Diaspora, Jewishness, and Difference in Isaiah Berlin’s Thought

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1 Introduction

“No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine.” So, at least, asserted the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poet John Donne in one of his most famous meditations, giving birth to a metaphor numerous subsequent authors and commentators have not tired of citing. At least one inhabitant of the British isle, Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), must have agreed full heartedly with Donne: “I am a social being in a deeper sense than that of interaction with others,” Berlin wrote in his seminal essay “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958). “I am not disembodied reason. Nor am I Robinson Crusoe, alone upon his island.” What I, the island, really am, Berlin asserted, has much to do with my relation to the continent or other islands in the archipelago:

For am I not what I am, to some degree, in virtue of what others think and feel me to be? When I ask myself what I am, and answer: an Englishman, a Chinese, a merchant, a man of no importance, a millionaire, a convict—I find upon analysis that to possess these attributes entails being recognized as belonging to a particular group or class by other persons in my society, and that this recognition is part of the meaning of most of the terms that denote some of my most personal and permanent characteristics. […] It is not only that my material life depends upon interaction with other men, or that I am what I am as a result of social forces, but that some, perhaps all, of my ideas about myself, in particular my sense of my own moral and social identity, are intelligible only in terms of the social network in which I am (the metaphor must not be pressed too far) an element.¹

* A longer version of this essay appeared as “What is Jewish (If Anything) about Isaiah Berlin’s Philosophy?,” in Religions 3 (2012): 289–319. I would like to thank the publishers for permission to reprint it in an abbreviated form here.

Being “me” and being with others need not become polarized. What I am is intimately tied to the larger collective I see myself as part of. Moreover, Berlin added: the lack of thereof, the feeling of islandish insulation and isolation, the sense I lack proper recognition from others is what prompts me to complain of lack of freedom. Put otherwise, as much as we are free agents, the very way we ascribe meaning to our identity and our sense of freedom depends on our interaction with others, not on what eighteenth-century moralists called “moral sentiments” and the capacity to be empathic towards others, but on a more prosaic fact: that we must have an audience and interlocutors, for without it vita contemplativa becomes an asylum, and without an audience and a reference group, without this daily interactive experience with others, we would never be able to transcend our alienating individualistic isolation.

“Two Concepts of Liberty,” originally delivered as Berlin’s inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor in Social and Political Theory at Oxford University, enjoyed a remarkably rapid process of canonization. Not long after its publication it came to be considered a landmark text in liberal thought, generating ever since a mass industry of commentary and interpretation, and, one might add, an interesting mixture of praise and condemnation. Criticizing excessive individualism, needless to say, was not the kernel of Berlin’s essay. Its two main tasks were to come up with a more precise definition of the term “liberty” and, secondly, to do so by formulating a conceptual dichotomy separating a positive (and potentially totalitarian) understanding of freedom from a negative (liberal and humane) understanding of the same concept. On the face of it, Berlin’s task was to apply the tools of analytic philosophy to a key concept in political thought, a concept notorious for embracing the utmost heterogeneity of meanings. In a way, one may argue, the essay emerged from Berlin’s deep “philosophical” concern about improper usage of language. And indeed, much of Berlin’s effort becomes easier to understand when we consider the fact he began his academic career as an analytic philosopher of language. Like many others (including Quentin Skinner and other members of the Cambridge School of intellectual history who criticized Berlin for being sloppy in his methods as a historian of ideas), Berlin admired the work of John L. Austin, who posed the same question—How to Do Things with Words?—in the title of his most influential work, showing that “performative utterances” are, in fact, types of acts and that they operate, in a sense, in the world.2