Berlin, Isaiah. *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Originally composed between 1950 and 1952, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* (hereafter *PIRA*) was initially delivered by Isaiah Berlin at Bryn Mawr College as the Mary Flexner Lectures in 1952. *PIRA* not only represents Berlin's longest continuous text, it also contains in embryonic form most of the ideas found in Berlin's mature work: positive and negative liberty, his analysis of the philosophy of history, his critique of determinism, and his account of the Enlightenment and its varied critics and successors. As such, *PIRA* represents a key stage in the development of Berlin's political thought and its greatest value lies in its ability to speak to the question of whether or not Berlin can be understood as a systematic political thinker.

This review of *PIRA* begins with an overview of the intellectual focus of the book. Next, I assess Berlin's analysis of two major elements of his thought: romanticism and positive versus negative liberty. The review concludes with a critical examination of Berlin's treatment of Rousseau with the objective of assessing Berlin's critique of romanticism.

Berlin focuses on the time period at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century because the ideas of this period are "not only interesting," but also because they "generated and counteracted the period's greatest upheaval, the French Revolution" (p. 1). The French Revolution is important not only as a watershed political event, but also as an intellectual event as the "zealots" of the French Revolution attempt to put into practice some of the conflicting arguments of this period (p. 13). Thus, the Revolution and its consequences represent for Berlin tangible evidence of a tension inherent in the romantic vision that resides at the core of the Revolution's rationale, but more importantly it represents a window through which we gain insight into our own intellectual capital. According to Berlin, the political ideas of this period constitute the "basic intellectual capital on which, with few exceptions, we live with today" (p. 1).

Another aspect of the time period Berlin focuses on that warrants consideration are the varied intellectual camps encountered during this period. Berlin identifies seven intellectual camps of consequence (pp. 3-11). Of these camps, it is ultimately the romantic movement that provides the most revolutionary thesis and it is Berlin's express objective to "draw attention to its consequences—the degree to which it modified existing attitudes, the reaction against itself which it stimulated, and the degree to which it marks a chasm between the generations ..." (p. 11). In order to understand the romantic

revolution and properly assess "its intrinsic importance and its vast consequence," it is necessary to situate romanticism within its larger intellectual context (p. 11). Of the importance of context to understanding political philosophy, Berlin writes, "each political philosophy responds to the needs of its times and is fully intelligible only in terms of all the relevant factors of its age and intelligible to us only to the degree to which ... we have experience in common with previous generations" (p. 12). Berlin's concern with bringing together all relevant philosophic schools of thought at any given period of time points to his pluralistic conception of political philosophy. Such an approach requires one to look at more than a single text or author in order to understand a particular period in history. One must apply an understanding of changes in historical circumstances and new models of thought from fields as diverse as science, history, and religion in order to unlock the truth about any particular political theory (p. 12). Thus, one is left with the question of what Berlin finds once he unlocks the mysteries of romanticism.

Berlin's analysis of romanticism focuses on the romantic answer to what Berlin believes to be the critical question of political philosophy: Why should any man obey any other man or body of men (p. 17)? The concern with obedience leads Berlin to the conclusion that the romantic theory of freedom is grounded on a notion of endless creation (p. 181). This means that a free personality, a liberated individual, is free to impose itself on the world outside of it through political domination, the scientific subjugation of nature through an understanding of its laws, or the progressive development of a dominant group espousing a universal idea (p. 181). In short, every imposition of a pattern on other human beings constitutes the type of imposition that the romantic understanding of freedom is predicated on.

Such an understanding, Berlin argues, is a contradiction, as romanticism fails to emancipate itself from the teleological assumptions of earlier ages (p. 185). Rousseau's general will, which Berlin refers to as a "[g]rotesque and hair-raising paradox," serves as an example (p. 143). The source of the paradox is found in Rousseau's imposition of a "reign of liberty so absolute and universal that it keeps everyone everywhere in chains" (p. 144). To argue, as Rousseau does, that man must be compelled to freedom is contradictory. Romantics, following Rousseau, attempt to side-step this contradiction by conceptualizing liberty in terms of a universal desire "to fulfill a plan, to realize a pattern, to obey a law" (p. 185). This plan cannot externally be imposed as this leads to the charges of coercion and slavery. Instead, romantics internalize the plan by making it correspond to some inner desire. Only by realizing this desire can true freedom be obtained. Thus, romantics understand freedom as the ability "to do what one wishes and a rational being wishes to fulfill some plan, express some pattern" (p. 203). Such an understanding contrasts with the liberal vision of freedom endorsed by Berlin in *PIRA*.

According to Berlin, the most obvious meaning of freedom is the "[d]esire for freedom on the part of individuals and groups not to be interfered with by other individuals or groups" (p. 88). The liberal understanding of liberty carries "a greater or lesser connotation of resistance to interference on the part of some—some person or persons, and not things or circumstances—in more or less specified conditions" (pp. 156-57). The liberal understanding is equated with unobstruction. As such, freedom itself does not equal a positive goal; it is only a means that must be guaranteed before positive goals (wishes, ideals, and policies) can be pursued. These two qualities indicate that the liberal conception of freedom is consistent with the primary sense of freedom (pp. 156, 190). The clearest expression of this, according to Berlin, is John Stuart Mill's defense of political freedom wherein freedom is seen as a necessary condition for the good life rather than an ingredient in it (pp. 160-61).

Berlin's critique of romanticism and its reliance on positive liberty finds its clearest and fullest expression in Berlin's analysis of Rousseau. Rousseau, according to Berlin, is the key figure of the time period and is the focus of *PIRA*, as his "words and their imagery" make possible the most influential trends of the nineteenth century: romanticism, nationalism, socialism, naturalism, and fascism (pp. 2, 109). While Rousseau's influence during this period is certainly considerable, one must ask the question of whether or not somebody Berlin describes as "a poor, or rather a deliberately self-blinded, sociologist" could exert such an influence (p. 107).

In order to answer this question one must determine, first, how Berlin understands political philosophy, and second, how Berlin interprets Rousseau. Berlin begins to define political philosophy by distinguishing it from history and natural science as "a branch of thought which deals neither with empirical matters of fact nor with formal relationships governed by identifiable rules and axioms" (p. 11). Political philosophy is thus distinguishable from history, which provides knowledge of a people at a particular moment in time, and natural science, which is committed to the proper attribution of individual cases or sets of cases to laws (or uniformities) that have the greatest predictive and classificatory power (p. 214). The distinction Berlin draws between political philosophy and natural science speaks directly to Berlin's critique of determinism and positivism. According to Berlin, it is a fallacy to apply human characteristics to nonhuman things and equally fallacious to apply the analogy the other way around (p. 212). Thus, applying the logic of natural science to the study of politics is not only fallacious; to do so represents an assault on the moral dignity of individuals. To view humans and human activity as merely things in need of classification is to deny them the "capacity for moral judgment" and "self-determining choice" (p. 212).

The purpose of political philosophy is to explain, elucidate, classify, clarify what a given doctrine asserts, entails, whether it is internally consistent or not, and of what vision of the universe it forms a part (p. 11). Given the

multiplicity of political philosophy's purposes, Berlin ultimately describes political philosophy in terms of "Thick Description" where the political philosopher "can do no better than try to describe what some of these [philosophic] models ... consisted of" (p. 13). Berlin's ultimate concern is with a descriptive analysis that identifies relevant models of philosophy. He is less concerned with the question of whether or not the model he attributes to a particular philosopher is accurate. One sees in Berlin's treatment of Rousseau confirmation of this point.

Berlin does not think that Rousseau provides a "coherent and logical whole" (p. 104). Berlin arrives at this conclusion, in large measure, because he does not consider the totality of Rousseau's writings. Berlin's almost exclusive focus is on Rousseau's *Social Contract*. While this is Rousseau's most overt political writing, to read it outside of the larger philosophic context provided at a minimum by Rousseau's *First* and *Second Discourses* and his *Emile* is to deny from the outset the possibility of coherence to Rousseau's thought. Moreover, Berlin makes almost no effort to understand Rousseau's argument in Rousseau's own terms; instead, he focuses on subsequent interpretations of Rousseau because "[t]his is how he has often been interpreted; and this is certainly the form his doctrine took in those later writers whom he so powerfully influenced ..." (p. 132). Thus, while Berlin admits that Rousseau never speaks in terms of societies having wills or purposes, it is acceptable to attribute these qualities to Rousseau's thought because "many thinkers in the nineteenth century interpreted him as saying this" (p. 138). Given Berlin's approach to Rousseau's thought and the centrality of this analysis to the argument presented in *PIRA*, one is naturally led to consider the possibility that the thrust of *PIRA*'s argument is inaccurate to the extent that Berlin's analysis of Rousseau is incorrect. Inspection of what Rousseau actually says about the general will and liberty indicates that Berlin's critique of Rousseau, and by extension romanticism, is misplaced at best.

Through the general will, Rousseau's government is designed to defend and protect through its joint strength the person and property of each associate. While suggesting a similarity to the liberal theories of Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau goes further with the important addition that securing the ends of government must be done in such a way as to allow man to retain his sovereignty. According to Hobbes, individuals are only sovereign in the state of nature and Locke limits the sovereignty of the people to society, which is prior to the creation of government. Both Hobbes and Locke require that sovereignty be transferred to government. For Rousseau, the people do not and cannot transfer sovereignty. They can only transfer power. Thus, the general will only harnesses and directs the power of the body politic in accordance with the common good.

Rousseau's understanding of the common good and his emphasis on it suggests that the general will is limited. As all must be done for the common good, Rousseau distinguishes between common and private interests. The general will is only concerned with common interests and not those

decisions falling outside of this area, or private interests. Because of this distinction, those under the law are considered in their collective capacity and not individually. As a result, the nature of obligation between the citizen and the sovereign is one where the citizen owes the state all he can only when the sovereign asks, but the sovereign cannot impose any burden which is useless to the community. The limited nature of Rousseau's general will is, in fact, less of an imposition than Berlin leads his reader to believe (see pp. 116-18, 131, 138-39). Instead of the constant imposition of the plan dictated by the general will, Rousseau asks for self-sacrifice and conformity only in those limited instances required of the public good. In all other instances, the individual is left alone.

Berlin would also like his reader to believe that Rousseau argues for a return to the limitless liberty of the state of nature (p. 107). This interpretation of Rousseau misses the subtlety of the argument presented in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. To claim that Rousseau desires a return to the state of nature is to assume that the state of nature is, in Rousseau's estimation, preferable to civil society. Given Rousseau's characterization of civil society, it is not surprising that Berlin arrives at this conclusion. This is not, however, Rousseau's final verdict, as he finds between the state of nature and civil society a happy and durable epoch of human history that Rousseau believes to be the best state for man. This period, which Rousseau refers to as "nascent society," maintains the golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulance of civil society. Unlike savage or natural man, who was limited to pure sensation and never profited from the gifts supplied by nature, nascent man has learned to conquer nature's obstacles. More adept at providing for himself, nascent man does not require the help of others. He is an autonomous, independent being who is neither savage nor civilized. He is free.

While the critique of romanticism provided by Berlin appears off target, *PIRA* does offer its reader valuable insight into Berlin's understanding of liberalism. On the one hand, Berlin's concern with obedience and his preference for negative over positive freedom indicates that his liberalism is traditional (pp. 90-92). This is to say that Berlin refuses to furnish an understanding of the highest good because such an understanding could be used by political authorities to impose their beliefs and practices on the people. The traditional view of liberalism focuses on avoiding the worst rather than realizing the best, as seen in its emphasis on self-preservation and prosperity. Liberalism, as such, has become synonymous with indifference to the cultivation of character, hostility to the bonds of community, and antagonism to human excellence.

On the other hand, Berlin's acceptance of Mill's defense of political freedom suggests the possibility that his liberalism recognizes that certain character traits are necessary for the cultivation of higher desires. Unfortunately, Berlin does not develop this argument at any length in *PIRA*. Were he to do so, one may look for evidence suggesting that Berlin attempts to reconcile the protection of individual rights with social solidarity. *PIRA*,

once properly situated into the context of Berlin's other writings, provides its reader with both insight into the coherence of Berlin's thought and questions concerning the nature of liberalism. As such, it warrants one's careful attention.

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