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Books in Review

The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas

The One and the Many

The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas. By Isaiah Berlin. *Alfred A. Knopf. 277 pp. $22.*

Reviewed by Gilbert Meilaender

Henry Hardy, the editor of this book, describes it as "in effect the fifth of four volumes" of Isaiah Berlin's collected essays. Like one of its predecessor volumes (*Against the Current*, 1979), this collection includes essays in the history of ideas. In one sense we might judge this one volume too many, since these are somewhat repetitive essays which, while ranging very widely, have one basic theme. But there is another perspective from which we are surely the richer for this collection, since the reader has the pleasure of watching a truly great essayist develop a theme in rich detail.

The topics of these essays range from Joseph de Maistre (the development of whose thought is traced in a long essay, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism") to the rise of nationalism. Two titles, however, point to the central concern underlying the volume–"The Pursuit of the Ideal" and "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World." What concerns Berlin is the very old problem of the One and the Many. Only very recently in our cultural history–since "the second third of the eighteenth century," by Berlin's reckoning–have we developed a true appreciation of the claims of the "Many," of diversity and pluralism in the realm of values. "Who in the ancient world or the middle ages," he writes, "even spoke of the virtues of diversity in life or thought?" "But when a modern thinker like Auguste Comte wondered why, when we do not allow freedom of opinion in mathematics, we should allow it in morals and politics, his very question shocked J. S. Mill and other liberals."

The idea that there must be a perfect society, some form of the "good life" binding on all of us–the myth of an ideal world–only really begins to lose its hold on us in the thought of men such as Vico and Herder. And this shift, though "a deep and radical revolt against the central tradition of western thought which affirmed the existence of eternal values," is, in Berlin's eyes, a very good thing. It is an affirmation of human freedom.

His objections to the myth of a perfect society are both theoretical and practical. At the level of theory, he believes that "this vast Platonic assumption, sometimes in its baptized, Christian form," which affirms a single version of the good life for all, is internally incoherent. In "The Pursuit of the Ideal," this volume's opening essay, Berlin recounts autobiographically how his reading of Machiavelli first formed in his mind the theoretical problem. In Machiavelli he found one who revered and sought to revive the virtues of republican Rome. But alongside those virtues he set certain Christian virtues: "humility, acceptance of suffering, unworldliness, the hope of salvation in an afterlife." Without condemning them, Machiavelli simply notes that they will not foster the type of citizen and state he favors. "He merely points out that the two moralities are incompatible, and he does not recognize any overarching criterion whereby we are enabled to decide the right life for men." This recognition–that certain ideals may be incompatible–was, Berlin notes in a later essay, "quietly ignored" until the eighteenth century.

Gradually, however, the theoretical difficulty became clear. There could be no society that would combine the excellences of republican Rome and the Christian virtues, no single form of the good life that could hold together these two quite different visions of human excellence. More generally, the Muslim paradise is not a paradise for Christians, and "a society in which a Frenchman would attain to harmonious fulfillment is a society which to a German might prove suffocating." There is no one "common good" for all humans; there are only the many different cultural visions of human fulfillment. We may sympathetically inhabit as many of them as we can, but there is no criterion that will enable us to decide among them. Faced with such irreconcilable conflict among the ends of life, we must simply choose which we prefer. Or, if that formulation makes it sound too much like a fate to which we must resign ourselves, we are free (within the limits of our time and place) to choose authentically the ends of life to which we will commit ourselves.

Very occasionally, Berlin will add a significant qualification to this theoretical objection, as in the following sentence: "The notion of a perfect society in which all that men have striven for finds total fulfillment is consequently perceived to be incoherent, at any rate in terrestrial terms." Most of the time, however, he writes as if what is incoherent on earth is likely to be incoherent in heaven as well.

At least as important are the practical dangers he sees in any commitment to a perfect society. If one believes a "final solution" to the clash of human commitments is possible, one may be willing to pay a very high price (or ask others to do so) in order to achieve that goal. Berlin fears the ancient faith in and search for a perfect and harmonious society, "an ideal for which more human beings have, in our time, sacrificed themselves and others than, perhaps, any other cause in human history."

That his concern is legitimate few will deny, and wholly apart from the theoretical issue noted above, this concern constitutes a strong practical argument for a liberal polity (which does no more than promote "some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of different groups of human beings"). Whether such political wisdom is also moral wisdom is, however, a question worth pondering.

Berlin comes closest to addressing this question in an essay titled, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth–Century European Thought." There he takes up the concern, which might well occur to a reader, that his view leads straight to moral relativism. Indeed, his own language sometimes has seemed to point in that direction. For example, after recounting autobiographically his own discovery in Machiavelli of incompatible and incommensurable moralities–each capable of attracting us–he writes that Machiavelli simply leaves us "to choose."

> The idea that this planted in my mind was the realization, which came as something of a shock, that not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another. It undermined my earlier assumption . . . that there could be no conflict between true ends, true answers to the central problems of life.

But if we must simply choose among several "true" moralities, it is no longer clear what it means to call them all true–unless, of course, it means simply "true for you" and "true for me," unless, that is, we end in relativism.

Nevertheless, Berlin argues that his view is best described by a different term: pluralism. Following his reading of Vico and Herder, he does not wish to claim that there are no objective values–or, indeed, that ours might not be objectively true because they are simply the product of our time and place. No, it may be the case that our values are objectively true and so are theirs–but that these two visions of life are incommensurable and incompatible. They cannot be lived together; nor can they be hierarchically ordered in such a way that one must be preferred. (There are limits to the pluralism he posits. If, he notes, different cultures had nothing in common, communication between them would be impossible. "Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many; they must be within the human horizon.") We may value both freedom and equality. We may be able to enter sympathetically into cultures that give one or the other of these primacy. But we will not be able to live in a world in which these two values do not conflict and in which we do not have to choose which shall have pride of place. We must learn to think of life "as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective: incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard."

I, at least, am willing to grant that *political* wisdom lies somewhere in the direction Berlin points. But perhaps not *moral* wisdom. On his view, pluralism seems necessitated not by (in Kant's phrase) "the crooked timber of humanity" but by a crooked, tormenting universe with which we must come to terms. Not all of us will, of course. Some of us, Berlin supposes, unwilling to settle for "an unstable equilibrium in need of constant attention and repair," will crave something more–that perfect society. We will not be able to resist the myth's lure, perhaps because "men cannot face too much reality, or an open future, without a guarantee of a happy ending."

But it is one thing to crave a guarantee and another to hope. Is the hope, which he calls craving, so foolish? After all, Berlin's favorite thinkers teach us that what matters is "self–expression for the individual spirit" and "authenticity," that "what alone counts [is] my respect for myself as a free being." But this is a cramped and narrow world indeed, imprisoned within the confines of oneself. To many it might seem a rather shriveled universe. Do we really have nothing to fear from such a self–especially when Berlin's own essays have shown in intricate ways how such advocates of the "romantic will" in all its diverse manifestations may themselves become tyrants?

The truth is that the timber of humanity is crooked both in those who desire a perfect society and those who do not. Pluralism is politically wise, but it offers no salvation for the human condition. To desire more, even to think one has religious grounds to hope for more, while postponing the political realization of one's hopes–that may yet turn out to offer a richer and more humane vision of our common life.

Gilbert Meilaender, a regular contributor to *First Things*, is Professor of Religion at Oberlin College.

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FIRST THINGS
156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 400
New York, NY 10010
Phone: (212) 627-1985
Email: ft@firstthings.com
Web: http://www.firstthings.com

Leadership University
3440 Sojourn Drive, Suit 200
Carrollton, TX 75006
Phone: (972) 713-7130
Fax: (972) 713-7670
Email: lu@leaderu.com
Web: http://www.leaderu.com