the role of metaphorical illustration. This is significant. Berlin’s argument operates solely on a phenomenological level, and is concerned to analyse and define the pragmatic inadequacy of modern thought – from the *post facto* perspective of a Post-War world – rather than castigate it for distorting a putatively higher reality, which appears to be Heidegger’s intention in his later thought.

56 For a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the confluence, post 1945, of the pressingly political and the dispassionately philosophical in the search for the origins of totalitarianism, which began in earnest during the early years of the Cold War, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially chapters six and seven, pp. 108-120 and pp. 121-143, respectively.
what is living and what is dead, or else irretrievably moribund, in Enlightenment thought after the onslaught of totalitarianism. This forms the most immediately pressing conclusion, Berlin is convinced, that must be drawn from the events of the short twentieth century, at least if a sense of reality is to inform political judgement and ground intellectual life.

IV

Marxism and the Rise of a Secularised Neo-Calvinism

On the basis provided by Berlin’s analysis of the rupture that separates the Post-War world from modern thought, we must now consider a corollary that flows from his analysis of the ‘homelessness’ of intellectual life in the wake of recent desolation. Since Berlin’s account of a decisive historical rupture is painted in the broadest of philosophical brushstrokes, we must move from the sweeping arc of argument in *The Sense of Reality*, more akin to a Jackson Pollack than a John Constable, to a more precise perspective. We must, in short, move from the level of underlying historical and philosophical context and consider a specific development of Berlin’s overarching thesis. This continuation and deepening, as we shall see, is central to Berlin’s analysis of totalitarianism, and provides one aspect of his turn to the desolate and paranoiac world of Joseph de Maistre, which we will examine in greater detail in chapter five.

In a manner that is altogether characteristic of his thought, the general and sweeping philosophical argument propounded in *The Sense of Reality* receives its specific development from an unexpected direction: one of Berlin’s longer essays from the 1960s, a period of intellectual consolidation, which he simply entitled ‘Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century’. 57 Within the characteristically discursive argument developed in the essay, which touches on a number of related themes, one of

Berlin’s contentions is of greatest philosophical and historical moment. On the foundations provided by the doctrine of the necessary unity of theory and practice, Marx affirmed the idea of a secularised neo-Calvinism.

For Berlin, this unwieldy neologism possesses great importance. Marxian thought, even though Marx never sought this outcome, produced the first secular affirmation that humanity can and must be split, on the basis provided by historical necessity, into two distinct and mutually hostile groups, which can never merge and are locked into a mortal struggle: those who are the elect of history – the proletariat, soon to be victorious – and those who have been predestined for destruction, the doomed ranks of the bourgeoisie. In Berlin’s judgement, this is a development of the greatest philosophical and historical significance: the idea of the necessary unity of humanity was shattered by the rise of Marxism. We will explore Berlin’s development of this argument in greater detail below.

At this point, it is important to note that Berlin’s contention constitutes a continuation, in a more precise and developed form, of his argument in *The Sense of Reality*: the rise of a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism, as one of the bulwarks of all totalitarian thought, helped to lay the foundations for the destruction, in the twentieth century, of the concepts and categories of enlightened thought.

As one of the necessary presuppositions of totalitarianism, Berlin avers, a secularised neo-Calvinism, with a strongly pronounced Marxian accent, is one of the causes of the rupture, clearly discernible from the contemporaneous and transhistorical perspective of the Post-War years, that separates modern thought from the mid twentieth century. This contention provides a key, it will be argued, to Berlin’s decision to seek historical and philosophical illumination from one of the leading apostles of darkness and irrationalism in the nineteenth century, Joseph de Maistre. The remainder of this chapter, consequently, will be devoted to examining one of the bases of Berlin’s turn to the most formidable enemy of his own chastened and unorthodox ‘liberalism of fear’. 58

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58 The phrase, as well as the philosophical and historical idea and ideal of a chastened, Post-War ‘liberalism
Despite its bald literalism, the title of Berlin’s essay is curiously misleading. Although it promises a dual examination of Marx and the foundation of the First International, Berlin’s focus is on Marx himself, for one overriding reason: the essay is a reckoning with the legacy, far more than the thought, of Marxism in the twentieth century, which Berlin undertakes from the transhistorical and contemporaneous perspective of the Post-War years. The contemporaneity of Berlin’s reading of Marx is highlighted by the changes that his interpretation underwent, which are subtle yet significant, between the initial publication of his biography of the great ‘Red Prussian’, in 1939, and the interpretation advanced in ‘Marx and the International’, published in 1964.

The reader is struck by an immediate and significant departure. On the eve of a total world war, Berlin interpreted Marx as an orthodox representative of the Enlightenment: materialist, empiricist, positivist and committed to a form of social scientific analysis. In the aftermath of 1945, however, his view underwent a pronounced philosophical and historical development. As John Toews observes, although the change is largely evolutionary, Berlin’s view of Marx became strongly inflected by the idea of teleological determinism, which received its first and fullest examination in the pages of *Historical Inevitability*. In the place of the strict positivist determinist of the first edition of *Karl Marx* – an interpretation that could have come straight from the pages of Plekhanov, whose Berlin acknowledges as significant – the Marx who emerges from the pages of *Marx and the International* is a more disturbing admixture of influences.

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61 For Berlin’s interpretation of Plekhanov, whom he credits with developing the distinctive features of Russian Marxism, see his ‘The Father of Russian Marxism’, in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Power of Ideas* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 126-133. For the substantive changes to Berlin’s interpretation of Marx, the reader should consult and compare, in addition to *Marx and the International in the Nineteenth Century*, the first edition of Berlin’s *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*,
From the *post facto* perspective of 1964, Berlin saw Marx as the inheritor of a twinned legacy. The teleological nature of Marxian determinism, Berlin now maintained, flows from a bifurcated inheritance – which unites the materialist Enlightenment with the anti-modern Counter-Enlightenment, as refracted through the powerful lens of Hegelianism – and together produces a combination of radical materialism and teleological determinism. This constitutes the philosophical beginning of Berlin’s reckoning with both Marxism and the idea of a rupture with the ruling presuppositions of enlightened thought.

Although Berlin sees Marx as the legatee of a bifurcated inheritance, he is also convinced that Marx’s distinctive brand of teleological determinism, which provides the locomotive force of historical materialism, would lapse into outright incoherence without the philosophical resources of the *philosophia perennis* of Western rationalism: monism. This is highly significant, for it introduces another decisive element into Berlin’s ‘renovated’ interpretation of Marx and Marxism. While Marxism partakes of the legacy of Counter-Enlightenment thought, Marx’s thought is also coterminous with the central stream of monism, in the same manner as the Enlightenment. The pervasive and tranhistorical influence of monism, therefore, forms a common denominator in Berlin’s interpretation of both the Enlightenment and Marxism.

Most importantly, Berlin is committed to the contention that the Marxian theory of the unity of theory and practice is little more than an extension, albeit in modern philosophical dress, of the metaphysical core of monistic thought. In this sense, Berlin sees Marx as a faithful son of the central stream of the rationalist tradition, at least after his own fashion. Teleological determinism, Berlin avers, is impossible without the sustaining force of monism. Despite Marx’s own powerful and sincere protestations to contrary, Marxism is
founded on the ancient metaphysical bedrock of monism:

While I do not propose to expound the familiar principles of Marxism, I think it as well to remark that they rest upon a metaphysical foundation which is by no means self-evident, a vast assumption that Marx took over from Hegel and classical philosophy, and which he did not trouble to argue. This assumption, important not only intrinsically, but on account of the vast influence it has had, is the monistic conception of history.\(^{62}\)

The importance of this judgement for Berlin’s reckoning with Marx is difficult to overstate. Just as Berlin is convinced that a line of philosophical continuity connects the Enlightenment to monistic rationalism, notwithstanding the *philosophes* avowed political radicalism, his critique of Marxism – launched from across the rupture that separates the twentieth century from modern thought – is built on the same foundations: the unity of theory and practice, as a modern form of monistic rationalism, provides the necessary foundation for the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism. It is to this point that we must now turn.

The putative unity of theory and practice, Berlin avers, it is based on a sustaining conception of ‘man and the universe’. This is ontologically basic. Its lineaments are clearly discernible in Max’s thought. As a theory of history and a promethean ethic of liberation, Berlin argues, the unity of theory and practice is founded on the conviction that every obstacle to human fulfilment, from the minor to the seemingly intractable, such as the capitalist mode of production itself, is susceptible to a final resolution.\(^{63}\) Notwithstanding the melancholy record of human history, all human beings seek unity and concord. Discordance is a sign of irrationality.\(^{64}\) Although a necessary vehicle for the full development of productive forces, class conflict is a pathological condition, which must come to an end when the prehistory of humanity fades into oblivion, and the inevitable and

\(^{62}\) Isaiah Berlin, ‘Marxism and the International, pp. 119-120.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 120.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 120.
justifiable supersession of capitalism takes place. For Marx and his rationalist disciples, Berlin maintains, inevitability and justifiability are two sides of the same rationalistic coin: rational understanding must lead, on pain of irrationality, to an action in accord with Reason. On this basis, Berlin characterises the Marxian theory of human nature in the following terms:

It is this assumption that all human beings have a common nature, change as it may, definable in terms of very general, specifically human goals – a doctrine at the root of Aristotle and the Bible, no less than Aquinas, Descartes, Luther and the atheists of eighteenth-century Paris – that makes possible talk of frustration, degradation, distortion of human beings. Men have permanent spiritual and material potentialities which they can realise only in one final set of conditions: when they ease from mutual destruction, when they turn their energies from fighting one another and unite them to subdue their environment according to reason; reason being understood as that which understands and seeks the satisfaction of needs that men cannot help possessing, needs misconceived for historically explicable reasons in the past, and misused to justify aggression and oppression. The central – and uncriticised – assumption is that all human ends are, in principle, harmonisable and capable of satisfaction; that men are, or can be and will be, such that the satisfaction of one man’s natural ends will one day not frustrate the quest for similar satisfaction by his brothers.65

Although conflict is the engine of historical development, its final Aufhebung in the overthrow of capitalism is a requirement of Reason.

Given these sustaining presuppositions, the historical process becomes the scene for a dramatic and decisive struggle. Despite the seemingly random and circuitous movements of historical development, which might appear to confirm the conviction – sometimes affirmed in despair, sometimes hailed as a liberation – that history possesses no libretto, Marx dismisses such scepticism as an abdication of Reason before mere experience. For those with the rationality to recognise its lineaments, history discloses a story of the “harmonious realization of all human powers in accordance with the principles

65 Ibid., p. 120.
of reason”. Drawing on the romantic idea of the self-fashioning and self-transforming human subject, Marxism is committed to the idea of ‘man as labouring subject’. History is the tale of human creative subjectivity, externalised in the objects of its creativity, struggling to achieve freedom and belonging within the material world. In the Marxian account of human nature, the overriding aim of the historical process is the realisation of radical autonomy and integral expression in the phenomenal world.

This leads to a significant and linked contention: the experience of alienation is both a pathological condition, an expression of an irrational economic and political order, and a necessary locomotive force within history. As Berlin points out, the travails of the labouring subject stand at the core of the Marxian conception of human beings fashioning a world in their own image: “Work in the cosmic vision of Marx is what cosmic love had been for Dante – that which makes men and their relationships what they are, given the relatively invariant factors of the external world into which they are born”.

On this broad philosophical basis, Berlin begins his critique of the unity of theory and practice, which, he argues, forms the ground of a secularised neo-Calvinism. Marxism does not proclaim the general maxim that actions are a surer guide to belief than even the most ardent professions of sincere conviction. It lays claim to a far more powerful position: action is the equivalent of rational understanding. The power of Marx’s unification of theory and practice does not stem from an empirically grounded analysis of cause and effect, but springs from his conviction, which he shares with the mainstream of the rationalist tradition, that, if one correctly understands the nature of reality, then one cannot live and act in a manner that is contrary to that knowledge and remain a rational being.

Freedom is the equivalent of rational understanding. If one has correctly distinguished the shifting and treacherous shadows of mere appearance from reality in itself, but does not act

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68 Ibid., p. 171.
72 Ibid., p. 122.
on that basis, then one is not merely heteronomous, but probably insane:

From these classic premisses [Marx’s conception of the labouring subject, his theory of human nature] he drew the most original of all his conclusions, and the most influential – the celebrated doctrine of the unity of theory and practice. The Marxist doctrine is that what you do is what you believe; practice is not evidence for, it is identical with, belief. To understand something is to live, that is, act, in a certain fashion; and vice versa. If such understanding and knowledge belongs to the realm of theory, then it is the activity of thinking along certain lines; if it occurs in the world of action, then it consists of a readiness to act in a certain way, the initiation of a certain type of behaviour. Belief, thought, emotion, volition, decision, action are not distinguishable from one another as so many activities or states or processes: they are aspects of the same praxis – action upon, or reaction to, the world.73

The unity of theory and practice is an example of a maximally rationalist assumption. The Marxian identification of rational understanding with action is constructed on the foundations provided by the quintessence of metaphysical rationalism: the identification of virtue with knowledge.

As Berlin observes in his essay on the Utopian tradition and its decline in the West, the identification of virtue with knowledge, as it is expressed in classical thought and as it developed throughout the history of rationalist thought in the West, is an early anticipation of Marx’s doctrine. In a manner that would have mystified Plato and infuriated Marx, Berlin argues that there is a continuity between Platonic metaphysics and the doctrine of the unity of theory and practice: “to know how to compass your ends and then not to try to do so is, in the end, not to truly understand your ends. To understand is to act: there is a sense in which these earlier thinkers [for Berlin, the majority of the thinkers within the Western tradition] anticipated Karl Marx in their belief in the unity of theory and practice”.74

73 Ibid., p. 122.
This brings us closer to the core of Berlin’s charge against the sweepingly metaphysical presuppositions that sustain the unity of theory and practice. Much like the proponents of the identity of knowledge and virtue, with whom he shares a common and delusive philosophical kinship, Marx is committed to the contention that rationality consists in understanding the nature of reality, especially its class structure, and comprehending one’s own relationship to that reality. 75 To be entitled to claim knowledge of anything in the world, one must understand what part it plays within the historical process, whose necessary aim is the full and harmonious realisation of the interests of the labouring subject.

For Berlin, this is the teleological heart of Marxist thought. 76 History is determined by this process, which is driven forward by the perpetual striving of the labouring subject. In a sense, therefore, human nature is the immanent force moving the historical process forward. From a Marxian perspective, Berlin avers, it is impossible to correctly analyse a situation – that is to say, identify its inherently class based structure – yet fail to act in accordance with that understanding. 77

A rational evaluation is the correct assessment of ends, means, situations, agents involved in them. To discover these truths is to apply them...If I cannot know what my true goal is and how to obtain it, I cannot be rational and I cannot determine myself to act in the light of such knowledge. 78

This produces the peculiarly Marxist conception of rational necessity. For Marx, Berlin argues, it is not the epitome of rationality to work for the revolution because it is inevitable. Rather, rationality and inevitability are founded on the fact that the inherent contradictions of capitalism must become unacceptable to anyone who has grasped, as

76 Ibid., p. 122.
77 Ibid., p. 123.
78 Ibid., p. 123.
Marx did, what form a rational society should possess. This makes the outbreak of revolution, and therewith the beginning of history, an inevitable part of the historical process. Although this conception of the interplay between liberty and necessity in the struggle of the labouring subject to achieve freedom and belonging in the material world does not leave much room for freedom, the unity of theory and practice produces an idea of self-determination through Reason:

This tension, for Marx, makes certain an ultimate revolt by a given society against frustrations which spring from its own unavoidable ignorance or stupidity, and take the form of maintaining institutions originally created by itself in response to real needs, but now no longer capable of fulfilling them...No doubt this pattern of partial fulfilment breeding its own tensions, and diseases generating their own remedies, is itself inescapable; but it is explicable in terms of men’s own nature – the miseries and splendour of men’s reason and invention – and not of some external non-human power which shapes men as it does, whether they like it or not. The play is determined, but the actors are not marionettes controlled by strings pulled by some outside agency; they determine themselves. Their lines are set them by their predicament, but they understand and mean them, for the ends are their own.

A decisive corollary, Berlin believes, flows from the Marxian account of the relationship between freedom and necessity. If the historical process is the stage for the development of the labouring subject – the externalisation of whose creative power in various modes of production is the ‘engine-room’ of history – then possibility of universal and immutable human goals, as these were conceived by the older natural law tradition, becomes untenable. This stands at the heart of what Berlin characterises as Marx’s commitment to a form of evolutionary relativism. All social and political ends, rules, values and ideals will be altered, probably beyond all recognition, by the continuously changing relationship of

\[79\] Ibid., p. 124.  
\[80\] Ibid., p. 125.  
\[81\] Ibid., p. 125.
classes to each other, as well as between the individuals who together form these classes.\footnote{Ibid., p. 125.}

No putatively universal moral principle can override those demands that Reason makes of fully rational men and women, which are nothing more than a consequence and corollary of the painful, but ultimately inevitable, ascent of the labouring subject towards the full realisation of its nature.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 125-126.}

This construal of rationality and morality, Berlin maintains, is the consequence of Marx’s commitment to a form of evolutionary relativism: every way-station along the difficult road to unforced belonging and freedom in the material world possesses its own scale of values, which appear, even though they are not, ultimate to those individuals who have not understood the nature of reality. As Berlin observes, Marx never condemned bourgeois morality on the basis of a higher or objective morality. The reprehensible character of bourgeois morality does not rest on its inherent moral failings, in the way that utilitarianism is morally unjustifiable from a Kantian perspective. Rather, its fatal and inevitable failing, Berlin avers, is contained in its very name: the tenets of bourgeois morality are meaningless simply because they are bourgeois, which leads them to conflict with the rationally discernible “pattern of human progress, and therefore cannot but distort the facts.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 129.} A decisive corollary flows from this conviction: “Truth, in this sense, resides in the vision of the most progressive men of the age: these are, ipso facto, those who identify their interests with those of the most progressive class of the time.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 129.} If they have understood the demands of rational necessity correctly, then the truth of their understanding of the connection between reality, liberty and necessity will disclose itself as success in practice: theory and practice are unified.\footnote{Ibid., p. 129.}

This cardinal conviction led Marx, Berlin avers, to the sustaining groundwork of his doctrine of the unity of theory and practice: truth and the authority reside in only one
class, whose interests represent the universal needs of humanity, the industrial proletariat. This was a philosophical and political move of epochal significance: the interests of the proletariat correspond to the truth – in other words, the rational necessity – of the historical process, which makes this class, as well as those who identify themselves with its historical mission, the rational source of all authority.  

Although great religious traditions have, on the basis of a supernatural foundation, invested one group of human beings with complete truth and authority, this conception of the nexus between authority and truth, Berlin argues, had never before been affirmed by secular thinkers.  

Marx endowed history with the all-encompassing authority of rational necessity. Those who understand the character of reality, therefore, are its authorised interpreters:

It is this notion of truth as the authority of the group over the individual, or, for practical purposes, of the leaders of the group over the group, that is now prevalent wherever Marxism is dominant, where it has replaced the older notion of an objective truth, for all men to seek and find, testable by public criteria open to all. This is what Marxism has in common with some of the great dogmatic Churches of the world.

The powerful admixture of evolutionary relativism and rational necessity, both of which receive their justification from Marx’s conception of history, produces the Marxian account of authority, which is the keystone of Berlin’s reckoning with Marx’s thought from the contemporaneous and transhistorical perspective of Post-War reality.

The absolute authority with which Marx arms the ‘vanguard’ of history rests on the fact that vanguardists have understood the nature of reality, which allows them to act in accordance with the dictates of Reason, and thereby makes it possible for them to move history forward.  

For Marx, Berlin maintains, the rightness of their actions is guaranteed by their grasp of what is rational within the historical process:

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87 Ibid., p. 129.
88 Ibid., p. 129.
89 Ibid., p. 129.
90 Significantly, there is, for Berlin, no significant disjunction between Marxism and Leninism, since the presuppositions of the former are simply further developed and applied in the latter.
Consequently, only that valuation, and the activity that expresses it, will be rational which springs from a correct grasp of my historical position, that is, of my position in the process determined by whatever is the dominant factor in it – God or the laws of nature, or State, or Church, or class – and consists in the choice of only those means which, given this process, can alone effectively promote those ends which as a rational being I cannot help seeking; cannot help, not in some mechanical sense in which, say, I cannot help digesting, but in the sense in which I cannot help reaching logically correct conclusions if I employ logical methods of reasoning...

The Marxian unity of theory and practice leads to a justification of the ruthless imposition of absolute authority, on the warrant provided by the demands of Reason in history. The consequence of this affirmation, Berlin maintains, is the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism. By producing a form of ‘secular’ predestination on the foundations provided by historical necessity, Marx’s succeeded in splitting humanity into two separate worlds, which are locked in a rationally ordained historical struggle, with one world destined to be defeated by the other. The unity of humanity, hitherto proclaimed on the basis of a common human nature, was shattered by a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism, in a manner more devastating than at any other moment in human history.

Berlin does not shrink from the sweep and power of this moral judgement. Marxism, once transformed into a neo-Calvinist theory of the elect and the damned, denied the possibility of communication and compromise between the two groups that it saw as locked in an inevitable struggle for survival. The unique radicalism of a Marxian accented neo-Calvinism finds its expression, Berlin maintains, in the fact that it denies the possibility of wide-scale conversion to the Truth. Not even the most fervent and intolerant religious sects – apart, perhaps, from Calvinism itself – had thought of humanity in such necessarily divided terms. The possibility of conversion to the truth, which would

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91 Ibid., p. 124.
92 Ibid., p. 139.
93 Ibid., p. 135.
expunge the offence of heresy, had been a permanent possibility, and provided a justification for the actions of the believer when confronted with a challenge to the Truth.\textsuperscript{94} The rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism brought to an end the ideal of a unified humanity:

This, if it is valid, is a radical discovery: for it undermines the basic assumptions of rational dispute, of the possibility of uncoerced consensus which alone justifies democratic government. In a class-divided society, there is in principle no possibility of a rational compromise between groups incapable of understanding, indeed of not seeking to destroy, each other. Hatred, historically inevitable hatred, blows up the entire basis of a unitary State, of society, government, justice, morality, politics, as hitherto conceived. Those whom history has doomed, it has deprived of understanding. They are like the pagans whom the Israelites were to eradicate in their entirety, condemned by God utterly.\textsuperscript{95}

The emergence of a secularised neo-Calvinism, in Berlin’s judgement, helped to produce one of the intellectual and political preconditions of the totalitarian thought that assailed the mid-twentieth century: the idea that whole sections of humanity – which stand condemned by history, and are therefore beyond all hope of salvation – are expendable:

This conception, at one blow, undermines the entire notion of the unity of mankind, the possibility of rational (or any other kind of) argument among men of different outlooks and persuasions: the notion of man which is at the heart of all previous views of life; the central pillar on which the entire Western tradition, religious and secular, moral and scientific had rested. The Marxist doctrine is a terrible new weapon, for its truth entails that there are entire sections of mankind which are literally expendable. It can only be false humanitarianism to try to rescue classes irrevocably condemned by history. Individuals, of course, can avoid destruction, and may even be helped to escape – Marx and Engels themselves did, after all, abandon the sinking ship on which they were born for the seaworthy vessel of the proletariat; they crossed over to the party of humanity; so did others. But the class as such is doomed and cannot be rescued. There cannot be mass conversions, for the fate of human groups

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 135.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., p. 136.
depends not on free actions – the movements of the spirit – in the heads of men, but on objective social conditions, which guarantee the salvation of one class and the destruction of its rival.\textsuperscript{96}

Given the historical context of the essay – the politically and culturally fraught years of the Cold War, only two years after the Cuban missile crisis – it is unsurprising that Berlin’s argument reads like an account of the Marxian origins of Soviet totalitarianism.

Significantly, however, this is only one aspect of his position. Berlin’s historical and philosophical ambition are more comprehensive. In the twentieth century, he maintains, the separation of humanity into the damned and the saved, ordained by the historical process in Marxism, was separated from its original metaphysical foundations – the unity of theory and practice – and achieved a translation into racial terms in the idioms of hatred produced by Fascism and Nazism. For Berlin, the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism, now far removed from its Marxist foundations, also stands at the core of the totalitarian thought of Nazism, including, of course, the Final Solution itself. It is an enabling condition of totalitarianism:

This neo-Calvinist division of mankind into those who can (and for the most part will) be saved and those who cannot, and (for the most part) perish, is novel and somewhat frightening. When this separation into the elect and the evil who cannot help themselves was translated into racial terms, it led, in our century, to an enormous massacre – a moral and spiritual catastrophe unparalleled in human history. The fact that the rationalist Marx would, of course, have fought this irrationalist wave with all his might as a monstrous nightmare is beside the point at issue... A doctrine which identifies the enemy and justifies a holy war against men whose ‘liquidation’ is a service to mankind releases forces of aggression and destruction on a scale hitherto attained only by fanatical religious movements... Lenin, who acted on these assumptions with his customary single-minded consistency, did not in any particular betray the principles of his master. Those who recoiled from such practices recoiled, whether they knew it or not, not from some peculiarly fanatical exaggeration of

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., pp. 138-139.
Marxist doctrine, but from Marxism itself.\textsuperscript{97}

In Berlin’s judgement, the maximally rationalist presuppositions of the Marx’s thought helped to create the necessary conditions for the eruption of a politicised irrationalism, which was not merely confined to Fascism and Nazism, but also formed part of the philosophical core Leninism. Despite his undoubted standing as one the greatest historical analysts and prophets of the Age of History, or possibly because of it, Marx could not have foreseen, Berlin avers, the terrible historical irony that grew to increasing strength, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the rationalist presuppositions of his own thought. Although Marx would have fought with all of his considerable intellectual might against the irrationalism that convulsed the twentieth century, his severely rationalist thought helped to create a necessary element of the political and philosophical bedrock of totalitarian thought. Despite the eleven years that separates their publication, Berlin’s central arguments in \textit{The Sense of Reality} and \textit{Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century} form two sides of the same coin.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 139.
Chapter Five:

The Destruction of the Questions and Berlin’s Turn to Joseph de Maistre

I

Introduction

For Berlin, as we saw in the previous chapter, there is a close relationship between the implosion of enlightened thought in the short twentieth century, which makes the continued affirmation of its ruling concepts and categories unsustainable, and the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism. The development of a secularised neo-Calvinism provided one of the necessary conditions for the totalitarian thought and practice that gripped the twentieth century. Significantly, Berlin’s historical perspective and philosophical argument – which so outraged E.H. Carr’s materialist sensibility that he dissected Berlin’s argument within the pages of What is History?[^1] – is resolute in its historical idealism. Moreover, the inadequacy of modern thought in the aftermath of 1945 is closely tied to the legacy of the Marxian doctrine of the unity of theory and practice. This forms the central and sustaining conclusion of Berlin’s linked arguments in The Sense of Reality and Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century.

Importantly, Berlin’s analysis of the damage inflicted on modern thought by the rise of totalitarian thought possesses another, no less decisive, aspect, which is connected to his analysis of the rise of neo-Calvinism. As we shall see, Berlin’s turn to Maistre, perhaps the most ferocious wolf of the Counter-Enlightenment, is intimately connected

[^1]: For E.H. Carr’s critique of Berlin’s approach to the philosophy of history, especially Berlin’s contention that moral judgement, as an inescapable aspect of our presuppositional framework of experience, is presupposed by all sound historical interpretation, see Carr’s Trevelyan lectures, delivered in Cambridge in 1961, and published as his equally celebrated and denigrated contribution to the exploration of the character of historical explanation, What is History? [2nd ed.] (London: Penguin, 1990).
with his contention that totalitarian thought – which presupposes the expendability of whole sections of humanity, a view that a secularised neo-Calvinism made philosophically articulate – possesses a further sustaining presupposition. It is closely related to the affirmation of neo-Calvinism, in its secularised and historicised form, yet remains conceptually independent of it.

The twentieth century, Berlin maintains, also witnessed a drive towards the destruction of the question, by which Berlin means to denote a drive, both psychological and philosophical, to deconstruct the central and enduring questions of political philosophy, such as the relationship between liberty and authority. This striking neologism – which Berlin intends to be taken literally, as both a philosophical concept and a decisive political force – forms the second bulwark of his turn to the Counter-Enlightenment, especially to the ferocious anti-modern animus of one of its most severely reactionary figures, Joseph de Maistre.

Berlin develops this argument in another largely overlooked essay, ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, published in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in 1950. Its aim of examining the fate of political thought in the first part of the twentieth century provides Berlin with the necessary backdrop for his central conclusion: the short twentieth century was stricken by a drive towards the destruction of the millennial questions of political thought. This melancholy development has parallels with, and forms a complement to, the rise of an historicised and revolutionary neo-Calvinism.

A process that is philosophical and psychological, the destruction of the questions is a drive towards the dissolution of the perennial questions of political thought. Dissolution is privileged over resolution. Since any putative answer would be subject to a rational critique, the development of possible answers, or even the toleration of the conditions necessary for their promulgation, must always lead to the same terrible social and political nadir: the triptych of dissension, debate and disharmony, which is the necessary foundation for the destruction of any unified effort towards an ultimate social
goal. In Berlin’s judgement, the destruction of the questions – whose earliest intimations he detects in Sorel’s prescient thought, and whose implementation he sees as Lenin’s baneful contribution to political practice – is one of the cardinal preconditions for the appearance of totalitarian thought within the borders of a supposedly enlightened Europe. While the drive towards the destruction of the questions is not logically dependent on the idea of a secularised neo-Calvinism, it is complementary. Both are necessary presuppositions of the disturbed logic of totalitarian thought.

But this is not its only significance that Berlin attaches to the destruction of the questions, nor is it the most decisive. It also forms the basis for Berlin’s seemingly incoherent turn to the most implacable foes of his own liberal humanism, especially Maistre. The reason for this is straightforward. Berlin’s seeming turn away from the Enlightenment and towards a thinker like Maistre, which Lilla interprets as a misguided attempt at saving liberalism by fleeing from its foundations, has a different aim, methodological in character, and is concerned with the analysis of those elements that Berlin sees as central to totalitarian thought and practice: a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism and a drive towards the destruction of the questions.

For Berlin, Maistre possesses unusual importance, from the perspective of contemporaneous concern, because of his prescient insights into the intellectual character and mind-set of totalitarianism. Significantly, Berlin does not see Maistre as standing at the fountainhead of totalitarianism, in a linear sense. While he does not hold him responsible for the rise of totalitarianism in a causal sense, which would lead to a history of degeneration from a privileged point of origin, as in Jacob Talmon’s *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Berlin sees Maistre as a precursor of developments yet to come.

Since Berlin is convinced that the eruption of totalitarian thought cannot be understood apart from the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism and the drive towards the destruction of the questions, his central concern is to find a method – an analytical window – with which to examine a phenomenon that is without precedent in Western history. This
leads Berlin to an unusual position. Although totalitarian rule forms the twentieth century’s cardinal contribution to political thought and practice, some thinkers of the relatively recent past, especially Maistre, can be explored for intimations of the mind-set that underlies the character of totalitarian thought. Only thinkers who thought in a similar philosophical and political vein to the prophets and exponents of totalitarianism, Berlin suggests, can be read as guides to the mind-set of totalitarianism.

Implicit within this judgement is Berlin’s commitment to a contemporaneous and transhistorical approach to historical inquiry, especially the conviction that thinkers of the past can be read, in a manner that Skinner would condemn as ahistorical, through the lens of contemporary concern. From Berlin’s perspective, the philosophical and historical significance of Maistre rests on the fact that he, although necessarily ignorant of events and developments that occurred after his death, can be read as an unusually prescient analyst of tendencies that only came into their own in the twentieth century.

The centrality of this form of historical interpretation, which forms an application of Berlin’s philosophy by other means, makes the thinkers of the Enlightenment philosophically insufficient. Whatever his genius as a writer and thinker, Voltaire possesses little insight into the assumptions and principles that developed into totalitarian thought. Berlin turned away from the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, in a manner that so disturbs both Lilla and Sternhell, because he saw them as largely incapable of providing insight into events that went decisively beyond the conceptual resources of the Age of Reason. Maistre, apostle of reaction and obscurantism that he is, possesses no such inherent limitation. For Berlin, therefore, the Enlightenment is too innocent, in both senses of the term, to provide Post-War thought with philosophical illumination, especially because very few, if any, of the ruling concepts and categories of enlightened thought survived into the twentieth century.

This is the significant point of connection with Berlin’s argument in The Sense of Reality: the implosion of the central concepts and categories of Enlightenment thought
makes it almost impossible to analyse the eruption of totalitarianism from within the shattered remains of the dominant intellectual traditions of the modern world. While Voltaire is an admirable thinker – a humane and liberal philosophe, an honourable paterfamilias of Berlin’s own liberalism – it falls to Maistre to provide the insights that are indispensable to a world still reeling from the end of the ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’. Thinkers like Maistre, Berlin believes, are a methodological necessity. We can regret this necessity, but cannot circumvent it.

As an analyst of totalitarianism, writing from the contemporaneous perspective of the immediate Post-War years, Berlin did not abandon the Enlightenment in a misguided attempt at shoring up the political fortunes of liberalism by attacking its historical and philosophical foundation, as Lilla suggests, but turned to the most prescient foes of his own liberalism as a way of gaining a clearer view of the sustaining presuppositions of totalitarian thought, especially its intimately linked and necessary aspects, a secularised neo-Calvinism and the drive towards the destruction of destruction of the questions.

II

The Destruction of the Questions

Berlin develops is analysis of the destruction of the questions in one of his most overlooked essays, ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, which attracted no significant scholarly interest when it was included in the first edition of Four Essays on Liberty. Its publishing history provides an indication of its significance, however. Originally commissioned by Hamilton Armstrong Fish, then the editor of Foreign Affairs, the influential journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, for its mid-century edition, Berlin’s theme revolves around the problem of retrospective analysis from a position of disorienting immediacy:
The student of the political ideas of, for example, the mid-nineteenth century must indeed be blind if does not, sooner or later, become aware of the profound differences in ideas and terminology, in the general view of things – the ways in which the elements of experience are conceived to be related to one other – which divide that not very distant time from our own. He understands neither that time nor his own if he does not perceive the contrast between what was common to Comte and Mill, Mazzini and Michelet, Herzen and Marx, on the one hand, and to Max Weber and William James, Tawney and Beard, Lytton Strachey and Namier, on the other; the continuity of the European intellectual tradition without which no historical understanding at all would be possible is, at shorter range, a succession of specific discontinuities and dissimilarities. Consequently, the remarks which follow deliberately ignore the similarities in favour of the specific differences in political outlook which characterise our own time, and, to a large degree, solely our own.²

Berlin’s position can be expressed in the form of a basic question: what can be said about the character of political thought in the first half of the twentieth century, and about its consequences for the political history of that devastated century? For Berlin, one point is clear: the development of political philosophy from the mid-nineteenth century into its successor exercised a decisive effect on the first half of the twentieth century. This forms the philosophical bedrock of Berlin’s largely historical and political argument in Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century. We must now consider it in greater detail.

With a journalistic succinctness that is relatively rare in his essays, Berlin states his central claim with a combination of conviction and clarity: throughout Western history, all disagreements about the proper ends of political and social life presupposed the existence of a series of foundational questions and their corresponding answers. If the questions were real and not entirely delusive, then their corresponding answers would have to be equally clear and certain. That much was thought to flow from the underlying rationality of reality. The twentieth century undermined this worldview, leaving its continued affirmation as little more than a fading hope in the face of an recalcitrant reality. This forms the core of

Berlin’s contention that the twentieth century was marred by the development of a drive towards the destruction of the questions. Significantly, however, Berlin maintains that a cursory survey of twentieth century history might suggest a very different story, at least, that is, to historians who are too deeply affected by the political turmoil of earlier or later periods.³

From this distorting perspective, many of the decisive political ideas and movements that characterise the twentieth century appear to be little more than developments – sometimes surprising, but always historically continuous – of tendencies that were present in the nineteenth century.⁴ In the case of international institutions, Berlin observes, this historical and philosophical judgement verges on a truism. As he points out, the International Court of Justice in the Hague, the United Nations and its unsuccessful predecessor, as well as the many international conventions and agencies of the pre-war and Post-War periods, are the children of the liberal internationalism that was the philosophical keystone and the political hope of progressive political thought in the nineteenth century.⁵ These liberal and humane institutions, Berlin suggests, stand at the mouth of a river that has its source in the philosophical uplands of the Ages of Reason and History. Even more significantly, the assumptions of the founders of liberalism, such as Condorcet and Helvétius, do not differ greatly from the principles espoused by later liberals like Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Masaryk.⁶ This historical interpretation, Berlin avers, is superficially plausible, but confuses a thin patina of continuity with an identity of philosophical substance. The unity of the European intellectual tradition, Berlin is convinced, extends no further than the borders of the Age of Totalitarianism. Although he does not construct a dividing line between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that is impervious to all forms

³ Ibid., p. 63.
⁴ Ibid., p. 61.
⁵ Ibid., pp. 61-62.
⁶ Ibid., p. 62.
of historical continuity, the desolate features of the twentieth century should not be viewed as merely more devastating developments of an antecedent crisis.\textsuperscript{7}

One of the central presuppositions of Berlin’s argument is his judgement, already explored in chapter two, that the Enlightenment does not represent a rupture with the wellsprings of monistic rationalism, but forms its continuation, albeit in largely materialist and naturalist dress. Although the rising consciousness of history in the nineteenth century altered the philosophical character of Western thought, its sustaining presuppositions remained impervious to challenge.\textsuperscript{8} Despite the fact that the materialist and naturalist thought of thinkers like Condorcet and Bentham, to employ Berlin’s examples, gave way to a greater appreciation of the historical contingency and particularity of social, political and cultural developments, the keystone of monistic rationalism continued to inform nineteenth century thought in all of its forms.\textsuperscript{9} A radical divergence on points of principle was underwritten, Berlin maintains, by a near unanimity on the level of underlying presuppositions.\textsuperscript{10}

As the two greatest political movements of the Age of History, both humanitarian individualism and romantic nationalism, Berlin maintains, were united by their commitment to a shared political and philosophical outlook.\textsuperscript{11} Notwithstanding the significant and even strident differences in political principles and programs that divided the many political and philosophical outlooks of the nineteenth century – socialist revolutionaries and Tory democrats were never the best of ideological friends – all parties to the intellectual and political maelstrom of the Age of History shared a series of grounding positions:

Whatever their differences – and they were notoriously profound enough to lead to a sharp divergence and ultimate collision of these two ideals – they had this

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 62-63.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 59.
in common: they believed that the problems both of individuals and of societies could be solved if only the forces of intelligence and of virtue could be made to prevail over ignorance and wickedness. They believed, as against the pessimists and fatalists, both religious and secular, whose voices, audible indeed a good deal earlier, began to sound loudly only towards the end of century, that all clearly understood questions could be solved by human beings with the moral and intellectual resources at their disposal...It therefore takes an exceptional effort of the imagination to discard the context of later years, to cast ourselves back into the period when the views and movements which have since triumphed and lost their glamour long ago were still capable of stirring so much vehement idealistic feeling: when, for example, nationalism was not felt to be in principle incompatible with a growing degree of internationalisation, or civil liberties with a rational organisation of society.12

All the warring political and philosophical tendencies of the nineteenth century fervently and unselfconsciously affirmed the possibility and necessity of rational analysis. This foundational method, it was believed, would eventually disclose those principles, limited in number and harmonious in character, that would lead any society to a consummation of the values that all rational individuals, in virtue of their rationality, seek to achieve.

As Berlin observes, this political and epistemological outlook, common to conservatives as much as socialist revolutionaries, rested on a cardinal conviction, whose devastation in the twentieth century lies at the core of the drive towards the destruction of the questions: all attempts at rational analysis were founded on the “common assumption that men must be spoken and appealed to in terms of the needs and interests and ideals of which they were, or could be made to be, conscious”.13 The significance of this presupposition, which places conscious interests and rational analysis at the centre of political thought and action, is almost impossible to overstate. In Berlin’s judgement, this foundational and hitherto unquestioned conviction, which Marx would have assented to as

12 Ibid., pp. 59 and 64-65.
13 Ibid., p. 66.
readily as Mill, was no longer a presupposition of much political thought and practice in the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{14}

For Berlin, this change forms another point of rupture between the Ages of Reason and History and the Post-War world. Although both Communism and Fascism derive, in an disturbed and mutated form, from humanitarian individualism and romantic nationalism, their transformation is not a case of a coherent and linear development, but can only be understood in relation to the end of rational appeals to conscious interests:

Yet it is a fallacy to regard Fascism and Communism as being in the main only more uncompromising and violent manifestations of an earlier crisis, the culmination of a struggle fully discernible before. The differences between the politic movements of the twentieth century and the nineteenth are very sharp, and they spring from factors whose full force was not properly realised until our century was well under way... One of the elements of the new outlook is the notion of unconscious and irrational influences which outweigh the forces of reason; another the notion that answers to problems exist not in rational solutions, but in the removal of the problems themselves by means other than thought and argument.\textsuperscript{15}

Most decisively, as Berlin observes, the dawn of the twentieth century saw the rise of the ideal of the primacy of irrational forces over Reason, all the more powerful because of their irrationality. In the twentieth century, Berlin avers, the possibility of removing seemingly perennial and intractable problems by harnessing the power of the irrational began its rise to intellectual hegemony and political implementation. It is this development that underlies the drive towards the destruction of the questions.

Although Berlin maintains that chronological frontiers make for poor lines of demarcation in the history of ideas, he is willing, in a suspension of his own maxim, to date this decisive turning point in political and intellectual history. The year is 1903: the place is London. The moment is the second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 68-69.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 61.
better known by two of its later titles: the Bolsheviks and, after 1917, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The most significant consequence of the congress, far more decisive than any of the various resolutions passed by its participants was the development – albeit circuitously, throughout the early years of the twentieth century – of the drive towards the destruction of the questions.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69.}

In one of the most unusually precise judgements in his work in the history of ideas, Berlin maintains that the second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party brought to fruition a tendency – hitherto inchoate but increasingly powerful – that had begun to develop throughout the later years of the nineteenth century. This changed at the congress. As Berlin observes, one of the delegates, who employed the \textit{nom de guerre} Posadovsky, made explicit one of the basic presuppositions of the drive towards the destruction of the questions.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69.} If the revolutionary vanguard of the party demands absolute authority, then an inescapable conclusion presents itself to the fully rational member of the movement: even the most basic of civil liberties, such as the sanctity of the person, must be abolished if the leaders of the party demand it.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69.} Only they have achieved a unity of theory and practice, which is the only justification of authority that a loyal member of the revolutionary movement has a right to demand.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69.} At the time, as Berlin points out, even Plekhanov, who later recoiled from the practical implementation of the demand for absolute authority, spoke in favour of this conception of the proper relationship between rights and historical necessity, declaring that “the safety of the revolution is the highest law”.\footnote{Ibid., p. 70.}

The political and philosophical ideal defended at the congress, whose internal logic is founded on the presuppositions of a secularised neo-Calvinism, led to a conception of revolutionary morality, which is a consequence of the unity of theory and practice:
Certainly, if the revolution demanded it, everything – democracy, liberty, the rights of the individual – must be sacrificed to it. If the democratic assembly elected by the Russian people after the revolution proved amenable to Marxist tactics, it would be kept in being as a Long Parliament; if not, it would be disbanded as quickly as possible. A Marxist revolution could not be carried through by men obsessed by scrupulous regard for the principles of bourgeois liberals. Doubtless whatever was valuable in these principles, like everything good and desirable, would ultimately be realised by the victorious working class; but during the revolutionary period preoccupation with such ideals was evidence of a lack of seriousness.21

Significantly, however, the philosophical and rhetorical steel on display at the second congress would have been little more than a statement of conviction, devoid of the means of translating it into practice, had not Posadovsky’s statement of principle been accepted by Lenin himself. As Berlin observes, Lenin’s position, which forms the political implementation of Posadovsky’s rhetoric, is founded on a basic presupposition: a necessarily small group of professional revolutionaries – the vanguardists of the party – must wield unlimited power in pursuit of the rational goal of history: the revolutionary transformation of the capitalist mode of production into communism.

For Lenin, Berlin maintains, the methods of democratic change and rational argument were delusive. Little more than weapons from an earlier period of history, they could no longer be employed in the changed circumstances of the early twentieth century.22 Decisively, Berlin avers, the Leninist justification for this transformation in principles and tactics made the drive towards the destruction of the questions indispensable for effective political action. It thereby marks a revolutionary change in intellectual and political history, without which the twentieth century would not have earned its baleful and accurate epitaph, the Age of Totalitarianism. The importance of this judgement in Berlin’s thought is made manifest in one sentence: “...in 1903 there occurred an event which marked the

21 Ibid., p. 70.
22 Ibid., p. 71.
culmination of a process which has altered the history of our world.”

For Lenin, all previous revolutionary thought rested on a cardinal misconception, whose destructive influence affected every aspect of radical theory: the assumption, still accepted by Marx, that human actions are the consequence of conscious beliefs, which entails the corollary that rational argument can radically alter belief and behaviour.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism out of the doctrine of the unity of theory and practice had begun an erosion of the ideal of rational argument as the foundation for, and agent of, radical economic and political change. In Berlin’s judgement, Lenin brought the underlying internal logic of a secularised neo-Calvinism to its fruition. Effective political action on the part of the vanguard of the revolutionary movement could only be based on one overriding presupposition: the revolution must be made by harnessing the power of irrational forces in political life. For Berlin, this development stands at the heart of the drive towards the destruction of the questions, the complement of a Marxian neo-Calvinism. These two sustaining presuppositions, Berlin maintains, formed the twinned bulwarks of totalitarian thought, and were both in place as the twentieth century opened:

Lenin went further than this [that is, than either Marx or Engels had done]. He acted as if he believed not merely that it was useless to talk and reason with persons precluded by class interest from understanding and acting upon the truths of Marxism, but that the mass of the proletarians themselves were too benighted to grasp the role which history had called on them to play...The important thing was the creation of a state of affairs in which human resources were developed in accordance with a rational pattern. Men were moved more often by irrational than by reasonable solutions...It follows that the wise revolutionary legislator, so far from seeking to emancipate human beings from the framework without which they feel lost and desperate, will seek to erect a framework of his own, corresponding to the new needs of the new age brought about by natural or technological change. The value of the framework will depend upon the unquestioning faith with which its main features are accepted;

23 Ibid., p. 69.

24 Ibid., p. 72.
otherwise it no longer possesses sufficient strength to support and contain the
wayward, potentially anarchical and self-destructive creatures who seek
salvation in it...This view, which inspires Jacobin tacts, though not, of course,
either Jacobin or Communist doctrines, is not so very remote from Maistre’s
central and deliberately unprobed mystery – the supernatural authority whereby
and in whose name rulers can rule and inhibit their subjects’ unruly tendencies,
above all the tendency to ask too many questions, to question too many
established rules.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 73-75.}

As we shall see below, Berlin’s conviction that there is a link, on the level of sustaining
assumptions, between Leninist practice and Maistre’s thought is central to his
methodological turn away from the Enlightenment and towards the proto-fascistic
intellectual world of the ultramontane Savoyard.

At this point, we can see that, for Berlin, the Leninist contribution to Marxian
thought leads to a conception of political thought and practice that is committed to the
destruction of the questions, not their rational solution. Since the application of critical
reason, as Maistre taught and Lenin accepted, can only divide and disunite, the only
rational course of action, at least for the enlightened revolutionary, is to harness the force
of the irrational. In a paradoxical reversal, the committed revolutionary, whose
understanding of the history is based on rational analysis, must rely on the fact that the
masses are moved most effectively towards rational ends by the power of irrational forces.
The most rational manner of dealing with the perennial and troubling question of political
thought, therefore, is by finding ways of dissolving their philosophical force and their
psychological hold. From the perspective of a Leninist conception of historical necessity,
consequently, the best way to achieve the liberation of the masses is not by providing
solutions to the problems that plague them, but by developing a “process, natural or
artificial, whereby the problems were made to vanish altogether”.\footnote{Ibid., p. 74.}
In this way, the drive towards the destruction of the questions made its way into the central river of twentieth century thought and political practice:

That this short way with the troubled and the perplexed, which underlay much traditionalist, anti-rationalist eight-wing thought, should have influenced the left was new indeed. It is this change of attitude to the function and value of the intellect that is perhaps the best indication of the great gap which divided the twentieth century from the nineteenth.27

For the first time in the history of Western thought and political practice, Berlin avers, a philosophical and political tradition was wholly committed to the destruction of questions in the name of the liberation of the humanity. The reliance on the power of the irrational to achieve a rationally ordered society, even if this was only envisaged as short term measure, stands as the keystone of the destruction of the questions, which is simply another way of saying, Berlin maintains, that it forms a necessary condition for totalitarian thought and practice:

For the first time it was now conceived that the most effective way of dealing with questions, particularly those recurrent issues which have often tormented original and honest minds in every generation, was not by employing the tools of reason, still less those of the most mysterious capacities called ‘insight’ and ‘intuition’, but by obliterating the questions themselves. And this method consists not in removing them by rational means – by proving, for example, that they are founded on intellectual error or verbal muddles or ignorance of the facts – for to prove this would in its turn presuppose the need for rational methods of philosophical or psychological argument. Rather it consists in so treating the questioner that problems which appeared at once overwhelmingly important and utterly insoluble vanish from the questioner’s consciousness like evil dreams and trouble him no more. It consists, not in developing the logical implications and elucidating the meaning, the context or the relevance and origin of a specific problem – in seeing what it ‘amounts to’ – but in altering the outlook which gave rise to it in the first place... And this is how Communist

and Fascist states – and all other quasi- and semi-totalitarian and secular and religious creeds – have in fact proceeded in the task of imposing ideological conformity.\textsuperscript{28}

For Berlin, the drive towards the destruction of the questions, which forms the quintessentially Leninist contribution to political theory and practice, provides part of the internal and deformed logic of totalitarianism. Yet the drive to destroy the possibility of any question being posed also raises a decisive philosophical and historical conundrum: how can the analyst of totalitarian thought, writing from the perspective of the Post-War world, explore and illuminate this development? This foundational question provides the ground of Berlin’s turn to Maistre and the foundation for his distance from the thinkers of the Enlightenment. We must consider it in greater detail below.

III

Berlin’s Interpretation of Joseph de Maistre

As a political thinker, Berlin suggests, Joseph de Marie, Comte Maistre, is less an implacable defender of an order already fading from memory when he composed two of his greatest works, \textit{Considerations on France} and \textit{The Saint Petersburg Dialogues}, than an apostle of an epoch still on the verge of becoming. A misunderstood prescience, rather than a defence of tradition in the idiom of the past, is Maistre’s signal bequest to the Post-War world. Maistre’s thought, which is rendered transhistorical by the prescience of its insight into the power of the irrational, is indispensable because it outruns its defining context.

Any characterisation of Maistre’s thought does well to begin in the negative. After being flung into the uncertainty of exile by Napoleon’s invasion of Sardinia, Maistre spent the most intellectually fertile years of his life, between 1803 and 1817, at the court of Tsar Alexander I as the emissary of the exiled King of Sardinia, where he developed one of the

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 76-77.
most powerful and uncompromising condemnations of the Enlightenment ever committed to print. Few thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment, Berlin maintains, are as ferociously hostile to the French Enlightenment as Maistre: a fierce absolutist, an ultramontane Catholic, a supporter of the most ruthless and crushing authority, Maistre saw society as resting, given the fallen nature of humanity, on a monstrous trinity of Pope, Monarch and Executioner.

Infamously, as Berlin observes, Maistre saw the executioner, rather than either the power of the Pope or a King, as the bedrock of all authority and social stability. It is the oppressive and terrifying figure of the executioner, without whom the sinful tendencies of a fallen humanity would never be checked, who guarantees the absolute power of the Vicar of Christ and his secular lieutenants. The executioner, reviled and feared by all, is the sole hope of humanity. In a monstrous but remorselessly logical manner, Maistre defends a paradoxical theory of liberation: the crushing power of absolute authority, wielded without justification or pity, is the only source of justice and hope that a fallen humanity can rightfully expect. Everything else is a crime against a divinely sanctioned order, whose irrationality and absolutism is both its glory and guarantee.

In the course of his exposition of the central presuppositions of Maistre’s thought, in which his focus is largely on the epistemological core of Maistre’s irrationalist vision, Berlin quotes one of the most famous passages from Maistre’s _Saint Petersburg Dialogues_, which gives a powerful indication of Maistre’s philosophical and political outlook. Its underlying political ideal, Berlin suggests, had to wait for over a century after Maistre’s death to come fully and devastatingly into its own. Despite its length, it is worth quoting in full:

> Who is this inexplicable being, who, when there are so many agreeable, lucrative and even honourable professions to choose among, in which a man can exercise his skill or his powers, has chosen that of torturing or killing his own kind? This head, this heart, are they made like our own? Is there not something
in them that is peculiar, and alien to our nature? Myself, I have no doubt about this. He is made like us externally. He is born like all of us. But he is an extraordinary being, and it needs a special decree to bring into existence as a member of the human family – a fiat of the creative power. He is created like a law unto himself.

Consider what he is in the opinion of mankind, and try to conceive, if you can, how he can manage to ignore or defy this opinion. Hardly has he been assigned to his proper dwelling-place, hardly has he taken possession of it, when others remove their homes elsewhere whence they can no longer see him. In the midst of this desolation, in this sort of vacuum forced upon him, he lives alone with his mate and his young, who acquaint him with the sound of the human voice: without them he would hear nothing but groans...The gloomy signal is given; an abject servitor of justice knocks on his door to tell him that he is wanted; he goes; he arrives in a public square covered by a dense, trembling mob. A poisoner, a parricide, a man who has committed sacrilege is tossed to him: he seizes him, stretches him, ties him to a horizontal cross, he raises his arm; there is a horrible silence; there is no sound but that of bones cracking under the bars, and the shrieks of the victim. He unties him. He puts him on the wheel; the shattered limbs are entangled in the spokes; the head hangs down; the hair stands up, and the mouth gaping open like a furnace from time to time emits only a few bloodstained words to beg for death. He has finished. His is beating, but it is with joy: he congratulates himself, he says in his heart ‘Nobody breaks on the wheel as well as I’. He steps down. He holds out his bloodstained hand, the justice throws him – from a distance – a few pieces of gold, which he carries off through a double row of human beings standing back in horror. He sits down to table, and he eats. Then he goes to bed and sleeps. And on the next day, when he wakes, he thinks of something totally different from what he did the day before. Is he a man? Yes. God receives him in his shrines, and allows him to pray. He is not a criminal. Nevertheless no tongue dares to declare him virtuous, that he is an honest man, that he is estimable. No moral praise seems appropriate to him, for everyone else is assumed to have relations with human beings; he has none. And yet all greatness, all power, all subordination rest on the executioner. He is the terror and bond of human association. Remove this mysterious agent from the world, and in an instant order yields to chaos: thrones fall, society disappears. God, who has created sovereignty, has also made punishment; he has fixed the earth
upon two poles: ‘for Jehovah is master of twin poles and upon them he maketh turn the world’... ([1 Samuel] 2: 8).\textsuperscript{29}

For Berlin, Maistre’s reactionary and ultramontane vision, with its explicit veneration of darkness and obscurantism, has few affinities with the assumptions of conservative thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His relationship to the main currents of conservatism is oblique, marked by an affinity of purpose, but not a kinship of underlying assumptions.\textsuperscript{30} In opposition to other conservative thinkers, even those with whom he claimed intellectual comradeship, such as Bonald, Maistre was sustained by a vision that flowed from his realisation that the remnants of the old world, shattered by revolution, were beyond resurrection.\textsuperscript{31} The fight against the influence of reason, liberalism, progressivism, secularism and meliorism required a new philosophical armoury, one that owed little, in substance, to other forms of ultramontane and reactionary thought.

More than a radical in defence of traditional thought and practice, or a reactionary in the literal sense of that easily deployed term, Maistre was that most paradoxical of figures: a revolutionary conservative, a man whose thought illuminates the future more than it defends the past. This is the central theme of Berlin’s interpretation of Maistre: despite speaking the language of the past, heavy with the accent of ultramontanism, Maistre is an apostle of, and therefore can be a post facto guide to, developments that had to wait until the mid-twentieth to be realised in practice. Although it took more than a century for his thought to make contact with reality, his quixotic relationship with his own time does not diminish his significance. Maistre’s prescience outshone his lack of timing:

…Maistre understood...that the old world was dying, and he perceived, as Bonald could never have done, the terrifying contours of the new order which was coming in its place. Maistre’s version of it – for all that it not framed in the language of prophecy – profoundly shocked his contemporaries. But prophetic

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 102.
it was, and judgements which seemed perversely paradoxical in his day are almost platitudes in ours. To his contemporaries, perhaps even to himself, he seemed to be gazing calmly into the classical and feudal past, but what he saw even more clearly proved to be a blood-freezing vision of the future.\(^{32}\)

As we shall see, Berlin’s contention that Maistre’s prescience outran his context, despite the fact that he never adopted the hubristic tone of historical prediction, stands at the base of his turn to the ultramontane Savoyard’s incisively contemporary thought. For Berlin, Maistre belongs within the desolate landscape of Post-War thought and reality in a way that Voltaire, for all his undoubted pessimism about the human condition, does not. Berlin’s lengthy and detailed portrait in prose, one of the most comprehensive essays in his work in the history of ideas, is an extended exploration of the striking and literal ‘post-modernity’ of Joseph de Maistre.

In Berlin’s judgement, it is both significant and unsurprising that Maistre’s long list of the enemies of any well governed society – the purveyors of reason and liberalism, natural science and atheism, among other traitors to divinely constituted authority – is one of the first intimations of later fascist denunciations of the ‘perverters’ of social and cultural ‘health’: democrats and egalitarians, scientists and secular reformers, journalists, lawyers and intellectuals of every stripe, freemasons and, of course, the Jews.\(^{33}\) Although not original in its wide-ranging animus, this list – along with its implicit corollary, humanity’s need for unquestionable authority – is one of the first statements, Berlin argues, of the lineaments of fascist thought.

The historical significance and originality of Maistre’s thought, Berlin claims, is founded on his unique position among his contemporaries and immediate predecessors: unlike other reactionary thinkers in the nineteenth century – indeed, unlike the great historical prophets, whether on the left or right – Maistre’s thought is prescient because its classical façade hides, but does not fully obscure, the startlingly modern nature of his

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 102.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 119.
sustaining vision. While Maistre’s thought might owe an intellectual debt to conservatism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including a grudging admiration for Burke, it remains decisively outside of its time.\textsuperscript{34} Whatever the influence of Burke on Maistre – and Berlin admits that it might have been substantive – the direction and tenor of his thought went far beyond Burke’s cautious, sober and ultimately empirical perspective.\textsuperscript{35} Fundamentally, Berlin argues, Maistre’s exaltation of violence and oppression as the natural condition of fallen man, ordained by a wise and inscrutable providence, is the first stirring of a developing cultural and political rupture. As we shall see in greater detail below, Berlin’s reading of the presuppositions that sustain Maistre’s thought – especially his exultation of absolute authority, which can only ever securely rest on the power of the irrational – connects Berlin’s argument in \textit{Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism} with his interpretation of the twinned presuppositions of all totalitarian thought and practice: the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism and the drive towards the destruction of the questions.

Rising above its avowed aims and achievements, Maistre’s ultramontane and ‘post-modern’ thought, Berlin avers, powerfully expresses one overriding concern: an attack on the world envisioned and partially created by the \textit{philosophes}.\textsuperscript{36} For Berlin, there are few significant political thinkers before the twentieth century – if any, not even Sade or Saint Just come close, he maintains – who launched a more virulent attack on the Rousseauian idea that all human beings are born free, only to be shackled by the garlanded chains of socialised injustice.\textsuperscript{37} For Maistre, Berlin argue, the antithesis is self-evident: no one is born in freedom. Every human being is born mired in original sin, which leads to a brutal conclusion: the wilful and destructive tendencies of humanity must be curbed, better still crushed, by the imposition of unquestioned authority. The dark mystery that underlies all authority, without which the corrosion of rational criticism sets in, is guarded by the figure

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 129.  
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 129.  
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 127.  
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 125-126.
of first significance and last resort: the Executioner. As Berlin points out, continuous and merciless repression are the keystones of Maistre’s conception of authority: “Men are too wicked to be let out of the chains immediately they are born: born in sin, they are made tolerable only be society, only by the state, which repress the aberrations of the untrammelled individual judgement”.\(^\text{38}\)

As Berlin observes, Maistre’s account of the need for absolute authority, guaranteed by the necessary and bloody triptych of Pope, King and Executioner, rests on a basic epistemological commitment, which forms a vein of steel at the core of his vision of the divinely ordained predicament of a fallen humanity: the universe is shrouded in an impenetrable mystery, forever beyond the bounds of human reason. This is the source of its power. Secular authority, vested in the Roman Church by divine fiat, total in its sovereignty like a divinely sanctioned Leviathan, flows from this mysterious spring. Religion is superior to reason because of, not in spite of, its inability to rationally defend its claims. Only the irrational has the power to sustain itself against the onslaughts of a wayward humanity in perpetual rebellion against divine authority. For Maistre, the record of history discloses one overriding truth: “What man makes, man will mar: only the superhuman endures”.\(^\text{39}\) On the basis of this foundation, Maistre drew his most uncompromising conclusion, which he hurled against the modern world and its defenders: “Irrationality carries its own guarantee of survival in way reason can never hope to do”.\(^\text{40}\)

As Berlin points out, the full-scale condemnation of the modern world in Maistre’s thought, a revolt of greater comprehensiveness and loathing than anything in the work of Vico or Herder, rests on this epistemological conviction. Significantly, it is stated as an unchallengeable first premiss, and is not derived from Maistre’s most hated aberration, the shallow rationalism of a thinking reed: ‘Reason, so exalted in the eighteenth century, is in reality the feeblest of instruments, a ‘flickering light’ weak in theory and practice,

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 125.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 122.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 130.
incapable alike of altering the behaviour of men or explaining its causes. Whatever is rational collapses because it is rational, man-made: only the irrational can last”.41

For Maistre, arch theocrat that he was, the mere application of reason to any significant dilemma is an abdication of our duty before reality: the desire for a rational justification of the given, demanded by the various disciples of reason, can only lead to the provision of an answer that, for all its intellectual subtlety and ingenuity, will always be vulnerable to an equally rational refutation. Any form of rationalistic or empirical explanation – certainly the heresies of Bacon and his followers, the mainstream of the French Enlightenment – is an example of sin. Regardless of the motive of one’s inquiry, to explain is always to explain away. The consequences of any rationalistic explanation, no matter how seemingly trivial or banal, are always corrosive and dangerous. Reason dissolves the rigid bonds of a well-governed society, without which human beings, mired in original sin, will inevitably destroy each other. Religion is superior to reason because of, not in spite of, its inability to rationally defend its claims. For society to survive, Maistre fervently maintains, its foundations must be antithetical to the commands of rationality. Once the rational questioning of ancient institutions – hereditary monarchy, the family, social hierarchies – has been accepted, even if its aim is to strengthen the power of the given, then the war has been lost. Once reason has established itself as the arbiter of social and political life, then every society, no matter how strictly ordered it might be, is doomed by the fallen nature of its members. Voltaire and the damnable philosophs are like the purblind leading the blind down the path to perdition.

For Maistre, the power to question the given must be crushed before its corrosive effects are allowed to overwhelm the sole guarantor of social health: orthodoxy in the service of the divinely sanctioned structure of society, whose institutions and practices must be defended by the imposition of total and crushing authority, no matter how irrational this might seem from the perspective of a thin and misleading Reason. In the end,

41 Ibid., p. 122.
Maistre’s thought always returns to its unbending vein of theological and philosophical steel: the trinity of Pope, King and Executioner. As Berlin observes, Maistre is adamant to the point of complete intransigence that the nature of man is like a ‘monstrous centaur’: weak and wicked, but ultimately free to pursue the delusions that fill his mind. On the basis of this Augustinian view of human nature, Maistre constructs his infamous vision of a society presided over by the terrifying image of the executioner, the final guarantor of the necessary power of the Vicar of Christ and his secular lieutenants:

Like all serious political thinkers, Maistre has before his mind a view of the nature of man. This view is deeply, but not wholly, Augustinian. Man is weak and very wicked, but he is not fully determined by causes. He is free, and an immortal soul. Two principles struggle for supremacy within him: he is both a theomorph – made in the image of his maker, a spark of the divine spirit – and a theomach, a sinner, a rebel against God. His freedom is very limited: he belongs to a cosmic stream which he cannot escape. He cannot indeed create, but he can modify. He can choose between good and evil, God and the Devil, and he is responsible for his choices. Alone in all creation he struggles: for knowledge, for self-expression, for salvation. Condorcet compared human society with that of bees and beavers. But no bee, no beaver, wants to know more than its ancestors; birds, fishes, mammals remain fixed in their monotonous, repetitive cycles. Man alone knows he is degraded. It is ‘the proof of his greatness and his wretchedness, of his sublime rights and his unbelievable degradation’. He is a ‘monstrous centaur’, living at once in the world of grace and that of nature, a potential angel and soiled with vice. ‘He does not know what he wants; he wants what he does not want; he does not want what he wants; he wants to want; he sees within himself something which is not himself, and which is stronger than himself. The wise man resists and cries “Who will deliver me?” The fool gives in and calls his weakness happiness’.

On the foundation provided by his conception of human nature, Berlin argues, Maistre builds a conception of the state that has few parallels in the nineteenth century, yet came decisively into its own a century later. The target of Maistre’s animus is clear: the

42 Ibid., p. 124.
43 Ibid., pp. 124-125. Italicisation original.
rationalist heresies of Locke and his ilk, who substitute a commercial contract where only hierarchy and total authority have a rightful place, forms the nadir of modern thought and political practice.\textsuperscript{44} No political constitution, when crafted by the feeble resources of the human mind and overseen by inherently sinful human beings, can survive the storms that have assailed every state in recorded history, and that will continue to strike at the heart of every society. The dissolution of the individual into the social whole, therefore, is the only bulwark against the dissolution of the state: “...all government comes from some unquestioned coercive source. Lawlessness can only be stopped by something from which there is no appeal. It may be custom, or conscience, or a papal tiara, or a dagger, but it is always something”.\textsuperscript{45}

For Maistre, it is the imposition of absolute power and blind faith. Only this dual yoke can immure society against the possibility that unsettling questions might be raised. If such a threat to the iron bonds of society were ever to break out, then it must be crushed by the relentless spilling of blood, that of the innocent as much as that of the guilty, for no one is without guilt. As Berlin observes, Maistre’s conception of society is organic. The organicist metaphor is much more than literary and allusive. Like any organism in nature, the social whole has certain requirements for health: a release from a necessary and crushing hierarchy is not one of them. Liberty is an illness, and Maistre knows only one cure. In a rare instance of direct quotation, Berlin quotes Maistre’s conception of healthy and necessarily total government:

\begin{quote}
Government [he declares] is true religion. It has its dogmas, its mysteries, its priests. To submit it to the discussion of each individual is to destroy it. It is given life only by the reason of the nation, that is by political faith, of which it is a symbol. Man’s first need is that his growing reason be put under the double yoke [of church and state]. It should be annihilated, it should lose itself in the reason of the nation, so that it is transformed from its individual existence into another – communal – being, as a river that falls into the ocean does indeed
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 126.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 125. Italicisation original.
persist in the midst of the waters, but without name or personal identity.\textsuperscript{46}

For Berlin, this conception of the state strikes a powerful and a discordant note in Maistre’s own time, yet proved to be unusually and powerfully prophetic. The authoritarianism at its core, Berlin maintains, goes significantly beyond the conceptions of authority held by such ultramontane Counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Bossuet and Bonald, with whom Maistre is often identified. Only the façade of Maistre’s thought is classical. More than any of the historical prophets of the nineteenth century – certainly more than Marx – Maistre’s discerned and defended the lineaments of developments yet to come:

The façade of Maistre’s system may be classical, but behind there is something terrifyingly modern, and violently opposed to sweetness and light...Nor is the tone remotely that of the eighteenth century, not even of the most violently hysterical voices who mark the highest point of revolt – like Sade or Saint-Just – not yet is it that of the frozen reactionaries who immured themselves against the champions of freedom or revolution within the thick walls of medieval dogma...in practice if not in theory (at times offered in a transparently false scientific guise), Maistre’s deeply pessimistic vision is the heart of the totalitarianisms, of both left and right, of our terrible century.\textsuperscript{47}

In the course of his implacable and embittered rear-guard action against the forces unleashed by the Enlightenment and its development in the nineteenth century, Maistre presaged, without ever aspiring to the idiom of historical prophecy, many of the principles that eventually coalesced into totalitarian thought and practice. No less powerfully than Lenin, Hitler or Stalin, Maistre was committed to the idea of violence as at the heart of all things, along with a belief in the power of the irrational; the glorification of severe chains to yoke the individual to Church and State; the conviction that only the irrational can endure in a world pervaded by sin, which is paired with an affirmation, expressed in a tone close to exultation, of death, blood, suffering and self-immolation as ineradicable features.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., pp. 125-126. Interpolations original.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., pp. 126-127.
of human life. These fundamental aspects of Maistre’s vision of the human condition fully transcend the context of their composition, Berlin argues, and illuminate the character of totalitarianism.

On the basis provided by the preceding analysis of Berlin’s reading of Maistre – surely one of the most unlikely in the corpus of twentieth century liberal thought – our argument will now proceed to the following contention: Berlin’s turn to Maistre – which is fully consonant with his commitment to philosophy by other means – is only fully explicable as an attempt to deepen his judgement that all totalitarian thought and political practice, whether of the right or of left, is based on a secularised neo-Calvinism and a drive towards the destruction of the questions. In this manner, Berlin’s analysis of the implosion of the ‘imagined garden of liberal culture’, which was examined in chapter four, finds its culmination in his reading of Joseph de Maistre.

The reasons for this is straightforward: if modern thought collapsed in the face of the virulent onslaught of totalitarian thought and practice – and if, moreover, totalitarianism depends on the disturbed logic of a secularised neo-Calvinism and the destruction of the questions – then Maistre, as the greatest prophet of this outlook, provides one of the few sources of conceptual illumination available to the Post-War analyst of totalitarian thought. Maistre is a surer guide to the pathologies of the twentieth century – because he is less philosophically naïve– than his liberal enemies. Notwithstanding Voltaire’s humane vision, and probably because of it, he cannot provide the depth of insight that comes from an affinity of sensibility and purpose. From the perspective of contemporary concern, therefore, the concerned liberal, committed to a Post-War ‘liberalism of fear’, must turn to Maistre. Berlin was surely not unaware of the historical ironies in his position. Irony is not the same thing as incoherence, however. As we shall see below, Berlin turned to Maistre with a precise methodological intent.
IV
Maistre and the Analysis of Totalitarian Thought

In order to develop this line of argument, we must begin in a negative vein. Few of Berlin’s interpreters and critics, with the possible exception of Mark Lilla, have been more ardent, incisive and intransigent in their critique of Berlin’s thought than Zeev Sternhell, the Israeli historian of Fascism. Given the trajectory of his work over more than three decades, it is hardly surprising that Sternhell, in his recent study of anti-Enlightenment thought, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, devotes an entire chapter to Berlin’s interpretation of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought. The title of Sternhell’s work is significant and suggestive. Much like Mark Lilla, but with even greater historical comprehensiveness, Sternhell interprets anti-Enlightenment thought as an historically continuous tradition, whose rise is identical with, and could not have occurred without, the development of modernity itself: the Enlightenment has always been shadowed by a hostile, dangerous and vengeful sibling.

In Sternhell’s judgement, Berlin must be accounted as one of the most egregious members of this tradition. His reasons closely mirror Lilla’s: Berlin must be convicted of treachery from within. As a liberal political thinker, Berlin betrayed his own deepest political convictions by turning against their necessary foundation: the tradition of Enlightenment thought. Unsurprisingly, given the philosophical character and political orientation of his critique, Sternhell reserves some of his most considered and withering animus for Berlin’s turn to Maistre, an interpretative turn that Sternhell sees as a philosophical and historical nadir of Berlin’s attempt to defend liberalism in the aftermath of recent desolation.

Sternhell’s charge is clear and uncompromising. Although Berlin rightly saw Maistre as a precursor of Fascist thought – as the title of his essay makes very clear: *Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism* – he was remained willing, for reasons that
are as philosophically dubious as they are politically ill-judged, to defend Maistre as an important and neglected thinker for the Post-War world. In the distorting light of Berlin’s interpretative perspective, Sternhell avers, Maistre is not so much an early exponent of Fascism – a fervent enemy of liberal thought, whose epigones devastated the tradition of enlightened thought and political practice – but a thinker who can be turned against the totalitarian thought that he helped to bring to fruition in the twentieth century. 

In Sternhell’s judgement, this is not merely incoherent – an indictment that is serious enough in itself – but a sign that Berlin perpetrated one of the most serious betrayals of the ideals of toleration, openness, human rights and political optimism in Post-War thought. A traitor in the service of a false Enlightenment, Berlin did little more than wage a war, incoherent in theory and deleterious in practice, against the humanism, rationalism and early liberalism of the Age of Reason. The core of Sternhell’s critique is unambiguous:

It was once again the rejection of the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment that Berlin singled out in his essay on Maistre, an essay that ascribed great importance to the diplomat from Savoy, describing him as “our contemporary”. He was our contemporary, said Berlin, in his historism, “in denouncing the impotence of abstract ideas and deductive methods…” Against this naïve optimism, Maistre fought with all his might, just as he attacked the other aspect of this complacent optimism, the use of the scientific method in the human sciences. This is what Berlin felt to be important in Maistre. He fully recognized the violent, brutal, bloody, and dictatorial side of Maistre’s thinking. He knew that relied on the pope and the hangman to conduct human affairs, but he was full of admiration not only for his deep understanding of human nature but also for his out-and-out struggle against rationalism and scientism…Although he did, in fact, see him as a precursor of fascism, anti-Dreyfuism, and Vichy, he thought him admirable on account of his historism, his interest in the variable and the particular, in prejudices, in national particularities, his contempt “for man”…Founder of fascism though he was, he was on the right lines when, like Burke, he opposed the idea that “man” can

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exist outside a given cultural and social context. Burke, Maistre, and Maurras, and, following them, Gentile, Rocco, and Mussolini, Carl Schmitt and Alfred Rosenberg considered the idea of the rights of man as the greatest absurdity in modern thought. Berlin adopted as his own, in the name of pluralism, Maistre’s attack on the rights of man and his view of a humanity split into an indefinite number of cultures and ethnic groups.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 408-409. Italicisation original.}

For Sternhell, as the preceding quote makes clear, Berlin’s interpretation of Maistre is not only mistaken on points of historical significance and philosophical substance, but provides evidence for a stronger point of condemnation. Berlin seems to be believe, Sternhell is convinced, that it is possible to turn to Maistre in a substantive sense, by appropriating aspects of his attack on the Enlightenment in an attempt to salvage its shattered legacy in a Post-War world, without contaminating the patient whom one is attempting to inoculate against the ravages of the totalitarian contagion.

Although we cannot explore the range of Sternhell’s engagement with Berlin’s thought, it is clear that his indictment of Berlin rests on the contention that he attempted to make a substantive pact with one of the most dangerous wolves of the Counter-Enlightenment. Berlin attempted to translate the presuppositions of Maistre’s work into a bulwark of liberal political morality. For Sternhell, no philosophical Rosetta stone can translate the anti-modern enmity of Maistre’s thought into contemporary amity. Significantly, Sternhell is no less committed to this contention than Lilla, whose critique of Berlin was explored in chapter two.

Although both Sternhell and Lilla correctly discern decisive weaknesses within the complex fabric of Berlin’s interpretation of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, especially, of course, his overly schematic reading of the Enlightenment as a largely undifferentiated continuation of Western monism, their respective critiques of his thought err on one fundamental point: while Berlin undoubtedly turned to the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment, his interest in Maistre is methodological. The underlying reason
for this flawed attribution is straightforward: neither Sternhell nor Lilla, despite their incisive parsing of Berlin’s interpretation of Enlightenment thought, place any emphasis on Berlin’s analysis of two of the necessary conditions of all totalitarian thought, which flows from his analysis of the inadequacy of enlightened thought in the aftermath of total war, totalitarianism and the Holocaust: the affirmation of a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism – Marx’s unintended contribution to nineteenth century thought – and the drive towards the destruction of the questions, which forms the baleful attribute of Leninist thought and revolutionary practice.

When we turn away from the Enlightenment and towards Maistre is read in conjunction with his analysis of the necessary elements of totalitarian thought, a different interpretation suggests itself: namely, that Berlin saw in Maistre a thinker who – with a powerful combination of unintended prescience – understood the philosophical and political character of the totalitarian drive to divide humanity into the new categories of the damned and the elect, and to rely on the power of the irrational to dissolve, rather than to solve, the perennial questions of political thought.

Berlin signals his methodological project in the introduction to the essay. After observing that Maistre is usually seen, by his many detractors and fewer defenders, as a strange and disturbing relic from an earlier period of history – born out of his time, a few centuries too late for his thought to march in lock-step with its context – Berlin suggests that Maistre was certainly born out of his time, but in the opposite chronological direction: he is, for Berlin, as already observed above, a prophet of events and developments yet to come. In avowed opposition to the thesis that Maistre’s time has definitively passed into history, the entire argument of Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism, Berlin avers, is devoted to one overriding theme:

This assessment [that Maistre’s thought belongs to a vanished age], intelligible in a less troubled world, seems to me altogether inadequate. Maistre may have spoken the language of the past, but the content of what he had to say presaged
the future. In comparison with his progressive contemporaries, Constant and Madame de Staël, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, not to speak of radical extremists and Utopians, he is in certain respects ultra-modern, born not after but before his time. If his ideas did not have wider influence (and apart from ultramontane Roman Catholics and the Savoyard aristocracy among whom Cavour grew up there are not many traces of it), the reason is that the soil was, in his own lifetime, un receptive. His doctrine, an still more his attitude of mind, had to wait a century before they came (as they all too fatally did) into their own. This thesis may at first seem as absurd as any for which Maistre used to be derided; clearly it needs evidence to render it even plausible. This study is an endeavour to provide support for it.\textsuperscript{50}

importantly, Berlin’s interpretation of Maistre, sustained over nearly eighty pages of closely argued exposition and analysis, remains true to his stated aim in the introduction. Notwithstanding the conviction of some of his interpreters, Berlin is adamant that one judgement must be clear to any attentive reader of Maistre’s work. Anyone who has lived through the twentieth century – the essay was written in 1960, but only published in 1990, as part of \textit{The Crooked Timber of Humanity} – should not fail to recognise that:

... Maistre’s political psychology, for all its paradoxes and occasional descents into sheer counter-revolutionary absurdity, has proved, if only by revealing, and stressing, destructive tendencies – what the German romantics called the dark, nocturnal side of things – which humane and optimistic persons tend not to want to see, at times a better guide to human conduct than the faith of believers in reason; or at any rate can provide a sharp, by no means useless, antidote to their often over-simple, superficial and, more than once, disastrous remedies.\textsuperscript{51}

Importantly, moreover, Berlin’s development of his methodological turn continues throughout his essay, and forms a unifying principle of his interpretation Maistre’s significance from the perspective of contemporary concern. Although never remarked upon by Sternhell, who is committed to a substantive interpretation of Berlin’s argument, \textit{Joseph de Maistre and Origins of Fascism} is an example of Berlin’s philosophy by other

\textsuperscript{50} Berlin, ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’, p. 96. Italicisation added.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 167-168.
means. As Berlin observes in the course of examining Maistre’s sustaining assumptions and principles – none of which, he is convinced, are merely a contribution to the neo-medievalist principles of ultramontane and reactionary thought in the nineteenth century – the underestimated Savoyard must be accounted an usual type of genius, one whose thought exhibits all the flaws of theological and philosophical dogma, yet manages, precisely because of its veneration of the irrational for its own sake, to illuminate the lineaments of totalitarianism. From the perspective of the Post-War world – the sine qua non of Berlin’s philosophy by other means – Maistre is of significance, not because his thought is admirable in itself, let alone because it forms a coherent and justifiable foundation for liberalism, but because of the largely unparalleled “depth and accuracy of his insight into the darker, less regarded, but decisive factors in social and politic behaviour”.

Maistre was an original thinker, swimming against the current of his time, determined to explode the most sacrosanct platitudes and pious formulas of his liberal contemporaries. They stressed the power of reason; he pointed out, perhaps too gleefully, the persistence and extent of irrational instinct, the power of faith, the force of blind tradition, the wilful ignorance about their human material of the progressives – the idealistic social scientists, the bold political and economic planners, the passionate believers in technocracy. While all around him there was talk of the pursuit of happiness, he underlined, again with much exaggeration and perverse delight, but with some truth, that the desire to immolate oneself, to suffer, to prostrate oneself before authority, indeed before superior power, no matter whence it comes, and the desire to dominate, to exert authority, to pursue power for its own sake – that these were forces historically as least as strong as the desire for peace, prosperity, liberty, justice, happiness, equality.

This aspect of Berlin’s interpretation of Maistre is never raised by either Lilla and Sternhell, who seem content to maintain that, because Berlin charged the Enlightenment
with the excesses of monism, his turn to Maistre, whom he sees as the anti-Enlightenment thinker *par excellence*, must result in a complete acquiescence to the full-blooded attack on the Age of Reason launched by the ultramontane Savoyard. Both Lilla and Sternhell, moreover, overlook the connection between Berlin’s analysis of the necessary elements of totalitarian thought – the affirmation of a secularised neo-Calvinism and the destruction of the questions – and his interpretation of Maistre. This is significant. In Berlin’s judgement, the division of humanity into two categories, the damned and the saved, along with the conviction that an appeal to the irrational is the only sound foundation for political thought and practice, was already conceived by Maistre with the insight and passion of commitment. As a consequence, Maistre can assist the Post-War analyst of totalitarianism to understand the presuppositions and principles of totalitarian thought, which he understands from the inside, as it were, because he is committed to their defence and realisation. Therein lies his insight and his indispensability. Maistre is central to Berlin’s conception of the enabling conditions of totalitarian thought and political practice.

If Berlin’s intent were a substantive translation of anti-modern animus into a philosophical idiom for the defence of a ‘liberalism of fear’, as Sternhell maintains, then his conclusion would be difficult to reconcile with the substance of the essay. In his summation of the argument expounded in *Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism*, Berlin makes the observation that Maistre’s vision of the human condition is repellent to anyone who values the virtues of human freedom.54 This much, for Berlin, is undeniable. Yet it is also the source of Maistre’s importance. It is worth quoting Berlin’s concluding paragraph in full, for it provides an indication of the underlying rationale for his interest, seemingly inexplicable for a liberal political thinker, in the blood-stained and proto-fascistic world of Maistre:

His vision may be detestable to those who truly value human freedom, resting

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as it does on a dogmatic rejection of a light by which most men still live, or wish to live; yet in the course of constructing his great thesis Maistre boldly, more than once, and often for the first time, revealed (and violently exaggerated) central truths, unpalatable to his contemporaries, indignantly denied by his successors, and recognised only in our own day – not, indeed, because of our more perfect insight or greater self-knowledge or honesty, but because an order which Maistre regarded as the only remedy against the dissolution of the social fabric came into being, in our own time, in its most hideous form. In this way totalitarian society, which Maistre, in the guise of historical analysis, and visualised, became actual; and thereby, at inestimable cost in human suffering, has vindicated the depth and brilliance of a remarkable, and terrifying, prophet of our day.

In Berlin’s judgement, Maistre provides, despite of the reprehensible character of his thought, one of the few windows into the ‘thought-world’ of totalitarianism. Given Berlin’s commitment to the practice of philosophy by other means – which affirms the possibility and even the necessity of reading earlier thinkers from the perspective of contemporary concern – there can be few more significant legacies for the Post-War world. As Berlin observes, Maistre’s thought remains unmarked by the major philosophical and political currents of the nineteenth century, and thereby constitutes a prophecy in the form of historical and political analysis: “This is neither quietism nor conservatism, neither blind faith in the status quo, nor merely the obscurantism of the priesthoods. It has an affinity with the paranoiac world of modern fascism, which it is startling to find so early in the nineteenth century”.55

In short, therefore, Berlin’s methodological turn to Maistre, pace Lilla and Sternhell, is consonant with his analysis of the baneful influence of a secularised and historicised neo-Calvinism and the rise of a drive towards the destruction of the questions. Importantly, Berlin’s judgement does not presuppose a causal link between Maistre and the rise of totalitarian thought, but affirms the philosophical, and even emotional, insight to be gained by a careful reading of Maistre’s work. In view of this, Berlin avers, he is our

55 Ibid., p.113.
For Maistre understood, as Bonald gave no sign of doing, that the old world was dying, and he perceived, as Bonald could never have one, the terrifying contours of the new order which was coming in its place. Maistre’s vision of it – for all that it was not framed in the language of prophecy – profoundly shocked his contemporaries. But prophetic it was, and judgements which seemed perversely paradoxical in his day are almost platitudes in ours. To his contemporaries, perhaps even to himself, he seemed to be gazing calmly into the classical and feudal past, but what he saw even more clearly proved to be a blood-freezing vision of the future. Therein lies interest and his importance.56

Berlin’s argument in *Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism*, therefore, does not constitute an incoherent attempt at philosophical alchemy, both ill-judged and inherently dangerous, but infuses his analysis of the character of totalitarian thought. In the end, Berlin is convinced, it is Maistre, not Voltaire, who provides an insight into the intellectual and emotional world of totalitarianism.

In a philosophically significant sense, therefore, Berlin’s engagement with the desolate thought of Joseph de Maistre can be described, following Cécile Hatier, as an analysis of the totalitarian mind.57 Although her interpretation of Berlin’s contribution to the Post-War search for the origins of totalitarianism ranges over a number of themes, including a critique of Berlin’s reading of the Enlightenment, it is her conclusion that is of greatest significance from our perspective: as an early analyst of totalitarianism, Berlin should not be read, Hatier maintains, as engaged in a search for the origins of totalitarianism in a causal and linear sense, in the same manner as Jacob Talmon, for instance, but should be seen as an analyst of the ‘totalitarian mind’.58 As a neologism with substantive weight59, Hatier is concerned to highlight the distinctive philosophical and

59 Hatier makes an explicit reference to, and draws on the conceptual resources of, Revel’s conception of a ‘totalitarian temptation’ in Western political thought and practice – a latent psychological propensity that
historical character of Berlin’s response to totalitarian thought, most notably its psychological insight into the nature, and even the emotional appeal, of totalitarianism.60

Berlin’s intellectual strength and contemporary importance, for Hatier, is not as an historian of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought, nor as an analyst of the character of totalitarian rule, in a sociological sense. For this enterprise, she avers, Berlin’s contribution to intellectual history is too schematic and undeveloped, while his interest in institutional history and social scientific analysis was not so much underdeveloped as non-existent. Berlin should be read, Hatier argues, as a gifted analyst of the psychological dimensions and emotional appeal of all totalitarian thought, who applied the canons of Vico’s empathetic method – the ideal of fantasia, or Herder’s Einfühlung – to the monistic assumptions of totalitarianism. For Hatier, as for Lilla and Sternhell, Berlin’s indictment of the Enlightenment as a precursor of totalitarianism is unpersuasive. Yet his psychological sensitivity as an analyst of the totalitarian mind is highly developed:

His unique understanding of the “power of ideas” on modern man sheds specific light on the events that have marked the twentieth century. Berlin displays an incomparable capacity to enter into the minds of individuals fascinated by the rewards promised by utopias. As such, he develops an insight into the psychological process that leads normal beings to the most extremist emotions and decisions. This insight has been normally arrive at by the great minds of literature. Berlin is incontestably a master of grasping the thoughts of people he is at odds with, and of recovering the entirety of the experience of those who believe in a profound unity and harmony of values...Thanks to this unusual perception, Berlin admirably recovers all the dimensions of the “totalitarian temptation,” to draw on Jean-Francois Revel...The psychological dimension in his denunciation of the monistic way of thinking is a major contribution to the intellectual engagement with Nazism and communism, but also with all modern tyrannies...Consequently, Berlin ought to be recognised as

Revel considers to be a threat to all Western democracies – on p. 771, in Ibid. For Revel’s development of the ‘totalitarian temptation’ haunting all liberal democracies, something like a proto-totalitarian spectre, see his The Totalitarian Temptation, translated from the French by David Hapgood (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977).

60 Ibid., p. 771.
an insightful commentator on the totalitarian mood or mind.  

Importantly, the contention at the core of Hatier’s argument – that Berlin did not produce a linear and causal history of the origins of totalitarianism, yet managed to illuminate the totalitarian mind – helps to strengthen our interpretation of Berlin’s turn away from the Enlightenment and towards Joseph de Maistre. In opposition to other influential Post-War thinkers, Berlin’s thought does not issue in a causal history of origins, despite his critique of the Enlightenment, but forms an exploration, to employ Hatier’s preferred neologism, of the totalitarian mind from the historical and philosophical perspective afforded by Maistre’s incisive and prescient thought.

Significantly, two of the most philosophically important aspects of Berlin’s work – his commitment to a philosophy by other means, along with his contention that totalitarianism is founded, in part, on a secularised neo-Calvinism and a commitment to the destruction of the perennial questions of political thought – provide the impetus of his turn towards Maistre. Although Berlin, by his own admission, felt no political sympathy for the blood stained vision of the ultramontane Savoyard, he saw in Maistre a contemporary of the twentieth century, whose insights into the character of totalitarian thought are indispensable for an incisive philosophy by other means.

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61 Ibid., pp. 771 and 778.
Conclusion

Isaiah Berlin’s thought is not an example Counter-Enlightenment liberalism. Although he launches a sweeping critique of the Enlightenment, based on his conviction that its commitment to the tradition of Western monism provided philosophical succour to totalitarian thought and practice, Berlin’s turn away from the Age of Reason possesses a methodological foundation. He does not, as both Lilla and Sternhell are united in charging, abandon the substantive legacy of Enlightenment thought for a philosophically incoherent and politically dangerous embrace of the anti-modern animus that sustains Counter-Enlightenment thought. The gulf that Lilla and Sternhell discern between Berlin’s liberalism – his development of the philosophical and political bequest of the Age of Reason – and his work in the history of ideas has its basis in Berlin’s conviction that only a thinker like Maistre, out of place in his own time, but singularly at home in the twentieth century, can provide an analytical window onto the character of totalitarian thought. Berlin does not seek to base his liberalism on the presuppositions of Maistre’s work, but employs the ultramontane Savoyard’s thought as a guiding framework for his analysis of totalitarianism. In this sense, Cecile Hatier’s neologism is strikingly accurate: Berlin should be read as an analyst, working on the basis of the philosophy by other means, of the totalitarian mind or temptation.

Although Berlin’s work as an intellectual historian ranges widely, from studies of Vico and Herder to the Russian intelligentsia of the 1840s and 1860s, his turn to Maistre constitutes the challenging core of his work in the history of ideas. The reason for this is overlooked by Lilla and Sternhell: namely, Berlin’s analysis of two of the necessary presuppositions of totalitarian thought and political practice, the rise of a secularised neo-Calvinism and the development of a drive towards the destruction of the perennial questions of political thought. While Berlin draws on the thought of other Counter-
Enlightenment thinkers, especially Vico, Herder and Hamann, a trio who lend historical context and philosophical ammunition to his defence of value pluralism, his concern with totalitarianism leads him to one of the few Counter-Enlightenment thinkers who, when read from the perspective of contemporary concern, understands the psychological and philosophical character of the totalitarian mind. The luminaries of the Age of Reason, with whom Berlin feels great political sympathy, can provide no support for this Post-War project. No less importantly, the other great thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment who jostle for attention in the pages of Berlin’s essays, Machiavelli, Vico, Herder and Hamann, do not possess a similar insight into the character of totalitarian thought.

As a consequence, Berlin’s interpretation of Maistre forms an important litmus test for the charge that his liberalism is premised on a turn away from the Enlightenment. Given that Berlin’s interest in Maistre is methodological – and flows from his analysis of the presuppositions that underlie totalitarianism – the charge of philosophical incoherence is difficult to sustain. Since Berlin’s turn to Maistre – the thinker at furthest remove from his own liberal humanism – does not disclose an attempt at basing liberalism on the intellectual foundations provided by Counter-Enlightenment thought, the indictment brought against him by Lilla and Sternhell begins to lose its force. Of course, other aspects of Berlin’s thought – which are also indebted to his reading of Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, such as his value pluralism – might still be judged either flawed or insufficient. Yet this is not the equivalent of substantiating the charge that Berlin abandoned the legacy of the Enlightenment, and thereby left his liberalism without a coherent foundation.

Since Berlin did not imbibe the anti-modern hostility of Maistre’s thought, but turned its philosophical virulence into a methodological principle, the character of his liberal thought takes on a different hue. Committed to the political legacy of the Age of Reason, as his defence of negative liberty makes clear, but no less dedicated to the contention that the Enlightenment cannot provide an analytical window onto totalitarianism, Berlin sees Maistre as vital to Post-War thought, whereas Voltaire is
bounded and restricted by the context of his time. For Berlin, Maistre’s thought is transhistorical and contemporaneous, and therefore vital for a Post-War philosophy by other means.

By overlooking the centrality of Berlin’s analysis of the presuppositions that sustain totalitarian thought, Lilla and Sternhell misjudge the nature, as well as the extent, of Berlin’s turn away from the Enlightenment and towards the Counter-Enlightenment, especially in the ferocious form of Joseph de Maistre. Berlin’s turn away from the Age of Reason is never total, but only partial and strategic: it is never wholly substantive, but always fundamentally methodological in character.

As a liberal thinker, as well as a Jewish one, Berlin’s concentration on the entwined histories of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thought is hardly surprising. Despite the similarities that bind Berlin’s intellectual project to that of his contemporaries, however, his philosophical perspective is unusual. While Berlin does not provide a comprehensive account of the origins of totalitarianism, in the same way that this daunting project is undertaken in Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism, his thought provides a qualified defence of Enlightenment thought, principally its contribution to liberalism, on the basis of a methodological turn to a thinker who was committed to its destruction. As a philosopher by other means, Berlin defends a version of liberal political thought by exploring, from the transhistorical perspective of Post-War concern, the crystalline insights of a nineteenth century prophet and unwitting analyst of twentieth century realities. He sought to defend what Maistre set out to destroy. Berlin’s turn to an arch wolf of the Counter-Enlightenment is both idiosyncratic and marked by considerable historical irony. But it is not incoherent.
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