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FORUM

Isaiah Berlin and the Aesthetics of Liberalism Introduction: An Aesthetic Approach to Intellectual History? Isaiah Berlin and the Ethos of Liberalism

Joshua L. Cherniss[1] and Sarah Collins[2]

[1]Department of Government, Georgetown University, USA and [2]Conservatorium of Music, University of Western Australia, Australia
Corresponding author: Joshua L. Cherniss; Email: Jlc306@georgetown.edu

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As a collection of methods oriented toward the artefacts of human expression and the minds that shaped those expressions, intellectual history seems well placed to mobilize the category of the aesthetic, yet the aesthetic is rarely a focus on methodological discussions. The special forum that this article introduces explores what an "aesthetic approach" to intellectual history might look like. It focuses on the work of leading twentieth-century liberal Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), whose amorphous role in the history of intellectual history means that his work offers a parallax view on important questions of method and approach. In introducing this special forum, this article situates Isaiah Berlin's distinctive approach and varied work as a historian of ideas and defender of liberalism within several larger contexts. One is Berlin's response to tendencies in post-World War II British philosophy, and his turn to the history of ideas—an understanding of this area of study as requiring essentially aesthetic qualities of judgment, imagination, pattern recognition, and empathetic entry into the perspectives of others. A second is the development of other, more influential approaches to the history of ideas, to which Berlin's approach is briefly contrasted. A third is the ideological struggles of the Cold War; in this last connection, we explore the affinities between Berlin's awareness, and affirmation, of the aesthetic and the ethical in his articulation of liberalism.

> *Modern Intellectual History* is concerned with the historicity of textual performances, whether written, printed, visual or musical … By describing texts as performances we want to imply, first, that they are products of individual agency, and, second, that agency is a more complicated matter than has often been supposed.'[1]

With these extraordinary framing words in the first issue of *Modern Intellectual History* in 2004, the editors sought to mark out a distinctive mode of inquiry—one that acknowledged how texts and discourses present us with "multiple points of entry into human creativity." What is particularly striking about these words today is the

[1]"Editorial," *Modern Intellectual History* 1/1 (2004), 1–2, at 1.

deployment of terms that at first appearance seem more readily associated with the arts, or with the aesthetic. That is, the aesthetic understood not as a reverence for Beauty, the sublime, and the universal, but as a mode of judgment and perception, an approach, or a way of engaging with the world that is attuned to the shifting qualities of forms, to variousness and undecidability. Indeed, from the quotation above the evocation of "performances" encompasses the more specific and politically oriented notion of the "performative"; the term "creativity" gestures toward the importance of the imagination and judgment, of course, but also agency, enough to establish authorship; and the idea that individual agency is complex and porous, together with the journal's call for contributions not by topic but by scholarly temperament—"hermeneutically minded scholars with an historical orientation"—all speak to what might be described as broadly aesthetic concerns. As a collection of methods oriented toward the artefacts of human expression and the minds that shaped those expressions, then, intellectual history seems well placed to mobilize the category of the aesthetic methodologically. This forum explores what this type of "aesthetic approach" to intellectual history might look like. It focuses on the work of leading twentieth-century liberal Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), whose amorphous role in the history of intellectual history means that his work offers a parallax view on important questions of method and approach.

Frequently cited as the epitome of liberalism in the period between the end of World War II and the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, Berlin is an apt figure for this purpose, insofar as his career and reputation are bound up with the intellectual and political currents of the Cold War, which itself was a moment of change in the fortunes of intellectual history as a field.[2] Despite its close association with the postwar period, Berlin's approach to intellectual history—which took interest not only in the propositional claims of a text but also in the character, temperament, and personality of its author; the expressivist nature of thought; the stylistic aspects of writing and thinking; and the nature of value and judgment—was formed initially in response to debates around the nature of meaning and knowledge in interwar Oxford philosophy.[3] In this context, Berlin was a fellow traveller in his colleague J. L. Austin's challenges

[2]For surveys of liberalism highlighting Berlin as representative of postwar liberalism see Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, 2014) 317–27; Alan S. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2023), 348–61. On Berlin's relation to and place within Cold War thought see Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On 'Cold War Liberalism,'" *European Journal of Political Theory* 7/1 (2008), 45–64; James Tully, "'Two Concepts of Liberty' in Context," in Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols, eds., *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: "Two Concepts of Liberty" Fifty Years Later* (New York, 2013), 23–51; George Crowder, "In Defense of Berlin: A Reply to James Tully," in ibid., 52–69; Melissa A. Orlie, "Making Sense of Negative Liberty: Berlin's Antidote to Political Rationalism," in ibid., 143–53; Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013); Ian Shapiro and Alicia Steinmetz, "Negative Liberty and the Cold War," in Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge, 2018), 192–211; Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Isaiah Berlin's Cold War Liberalism* (New York, 2019); Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2021); Louis Menand, *Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York, 2021); Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven, 2023).

[3]For attempts to move past the ossified view of Berlin as a "Cold Warrior" and situate his thought in the intellectual context of the interwar period see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*; Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York, 2012).

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to logical positivism, while also coming under the influence of R. G. Collingwood's historicized idealism. This would seem to give Berlin a strong affinity with the later theorization, and renaissance, of intellectual history, given the Austinian inflection of the idea of "textual performances," so central to the theorization and practice of intellectual history since the 1960s.[4] Yet Berlin never expressed much interest in theorizing the method of the field which he insisted on calling "the history of ideas." His historical work is frequently dismissed as unreliably generalizing, insufficiently systematic, failing to exhibit sufficient contextual sensitivity and linguistic precision, yielding neither authoritative interpretations of individual thinkers or periods nor narratives of broader trends of development that withstand scholarly scrutiny.[5] Berlin's historical practice has, accordingly, been eclipsed by more methodologically conscious and rigorous successors, such as the "Cambridge school" discursive contextualism of John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and company, or the *Begriffsgeschichte* of Reinhart Koselleck and his collaborators.

The criticism, neglect, or puzzlement to which Berlin's work has been prone may reflect peculiar features of his approach that are not mere failings, but sources of insight. Berlin practiced a very different sort of political theory and history of ideas, which this forum broadly characterizes as aesthetic. His approach centered on sensibility, character, ethos, judgment, and perceptions of not only political or moral but also aesthetic categories of experience, and was guided by such perceptions and characterized by aesthetic dispositions or virtues. These aspects of his approach were deeply rooted in—and expressions of—his liberalism. Indeed, one of the areas of intellectual history where there have been active considerations of the relationship between textual expressions, methods of interpretation, forms of sensibility and judgment, and aesthetics is in recent discussions of the history of liberalism. Such studies have often

[4]One can get a sense of this best in his early essays published in Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2014), where he positions himself against verificationism and related tendencies. See also Berlin's own description of his intellectual formation in Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," in Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2013), 1–28; and his reminiscences of J. L. Austin in Berlin, *Personal Impressions: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, ed. Henry Hardy, 3rd edn (Princeton 2014), 157–78. On Berlin's early philosophical formation see also Peter Skagestad, "Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66/1 (2005), 99–112; Jamie Reed, "From Logical Positivism to Metaphysical Rationalism: Isaiah Berlin on the Fallacy of Reduction," *History of Political Thought* 29/1 (2008), 109–31; Carla Yumatle, "Isaiah Berlin's Anti-reductionism: The Move from Semantic to Normative Perspectives," *History of Political Thought* 33/4 (2012), 672–700; Naomi Choi, "Berlin, Analytic Philosophy, and the Revival of Political Philosophy," in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 33–52; Johnny Lyons, *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* (London, 2020); Lyons, *Isaiah Berlin and His Philosophical Contemporaries* (London, 2021).

[5]See e.g. Robert E. Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/4 (2007), 635–58; Bernard Yack, "The Significance of Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12/1 (2013), 49–60; and the essays contained in Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson, eds., *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2016). Even some more sympathetic scholars of Berlin's work have been critical of his practice in these regards: see e.g. Joshua L. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas: From the Twentieth Century to the Romantic Age," in Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton 2014), lix–lxiv.

drawn decisively from literary, and specifically Victorianist, perspectives.[6] From this vantage, to focus on aesthetics becomes less about an opposition to contextualism and more about the role of feeling and temperament in shaping ideas historically. This methodological move is connected to a substantive one: liberalism emerges from such studies as (for better or worse) less purely rationalist in its dispositions and modes, less purely materialist in its motivations, less narrowly institutional in its prescriptions, than caricatural views have sometimes suggested. Rather, liberal projects have almost always been tied up with the cultivation of imagination and judgment, either as ends in themselves, or as preconditions for the viability of liberal institutions and practices.

Excavating Berlin's aesthetic approach to intellectual history, and its connection to his commitment to liberal politics, offers timely resources for contemporary scholars. First, it recovers a chapter in the history of intellectual history which has been little explored, but which, on examination, offers fresh perspectives on the relationship between intellectual history, aesthetics, and politics. It also reveals continuities across different facets and registers of Berlin's work—spanning philosophy, political theory, the history of ideas—all of which centered on the importance of interpersonal communication, individual expression, and openness to variety and complexity. In this way, our subject mirrors our purpose: the role of Berlin's own temperament in shaping his approach to intellectual history echoes his interest in the role of personal experience, sensibility, character, and temperament in shaping the ideas of the thinkers about whom he wrote. The contributions to this forum thus both retrieve, and practice, an approach to intellectual history which diverges from the tendency to move away from a focus on personality to discourse, or from imagination to argumentative strategy. They also highlight facets of Berlin's thought lost in the focus on Berlin as a Cold Warrior, a proponent of "negative liberty" and of a more negative or bare-bones liberalism. In so doing, they join in the rethinking of the intellectual and ideological landscape of the Cold War, not refuting, but complicating, received views about the development of liberalism following World War II, and Berlin's place within that process. They also suggest that aspects of Berlin's thought often identified as failings under conventional disciplinary value systems—a degree of vagueness or imprecision; historical prolepsis; and a tendency to attend to matters of individual character, sensibility, and culture rather than the institutional workings of politics—can offer substantive methodological insight for the field today.[7]

[6] A number of the contributions to this forum are shaped by an engagement with this literary treatment of liberalism, including the Victorianist preoccupation with the form of the novel and the essay. See forum contributions for additional references, though it is difficult to escape the pervasiveness of Amanda Anderson's work in this field, including *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, 2016), *The Way We Argue Now* (Princeton, 2006), and *The Powers of Distance* (Princeton, 2001).

[7] For critiques of Berlin's historical work to this effect see the works cited in note 5 above; for criticism of Berlin for failing to focus on politics proper (that is, political institutions) see Jeremy Waldron, "Political Political Theory: An Inaugural Lecture," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21/1 (2013), 1–23; Waldron, "Isaiah Berlin's Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism," in Brockliss and Robertson, *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*, 205–19. For a more sympathetic view of Berlin's "cultural" (or aesthetic) approach, which

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Berlin's aesthetic approach

This "aesthetic" reading of Berlin as a historian of ideas offers clarification not only of the relationship between his historical practice and his political thought, but also of what he was doing in turning to the history of ideas in the first place. This move may appear puzzling when one considers Berlin's repeated self-description (to which many critics would assent) as "really no scholar," and, at best, "an amateur historian."[8] If Berlin was not a scholar, then what *was* he? And why did he insist on practicing the history of ideas, as opposed to engaging in first-order, normative political theorizing or moral philosophy, or inductive political science?[9]

Perhaps the most obvious answer, and one Berlin might have been tempted to offer, was that studying the history of ideas simply expressed his intellectual inclinations. Indeed, the defense of the value of the spontaneous expression of human individuality and variety—against attempts to think always of what was most useful, or to fit into some pattern prescribed by theory—was central to Berlin's thought. There was value, in Berlin's anti-utilitarian and antidogmatic outlook, in the study of the origins, transmission, personal resonance, and political influence of ideas simply as a spontaneous expression of "disinterested," even "idle," curiosity, and enthusiasm or excitement at the discovery of unfamiliar arguments and beliefs,[10] and as a way of taking up different theories, vantage points, and interpretations as objects to be experimentally explored, but not inflexibly adhered to. This is one sense in which we may usefully characterize Berlin's approach to the history of ideas as "aesthetic."

That Berlin's study of the history of ideas proved satisfying to *him* does not, however, constitute a reason why *others* should be interested in his work—particularly decades after his death. We may recognize a larger significance in Berlin's work, if we understand Berlin's practice of the history of ideas as embodying a broader, "aesthetic" understanding of the subject matter and goals of intellectual history. In the first place,

anticipates some of the arguments presented in this forum, see Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton 2012), 395–412.

[8]Isaiah Berlin to Quentin Skinner, 15 March 1976, in Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2013), 490–93, at 491–2. Cf. Berlin's declaration "I am no historian" in Berlin, "The Origins of Cultural History, Lecture 1. Two Notions of the History of Culture: The German versus the French Traditions," (1973), at https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/origins1.pdf, 15.

[9]For perceptive analyses of what Berlin was doing in his theory and practice of history see James Cracraft, "A Berlin for Historians," *History and Theory* 41/3 (2002), 277–300; Duncan Kelly, "The Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4/1 (2002), 25–48; Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Berlin and History," in George Crowder and Henry Hardy, eds., *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, 2007), 159–80; Hanley, "Berlin on the Nature and Purpose of the History of Ideas," in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 81–96.

[10]Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," in Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 55–93, at 81, 92. Cf. Berlin's later defense of "disinterested intellectual satisfaction, and the exhilarating prospect of understanding the forces at work in one's world," and declaration that "human beings are in general entitled to have their capacities for thought and feeling developed even at the cost of not always (or even often) fitting smoothly into some centrally planned social pattern, however pressing the technological demands of their societies; that public virtues and social peace are not necessarily preferable to, still less identical with, the critical intellect, the unfettered imagination, and a developed capacity for personal relationships and private life." Berlin, "General Education," in Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, 260–71, at 262, 266.

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for Berlin the study of ideas *about* aesthetics was central to the field. He identified himself as a historian of "social, political and *artistic* ideas" (or "aesthetic, moral and political" ideas).[11] This was apparent from his numerous writings on music, literature, and general cultural trends in the 1930s (and thereafter),[12] to his focus on ideas about the political purpose of literature and the exploration of political ideas in literature in his writings on Russian intellectual history in the 1950s and 1960s, to his study of Vico and Herder and absorption in Romanticism from the 1960s onward. The two never-completed large projects envisioned by Berlin—one on the Russian critic Belinsky and his circle, the other on European Romanticism—each centered on the interplay of aesthetic with political and ethical concerns.[13] These interests reflected his larger sense of the deep connection between "political goals and concepts and structures, and cultural experience and direction."[14] Berlin thus rejected narrow specialization and artificial divisions between different disciplines and provinces or modes of thought.

Berlin was concerned not only with ideas about aesthetics, but also with the aesthetic dimension of ideas. He was drawn to Russian thinkers partly because of his sympathy for their conviction that "ideas are something wider and more intrinsic to the human beings who hold them than opinions or even principles," and which are "discovered in behaviour, conscious and unconscious, in style, in gestures and actions and minute mannerisms at least as much as in any explicit doctrine or profession of faith."[15] Historical understanding should seek to attain "the inside view," entering into the "mental world" of past thinkers, grasping their "purposes, feelings, hopes, fears, efforts, conscious and unconscious," so as to recover "what the ideas meant to those who entertained them." This required not simply reconstructing the logical connections of ideas, or charting the linguistic meanings and strategic uses of key concepts (as emphasized by "Cambridge school" contextualism), but *feeling* the problems that troubled past thinkers *as problems*.[16] Such re-creations of "the inside view" should be judged

[11]Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London, 1992), 24, added emphasis; Isaiah Berlin, "Philosophy and Government Repression," in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2019), 67–95, at 70.

[12]On which see Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin*; Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*; as well as the articles by Cherniss and Collins in this forum.

[13]It is telling that late in life Berlin conceived of a scaled-down version of this vast project in terms of a study of E. T. A. Hoffmann. On this see Henry Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure* (London, 2019), 139–41.

[14]Isaiah Berlin to Judith Shklar, 31 Dec. 1980, Isaiah Berlin Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Berlin 214, 292.

[15]Isaiah Berlin, "Vissarion Belinsky," in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly, 2nd edn (London, 2008), 170–211, at 176.

[16]Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 23–4, 79–80. Berlin's understanding of the "meaning" of ideas to their authors as encompassing both conscious and unconscious elements, and "feelings, hopes, fears" as well as intended purposes or effects, represents a contrast with Skinner's injunction for intellectual historians to attend to authors' "intentions" (what they intend or aim to *do* by intervening in a particular discursive context in a particular way), as opposed to their "motives" (which encompasses psychological or emotional states not directly discernible to the historian). See Quentin Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History* 3/2 (1972), 393–408.

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by criteria more aesthetic than scientific: not as merely factually correct or incorrect, but as coherent or incoherent, "profound or shallow, realistic or unrealistic, perceptive or stupid, alive or dead."[17]

This conception of the *aims* of the history of ideas was tied to an aesthetic *approach*. As Ryan Patrick Hanley has argued, Berlin was "not a methodologist, and failed to produce a methodological manifesto that future historians of ideas might follow." Instead, Berlin exemplified the practice of the history of ideas through the application of certain dispositions or skills—political judgment, a "sense of reality," and imaginative sympathy.[18] The "sense of reality" involved the distinctively aesthetic skill of perceiving coherent patterns within the myriad stuff of experience—without, however, doing too much "violence" to this reality.[19] The criterion for valid pattern construction was itself aesthetic, or (as Berlin might have put it) quasi-aesthetic: the patterns into which historians of ideas arrange their material "satisfy us because they accord with life—the variety of human experience and activity—as we know it and can imagine it"; it is thus "related to moral and aesthetic analysis."[20]

The emphasis on judgment and imaginative insight was connected to the critique of approaches that sought to understand human experience via deduction from first principles or the establishment and application of general laws. This anti-scientistic model of historical understanding resembled a model of aesthetic understanding, according to which "no general hypothesis of the kind adopted in physics, no general description or classification or subsumption under scientific laws," could allow one to grasp "what it was that made a work of art"—such as

> why particular colours and forms produced a particular piece of painting or sculpture; why particular styles of writing or collocations of words produced particularly strong or memorable effects upon particular human beings in specific states of awareness; or why certain musical sounds, when they were juxtaposed, were sometimes called shallow and at other times profound, or lyrical, or vulgar, or morally noble or degraded or characteristic of this or that national or individual trait.[21]

Berlin's conception of what was demanded in the practice of the history of ideas, and his own practice, expressed an aesthetic taste or outlook, which also animated his liberalism. This was marked, above all, by an aversion to tidiness, rigid order, and homogeneity, and a celebration of originality and idiosyncrasy. As he

[17]Isaiah Berlin, "Vico's Concept of Knowledge," in Berlin, *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2013), 151–207, at 148. On Berlin's approach to the history of ideas as a more imaginative and artistic alternative to the quest for a more "scientific" approach, see also the somewhat elusive remarks in Robert Wokler, Joshua L. Cherniss, and Ryan Patrick Hanley, "A Guide to Isaiah Berlin's *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*," *History of Political Thought* 29/2 (2008), 344–369.

[18]Hanley, "Berlin on the Nature and Purpose of the History of Ideas," 96.

[19]See ibid., 87–9, for a nuanced treatment of Berlin's views on "pattern formation."

[20]Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 135–86, at 150.

[21]Isaiah Berlin, "German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow," in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 155–69, at 156.

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wrote, "I do not … want the universe to be spick and span, tidy, follow rigorous rules."[22] Intellectually, he was opposed to those who "want to smooth out the world, make it spick and span, trample on inconvenient human variety";[23] politically, his nightmare was not only of totalitarian cruelty or humiliation but of a "fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions, each within his own rigorously defined province, in [a] rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy of the perfect society."[24]

The positive corollary to this was a sense of the beauty of peculiarity, variety, and imperfection. This impulse—so opposed to the general tendency, in postwar intellectual life, toward what Berlin's fellow Rigan-born refugee Judith Shklar termed "ideologies of agreement"[25]—shaped Berlin's political vision, with its insistence that "a loose texture and toleration of a minimum of inefficiency" and "spontaneous, individual variation … will always be worth more than the neatest and most delicately fashioned imposed pattern,"[26] and his practice as a historian of ideas, who lavished his attention on thinkers who were "originals" and eccentrics, and fascinated by innovation rather than continuity within the history of ideas—and, furthermore, innovation as the expression of some inner vision, as opposed to a strategic move within a larger discursive struggle (as theorized by Quentin Skinner). Part of the power of his work is his capacity to convey—because he himself shared in—the exhilaration of discovery; one ground for objection to his historical claims is that he confused his own perception of originality and importance, and enthusiasm for, certain authors or ideas with their actual historical influence or significance.[27]

Closely connected to this, Berlin's historical writings offer an affirmation of individuality, an appreciation of individuals as individuals, not as nodes within a larger discursive system: Berlin thus insisted that in "perceiving the relation of parts to wholes, of particular sounds or colours to the many possible tunes or pictures into which they might enter, of the links that connect individuals," the individuals should be "viewed and savoured as individuals, and not primarily as instances of types or laws."[28] Hence Berlin's practice of the history of ideas as what Alan Ryan has termed "psychodrama"—a vividly imagined exploration of the interplay of the personalities, emotions, predicaments, perceptions, theories, and reactions of his subjects, evoking "the interaction between … sensibility and experience."[29] Achieving such understanding and appreciation of the individuality of past thinkers required the exercise of

[22] Isaiah Berlin to Morton White, 4 Feb. 1987, in Berlin, *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (London, 2015), 309–10; cf. Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, 2006), 125.

[23] Isaiah Berlin to Mark Lilla, 13 Dec. 1993, in Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 494–500, at 498.

[24] Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in Berlin, *Liberty*, 94–165, at 112.

[25] Judith N. Shklar, *Legalism: Laws, Morals, and Political Trials* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 86–110.

[26] Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," 92–3.

[27] See e.g. his declaration in Berlin to Skinner, 15 March 1976, 491, 493: "The thing to me about Vico and Herder is that they opened windows on to new prospects. Nothing is ever more marvellous, and men who do it are rightly excited, and indeed overwhelmed."

[28] Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," 184.

[29] Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, 395; Alan Ryan, "Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12/1 (2013), 61–73.

imaginative re-creation: as Berlin recalled, "When I was working on Marx, I tried to understand what it was like to be Karl Marx in Berlin, in Paris, in Brussels, in London." Similarly, with Vico, Herder, Herzen, Tolstoy, Sorel, and others, Berlin sought to grasp the particular circumstances, external and internal, in which their ideas were born—which meant "ask[ing] yourself what bothered them, what made them torment themselves over these issues."[30] This involved a willingness to *listen* to one's subjects; as Berlin reported, when engaged with his subjects "I think I hear them talk. It's an illusion, but unless I think I hear their voices, I'm not under the impression that I understand their thoughts."[31]

Berlin's actual achievements in this regard are disputed. Some critics have pointed out the ways in which many of his disparate subjects come out sounding remarkably like one another—and like Berlin himself.[32] An emphasis on direct perception of one's subjects, unmediated by theoretical or methodological predilections, could result in perceiving things that were not there.[33] His conviction that he had come to know his subjects as personalities could also lead to a resistance to evidence that contradicted the impression he had formed—a tendency on particularly unfortunate display in his writings on thinkers he personally took against, such as Rousseau.[34] For his admirers, on the other hand, this capacity for imaginative empathy was central to his own achievements. His student Robert Wokler (himself a leading Rousseau scholar, who did not share his mentor's views of Rousseau) averred that "Berlin could make the ideas and personalities of both past and contemporary thinkers vivid and compelling because in his fashion he came close to entering their own minds and to conveying their own thoughts."[35]

Whatever its interpretive merits, this approach carried a more than scholarly burden. It reflected Berlin's central ethical values. The emphasis on creativity and originality, individuality, irregularity, feeling, and choice was for Berlin crucial to affirming humans' moral dignity, their claims to liberty and respect, and their capacity to function, and right to be regarded, as moral agents. Similarly, Berlin's favoring of imaginative insight over methodological rigor echoed his hatred for "the despotism of formulae—the submission of human beings to arrangements arrived at by deduction from some kind of a priori principles which had no foundation in actual experience,"

[30]Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 28.

[31]Suzanne Cassidy, "I Think I Hear Them Talk" (interview with Isaiah Berlin), *New York Times Book Review*, 24 March 1991, 30.

[32]See e.g. Ernest Gellner, "Sauce for the Liberal Goose," *Prospect*, Nov. 1995, 56–61; Russell Jacoby, "Isaiah Berlin: With the Current," *Salmagundi* 55 (1982), 232–41.

[33]This tendency was diagnosed as early as 1941, in Lord Berners's character "Mr. Jericho," based on Berlin: "You felt that there was nothing his eyes missed, and, indeed, that they often saw a good many things that weren't there." Gerald Tyrwhit-Wilson, Baron Berners, "Far from the Madding War," in *Collected Tales and Fantasies of Lord Berners* (New York, 1999), 349–434, at 372.

[34]Cf. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas," lxii–lxiv. On Berlin's reading of Rousseau and its historical context see Christopher Brooke, "Isaiah Berlin and the Origins of the 'Totalitarian' Rousseau," in Brockliss and Robertson, *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*, 89–98.

[35]Robert Wokler, "All Ears," in Henry Hardy, ed., *The Book of Isaiah* (Woodbridge, 2009), 169–73, at 173; see also Alan Ryan, "A Glamorous Salon: Isaiah Berlin's Disparate Gifts," *Encounter* 43/4 (1974), 67–72.

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which motivated his numerous attacks on "scientism" and "monism."[36] His insistence on seeing ideas as artefacts expressing human creativity was tied to what were, for him, the fundamental preconditions for morality: thus he asserted that "all theories of life and morals" were "human efforts," and attempts to treat human beings as "material objects played on by outside forces" constituted an attempted evasion of responsibility, and a denial of the truth that we are "what we make ourselves," and thus "what we feel, do, intend, and want."[37] Even his defence of the history of ideas as an expression of curiosity about the thoughts, experiences, and personalities of other human beings reflected a conviction that curiosity constitutes a powerful emotional antidote to intolerance and dogma, going so far as to assert that "*understanding* how other societies—in space or time, live: and that it is *possible* to lead lives different from one's own, and yet to be fully human, worthy of love, respect or at least *curiosity*" was the "only cure" for fanaticism, chauvinism, and intolerance.[38]

The various affordances of the "aesthetic" identified above, and amplified in the articles that follow, constituted a significant part of what made Berlin's liberalism distinctive, and sharply different in character (despite significant points of agreement or affinity) from the liberalisms developed by such contemporaries of Berlin as Friedrich Hayek, John Rawls, or Judith Shklar (or, indeed, fellow "Cold War liberals" such as Karl Popper or Raymond Aron). In some respects, this was a more "aristocratic" as well as aesthetic liberalism, motivated by delight in "independence, variety, the free play of individual temperament," and desire for "the richest possible development of personal characteristics … spontaneity, directness, distinction, pride, passion, sincerity, the style and colour of free individuals," and disgust with "conformism, cowardice, submission to the tyranny of brute force or pressure of opinion, arbitrary violence, and anxious submissiveness … the worship of power, blind reverence for the past, for

[36]Isaiah Berlin, "Alexander Herzen," in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 213–39, at 228–9.

[37]Isaiah Berlin to Aline Halban, 3 Jan. 1955, in Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London, 2009), 467–8.

[38]Isaiah Berlin, "Notes on Prejudice," in Berlin, *Liberty*, 345–7, at 346, original emphasis. These remarks may go some way to alleviating, or at least complicating, the worry that Berlin's "aestheticism" stands in tension with, or threatens, a commitment to morality—and to liberalism—which has been forcefully expressed by George Kateb in "Can Cultures Be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work," *Social Research* 66/4 (1999), 1009–38. Kateb is concerned with Berlin's tendency to treat *cultures* as aesthetic wholes to be appreciated and thus not judged. But Berlin's aesthetic appreciation of *individuality* seems to bring him closer to Kateb's own sense of morality. Berlin himself was anxious to insist that Romanticism's identification of politics with artistic creation, which implied that rulers should be judged by aesthetic rather than moral standards, and subjects regarded as material on which to exercise the leader's creative will, was a "monstrous fallacy," which "leads to dangerous nonsense in theory, and savage brutality in practice. Isaiah Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World," in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd edn (Princeton, 2013), 219–52, at 252. For a nuanced exposition of this point see Gina Gustavsson, "Berlin's Romantics and Their Ambiguous Legacy," in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 149–66. Whether Berlin's "aestheticism" leads to failures of moral or political judgment, by confusing these with aesthetic evaluations, is variously addressed in the articles by Cherniss, Steinmetz, and Smith in this forum.

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institutions, for mysteries or myths; the humiliation of the weak by the strong, sectarianism, philistinism, the resentment and envy of majorities, the brutal arrogance of minorities."[39]

Berlin's moderate but persistent moral egalitarianism, his ethical pluralism—and his appreciation, bolstered by the aesthetically centered writings of Vico and Herder, of the value of different cultural forms of life—shaped a strongly anti-paternalist liberalism, which diverged from the imperial, tutelary projects of others. The critique of "positive liberty" and its Victorian proponents targeted aggressive nationalists and "enlightened" imperialists (or, as Berlin called them, "Victorian schoolmasters and colonial administrators"), as well as progressive paternalism and Soviet communism).[40] Berlin's liberalism was sharply aware of contingency, complexity, and incompleteness; resistant to dogmatism or inflexibility (including when these came to characterize liberalism itself); and committed to open-endedness, open-mindedness, and experimentation.

This forum

We turn, now, to an overview of the contributions that follow. In the first article, "Aestheticizing Heroism for an Aesthetic Liberalism: Isaiah Berlin on Heroes and Hero Worship," Joshua L. Cherniss reconsiders the role of heroism in our understanding of liberalism, recovering the ways in which it allows us to think through how moral aspiration and aesthetic temperament can shape action. Although Berlin was clearly attracted to the sense of greatness and power of heroic temperaments, he remained wary of the impact of these temperaments on the daily lives of individuals. Committed to unpredictability and variety, he was simultaneously anxious to vindicate the ability of strong-minded individuals to shape history, and resistant to the imposition of any single will onto the variousness of human life. Cherniss examines this tension in Berlin's work through the lens of his musical heroes, such as the conductor Toscanini and the Busch Quartet, whom he saw as combining single-minded strength with a humanistic ideal. Noting the convergence between Berlin's ideas on artists and political thinkers, Cherniss discerns an "aesthetic–ethical ideal" within Berlin's liberalism, combining admiration for visionary commitment with a sensitive receptiveness to reality, and comprehension of what one is giving up in choosing one path among many possible alternatives. The way in which Berlin conceived of heroism as both aesthetic and ethical—as bound up with particular modes of expression and being—enabled him to temper its more politically destabilizing and morally troubling elements, and integrate it into the liberal tradition.

Alicia Steinmetz's article, "Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Reformation," reframes questions about the political nature of Berlin's turn from analytical philosophy to the history

[39]Isaiah Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 93–129, at 99.

[40]Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Berlin, *Liberty*, 166–217, at 198. On the anti-paternalist theme in Berlin's thought see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, Chs. 4, 8; on Berlin's complex view of nationalism and its connection to anti-imperialism see 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; William Easterly, *Saviors and Skeptics*, forthcoming.

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of ideas, and the extent to which his account of the history of ideas was simply a defense of liberalism against totalitarianism. Berlin's style of intellectual history has attracted criticism for resisting ethical determination. Addressing this criticism directly, Steinmetz redescribes how Berlin's approach sought to reform the historical understanding and practice of liberalism in a way that highlighted the role of uncertainty and lived experience, in contrast to approaches based on the natural sciences. Berlin's approach, which acknowledged the difficulty of deciding between incommensurable values, and the reality of unpredictability, foregrounded the individual as a creator of values in response to situations over time, rather than as a rational agent or natural object. As Steinmetz points out, Berlin associated this approach with the Counter-Enlightenment, and he integrated this into the history of liberal thought through his study of J. S. Mill. The approach was a way of acknowledging the aesthetic, meaning-making aspect of human activity at the level of the individual, without tipping over into a fully aestheticized politics that arises from a focus on collective expression. Berlin's description of this aspect of Mill's thinking enabled him to both describe an approach and perform the approach described. His focus on temperament and the link between historical forms of expression and ideas reflected his belief that *intellectual history is a story of both thinking and feeling*. He was committed to performing sympathy with his historical subjects, just as they themselves advocated for political forms that took greater account of the role of feeling in perception and intellectual activity. Yet, Steinmetz suggests, Berlin's own way of seeking to separate political understanding from "scientific" approaches might, paradoxically, inhibit our ability to resist overweening claims to scientific authority: by categorizing areas (such as economics) that seem amenable to scientific study as being outside the realm of "politics," Berlin's approach may actually reinforce the capture of fundamental features of social life by purported scientific experts (such as free-market economists).

Just as Berlin had a pronounced taste for the intellectual temperaments associated with Romantic heroism and Counter-Enlightenment antirationalism, he also was aesthetically attracted to moderation in thought and action. Steven B. Smith, in "Isaiah Berlin and the Aesthetics of Judgment," pinpoints judgment as a central feature of Berlin's political philosophy—namely the ability to imagine ourselves in different worlds, to decide between competing alternatives, and to respond to experience. As Smith notes, Berlin's work suggests to us that judgment is an aspect of both character and experience. It is premised on a belief in human beings as a meaning-makers, who see patterns and make connections between things. As such, judgment is "an aesthetic apperception," making coherent that which is otherwise disparate. Like Steinmetz, Smith writes sympathetically of Berlin's resistance to the identification of all forms of understanding with a scientific (or a rational–deductive) model, but worries that Berlin's account of judgment (in contrast to the similar, in some respects, account set out by Aristotle) may fall prey to an "aestheticism" that rejects or undermines belief in the objectivity or rationality of value judgments, rendering Berlin's liberalism prone to collapse into relativism.

In "Naivety, Liberalism, and Isaiah Berlin's Musical Thinking," Sarah Collins extends recent efforts to recover histories of "aesthetic liberalism" beyond textual devices

and sources to musical ones. Music's powerful emotional force yet limited communicative ability earned it an ambivalent status among liberal thinkers. Yet the way in which it shaped Berlin's thought and practice—a shaping influence that is not often remarked as such—suggests how it conditioned a significant aesthetic–ethical stream of liberal thought, as well as a stream of intellectual history that joins thought and feeling, sensation and idea (i.e. an "expressivist" tradition of thought). The article makes an important distinction between different ways in which the "aesthetic" has appeared within the history of political thought—namely as a claim about the way taste and judgment affect values, about the way all thought is formed by its mode of expression, or as a series of illustrative metaphors—before moving on to describe the unacknowledged entanglements of Berlin's musical and political thinking, and exploring the implications of this claim for how we understand "aesthetic liberalism."

Just as feeling shapes our values, beliefs, and thought, for Berlin so too does language. Jason Ferrell, in "Metaphor as Method in the Writings of Isaiah Berlin," highlights Berlin's rhetorical strategies—especially the use of metaphor, simile, and analogy—to convey a sense of plural categories and incommensurables in his work. While others have linked this feature of Berlin's work to his subjectivism, as part of a critique of Berlin's vaunted relativism, Ferrell suggests that the manners of Berlin's writings were contributing factors to the ideas and arguments he forwards, and the temperaments he describes. In other words, *how* Berlin writes is just as important as *what* he writes about. This argument clarifies how Berlin was committed to the notion that not everything can be known, rather than to the idea that all knowledge is subjective. As Ferrell suggests, figurative language implies that different forms of knowledge may be comparative, even when seemingly incommensurable. For Berlin, this aesthetic technique appeared more effective than rationalist techniques. From this observation, Ferrell draws the larger suggestion that, in the history of liberal thought, language and thought are latently metaphorical.

Taken together, these essays do not present a single or systematic account of the place of the aesthetic in the writing of intellectual history or the formulation of liberalism, whether in Berlin's work or more generally. They instead offer a variety of shifting, complementary vantage points into Berlin's political thought and intellectual practice, the better to situate them in their synchronic and diachronic contexts in the larger trajectory and tapestry of liberal thought, and the development of political theory and the history of ideas as scholarly practices in the mid-twentieth century. Berlin remains an ambivalent figure—at once central to and representative of a moment of political thought and intellectual development, and idiosyncratically hard to place or confine in any one school or mode. He was in this way a typical liberal, whose intellectual orientation attracted him to, and whose thought drew on, preoccupations and traditions distant from liberalism. He was also a humane scholar who defied disciplinary distinctions and methodological rigor in favour of a more personal, literary approach. The aim and, we believe, achievement of this forum is not to resolve or explain away these tensions, but to allow us to better appreciate them, and thereby to achieve a richer understanding both of Berlin's thought, and of the traditions and debates which shaped it.

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