



ISAIAH BERLIN
LIBERTY

Edited by Henry Hardy



Incorporating
FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY

LIBERTY

ISAIAH BERLIN

Incorporating *Four Essays on Liberty*

Edited by Henry Hardy

*With an essay on Berlin and his critics
by Ian Harris*

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Also by Isaiah Berlin

✻

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To the memory of Stephen Spender
1909–1995

The essence of liberty has always lain in the ability to choose as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, unbullied, not swallowed up in some vast system; and in the right to resist, to be unpopular, to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions. That is true freedom, and without it there is neither freedom of any kind, nor even the illusion of it.

Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*¹

¹ London and Princeton, 2002, pp. 103–4. The lectures that comprise *Freedom and its Betrayal* were delivered in 1952. (Berlin uses the words ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ interchangeably.)

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THE EDITOR'S TALE

Liberty is the only true riches.

William Hazlitt¹

IN THE YEAR that Isaiah Berlin died, I was invited by *The Times Higher Education Supplement* to contribute to their 'Speaking Volumes' series, in which readers write briefly about the book that has influenced them most. I had no hesitation in choosing Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty*, which not only bowled me over when I first read it, but also set me on course towards becoming Berlin's editor, and so led, thirty years on, to the publication of this expanded edition of the book.

My *THES* piece was written just before Berlin's death, and published shortly thereafter.² Part of what I said seems to me to bear repeating in the present context:

I had no idea when I joined Oxford's Wolfson College as a graduate student in 1972 that I was about to discover my eventual occupation. The College's President was Isaiah Berlin. It was clear as soon as I met him (at a scholarship interview for which I arrived late after a car accident, and during which he repeatedly went to the window to see if a taxi had arrived to take him to a lunch appointment) that he was a remarkable man; but I had never read any of his work, and knew next to nothing about him.

I asked where I should start, and was rightly directed to *Four Essays on Liberty*, published three years earlier. I took it with me on a visit with friends to a remote Exmoor cottage during a University vacation, and was transfixed. Berlin liked to refer to the unmistakable sensation

¹ From 'Common Places' (1823): vol. 20, p. 122, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London and Toronto, 1930-4).

² Issue dated 21 November 1997, p. 21. Berlin died on 5 November. The article is also available on line at <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/>, under 'Writing about Berlin'. I have slightly adapted the extract used here.

of 'sailing in first-class waters', and this was the sensation I experienced. Quite apart from the persuasiveness of the propositions contained in the book, here was obviously a man of rare insight into human nature, a man plentifully endowed with that 'sense of reality' that he welcomed when he found it in others. There was room for disagreement on this or that point, but on the large issues one felt in safe hands.

The central plank in the book is Berlin's value pluralism, his belief that the values humans pursue are not only multiple but sometimes irreconcilable, and that this applies at the level of whole cultures – systems of value – as well as between the values of a particular culture or individual. It is an essential characteristic of the great monistic religions and political ideologies to claim that there is only one way to salvation, one right way to live, one true value-structure. This is the claim which, when it is given fanatical expression, leads to fundamentalism, persecution and intolerance. Pluralism is a prophylactic against such dangers. It is a source of liberalism and toleration – not just the unstable kind of toleration that waits for the mistaken to see the light, but the deep, lasting toleration that accepts and welcomes visions of life irretrievably different from those we ourselves live by.

Four Essays is full of other gold, including the devastating critique of historicism and determinism in 'Historical Inevitability', the famous discussion of 'positive' and 'negative' freedom in 'Two Concepts of Liberty', and the examination of the tensions in Mill's views in 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life'. It is one of the richest and most humane books I have ever read, and it has deservedly become a classic.

This said, it may seem *lèse-majesté* to tamper with it now, but, as will soon become clear, the first stage of expansion was devoutly wished for by the author himself, and I see myself as taking the process further towards its logical conclusion.

I do not apologise for having put pluralism rather than liberalism centre stage in my comments on *Four Essays*, though others would invert this priority. Berlin's pluralism seems to me the deeper and more original thesis – which is not to deny the indispensability of his version of liberalism, or of the view of humanity that lies at its heart, a view in which freedom of choice among incommensurably multiple possibilities is central. Indeed pluralism and liberalism, the two leading components of Berlin's philosophical outlook (sometimes aptly called 'liberal pluralism'), are mutually interdependent and supportive,¹ and I have at times thought of giving this

¹ In this view I differ, in company with others, from John Gray, author of the

collection a title such as *Freedom and Diversity*; but the Occamist imperative, reinforced by the pragmatic desirability of echoing the well-known earlier title, won out.

FIVE ESSAYS ON LIBERTY

The time has come said Linnet to Stallworthy to talk about Berlin again.

Oxford University Press memo from Catherine Linnet,
New York, to Jon Stallworthy, London, 21 June 1967

Berlin's *oeuvre* has been described by Ira Katznelson, somewhat sweepingly but quite understandably, as 'both correct and bold':¹ the luminous, settled, assured qualities of Berlin's writing are widely recognised and appreciated. But there is a paradoxical relationship between these undoubted attributes and the tortuous and tortured route by which his publications came to take the form they do. The 'correctness' is not achieved at the first attempt, nor even at the nineteenth; and the boldness is not matched by an equivalent self-confidence. As Berlin wrote to Karl Popper in gratitude for his approval of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 'I have little confidence in the validity of my own intellectual processes.'² Although he commanded the stage, he trembled in the wings.

The genesis of *Four Essays on Liberty*³ was just as chaotic and prolonged as that of the other compilation of his essays that Berlin published before I became his editor, namely *Vico and Herder*.⁴ The Oxford University Press file on the book is a treasure-house of anecdote: frustration, misunderstanding, tergiversation, indecisiveness, prevarication, unrealistic expectations abound. The whole

excellent *Isaiah Berlin* (London, 1995), who believes that Berlin's pluralism narrows the field for the justification of his liberalism: see Gray's chapter 6, 'Agonistic Liberalism'.

¹ 'Why is it so intuitively true that Berlin's work is both correct and bold?' he asks in 'Isaiah Berlin's Modernity': Arien Mack (ed.), *Liberty and Pluralism* [*Social Research* 66 No 4 (Winter 1999)], 1079–101, at 1079.

² Letter of 16 March 1959.

³ Published by OUP in London and New York in 1969. Bibliographies often state, misleadingly, that the book was published in Oxford.

⁴ I offer a brief version of the saga of this later (1976) volume in Berlin's *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London, 2000: Chatto and Windus; Princeton, 2000: Princeton University Press), pp. vii–viii.

proceedings, year after year, are accompanied by frantic re-schedulings on the part of OUP, as well as complementary and conflicting discussions of other projects, which appear out of the fog and then recede. OUP become increasingly desperate as time slips by, and some of the wry internal memoranda make excellent reading. I say all this not to poke fun, though the file is undoubtedly fun to read, but because we learn much about Berlin the man by having the complex process of creation of his famous and important book – in his view, his most important book – laid bare in such comprehensive detail. I hope it is clear, too, from my opening remarks that the spirit in which I tell the story of the book's gradual emergence is one of affection rather than censure, for all that Berlin's conduct, benign but gloriously unprofessional,¹ caused justifiable exasperation on the part of his publisher. The path was stony, but the destination fully worth the journey, and not to be reached by a more direct route.

Here I can only skim off the cream of the story. The file opens in November 1953 with a letter from the New York office of Berlin's literary agent, then as now Curtis Brown, to Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, who had taken the lead in the commissioning of the book. At this point only the first two of the four essays had been written, though a book of essays 'on political topics' was already under discussion. 'I will try to obtain a list of essays from Mr Berlin as quickly as I can,' writes John Cushman of Curtis Brown. What would he have said, we may speculate, had he known that it would be sixteen years before the book finally appeared?

At that time OUP had two publishing offices in the UK, one in Oxford (the academic Clarendon Press) and one in London, at Amen House. Amen House was responsible for publications aimed at a general readership, including Oxford Paperbacks, the series in which the UK edition of the book was to appear. The London Publisher, Geoffrey Cumberledge, was interested but pessimistic: 'Berlin ... is brilliant but his output is very small and his performance is worse than his promise.'

In 1958 Berlin gave his celebrated inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory in Oxford, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', and in 1959 his Robert Waley Cohen Memorial Lecture, 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life'. Both of these

¹ The manner of the book's creation would surely have been roundly censured in a Research Assessment Exercise.

thereafter start to appear as constituents of the volume, by 1960 hyperbolically if provisionally entitled 'Collected Writings' by the New York office.

In reply to an enquiry from New York early that year about progress, Colin Roberts, Secretary (that is, head) of OUP, writing from the Clarendon Press, quotes a letter from Berlin, the first communication from him represented in the file:

Alas, my Introduction to the paperback on liberty is not just a question of a willing typist – I wish it were – last-minute corrections are my *métier* as you know too well, but it is not that that is delaying me. I should like to write a preface – more a postface – in the way of discussing and, so far as I can, replying to the various points and objections which all three essays¹ have encountered one way and another – not indeed by name and address, but in fairly general terms. This I cannot do for a while – I am a slow worker – and hope to do in summer.

In March 1961 Amen House writes to OUP's Deputy Secretary, Dan Davin, at the Clarendon Press: 'Is there the vaguest possible chance that Berlin might even have begun to work on the prefaces which he insists are necessary?' A letter from Berlin reported by Davin later that month announces that

The Three Essays have now become four – Mill being added . . . As to the Introduction, I shall write it in the summer in July and August, it will have to be in the nature of a general reply to all the many and fierce objections that have been made to these essays, and are still being made in current publications, so that the Press in New York must not think they are losing something with every new reference in my reply to the critics. They will acquire at least one new potential reader (the latest onslaught is in a magazine called *Dissent*, which arrived yesterday)² – so long as my opinions to my own astonishment provide a live horse for the critics to flog, it will not be too late to re-issue the essays.

Answering an enquiry from John Brown (Cumberledge's successor), Berlin's typist Olive Sheldon writes on his behalf in September that he is at work on the Introduction to a book to be

¹ The essay on Mill had not yet been added. At this stage the work is usually referred to as 'Three Essays on Liberty'.

² David Spitz, 'The Nature and Limits of Freedom', *Dissent* 8 (1961–2), 78–86.

called 'Essays on Liberty' or 'Against the Current' or 'Against the Stream'. Through her he expresses doubts about the value of the essays on J. S. Mill and on twentieth-century political ideas and suggests that they be sent to a referee. The Introduction is promised for January 1962. In November Harold Beaver of Amen House writes to Catherine Linnet in New York: 'I feel sure that Berlin is merely flapping when he wishes his material to be read.' Read it was, however, by Adam Ulam, Professor of Government at Harvard, who reported favourably, as expected, prefacing his remarks with this sound observation: 'I am not entirely in sympathy with the custom of sending the work of a reputable scholar which has a style and point of view of its own to be picked and hacked at by somebody else.'

In January 1962 Berlin writes a letter to John Brown that is worth quoting in full:

I am oppressed by feelings of guilt about the Introduction to the paperback containing my various essays on liberty and generally related topics. I do not believe I shall achieve this Introduction before the Summer. The reasons for this are: (1) that since it involves reading the accumulated criticisms of the various ingredients of this volume – that was the point of the new Introduction – [it] needs a good deal of time and deliberation and careful drafting of answers to objections. Critical reviews seem never to cease although I am prepared to draw a line at 1 January 1962 and take into consideration nothing that appears thereafter.

(2) Living the life that I do, I deliver too many lectures outside my Oxford curriculum, sit on too many committees, and generally scatter such energies as I possess in a highly uneconomic and indeed often absurd manner. In my lucid moments I regret this very much and make constant resolutions to resist invitations by undergraduate societies, and to lead a rational, i.e. more concentrated, life. But all these excellent resolutions break against the barrier, and the feeling that as a Professor I cannot refuse to tell the truth to those who make quite a good show of appearing to want to hear it. As for the committees, since they are my only excuse for going to London or abroad, I secretly cling to them even though I recognise their time-eating and energy-destroying properties.

These things being so, I know myself well enough to realise that I cannot write this Introduction in term-time – in April I shall be away both lecturing and functioning on my committees – but I shall write my piece in May or June, and you shall have it by mid-July. I felt it to be only fair to you to let you know how the matter stands – if this

delays publication, then, so far as I am concerned, I shall shed no tears, but I sincerely hope that it will not interfere with your publishing plans too much.

This generates a note from Beaver to Linnet: 'Isaiah Berlin, the great cunctator, has again put off supplying the preface.'

In May Bud MacLennan of Curtis Brown asks John Brown for an advance of £100, and in his absence a colleague tells her that they can pay £50 or £75, 'but I do not think we can go beyond this figure'. (One wonders what OUP's estimate was of the likely sales of the book, which has remained in print and in constant demand ever since.) The contract for what was now to be called *Four Essays on Liberty* was signed in July, replacing an earlier contract of July 1959 with New York for *Three Essays*. In October John Brown writes to Sheldon Meyer in New York: 'I think we have got everything satisfactorily tied up, provided only that Berlin will produce the copy.'

Berlin writes to John Brown in February 1963 that 'the Introduction for *Four Essays on Liberty* is a . . . complicated matter', partly because he was giving priority to another project (which, like many others, did not materialise), a book based on the 1962 Storrs Lectures at Yale, 'Three Turning-Points in the History of Political Thought'.

In March 1964 Jon Stallworthy of Amen House, by then in charge of Oxford Paperbacks, writes to Curtis Brown that 'it is over a year since we last corresponded about the Introduction for Sir Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty* and I wonder whether you could give us any news of progress on this?' The reply is that the piece will not be ready for at least another year, and OUP are asked if they wish to cancel the contract. Stallworthy writes to Peter Sutcliffe in Oxford: 'The Preface has been promised us for the best part of four years, and I think everyone – including perhaps even Berlin – realises that we shall never see it now.' Stallworthy asks Curtis Brown for permission to go ahead without it. Richard Simon of Curtis Brown replies that Berlin will definitely produce the Introduction for April 1966, and that, if he doesn't, OUP may publish without it. This arrangement is accepted by Stallworthy.

Needless to say, this deadline slipped, ostensibly because Berlin was ill. Stallworthy secured permission to typeset the four essays

before the arrival of the Introduction.¹ Before sending the typescript to the printer, he consulted Berlin about two possible forms of typesetting – hot metal and Monophoto – and explained that, if there were to be changes, it was vital to opt for hot metal. Berlin undertook to make no changes, and Stallworthy, rashly believing him, opted for Monophoto.² The Introduction was re-promised for the end of August, again on the understanding that the book would appear without it if it were not ready in time.

A further reversal occurred when Berlin wrote in the following terms to Stallworthy four days short of the new deadline, in a letter signed on his behalf in his absence by his secretary, Baillie Knapheis:

[. . .] I should like to hasten, in the first place, to thank you for your extremely considerate and patient treatment of me – beyond my deserts. I know that the Oxford Press in New York must regard me as a highly unsatisfactory client – because of all these delays – but one of the secret causes of this is my suspicion that the works which they kindly wish to reprint as a paperback are in some cases scarcely worth it; I have looked through ‘Historical Inevitability’ again, and I find that there are all kinds of things wrong with it, and I should certainly be ashamed if it appeared in an unaltered form. I have gone through the disagreeable task of reading through the nastier criticisms of it – such as I have kept – the more violent and ephemeral I mislaid or lost almost at once – and it appears to me that what some of the critics said is true, and that, in the interests of the readers and general integrity, the text cannot be left wholly intact. Consequently I have introduced corrections – though far less radical ones than were perhaps required – and hope to make up for this in the Introduction, which I propose to prepare next week. In the meanwhile I do hope that the corrections will not reduce the Press to despair: I realise that there is something for the printers to do,³ and if this is regarded as financially awkward, I am so anxious for this labour to be done – that is, for the corrections to be introduced (I should be ashamed – and indeed could not conceive the prospect – of letting the texts go out unaltered), that I should be prepared to consider reimbursing the Press for these

¹ This is why roman numerals are used to paginate the Introduction in *Four Essays*.

² It seems he had not studied the file for ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, where, with impressive self-restraint, Colin Roberts writes to Berlin on 6 November 1958: ‘You have certainly had a field day with the proofs.’ The lecture had to be completely reset.

³ One of the great understatements of our time: in the end the whole book had to be reset.

unexpected expenses. In fact the only prospect I could not contemplate was for the corrections not to be incorporated.

I hope you will forgive me for being such a nuisance. I know all authors are, and am perhaps not the worst among them; nevertheless, unlike some authors, I do possess a genuine conscience with regard to publishers and do not regard them as mere philistine adversaries to be sparred with, but as genuine intellectual collaborators, particularly the Press. Consequently I do hope that you will once again be patient with me, again beyond my proper deserts – for I am quite clear that if the only condition for publication is that the texts should go out unaltered, I would rather nothing were published at all, and that these essays continued to dwell in their present decent obscurity [. . .]

Mercy, rather than justice, is, I suppose, what I am asking for: but I truly cannot see how you could deny it to me. You must have had authors far more tiresome than even myself. Perhaps what I am asking for is not so terribly unreasonable. At any rate, I am very grateful.

Page proofs of the four essays arrived at the end of November, but there was still no Introduction. This finally arrived in May 1967, but was immediately put on hold because Berlin wanted comments from Stuart Hampshire and Herbert Hart. In the meantime he continued to correct the essays themselves heavily, despite his promise not to do so. This elicited the following comment from between Stallworthy's gritted teeth:

I think I should mention [a tactful substitution for 'remind you'] that the book has been set up by a Monophoto machine that produces a page not of lead but of film negative. Every correction involves a delicate operation not unlike that for the removal of a cataract from a human eye; the skin of the negative has to be cut and a new line or letter grafted on. Such corrections are very expensive.

Berlin finally returned the corrected proofs of the four essays in August. A month later he sent OUP a revised text of his Introduction, writing in his covering note: 'Owing to the devastating criticisms it has received, I have altered it, not nearly as much as the critics wish, but still, perhaps sufficiently to avoid howling errors (or perhaps not).' At this point an internal OUP note from Stallworthy reads: 'Despite all my explanations about the cost of correcting a filmset text, my suggestions, pleas, further explanations, further suggestions, and further pleas, Berlin has made extensive corrections.' If only the book had been published in the days of word processors and modern typesetting technology.

In November Stallworthy sent Berlin a long list of queries about the final text of the Introduction, but it was February 1968 before Berlin replied. In his letter (reproduced on page 2 below) he wrote:

I see that gradually but inexorably I am becoming if not your most intolerable (though I may be that too) certainly your most time-consuming author. At the risk of inflicting a blow upon you which may seriously endanger your health – such health and optimism as you may have regained during your recent holiday – I propose to inflict yet another hideous blow upon you [. . .] It has been represented to me by kind friends (for once genuinely kind) that the book might be improved by the inclusion in it of yet another essay on the same subject, namely my Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society a few years ago, the title of which was 'From Hope and Fear Set Free'. This would make a fifth essay in the book and the title could be altered from 'Four Essays on Liberty' either to 'Five Essays on Liberty' or simply 'Essays on Liberty', since five essays perhaps begin to deserve that title. The piece in question is not the worst that I have written, and I should like it included.

He enclosed the necessary small changes to the first paragraph of the Introduction, and added in a covering manuscript note: 'I do indeed grovel before you: I cannot operate any differently from the way that I do: but why should you (or the printer) suffer? Determinism & the helplessness of man must be true after all.'

Stallworthy's reply on the fifth essay was this:

Tempted as we are by the thought of a fifth essay, I'm very much afraid that it is now too late to include this. We have advertised 'Four Essays' in numerous catalogues, have made a block for the cover, have

(*opposite*) A page from the proofs of *Four Essays on Liberty*: see pp. 161–2 below. Berlin's long correction, which was not incorporated into the finished book in this form, reads as follows: 'Some thinkers seem to feel no intellectual discomfort in interpreting such concepts as responsibility, culpability, etc. in conformity with strict determinism. I must own that while the notion of uncaused choice, which is nevertheless not something out of the blue, is one of which I know of no adequate analysis, its opposite, a choice fully attributable to antecedent causes mental or physical, and yet regarded as entailing responsibility and therefore subject to moral praise or blame, seems to me even less intelligible. This difference, which has so deeply divided opinion, is the crux of the matter: a puzzle which has exercised some thinkers for more than two thousand years: while others either fail to see it, or have regarded it as a mere confusion. The present state of controversy seems to me much the same as in the days of the Greeks who first began it.'

worked out a published price on the basis of the present length, and – not last and not least – have set up as headline on every other page ‘Four Essays on Liberty’.

Berlin replied:

I am naturally disappointed that you should consider it too late to include ‘From Hope and Fear Set Free’. I am afraid that no further collection of essays on philosophical topics by myself will ever materialise [...] But this essay belongs as of right to the original collection which you are about to publish and, if not included there, can never be reprinted at all. This may seem to you (and, on reflection, to myself) not to be an appreciable loss to anyone; nevertheless, I should like to make a final plea, and beg you to consider whether perhaps it could not be substituted at the last moment for ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, to which it is vastly superior. The changes required will, after all, not be very grave. It will mean the loss of one appendix¹ and one, by now, ancient piece – that really could reappear, if it were thought worthy, in some other collection. I do not underestimate the trouble to which I am putting you, but, for once, my desire to improve the volume – as this substitution undoubtedly would do – is much stronger than even my easily disturbed guilt about all this tiresome chopping and changing for which I have been responsible. Would you give the matter another thought? Could you attempt to soften the (by now) savage breast of your New York colleagues? I do beg you to consider this once again.

Far from softening a savage New York breast, this hardened an Oxford heart. Deciding that the time had come for straight speaking, Stallworthy asked Berlin to come and see him. He now takes up the story in his own words:

Berlin countered with an invitation to lunch in All Souls. ‘Thank you, but no,’ I replied. There had to be a show-down and I wanted the territorial advantage of my own corral. Berlin, recognising the strategy, proposed other meeting-places, pleaded pressure of work, but I said No: there would be no further progress on the book until we had met – at the Press – to discuss the situation. He prevaricated for some weeks, but finally agreed.

I waited for him that morning wearing my darkest suit, my darkest frown.

‘Sir Isaiah . . .’

He interrupted my frontal attack with a raised hand and a rapid

¹ This now appears as note 1 to p. 69 below.