# INTRODUCTION

Anyone who was an undergraduate in the 1950s will remember the game of hedgehogs and foxes—our playful tribute to the probing essay that is here reprinted. When we divided all humanity (but especially the authors we were currently reading, the professors whose lectures we sometimes attended, our college friends and enemies) into Berlin's two types, those committed to a single all-embracing Truth and those attentive to many smaller truths, we were, of course, missing one of the points of his essay: that the line between monistic hedgehogs and pluralist foxes can cut through as well as between individuals. There are indeed writers who claim to see the One, the Whole, the Center, or the Essence, and there are writers who find all such visions radically *implausible*. But there are also writers who stand wholeheartedly in neither camp. Berlin's distinction, intended to illuminate the divided mind of Leo Tolstoy, casts a wider light on a conflict internal to much of Western literature and philosophy. Sticking labels on this or that man or woman is an engaging enough pastime, but it is far more exciting to imagine the full range of divided minds, all the partial, ambiguous, and incoherent ways of being fox-like and hedgehog-like, that have marked our cultural history. And there can be no doubt that Isaiah Berlin, who runs (mostly) with the foxes, is master of the range.

Tolstoy as Berlin portrays him, the fox who wanted to be, who thought it was right to be, a hedgehog, who sought all his life for the grand theory, the single key that would unlock every door—this Tolstoy is not just one example of the divided mind; he is exemplary, a representative man. If he lived out his divi-

sion with a special anguish, a rare intensity, his was nevertheless the common division. The conflict that Berlin describes in this essay takes many different forms, is experienced in many different ways, but it moves in only one direction, Tolstoy's direction. It is hard to think of any hedgehogs who wanted to be or thought it right to be foxes. Since Plato, monism has been the ideal of Western culture, inspiring in our greatest writers a ceaseless search for what Berlin (in his essay on Montesquieu) calls "some central moral or metaphysical category in terms of which alone all truths must be formulated."[1] And at the same time, for fully as long, the genius of the West has been to multiply and confound categories. What is true of Tolstoy is true more generally: the search does not determine the discovery.

Berlin has denied that *The Hedgehog and the Fox* is an argument for the superiority of foxes. The denial is certainly right; he does not give out grades of that sort, and he has no interest in devaluing Tolstoy's quest for a single, unifying vision. But he does insist that Tolstoy's genius, and his achievement, lay another way: "In the perception of specific properties, the almost inexpressible individual quality in virtue of which the given object is uniquely different from all others." What Berlin finds most admirable in *War and Peace* is the story, the particular adventures and reflections of the characters: just what Tolstoy, on principle, thought not admirable at all. Here Tolstoy stands firmly in the tradition—he longed for a universal explanation of all particular adventures and an objective moral truth—and Berlin, who doesn't share that longing, writes against the Western grain.

Tolstoy's universal explanation is the peculiar ver-

[1]Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: The Hogarth Press, 1979), p. 157.

sion of scientific determinism laid out in the "Epilogue" to *War and Peace.* All human choices, he insists, are radically unfree, caused rather than willed, or willed only because the will itself has been caused to be what it is. But the causes in question are so vast in number and so minute in their effects that they elude every scientific theory. In principle, knowledge is possible, in practice, not. The famous "integration of infinitesimals" is a science that mere men and women can never master. (How does Tolstoy's determinism differ practically, then, from indeterminism?) Despite this ignorance, however, or because he understands himself to be ignorant, Tolstoy claims to glimpse behind all that happens in history a force, a fate, a scheme of things, an ultimate wholeness, giving shape if not accessible meaning to human experience: "Something incomprehensible," he has Prince Andrei say, "but which is nevertheless, the *only thing* that matters" (emphasis added). What this is, or how it works, he cannot explain.

The positive doctrine of the "Epilogue" is, as Berlin suggests, "threadbare and artificial"; the power of the novel, as a novel of ideas, is overwhelmingly critical. What the reader cannot forget is the demolition of every alternative view of history—and most important, for most readers, the view that assigns responsibility for historical events to individuals and for world-historical events to world-historical individuals, "great men" like the emperor Napoleon who claim to understand and direct the course of wars and revolutions. To Tolstoy, such people are deluded: things happen to them in the same inexorable fashion as they happen to all the rest of us.

Berlin presents the Tolstoyan critique in all its relentlessness, and with a lively appreciation. His only evaluative comment is to insist that Tolstoy's best pages are nevertheless devoted to "private experi-

ences and relationships and virtues" that presuppose individual responsibility and a belief in freedom and spontaneous action. Determinism is not a creed that can easily be worked up into a novel, not even by a great (and determined) novelist. In a number of other essays, above all, in "Historical Inevitability," Berlin has elaborated his critique of determinism.[2] Once again, what is true for Tolstoy is true more generally. The ways in which we relate to one another and act in the world, and think and talk about our relationships and actions, all presuppose freedom and responsibility. When we choose a lover or write a poem or enter a profession or join a political party we believe, and it seems that we have to believe, that we are acting freely. It is virtually impossible to imagine how we would live or understand our lives in the deterministic universe that the advocates of history-as-science, Tolstoy among them, posit but significantly fail to evoke.

Tolstoy's failure as a defender of determinism, the corollary of his triumph as a novelist, takes on in Berlin's hands a certain philosophical importance. What we can't describe in concrete ways, what we can't imaginatively evoke, we should be wary of believing. In his essays on the philosophy of history, Berlin never denies that determinism might be true; he says only that it has not been proven and that we can hardly begin to imagine what its truth might mean. Common sense requires us to act as if it were false (or, at best, or worst, as if it were only partly true: false for some significant area of our lives). Historical understanding depends upon this same common sense, this awareness of ourselves and other people as individuals capable of choice and engage-

[2]Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 41–117.

ment: "For here I am not primarily an external [scientific] observer, but myself an actor; I understand other human beings and what it is to have motives, feelings, or follow rules, because I am human myself. . . ."[3] Statistical correlations and covering laws tell us something, perhaps, about what happened in the past, but little about the experience of what happened. We miss the very stuff of history if we step back and study men and women "merely as organisms in space, the regularities of whose behaviour can be described and locked in labor-saving formulas."[4] In any case, there is no sure place to step back to—no objective standpoint from which, godlike, we can survey historical events. We are compelled to take an insider's view, more like a novelist, indeed, than a scientist.

The difference between the study of nature and the study of human beings, most important between the physical or biological sciences, on the one hand, and history, on the other, is a central theme of Berlin's writings. His purpose is nothing so simple as to mark out a realm of freedom from a realm of causal determination. He is fully aware of the limits of human freedom and never unsympathetic to the scientific exploration of those limits. Let the scientists do what they can. It is not the absence of external cause that is crucial, but the presence of intention, the cause that comes from within: hope, dream, goal, ideal, plan, motive, purpose, project, end-in-view. Of course, the ambition that shapes a career doesn't by itself determine the quality of a life; the vision of the future that inspires a political party doesn't determine the outcome of the historical process. But inten-

[3]Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays,* ed. Henry Hardy (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 129 ("The Concept of Scientific History").

[4]*Concepts and Categories,* p. 133.

tions of this sort give to history its character as human experience. The study of experience, of ambition and vision, success and defeat, has its own requirements—not detachment and observation alone, though these are surely important, but also understanding and interpretation. And these latter two are not consistent with the "all-embracing pyramid of scientific knowledge; one method; one truth; one scale of rational . . . values."[5] It is not the case that we know history less well than nature, but we certainly know it—once we recognize what "it" is—in a less systematic and singular fashion. This distinction, required by human freedom or, at least, by the human sense of being free, doesn't figure largely in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (it is developed most fully in "The Concept of Scientific History"). Scientific hedgehogs cannot understand it. Tolstoy, who understands it surpassingly well, acknowledges only a distinction without a difference: causation in the physical world, destiny in the moral world; the two equally unfathomable and overwhelming. For more ordinary (self-accepting) foxes, however, the recognition of the two worlds as two different worlds is likely to seem the beginning of wisdom.

In the years since Berlin wrote *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (his essays on the philosophy of history date from roughly the same period), it has become fashionable to study even the natural sciences in the interpretative and historical mode. For isn't the experience of nature, as much as our moral experience, subject to the shaping influence of human purpose? Doesn't natural science itself have a history, the record of our uncertain understandings? Surely it does; one might plausibly argue that Berlin exaggerates the objectivity of natural science. Still, once one has said all that can be said for the role of causal laws in the study of

[5]*Four Essays*, p. 43 ("Historical Inevitability").

history and for the role of understanding in the study of nature (or, better, in the study of the study of nature), some crucial difference between the two remains—and Berlin's work is still a lively and persuasive guide to that remainder. Perhaps there are humanistic as well as scientific hedgehogs, though the first group can hardly sustain the high presumption of the second, the claim that their method is the only possible method, their truth the only possible truth. Were such a claim ever made, it is not difficult to imagine Berlin's response.

His purpose in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* is not to defend the distinction between nature and history but to understand Tolstoy's denial of its importance, Tolstoy's view of history as destiny. This is not a place where Berlin expounds his own views; he doesn't put himself forward; his moral presence takes the form of a withdrawal, as it were, an eclipse of self for the sake of understanding someone else. But this essay is very much part of a larger corpus, and readers stirred by its lucidity and passion will want to read more—in pursuit of the author. In fact, Berlin's views are nowhere systematically laid out; system is not his style. He often reveals himself most clearly in what appear to be occasional pieces. His response to Tolstoy's critique of the heroic view of history, for example, is best found in his essay on the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, a case study in how to acknowledge the achievements of a great man—his ability to make things happen that might otherwise not have happened—without surrendering critical perspective.[6] But the study of Tolstoy also connects with two of Berlin's larger enterprises, the essays on the philosophy of history and the essays on the history of ideas.

[6]Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), pp. 32–62.

The burden of the first of these is the defense of freedom or, perhaps better, the critique of arguments, creeds, and philosophies hostile to freedom. The burden of the second is the exploration of pluralism, an argument, a creed, sometimes a philosophy, that Berlin takes to be friendly to freedom.

"The fox knows many things." Pluralism is the claim that there are in fact many things to know—and then that these things can't be known by a single method, or arranged in a coherent system, or judged by a single standard, or ranked in a hierarchical order. It follows that different readings of historical experience are in principle possible, and that a final reading, the one and only right and true account of the French Revolution, say, is in principle impossible. It is not only that there is too much to know, as Tolstoy says, but that there are too many (more than one is too many) different ways of knowing it. "The same facts can be arranged in more than one . . . pattern, seen from several perspectives, displayed in many lights. . . ."[7] There are indeed certainties in the study of history—Berlin is by no means agnostic about the possibility of factual knowledge; nor is that what pluralism requires—but one of the things about which "serious historians" will be certain is that the story they tell is only one of the stories that might be told.

Pluralism in the study of history generates pluralism in moral philosophy, for it suggests that human experience is too complex and too diverse to be hauled before a universal bar of judgement. One judge, one court, one law is simply not enough. Tolstoy perhaps succeeded at the end in a kind of willful simplification, turning himself into a (barely believable) moral hedgehog. But that is not for Berlin, for anyone who reads the novels, an attractive

[7] *Four Essays*, p. 107 ("Historical Inevitability").

transformation. The strong alternative to simplicity, however, is deeply disturbing: that, as Berlin writes in the "Introduction" to *Vico and Herder,* "the notion of a single, unchanging, objective code of universal precepts—the simple, harmonious, ideal way of life to which, whether they know it or not, all men aspire . . . may turn out to be incoherent; for there appear to be many visions, many ways of living and thinking and feeling, each with its own 'centre of gravity', self-validating, uncombinable, still less capable of being integrated into a seamless whole."[8] And what are we to do then? How are we to know the moral law? How are we to act with assurance and joy? Berlin brings us to the edge of uncharted regions: here lie the dragons of relativism.

I suppose it is fear of these dragons that drives writers like Joseph de Maistre, for all their destructive wit, to one or another ultra-orthodoxy. Berlin describes Maistre, reactionary and devout, as a man whose thought runs—no doubt at some distance—parallel to Tolstoy's. The description is not without its malice; Tolstoy's followers, if he still has followers, must be indignant, and not unreasonably so. What beliefs do this unlikely pair hold in common? Two above all: a contemptuous rejection of every rationalist and enlightened effort to grasp and explain (and shape and control) the march of events, together with an absolute belief that events do march and that the world we cannot understand, or can only understand in its myriad and conflicting parts, is nevertheless a coherent whole. Without this belief, both of them believe (and many others believe it too), life would be unbearable.

Berlin's explorations in pluralism suggest a very different view: that incoherence (the absence of a

[8]Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. xxiii.

"seamless whole") can indeed be borne, can even be celebrated as the necessary outcome of human freedom and creativity. But this celebration does not entail relativism—for two reasons: first, because the discovery of a pluralist universe is a real discovery; there really are many visions and many ways, self-validating and uncombinable; and second, because the freedom that gives rise to these visions and ways is genuinely valuable. The wisdom of the fox is real wisdom, though critics of Berlin might well argue that that wisdom is hedged (hedgehogged?) by his insistence that there exists, across time and culture, across the range of human difference, "a minimum of common moral ground."[9] To which Berlin might reply, rightly to my mind, that this common ground, important though it is, does not provide us with a "simple, harmonious, ideal way of life" against which we can judge every actual way of life. Tolstoy claimed in his last years to have found such an ideal, which he identified with the life of a Russian peasant. "He always has his *muzhik* in his pocket," wrote a French critic. But that's not the common content of the human pocket. There is no single ideal. But there is, as the ground of all ideals, some set of moral principles that protect living, thinking, feeling men and women against cruelty and oppression. And that means, according to Berlin, that while some of our historical and moral judgments are relative and subjective, others are not. We can write history, and read it, and act among our own contemporaries, with some assurance that our particularity and parochialism don't utterly cut us off from humanity at large. We can make, even from our necessarily partial perspectives, the judgments that Tolstoy's determinism would deny us. Only we must make these judgments,

[9]*Four Essays*, p. xxxii ("Introduction").

as it were, foxily: "We judge as we judge, we take the risks which this entails. . . ."[10]

Tolstoy, of course, took those risks all his life, though his doctrine would seem to make them pointless. Berlin in this masterful commentary on *War and Peace*, and in a series of related essays, manages both to explain the doctrine and to reaffirm the point—that action and judgment, however dangerous and uncertain, are crucial to our humanity.

—MICHAEL WALZER

[10]*Four Essays*, p. 103 ("Historical Inevitability").