




FORUM

Aestheticizing Heroism for an Aesthetic Liberalism: Isaiah Berlin on Heroes and Hero Worship

Joshua L. Cherniss 

Department of Government, Georgetown University
Email: Jlc306@georgetown.edu

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Among many conundrums in Isaiah Berlin's thought are the apparent tension between a strongly "personalist" approach to ideas and appreciation for Romanticism, and his warnings against the identification of freedom with human perfection and of politics with aesthetic projects, and aversion to any form of excessive "zeal," as potentially oppressive, callous, and cruel. Berlin the moderate, skeptical liberal coexisted with Berlin the enthusiast and hero-worshipper. This article argues that, over the course of his writing career—both in early, largely unknown writings on contemporary musicians, and in better-known work on the history of ideas and "personal impressions" of contemporaries—Berlin brought these disparate elements of his outlook together through an aestheticizing of heroism, and a close identification of the aesthetic with the ethical. It concludes by suggesting that Berlin's way of understanding heroism may have something to tell us about how commitment to liberalism and appreciation for heroism may coexist and intertwine in ways that contribute to a greater appreciation, and more compelling defense, of liberalism.

Isaiah Berlin often described himself as “a natural hero-worshipper.”¹ He frequently described individuals as his “hero,” and he was happy to do so, for he found that to be able to praise heroes—when they merit praise—“enhances one’s world and one’s life.”² This was not a purely personal foible, of no greater intellectual relevance. It was reflected in the characteristic ways he thought and expressed himself, and in the subject matter and goals of his work. Many of the figures about whom he wrote—Vico, Herder, the Romantics, Disraeli, Sorel—were themselves preoccupied with heroism. His writings on the philosophy of history insistently returned to a defense of individuals’ agency in the historical process. His essays—on past thinkers, contemporary artists and leaders, and intellectuals and writers he had known—are “studies in praise” of figures he regarded as

¹Isaiah Berlin to Jean Floud, 7 July 1968, in Berlin, *Building: Letters 1960–1975*, ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (London, 2013), 355; Berlin to Michael Ignatieff, 30 Dec. 1996, in Berlin, *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (London, 2015), 555.

²Berlin to Noel Annan, 2 Oct., 1978, in Berlin, *Affirming*, 86.

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inspirational or exemplary.³ As a historian of ideas, his characteristic gift was his ability to present, in Brian Horowitz's words, "a sympathetic portrait of the struggles within the souls of his heroes, and struggles of personality with ideology."⁴ This work, as his biographer Michael Ignatieff recognized, involved an *aesthetic* approach to character: a quasi-intuitive tendency to reveal the "essential melodic line" of a thinker's inner vision and temper, which ran through that thinker's work as an inner voice, easily lost beneath the explicit arguments and rhetoric, but discernible through them and holding them together.⁵ This gave his work as a historian of ideas its liveliness—and also, in many cases, its impressionistic, even inaccurate, quality, as his interpretations of thinkers reflected his imagination of, or aesthetic reactions to, thinkers' personalities (as Berlin perceived them) rather than the details of their arguments. Such an approach could yield both insight and illusion.⁶ For better and worse, Berlin's cast of mind was (to borrow Caryl Emerson's term) "personalist": instead of seeking to understand the world in light of, or master it through, an impersonal theoretical system, he thought in light of individual people.⁷

Yet Berlin's articulation of liberalism, most famously presented in "Two Concepts of Liberty," cautioned against taking the cultivation of human excellence as the goal of politics; indeed, in an earlier sketch of this argument, he identified one of the views of liberty that he would critique as "heroic."⁸ His temperamental moderation, expressed in the adoption of Talleyrand's "Surtout, Messieurs, point de zèle"⁹ as his motto, hardly seems hospitable to heroism—or likely to foster a version of liberalism capable of heroic strength in the defense of liberal values.¹⁰

This echoes a larger tension in the relationship of liberalism to the notion of heroism. The moral egalitarianism, concern with personal security, deprecation of warlike qualities, and fear or hatred of cruelty associated with many forms of liberalism all seem opposed to a heroic ethos. Yet liberals have not been consistently resistant to hero worship. This should hardly be surprising: the longing for heroes seems to be an impulse that many human beings, liberal or not, find difficult to shake. And if (many) human beings cannot dispense entirely with heroism, then

³Noel Annan, "Afterword," in Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2014), 441–64, at 442.

⁴Horowitz quoted in Caryl Emerson, "Isaiah Berlin and Mikhail Bakhtin: Relativistic Affiliations," *symplokē* 7/1 (1999), 139–64, at 143, also 152.

⁵Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York, 1998), 56.

⁶Cf. Joshua L. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas: From the Twentieth Century to the Romantic Age," in Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2014), lxii–lxiv.

⁷Emerson, "Isaiah Berlin and Mikhail Bakhtin," 142.

⁸Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 259, where Berlin identifies one of the strains of "non-humanistic definitions of freedom" as "heroic (in some Byronic or Nietzschean sense)."

⁹Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 92; Berlin, "Frageboden," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin*, 22 Jan. 1993, 27. On Berlin's prescription and practice of moderation see Aurelian Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Philadelphia, 2016), Ch. 3.

¹⁰This opposition to "zeal" and greatness as political ideals has led some to take Berlin to task for offering too negative or morally thin a form of liberalism. See e.g. Alan S. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2023), 14, 348–61. This view may, however, be open to challenge, for which see Joshua L. Cherniss, "In Defense of Liberal Limits and a Limited Liberalism," *Review of Politics*, forthcoming.

liberal discomfort with heroes and heroism may be a handicap for liberalism, in two connected, but distinct, respects. Strategically or practically, the disavowal of a heroic ethos may limit liberalism's appeal, and inhibit liberals from the sort of grand, arduous, and obdurate action that may be necessary to promote or preserve liberal societies. This practical disadvantage may reflect a deeper, theoretical deficit: in rejecting and renouncing heroism, liberals may overlook—or deliberately blind themselves to—an important dimension of human motivation and aspiration, rendering their liberalism less psychologically realistic and rich. A reconciliation with, or appropriation of, *some* dimensions of a heroic ethos, then, may enrich, and reinforce, liberalism.¹¹ Focusing on the theme of heroism may also enrich the study of political theory by drawing together the affective and the ethical, and bringing them to bear on the living-out of politics. For heroism involves both a moral ideal and an aesthetic mode which shapes our images of ourselves: of what we may be, and should aspire to be—as well as what we may dread.¹²

In the discussion that follows, I explicate what I take to be a familiar (though certainly not a universal) view: heroism is not safe for liberalism, and liberalism is inhospitable to a heroic ethos. I then turn to Berlin, exploring his lifelong preoccupation with heroism, and showing how he characterized figures he identified as his own heroes, focusing on his accounts of his artistic heroes (which, unlike his writings on Russian thinkers, and his analysis of political leaders, have seldom been discussed, and which underscore the way in which heroism, on Berlin's account, links ethics and aesthetics).¹³ In conclusion, I suggest that Berlin's way of understanding heroism may have something to tell us about how commitment to liberalism and appreciation for a conception of heroism which is aesthetic and ethical may coexist and intertwine, in ways that contribute to a greater appreciation, and a more compelling defense, of liberalism.

Liberalism and heroism: the terms defined and the tension stated

We may start by defining our terms, but this is no easy matter. Liberalism is a much-contested (and much-abused) concept, associated with a wide range of regimes, discourses, theories, policies, achievements, and disasters.¹⁴ There is no

¹¹For arguments reconciling liberalism to (some elements) of a heroic ethos see Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1987); and Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

¹²Victor Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830–1980* (Chicago, 1999), 2.

¹³For discussion of Berlin on political leaders see Joshua L. Cherniss, "'The Sense of Reality': Berlin on Political Judgment, Political Ethics, and Leadership," in Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge, 2018), 53–78; Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Political Science and Political Understanding: Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry," *American Political Science Review* 98 (2004), 327–39. For Berlin's views of Russian thinkers see Aileen Kelly, "Introduction: A Complex Vision," in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London, 2008), xxiii–xxxv; Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2021), 176–82.

¹⁴On the problem of definition see Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42/6 (2014), 682–714; Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2015). For recent attempts at writing histories of liberalism see Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, 2014);

single “liberalism,” but only many liberalisms. Nevertheless, the term is frequently and fruitfully associated with a political outlook that sets a premium on the promotion and preservation of individual freedom, understood primarily in terms of the ability “to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of [one’s] life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other.”¹⁵ This commitment inspires several further features often associated with liberalism: insistence on placing *limits* on the power that any body of human beings, but particularly the state, can exercise; separation of the social and political worlds into distinct realms; the safeguarding of individuals’ opportunities to move from sphere to sphere; and a more general valorization of choice and mobility—and thus variety, open-endedness, and unpredictability.¹⁶ Liberalism is closely allied to constitutionalism and representative government (which constrain and desanctify political power¹⁷), and to political, social, and ethical pluralism. These commitments involve a certain double-sidedness of disposition. On the one side, many variants of liberalism celebrate human potential, and express hopefulness about the possibility for growth and improvement (both individual and social) through the application of reason, knowledge, education, legitimate political institutions, sound economic policies, and the profusion and exchange of human differences.¹⁸ On the other, many liberalisms are marked by an apprehensive view of politics and society; an awareness of the fragility of freedom, peace, and order; the vulnerability of individuals; the frailty of human wisdom and virtue; the terrible dangers of power, intolerance, fearfulness, and unreason; and the misguided confidence that one is in the right and can do no wrong.¹⁹

Definition is scarcely easier with heroism, to which no really stable or consistent content can be adduced—save, perhaps, that heroes are *exceptional*.²⁰ But what renders them such, and what the implications of this are, vary widely. Different cultures, epochs, and individuals identify very different values and virtues as heroic: Achilles, Galahad, Napoleon, Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, Che Guevara, and Rosa Parks represent rather different sorts of person. Heroes’ status and function(s) also vary widely. In terms of status, heroes may be exemplars, or exceptions: they may be seen as exemplifying qualities of which all human beings are capable, or as superhuman, defying the ordinary limits of human nature.²¹ Heroes may be leaders or mavericks, but there is also a “demotic” conception in which heroism is located in the struggles of ordinary people to be more than ordinarily good.

Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018); and Kahan, *Freedom from Fear*.

¹⁵Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 21–38, at 21.

¹⁶See Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*; Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton, 1998); Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory* 12/3 (1984), 315–30; Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” *Political Theory* 18/1 (1990), 6–23.

¹⁷See George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean* (Ithaca, 1992).

¹⁸This side of liberalism is particularly evoked in Fawcett, *Liberalism*.

¹⁹This side of liberalism was developed in Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear”; and emphasized in Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times*.

²⁰Cf. Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes*, 3.

²¹The latter is emphasized in *ibid.*, 5.

Heroes may serve as models to be emulated, illustrations of what it takes to achieve great things, inspirations who affirm the potential of humanity, idols to be worshipped—or warnings of the disaster that comes from excess.²² The relationship of heroism to morality is ambiguous. Enormous in capacity or energy, heroes may commit enormities in action. By dint of being “great,” they may not be good—or may be beyond good and evil.

I have drifted, in the previous paragraph, from heroes to heroism—or from the figure and functions of heroes to a heroic ethos (I will return to this distinction). We can draw out an account of the latter by looking (in an admittedly stylized, simplified way) at the content of different historical conceptions of heroism. Let us start with the Greek heroic tradition—one distant from modern liberalism, in its presupposition of a fundamentally hierarchical order to the world, and a valuing of “honor, power, and fame” above all else.²³ The classical tragic hero is defined by his (or her: remember Antigone—or Medea) refusal to *yield*; not only courage or pride, but *endurance* of extraordinary suffering, defines the heroic disposition.²⁴ This is typically presented as an expression not of (moral) principle, but of *thumos*, or spiritedness.²⁵ If the Christian or morally purist hero says, “Let justice be done though the heavens may fall,” the Greek hero seems inclined to declare, “Let my own will be done, or my own nature be affirmed, though the heavens may fall on me and all around me.” As Mark Fisher notes, Greek heroes’ unyielding ambition and stubborn pride made them “difficult friends and family members”—and dangerous (though also, in some circumstances, necessary) political leaders, just as their uneasy relationships with equality, juridical procedure, and compromise made them poor democratic citizens.²⁶

This ancient Greek conception of heroism was one point of reference for Berlin. But his thinking about heroism was far more influenced by Romanticism. For Berlin, Romanticism was central to modern (European) conceptions of heroism—and the idea of heroism was central to Romanticism, at the very “heart” of which lay “the worship of the heroic martyr.”²⁷ As with the ancient Greeks (or the protagonists of such epics as *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon*), the capacity to endure, and propensity to inflict, suffering was a feature of Romantic heroes. Like these earlier warrior-heroic ethics, Romanticism valued “conflict, war, self-immolation against compromise, adjustment, toleration,” and “commitment, self-surrender and self-assertion against ... prudence, calculation, realism.”²⁸ But now heroism also came to be defined by qualities of integrity and devotion to an ideal; thus it is located in the subjective quality of feeling rather than the (objective) validity of the goal, and takes the form of “violent, continuous, irresistible expression of the

²²This taxonomy of heroism was suggested by conversations with Mark Fisher. For an illustration of a “demotic” conception of heroism see Joshua L. Cherniss, “Heroes, Critics, Teachers: Thinking with Stanley Hoffmann and Albert Camus,” *Tocqueville Review/Revue de Tocqueville* 39/2 (2018), 113–31.

²³Mark Fisher, “Heroic Democracy: Thucydides, Pericles, and the Tragic Science of Athenian Greatness” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2017), 3.

²⁴Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1964), esp. 7–17.

²⁵See Fisher, “Heroic Democracy,” 53.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 52, 62.

²⁷Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2019), 306.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 238.

inner vision” and worship of an “absolute principle,” through “utter defiance of all that obstructed and opposed a man in the worship of the inner light.”²⁹ This had an ambiguous relationship to morality. For many Romantics, *any* self-assertive defiance, *any* commitment to some goal, whether properly moral or not, was heroic. Vehemence as such—or, in Nancy Rosenblum’s phrase, “unconstrained self-assertion,” expressing a sense of “limitless power, possibility, and independence”—came to be the hallmark of the hero.³⁰ This reached its most extreme form in the celebration, or transmutation, of *antiheroic* figures as heroes: Faust, Karl Moor, Don Juan, Manfred (and his creator, Byron).³¹

These (and other) historical notions of heroism hardly seem *liberal*. Liberalism—or, at least, the form of liberalism most often associated with Berlin and his contemporaries and immediate successors, and, arguably, with the larger project of liberal constitutionalism—offers not heroic liberation, but a “fearful, self-protective” defense of liberty. According to critics, and even some defenders, liberalism’s tendency is to sap the militant spirit of heroism, diverting humanity from war to trade, from idealism to materialism, from self-sacrifice to narrow selfishness.³² The heroic “ethos of endless, insatiable striving” violates the ethos of mutual respect among morally equal individuals that liberalism demands, and threatens the personal security and civic peace that liberalism seeks to secure.³³ Where heroism is necessarily exclusive, liberalism aspires (or claims) to be inclusive; liberalism generalizes and reconciles, while heroism insists on uniqueness and demands deference (we are dealing here, of course, in ideal types, if not in caricatures). Liberalism thus seems inhospitable to heroism, and a heroic ethic seems unsafe for liberalism.³⁴

Heroism as problem and resource in Berlin’s liberalism

Berlin himself acknowledged, even emphasized, tensions between heroism and liberalism. He stressed the incompatibility between the cultural ideals of a “brutal, stern,

²⁹Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 13, 244, 246; cf. Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 12–15.

³⁰Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 19.

³¹See Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, 14, 21, 97, 142–3, 152–4.

³²On the project of liberal constitutionalism see Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford, 1987). The attack on martial virtue in favor of the gentler spirit of commerce is central to the famous account in Albert O. Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977); while Hirschman was writing of the (pre)history of capitalist thought, much of what he says can be applied to the antecedents of liberalism. The superiority of economic activity to militarism was later stressed by such nineteenth-century liberals as Herbert Spencer (see Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 82). In the twentieth century, liberalism’s “grey spirit of compromise” and lack of fighting spirit were frequently cited as a major failing by those longing for a more heroic civilization; on this see Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times*, 23–8.

³³Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 2, 10, cf. 4, 14, 19, 30, 34, 188.

³⁴This is, arguably, a misleading account of liberalism *as a whole*. Yet it certainly captures a great deal of liberalism, and many perceptions of liberalism. Thus, while Alan Kahan, *Freedom from Fear*, 44–9, 126–33, stresses that some liberals continued to view “greatness” as an ideal, he also suggests that liberalism is opposed to the notion of heroism as something irrational or amoral. Kahan accordingly (and I think dubiously) excludes Max Weber from the ranks of liberalism, despite Weber’s close ties and points of agreement with many of those Kahan (correctly) identifies as liberals, on the ground that Weber’s admiration for charismatic leadership—which involves a popular cult of the hero—disqualifies him as a liberal. *Ibid.*, 149.

oligarchical, ‘heroic’ society” (e.g. that of the Homeric Greeks), composed of “harsh and avaricious masters ... ruling over slaves and serfs,” and those of modern societies,³⁵ and linked “Romantic heroism” not only to “positive” conceptions of liberty, but to nationalism, imperialism, and—in its most “pathological” form—fascism and totalitarianism.³⁶ Following Vico, he connected these differences in ethos to differences in both language and political regime, drawing a contrast between the “poetic” language of heroic, oligarchic societies and “the humane, prose-using democracies.”³⁷ Indeed, democracy itself—particularly liberal, parliamentary democracy—threatened, as Sorel had warned, to undermine the very possibility of heroism, because it fosters (or aims to foster) a spirit of compromise, concessions, conciliation.³⁸

Berlin clearly did admire the sincere, wholehearted pursuit of an ideal, undertaken through struggle and in the face of suffering, which he associated with heroism (and, more precisely, with Romantic heroism). His writings reveal a recurrent attraction to quixotic figures who swam “against the current,” particularly among the Russian intellectuals for whose “moral and intellectual heroism” he had such great admiration and affection.³⁹ He found, and honored, this spirit both in obscure figures, such as the Catholic aristocrat Auberon Herbert,⁴⁰ and in Churchill, whose wholehearted, reality-defying commitment to realizing a deeply held ideal enabled him to save Britain, and change history.⁴¹ Yet this was not a way of being that Berlin himself endorsed. It is telling that, in titling the summation of his worldview “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” he chose the title ironically, insofar as the main burden of the essay is to warn against identifying any one single goal to pursue, or pursuing any single goal too single-mindedly. Against the heroic pursuit of some absolute ideal, the essay articulates a deliberately antiheroic program, defined by the need to “avoid extremes of suffering” by “promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair.” Admittedly, this was not “the stuff of which calls to heroic action by inspired leaders are made,” and would seem “flat” to those desiring a heroic mode of life.⁴² But, as Berlin had written decades earlier (not without irony or ambivalence),

when I think of 2 worlds ... one full of tiny little benevolent vulgarians ... & on the other flashing swords & Winston [Churchill], Tito, Ben Gurion, Uncle Joe [Stalin] ... & compare the flat 2 dimensional semiliterate prose of the first with the undoubted poetry of the second, I don't feel Nietzschean indignation!

³⁵Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 7, 127.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 32.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 145. Here Berlin echoes his fellow mid-century liberal Raymond Aron's remark that democracy was “the only regime that ... proclaims that the history of states is and must be written not in verse but in prose.” Raymond Aron, *History, Truth, and Liberty*, ed. Franciszek Draus (Chicago, 1986), 348.

³⁸Berlin, *Against the Current*, 394. This linkage of politics and aesthetics is notable in Berlin's prewar writings, where he detects a connection between a Romantic aesthetic of “the sublime” and “Nazi heroes, T. E. Lawrence ... & moral bullying. This in turn leads to reactionary Romanticism, the Germans, chivalry and the beauty of danger.” Isaiah Berlin to Elizabeth Bowen, Aug. 1936, in Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1945*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 2005), 191.

³⁹Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 172, also 173, 179–80.

⁴⁰See Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 190.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁴²Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 18–20.

... Because the rights of individuals matter more than glorious achievements: because liberty & even a passive semi-toleration matter more than armies on the march to ends however magnificent ...⁴³

Berlin here sets up an opposition between emotionally and aesthetically elevating heroism, and a morality defined by decency, respect for the rights of others, and self-restraint in conformity to shared norms of mutual forbearance and toleration. Having lived through the 1930s, and seen the ways in which the longing for heroic greatness had led his contemporaries to embrace antiliberal ideologies and behave with reckless disregard for others in their personal relations, he was keenly aware of heroism's divergence from, and danger to, "moral decency" (which he identified, in one late-life interview, as his favorite virtue).⁴⁴ Berlin found this opposition between a humane, liberal ethos and that of martial heroism expressed by Ivan Turgenev (a figure with whom he often identified), quoting the declaration by one of Turgenev's characters that "I am devoted to ... civilisation ... this word ... is pure and holy, while all the other words, 'nationality', for example, or—yes, or 'glory', smell of blood."⁴⁵ This sense of heroism's moral ambiguity extended to Churchill, whom Berlin described in print as a "mythical hero" and "the largest human being of our time."⁴⁶ Yet, on meeting Churchill, he reported being repulsed by the great man's "brutality, his contempt for the lesser breeds without the law, his lust for war, his odious doctrine about the need ... for a permanent reserve of unemployed as a source of efficiency."⁴⁷ When he heard that Churchill had been defeated (by the immensely unheroic Atlee) in 1945, Berlin danced a jig.⁴⁸

Berlin's self-description as a "natural hero-worshipper" was, indeed, qualified and ironic: as he went on to write, "I long for a flag: I should readily suppress truth, sign petitions supported by specious reasoning, attack old friends, behave like a partisan, if I found a cause or a leader I wholly believed in: perhaps I can only say this so confidently because I know I shall not find such a one: no feet to sit at."⁴⁹ He clearly perceived the tension between his penchant for hero worship

⁴³Isaiah Berlin to Marion Frankfurter, 17 Aug. 1950, in Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London, 2009), 187–8.

⁴⁴Berlin, "Frageboden." Asked in the same questionnaire to identify his favorite hero in literature, he chose Pierre in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—a notably unglamorous and irresolute but persistently questioning, questing, and amiably decent figure. His favorite literary heroine was Tatyana from *Eugene Onegin*—a shy, quietly romantic, vulnerable girl who grows into a nobly self-controlled woman.

⁴⁵Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 345–6 (quoting Turgenev's novel *Smoke*).

⁴⁶Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 23.

⁴⁷Isaiah Berlin to Alistair Cooke, 19 Sept. 1983, in Berlin, *Affirming*, 217. Berlin was reproached by left-wing friends for his praise of Churchill shortly before an election, and many will now be struck by Berlin's silence on Churchill's brutal imperialism—though these private remarks suggest that he was aware of and objected to both this and Churchill's ruthless economic views. On Berlin's encounters with British imperialism, and the anti-imperialist motifs in his work, see Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York, 2012); esp. Chs. 5, 7; Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013), 56, 118, 209–12; Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Isaiah Berlin on Nationalism, the Modern Jewish Condition, and Zionism," in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 169–91.

⁴⁸Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 134.

⁴⁹Isaiah Berlin to Jean Floud, 7 July 1968, in Berlin, *Building*, 355. In a similar vein he had earlier written, "by nature I am a hero-worshipper who has found insufficient heroes in his life, at whose feet I could

and his liberalism—and recognized that he was incorrigibly inclined to both. But if he had doubts about his attraction to heroic figures, he also had misgivings about his own doubting, moderate, even timorous, character. According to his biographer, Berlin wished that he could have been “one of life’s noble intransigents—those who did not bend, but made others submit to their will”: his heroes were mostly “fiery, implacable,” “hard, difficult, ‘impossible’ characters.”⁵⁰ He often seems to have feared that he was what his hero Alexander Herzen saw in the novelist Turgenev: “a feeble ally, a reed that bent too easily before every storm, an inveterate compromiser.”⁵¹ In declaring, “I think nothing true without endless qualifications,” he added, “I wish I were one of those monolithic characters with a clear conception of right and wrong and went steadily forward regardless of things, persons and ever-present possibilities of error, like Toscanini. That is why he is to me such a hero.”⁵² Against the “neutrality of the attitude ... timidity ... insecurity, and terror of being committed, of saying something irrevocable” that he found in the work of Henry James, he declared his preference for “the rhetorical exclamations of the 19th century about love or honor & immortal properties, inner freedom, etc.”⁵³ He also revolted against the anti-Romantic, cynical, and deflationary spirit he detected in Marx,⁵⁴ and the “becalmed,” dispirited mood he found prevailing in postwar culture.⁵⁵

Following the crises of the 1930s and the horrors of world war, the Holocaust, and Stalinism, Berlin feared two dangers. One was the force and allure of fanaticism—particularly collective, ideologically hardened fanaticism. The other was a turn to conscientious, humane, but narrow-minded technocracy. This might protect against the greatest of evils—the poverty and social discord that had afflicted democracies in the interwar period, and the horrors of totalitarianism. But it left too little room for human variety and enthusiasm. As he wrote in 1949,

men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible. It is from intense preoccupation with these ends, ultimate, incommensurable, guaranteed neither to change nor to stand still—it is through the absorbed individual or collective pursuit of these ... more often than not without conscious hope of success, still less of the approbation of the official auditor, that the best moments come in the lives of individuals and peoples.⁵⁶

continuously sit. Nothing could be a more humiliating confession, and yet about me it is I fear perfectly true.” Berlin to Felix Frankfurter, 15 July 1960, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 738.

⁵⁰Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 35, 56.

⁵¹Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 339.

⁵²Berlin to Rowland Burdon-Muller, 12 Feb. 1953, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 361–2.

⁵³Berlin to Elizabeth Bowen, July 1937, in Berlin, *Flourishing*, 241–3.

⁵⁴Thus he wrote of the “harshness of Marx’s vision of history, its insistence upon the seamy side of the social process, upon the need for long, tedious, painful labour, the anti-heroic realism, the mordant, deflationary epigrams, the deliberate and ferocious anti-idealism of tone.” Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 149.

⁵⁵See Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 64–5.

⁵⁶Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 55–93, at 93.

In such an atmosphere, the very errancy of heroic souls might be politically beneficial. Writing of the “legendary hero” of the Israeli war of independence, Yitzak Sadeh, Berlin acknowledges Sadeh’s moral shortcomings, but, against Sadeh’s disapproving in-laws (including Berlin’s own parents), emphasizes Sadeh’s virtues of “reckless, lion-hearted courage,” vitality, generous feeling, rich imagination, and appetite for life and for action. Sadeh was “one of life’s irregulars, wonderful in wars and revolutions and bored with peaceful, orderly, unexciting existence.”⁵⁷ While too much of the spirit represented by Sadeh “would ruin any possibility of order,” *some* element of it “is something which no society should lack if it is to be free or worthy of survival.”⁵⁸ Such evaluations reflect an ethical–aesthetic outlook: they reveal a sense of what is necessary to render a human life—and a society in which many human lives take shape and intersect—worthy of praise, pursuit, and defense. (This perspective carries with it a certain a looseness—a lack of a firm, defined line between morally acceptable and unacceptable degrees or forms of grandness of character—which will represent a significant weakness, even danger, in the eyes of many of Berlin’s fellow liberals.⁵⁹)

Berlin’s desire to preserve some space for heroes and heroism in human life had a further aesthetic–ethical dimension. This lay in its connection to his preoccupation with the possibilities for human agency in history. Berlin believed that, if human beings were not able to make choices between alternatives for themselves, and translate these choices into actions that could affect the shape of their lives and the lives of others, then human moral judgments would be rendered incoherent or vacuous, and human life would be denuded of meaning and import. This desire to vindicate human agency is reflected in Berlin’s first major work. In his biography of Marx (1939), he relished the paradox that Marx’s impact, contrary to his own philosophy of history, revealed the power of individuals and their visions to shape history. It is also clear in his accounts of such world-historical figures as Churchill, Roosevelt, and Weizmann and his lengthy essay “Historical Inevitability” (1954) and other writings on the philosophy of history.⁶⁰ Ethically, this opposition to determinism and attachment to human agency was connected to Berlin’s rejection of “realism”—the exaltation of strength over and against scruples, and identification of victory with validity. Berlin associated this with the “big-battalions” view of history, which “derived morality from historical success,” and thereby encouraged the “identification of what works with what is good, of what is right with what succeeds,” and “that which crushes resistance, with that which

⁵⁷Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 90.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Berlin’s sympathy for the sentiments behind nationalism, as well as elements in Romanticism, has led to charges of a morally subversive “aestheticism” from his fellow liberal Kateb. George Kateb, “Can Cultures Be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin’s Work,” *Social Research* 66/4 (1999), 1009–38.

⁶⁰Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 5th edn (Princeton, 2013); Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, 94–165; Berlin, “The Sense of Reality” (1953), in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 1–49; Berlin, “The Lessons of History” (1966), in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 265–76. See also Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time* 1–2, 30–40, 115–19, 193–9; James Cracraft, “A Berlin for Historians,” *History and Theory* 41/3 (2002), 277–300; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton, 2013), 21–2, 42–73, 110–16.

deserves to crush resistance.”⁶¹ Aesthetically, Berlin found the irregularity arising from human action deeply satisfying, and the idea of a fixed, orderly historical progression dreary. Thus “anything that upsets careful predictions, the general assumption that vast impersonal forces are guiding our faltering footsteps in directions unknown to us ... pleases me immensely. There is no limit to my pleasure in the unforeseen and fortuitous.”⁶² Or, more pithily, “I don’t want the universe to be too tidy.”⁶³

For Berlin, heroes are the great breakers of historical necessity (rather than the vehicles through which this necessity operates, as maintained by his polemical opponent E. H. Carr or communist orthodoxy); their emergence vindicates the possibility of individuals being agents, acting on the world and not merely being acted upon by “vast impersonal forces” before which they are prostrate. Accordingly, Berlin invoked the idea of historically transformative heroism against determinism. “If the notion of the hero who makes or breaks a nation’s life springs from an illusion,” this remains a “persistent, obsessive and universal illusion, to which the experience of our own time has given powerful support”—even if that support came from cases of individuals whose historical impact one might deplore, such as Lenin or Hitler. In any case, Berlin ventured to hold this belief to be “not delusive, but a true view of society and history.” In at least some instances, heroic individuals act as “the authors of revolutions that permanently and deeply alter many human lives” and, by their interventions, make “what seemed highly improbable in fact happen.”⁶⁴

Emphasis on individuals was central to Berlin’s aesthetic evaluations as well as to his historical judgments; and he saw this as characteristic of liberalism. Thus he wrote that “Turgenev, and liberals generally, saw tendencies, political attitudes, as functions of human beings, not human beings as functions of social tendencies. Acts, ideas, art, literature were expressions of individuals, not of objective forces of which the actors or thinkers were merely the embodiments.”⁶⁵ The focus of Berlin’s work as a historian of ideas on individual figures, and his emphasis on the way in which they had altered the course of human thought and culture (often unintentionally, imperceptibly, or long after their deaths), thus manifested what, for Berlin, were deep ethical, and characteristically liberal, commitments.

An emphasis on the historical agency of individuals could foster a “great-man” theory of history just as brutal as the big-battalion view. It was thus important for Berlin to identify heroism with individual defiance of external necessity, but *not* with the imposition of one individual’s (or some small elites of individuals’) will on others. Although he deeply wished to believe in the significance of individual action on history, Berlin did not define heroes in terms of their historical impact (as other defenders of freedom in history who turned to the figure of the hero did.⁶⁶) Hence his attraction to, and emphasis on, Romanticism’s exaltation of

⁶¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2014), 103, 106. For elaboration on this “ethical” opposition to determinism and realism see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 112–30.

⁶² Berlin to Nicolas Nabokov, 25 June 1970, in Berlin, *Building*, 426.

⁶³ Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, 2006), 125.

⁶⁴ Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 35.

⁶⁵ Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 340.

⁶⁶ Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (London, 1945).

“unavailing individual protest, or heroic opposition, in the name of individual beliefs, to outside pressure, opposition which was not guaranteed to win, whose value, indeed, for earlier Romantics, consisted in the purity of the principles adopted or the disinterested passion with which they were defended, whether or not against great odds.”⁶⁷ Tellingly, asked late in life “which military achievements do you admire most,” Berlin cited three examples of smaller, beleaguered forces defending their nations’ liberty against overwhelming odds: Marathon, the Maccabean revolt, and the Battle of Britain. In response to questions about his “favorite figure in history,” “favorite heroines in real life,” and “heroines in history,” Berlin named Lincoln, Hanna Senesh, and Mme Roland respectively; the latter two had suffered defeat and grisly death; the former was murdered shortly after achieving imperfect victory. (His “heroes in real life” he identified, simply, as “liberators.”⁶⁸)

But how to distinguish defiant, even Quixotic, heroism from either bullying (which Berlin hated above all things: in the same questionnaire he declared that the historical figures he detested most were “bullies,” and the quality he detested most “heartlessness”⁶⁹), or mere masochism? A (partial) answer can be found in Berlin’s accounts of his own heroes—and particularly his characterization of his artistic heroes.

Artistic heroism and the pursuit of the aesthetic–ethical ideal

Berlin wrote very little about, and seldom expressed admiration for, martial heroes. Perhaps more surprisingly, while he published several accounts of political heroes,⁷⁰ the individuals he tended to identify as heroes, or to describe in heroic or quasi-heroic terms, were typically not professional politicians (about most of whom Berlin was ambivalent),⁷¹ but intellectuals and artists. And while his writings are replete with references to literature, especially Russian literature, Berlin often expressed his hero worship most ardently in his discussions of musical figures. Foremost among these musical heroes was the conductor Arturo Toscanini, whom a young, enthusiastic Berlin declared “the greatest man in the world,” later adding, “My admiration for him both as a person & as an artist I really cannot exaggerate.” This adulation of Toscanini, Berlin recognized, offered an outlet for his inclination to hero worship: “I like finding heroes very much ... and Toscanini is obviously a good genuine one, & I can let myself go & collect picture postcards of him without restraint.”⁷²

⁶⁷Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 320; cf. the similar praise of “heroism and martyrdom,” *ibid.*, 187.

⁶⁸Berlin, “Fragebogen.” Mme Roland was a politically astute, trenchant, and stouthearted leader of the Girondins in the French Revolution; Senesh was a young Hungarian Jewish poet who parachuted into occupied Europe to assist anti-Nazi partisans and help to rescue Jews. Both were executed for their efforts.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰See e.g. Isaiah Berlin, “Winston Churchill in 1940,” in Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 1–29; Berlin, “President Frankling Delano Roosevelt,” in *ibid.*, 37–49; and Berlin, “Chaim Weizmann,” in *ibid.*, 57–96.

⁷¹See e.g. Isaiah Berlin to Lord Gladwyn, 24 Jan. 1963, in Berlin, *Building*, 141–2; Berlin to Bernard Williams, 13 Oct. 1971, in *ibid.*, 468.

⁷²Isaiah Berlin to John Hilton, 13 Oct. 1935, in Berlin, *Flourishing*, 137; to Berlin Marion Frankfurter, undated (early 1936?), in “Supplementary Letters 1928–1946,” *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, at https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/f/11supp.pdf, 33–4.

What was it that Berlin so admired in Toscanini? Partly it was his “unbending” strength of will, expressed both in his refusal to bend to tyrants, and in his obstinate pursuit of his musical vision (which could itself become tyrannical). But this strength of will was yoked to a *moral* vision: one consisting of “19th century ideals of human liberty” and *humility* before musical and moral ideals greater than oneself. It was because Toscanini was both proud and “almost painfully disciplined, painfully self-effacing before the desires of the composer,” that he was “the most morally dignified & inspiring hero of our time.”⁷³ Finally, in Toscanini these moral qualities were inseparable from aesthetic aims, and invested them with a distinctive pathos: as Berlin’s biographer states, Berlin found in Toscanini’s performance of *Fidelio* (itself a great expression of “humanistic piety”⁷⁴) “moral conviction and musical expression fused in a moment of awesome feeling.”⁷⁵

Many of these same qualities were embodied in the Busch Quartet, Berlin’s other great musical heroes of the 1930s (and after),⁷⁶ whose performance of the repertoire in which they specialized—the Austro-German classics—was distinguished not simply by “artistic accomplishment” or “depth of understanding,” but by “the participation of these in a very definite moral attitude,” consisting in a “disinterested” “striving after an end.”⁷⁷ They embodied an ideal of “absolute artistic incorruptibility, of unhesitating surrender to the composer, and ... awareness of the value and dignity conferred by the work upon its executant,”⁷⁸ as well as an “extreme purity and seriousness ... [and] moral nobility.”⁷⁹ Berlin connected this moral quality not only to aesthetics, but also to politics. For him the Busch Quartet embodied “the bourgeois virtues, the passionate working of the not to be transgressed against rights of the individual.” In the “extreme nakedness and colossal seriousness” of their playing, “all the frightful patter about self-realizing individuals & freedom in obedience to law appears unsullied & true.”⁸⁰

This is surprising, since Berlin would condemn such “frightful patter” as a dangerous, antiliberal mystification or delusion in “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Yet for him, the Busch Quartet *were* able to combine single-minded dedication to an ideal with the preservation of individuality. One never forgot that they were “four free and distinct individuals, each with his own peculiar artistic attitude, which is distinguishable even while it contributes itself to the whole, each aware of the equal and independent rank of his instrument, which is allowed to rise to its full stature among the others,” in contrast to quartets in which “everything is surrendered to purchase symmetry and smoothness; the individual differences are not reconciled but eliminated, and the residue acquires an inevitable tinge of something passive

⁷³Isaiah Berlin to Alice James, 24 April 1954, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 442–3; Berlin, “Man of Action: A Choice of Records,” at <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/broadcasts/man-of-action.pdf>.

⁷⁴Stephen Spender, *World within World* (New York, 1994), 71. Spender and Berlin heard Toscanini conduct *Fidelio* at Salzburg in 1935. Berlin, *Flourishing*, 697.

⁷⁵Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 54.

⁷⁶Isaiah Berlin to Richard Wilberforce, 15 May 1992, in Berlin, *Affirming*, 441–2.

⁷⁷Berlin, “Music Chronicle,” *Oxford Outlook* 11 (1931), 49–53, at 49.

⁷⁸Berlin, “Music Chronicle,” *Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 133–8, at 133.

⁷⁹Berlin, “Man of Action.”

⁸⁰Isaiah Berlin to Cressida Bonham Carter, undated (1938?), in Berlin, *Flourishing*, 272–3.

and oppressed.”⁸¹ Through a mix of dedication to a shared goal, which they all freely recognized, and respect for the individuality and equality of each member, the Busch Quartet was able to resolve the tension between collaboration and independence, subordination and freedom, in a way that Berlin’s work, with its emphasis on the incompatibility of ideals, suggests is seldom possible, particularly among larger, more heterogeneous groups of individuals, and in the contentious realm of politics.

The Busch Quartet’s was not the only way of resolving problems of conflict and choice, nor the only one that could attain heroic heights. Whereas for the Busch Quartet (and Toscanini) “there is no sense of deliberate choice between alternatives, of doctrine pressed home against encircling and eliminated possibilities,” in the playing of another artistic idol of Berlin’s, the pianist Artur Schnabel, “the actuality which he develops moves forward in conscious opposition to the unrealised potentialities.” For the former, “there is no sense of conflict; the musical process is one of harmonious, natural, unquestioning self-revelation”; while with Schnabel, “conflict arises at every stage. What one admires is the genius disclosed in each decision.” Here, “The intellectual strain is much greater, the tension much severer, problems are presented and some are resolved, some not, but the urgency of all of them gives the whole process an aspect at once more tragic and more personal.”⁸²

From this, I do not think it too much (though it is more than Berlin explicitly does) to generalize to a contrast between two types of heroism, both involving the overcoming of obstacles in dedication to some ideal. One—the Toscanini–Busch approach—involves a sense of singleness of purpose, the *terribilità*, or sense of “fierce and implacable necessity,”⁸³ which Berlin found thrilling and elevating in great art. Whether in art or in life, this approach created an intense pathos, the nobility and coherence of which satisfied both aesthetic and ethical senses. Yet it also involved a denial—or at any rate a more or less momentary suspension of awareness⁸⁴—of the reality of pluralism, and it could inspire tremendous inhumanity and impose terrible suffering. On the other hand, the approach represented by Schnabel recognizes pluralism, and the imperfection of any choice, while nevertheless conveying an aesthetic thrill and an ethical achievement, in the pathos of an individual struggling with difficult decisions and making choices in the clear-sighted knowledge that these involve sacrifices. This recalls Caryl Emerson’s incisive remark that, for Berlin, “honor is precisely the ability to live fully while being horribly torn between equally desirable but incompatible goods.”⁸⁵

While Berlin did not characterize Schnabel in the same heroic terms as he did the Busch Quartet and Toscanini, the acknowledgment of choices made and alternatives forgone conveyed by Schnabel’s playing connects to another virtue he emphasized in his aesthetic, and intellectual, heroes. This was honesty or truthfulness, understood as involving a steadfast resistance to wishful thinking and the lure

⁸¹“Music Chronicle,” *Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 133–8, at 134.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 137.

⁸³Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 56, 294.

⁸⁴That this adoption of single-mindedness was temporary (lasting through rehearsal and performance) and limited to a particular object (the artwork at hand) was one advantage of its expression in music, or other performing arts.

⁸⁵Emerson, “Berlin and Bakhtin,” 159.

of simplicity, self-restraint in imposing one's preferences and preconceptions on reality, and, at the same time, a dogged commitment to acknowledging what one finds to be true. Thus Berlin evoked "the heroic quality" of the Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky's "grimly undeviating, perpetually self-scrutinising honesty of mind and feeling,"⁸⁶ and wrote of the Bengali poet, playwright, and polymath Rabindranath Tagore:

Not to give way ... to the temptation of exaggeration—some dramatically extremist doctrine which rivets the eyes of one's own countrymen and the world, and brings followers and undying fame and a sense of glory and personal fulfilment—not to yield to this, but to seek to find the truth in the face of scorn and threats from both sides—left and right, Westernisers and traditionalists—that seems to me the rarest form of heroism.⁸⁷

As this suggests, Berlin linked heroic honesty both to artistic activity and to a political stance which courageously resisted "magnetisation" to extremes or surrender to partisan orthodoxies,⁸⁸ without abandoning commitment to ideals, or to the role of moral witness, for which artists and intellectuals were particularly suited. Berlin's characterizations of his artistic heroes repeatedly evoke a heroic struggle to remain true both to their own ideals and perceptions, and to the experiences that they have endured. He praised the recently deceased Joseph Brodsky for being "unswervingly" and "uncompromisingly" dedicated to his values,⁸⁹ and Brodsky's poetic mentor Anna Akhmatova as an "unsurrendering human being," who through her art and her manner of living bore witness both to "humane values" and to the sufferings inflicted on her, and upon the Russian people, by the Soviet state.⁹⁰ Berlin thus associates artistic heroism with two quite distinct forms of honesty or integrity: a cultivation of inwardness and individuality—being true to oneself and defending one's inner world—and responsiveness to reality and fidelity to experience.

This returns us to the tension, as well as the potential for mutual reinforcement or enrichment, between liberalism and heroism—and the relationship of both to aesthetics. We may, with audacious stylization, identify contrasting heroic and liberal aesthetics (that is, affective and expressive modes of being, which motivate certain sorts of conduct of life, shaping the way in which ideas are expressed and lived). The former impels toward action and self-assertion, and dispositions or responses of defiance and endurance. The latter impels toward receptivity, dispassion, reasonableness, and sober self-restraint.⁹¹ As exemplified by Berlin

⁸⁶Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 186, cf. 310.

⁸⁷Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 330.

⁸⁸Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 342.

⁸⁹Isaiah Berlin to Maria Brodsky, 30 Jan. 1996, in Berlin, *Affirming*, 522.

⁹⁰Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 250–51.

⁹¹Both this conception of an aesthetic, and characterization of a liberal aesthetic, are drawn from David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, 2017); see also Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, 2016), for a different but complimentary characterization of a liberal aesthetic; and Sarah Collins, "Aesthetic Liberalism" in Collins, ed., *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject* (Cambridge, 2019), 1–12.

through the figure of Turgenev, this aesthetic of “liberalism and moderation ... took the form of holding everything in solution—of remaining outside the situation in a state of watchful and ironical detachment, uncommitted, evenly balanced.”⁹² At the same time, Berlin noted that a liberal aesthetic often has a Romantic–heroic element as well: it enjoins not only receptivity, self-questioning, and openness, but the self-respect to stand one’s ground, to cultivate, remain true to, and claim rights for *oneself* and for others. It took, Berlin insisted, “a good deal of courage” for liberals “to resist magnetization by either polar force” in a conflict, since the “middle ground is a notoriously exposed, dangerous and ungrateful position. The complex position of those who, in the thick of the fight, wish to continue to speak to both sides is often interpreted as softness, trimming, opportunism, cowardice.”⁹³ The refusal to simplify the situation, or oneself, requires its own form of noble constancy. Even Turgenev (sometimes) “showed courage, the courage of a naturally timorous man determined to overcome his terrors”⁹⁴

Both dimensions—of defiance and self-assertion, and openness and self-restraint—are necessary to the development of a liberal culture: a culture marked by the coexistence of individuals who recognize one another as fellow individuals, with the mutual respect for individuality exhibited by the Busch Quartet—albeit without the unity of aim that chamber artists are able to sustain.⁹⁵

Coda: liberalism, aesthetics, and heroic exemplification

Berlin’s focus on heroism in artistic activity evades crucial problems of politics, which involves a sort of interpersonal subordination and coercion—and, at

⁹²Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 168.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 342–3.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 335.

⁹⁵Berlin’s evocation of the Busch Quartet’s achievement of harmony through free, equal, and individualized communication recalls Adam Smith’s attribution of the pleasure of society to the “correspondence of sentiments and opinions” and “a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another” — a “delightful harmony” which “cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions.” Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd edn (London, 1761), Part VII, Section IV, 428. Two points are worth remarking about this passage, in connection to Berlin’s liberalism. First, for Smith such harmony was founded in nature, and could be achieved through the throwing off of coercion, prejudice, and falsity. For Berlin, such harmony was a strenuous, provisional achievement of human art and will. This put Berlin closer to certain contemporary strains in socialist or social-democratic thought (or to a synthesis of socialism, democracy, and liberalism) than to (neo)classical liberalism, as represented by, to take the most prominent and fitting example, Hayek’s positing of a “spontaneous order” to be achieved through (law-governed) free economic exchange. For characterizations of the difference between liberalism and socialism/social democracy in terms of the affirmation or rejection of ideas of natural or spontaneous harmony, see e.g. Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision* (1933), trans. Franklin Sherman (New York, 1977); Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944) (Boston, 1957); W. B. Gallie, “Liberal Morality and Socialist Morality,” *Philosophy* 24/91 (1949), 318–34. However, it should also be noted that in the passage just quoted, the harmony envisaged by Smith is achieved through communication that is “free” not in the sense of being free from coercion, but in the sense of being honest, candid, and open. Smith can thus be read as suggesting that this harmony, even if it is rooted in nature, also requires a certain form of ethical conduct on the part of human agents to be realized, which goes beyond rules and institutions. This brings him closer to Berlin’s depiction of the Busch Quartet, whose artistic achievement was bound up in their dedication to truth.

extremes, violence—that need not present themselves in the realm of art. (As terrifying as Toscanini could be, he had no police force or army at his call.) Artistic decisions and performances do not shape the “basic structure” within which individuals live and peoples strive; artists may starve for their art, but they do not cause the starvation of populations. It is also, as Berlin recognized and emphasized, dangerous to treat politics as an aesthetic endeavor—or at least to do so after the fashion of those Romantics who came to envision great political leaders as artists creatively reshaping human “material” to their will, thus imposing a tyranny of “art over life”—or of the creative will (or ego) of some individuals over others.⁹⁶

While he rejected this sort of political aestheticism, Berlin did engage in a strategy of aestheticizing the heroic ethos, in order to reconcile it to liberalism. He did so in a triple sense. First, he relocated the heroic ethos to the *narrowly* aesthetic realm, as a feature of both the content and the production of works of art. Second, his writings invite us to reconceive what it means to be heroic in terms of qualities exhibited in aesthetic *as opposed to* political activity: heroism is identified with serving ideals in an expressive or communicative capacity, rather than mastering human beings.⁹⁷ Third, Berlin underscores the limits and dangers of a heroic ethos by identifying its merits as aesthetic, not moral: the example of heroes may be sublime, inspiring, beautiful, while also being recognized as morally questionable—particularly in politics, where consequences are particularly far-reaching and potentially dire, and responsibility for consequences is accordingly more compelling relative to individual expression.⁹⁸ Yet this only went so far: Berlin’s own conception of art, as being concerned with the expression or communication of character, visions, and beliefs,⁹⁹ and his conception of ethics as being concerned with the broad question of how to live a life, “what to be and do,”¹⁰⁰ rather than moral duty narrowly conceived, meant that aesthetics and ethics were not wholly distinct.

In articulating a liberalism that was as much ethical–aesthetic as it was narrowly political, Berlin drew on notions of heroism in two senses. My discussion has largely centered on how he dealt with what we might call “the heroic,” or a heroic ethos. But, as noted above, the figure of the hero can be defined functionally rather than in terms of content: as a commanding, exemplary figure. It is, indeed, this sense that Berlin (often) seems to have in mind when he describes himself as a natural hero-worshipper: he was inclined to look to the inspirational example of

⁹⁶Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, xxii; cf. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 227; Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 200–5; Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 239. See also the discussion in Alicia Steinmetz’s article in this issue.

⁹⁷This idea of (moral) action as expressive of ideals, which are closely linked to one’s “practical identity” or sense of oneself as a moral agent, may help to make sense of, and motivate, costly moral actions in the absence of any certainty of success. For an argument to this effect see Fabien Freyenhagen, “Acting Irrespective of Hope,” *Kantian Review* 25/4 (2020), 605–30.

⁹⁸Cf. Nannerl Keohane, “Democratic Leadership and Dirty Hands,” in Joanne B. Ciulla, ed., *Ethics: The Heart of Leadership* (Santa Barbara, 2014), 151–76. This, of course, echoes Weber’s articulation of an “ethic of responsibility” in Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” (1919); see Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, 2004).

⁹⁹See e.g. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 69–70, 78; Isaiah Berlin, “The Social Responsibility of the Artist,” at <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/socres.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰See Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 2.

individuals rather than to the reassurances of doctrine. Appropriately, heroic exemplification as a mode of inspiration and guidance is not theoretically developed by Berlin; it is instead illustrated incidentally, when Berlin describes Albert Einstein as living “an exemplary life” in the sense of “being, and being seen to be, one of the most civilized, honorable, and humane men of his time.” Einstein presented “a heroic image of a man of pure heart, noble mind, unusual moral and political courage, engaged in unswerving pursuit of the truth, who believed in individual liberty and social equality.” He thereby embodied “a combination of human goodness with a passion for social justice and unique intellectual power, in a society in which many seemed to live by the opposite values.”¹⁰¹

This may have its own uncomfortable implications for liberalism. To be guided by admiring responses to the example of others endows such “heroes” with a power that clashes with the egalitarianism, legalism, rationalism, and skepticism toward authority favored by many liberals. But this approach—of exemplification on the one side, and (discriminating rather than unquestioning) admiration on the other—also has advantages from a liberal perspective. It can invest liberal ideals with an emotional, motivational force that more impersonal, theoretical forms of liberalism struggle to evoke; it affirms the value of individuality, to which so much liberalism is committed; and it offers a mode of political and moral pedagogy that may convince by inspiration instead of indoctrination, and resonance rather than logical necessity. It may also enrich liberalism, repairing the rationalism, proceduralism, and institutional orientation that may hinder not only the inspirational force, but also the capacity for political understanding, of liberal theory.

Berlin’s scattered discussions of heroism, and his own sense of the heroic, point to the need to balance Romantic and liberal sensibilities and dispositions of individual pride, defiance, and self-assertion with humility, moderation, and self-restraint. Doing this is a terrifically difficult task; Berlin’s own work suggests that there are no easy recipes or solutions. But his practice of identifying and evoking heroes does contribute something to this goal. First, it does so by fostering a sympathetic appreciation of others, so that unheroic sensibilities can see the value of heroic ones, and those with aspirations toward heroism can see that heroism takes many forms, including humble endurance and truthfulness. Second, it may inculcate respect for the human impulse to swim against the current, to pursue some self-chosen ideal, to insist on one’s own complex and crooked humanity in the face of overwhelming odds and enormous pressures. Insofar as this is a compelling vision of heroism, those ideological and political systems that dishonor and crush such capacities (i.e. totalitarianism) will be revealed to be ugly; those ways of life and dispositions of character (we may call them liberal) that honor and foster such capacities will be revealed to be not merely safe, but potentially noble and beautiful.

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¹⁰¹Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 67, added emphasis. On the idea of exemplarity see Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford, 2017); Adriana Alfaro Altamirano, *The Belief in Intuition: Individuality and Authority in Henri Bergson and Max Scheler* (Philadelphia, 2021); Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times*.