8. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 77.
9. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, London: John Murray, 1990, p. 10. See also p. 77.
10. Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* edited by Henry Hardy with an introduction by Roger Hansheer, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000, p. 390n.
11. Berlin, 'Two Concepts', pp. 171–2.
12. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 79.
13. Ibid., pp. 79–80.
14. Ibid., p. 80.
15. Ibid., p. 74.
16. Ibid., p. 79.
17. Ibid., p. 81.
18. Ibid., p. 80.
19. Bernard Williams, 'The Truth in Relativism', in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
20. Ibid., p. 140. But see the powerful argument against Williams's proposed distinction in Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997, especially chapter 2.

8

An Unfashionable Fox

While working on a book on 'individualism'[1] I recall telling Isaiah Berlin that I had found eleven distinct senses of that protean concept. He outfoxed me, commenting, 'That's rather mean!' In rather the same spirit I want to begin by making the same observation about his famous distinction (drawn from the Greek poet Archilochus) between the hedgehog and the fox. I reject the hedgehog-like view that there is only one distinction here – only one kind of hedgehog and one kind of fox. For among humans there are many kinds of hedgehogs and many kinds of foxes. On some of these Berlin fixed his attention, exposing the moral and political costs of adopting the hedgehogs' limited vision, while exploring the world views of thinkers he recognized as fellow foxes. But there are other kinds of (presently fashionable) foxes he did not recognize as his fellows, with whom he had no elective affinity. I shall conclude by saying something about them and address the question: what kind of a fox was he?

Allow me to offer a preliminary typology of hedgehogs – thinkers who, in Berlin's words, 'relate everything to a single central vision, one system more or less coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance'.[2] I suggest there are at least four varieties, four species of this genus.

First there are what we may call the *positivist* hedgehogs. They believe that 'history could (and should) be made scientific', on the model of natural science (or what natural science is taken to be). Thus Auguste

Comte, writes Berlin, 'tried to turn history into sociology' but perhaps of all thinkers Marx took this programme most seriously, making 'the bravest, if one of the least successful, attempts to discover general laws which govern historical evolution'. (This according to Berlin: I hereby forego the temptation to dispute this interpretation of Marx as positivist.) Berlin remarks that Tolstoy

> saw clearly that if history was a science, it must be possible to discover and formulate a set of true laws of history which, in conjunction with the data of empirical observation, would make prediction of the future (and 'retrodiction' of the past) as feasible as it had become, say, in geology or astronomy. But he saw ... that this had, in fact, not been achieved ... and reinforced his thesis with argument designed to show that the prospect of achieving this goal was non-existent; and clinched the matter by observing that the fulfilment of this scientific hope would end human life as we know it.[3]

Tolstoy, by nature (on Berlin's account) a fox but who believed in being a hedgehog, had insight into what he saw as 'permanently out of the reach of science – the social, moral, political, spiritual worlds, which cannot be sorted out and described and predicted by any science, because the proportion in them of "submerged", uninspectable life is too high'. Insight into the nature and structure of these worlds required a form of understanding which 'distinguishes the real from the sham, the worthwhile from the worthless, that which can be done or borne from what cannot be; and does so without giving rational grounds for its pronouncements'.[4]

But Berlin hunted other foxes of the anti-positivist kind. Chief among these was, of course, Vico, the 'true father both of the modern concept of culture and of what one might call cultural pluralism, according to which each authentic culture has its own unique vision, its own scale of values, which, in the course of development, is superseded by other visions and values, but never wholly so' and of historical anthropology and the 'forgotten anticipator of the German historical school' whose distinctive method was imaginative insight to decipher the meaning of conduct and language different from our own, the faculty of *fantasia* which we employ to 'hear men's voices, to conjecture (on the basis of such edivence as we can gather) what may have been their experience, their forms of expression, their values, outlook, aims, ways of living'.[5] Berlin's claim for Vico was that he 'uncovered a species of knowing not previously clearly discriminated, the embryo that later grew into the ambitious and luxuriant plant of German historicist *Verstehen* – empathetic insight, intuitive sympathy, historical *Einfühlung*, and the like' – a sense of knowing that 'is basic to all humane studies: the sense in which I know what it is to be poor, to fight for a cause, to belong to a nation, to join or abandon a church or a party, to feel nostalgia, terror, the omnipresence of a god, to understand a gesture, a work of art, a joke, a man's character, that one is transformed or lying to oneself'.[6] This, Berlin argued, was a discovery of the first order, providing an escape route from the hegemonic hedgehogs of positivism.

Second, there are what we might label *universalist* hedgehogs or, better perhaps (using Lovejoy's term), *uniformitarian* hedgehogs. They hold with Hume that 'mankind is much the same in all times and places', with Locke that, 'Vertues and Vices ... for the most part are much the same everywhere' and with Voltaire that 'morality is the same in all civilized nations'. They may, like Voltaire, catalogue the widely varying customs found in past and present societies, but only with the purpose of illustrating the unvarying contrast between the civilized and the barbarians, between what is more and what is less enlightened. Berlin comments that Voltaire's conception of enlightenment as

> identical in essentials wherever it is attained seems to lead to the inescapable conclusion that, in his view, Byron would have been happy at table with Confucius, and Sophocles would have felt completely at ease in quattrocento Florence, and Seneca in the *salon* of Madame du Deffand or at the court of Frederick the Great.

To the universalist hedgehog cultural differences merely conceal transculturally invariant interests and motives, and ways of behaving; and they have no bearing on our moral or aesthetic or political judgements which, although they must arise in a particular cultural context, can be framed in abstract, context-free terms, according to which different ways of life, and their practices, can, in turn, be ranked. For Berlin, the fox who exploded this set of ideas was Herder. For Herder, there is

> a plurality of incommensurable cultures. To belong to a given community, to be connected with its members by indissoluble and impalpable ties of common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling, is a basic human need, no less natural than that for food or drink or security or procreation.[7]

So cultural differences run deep, shaping thought, perception and belief; and there are no culture-independent criteria of progress (as was believed in eighteenth-century Paris, and even Herder himself half accepted); every human achievement and every human society is to be

judged by its own internal standards. For Herder cosmopolitanism meant shedding what made individuals most human; and every image of *Humanität* was culturally *sui generis*.

This fox-like vision Berlin traced forward to cultural nationalism in the Austro-Hungarian, Turkish and Russian empires and thence to political nationalism in Austria and Germany and, by infectious reaction, elsewhere; and it is clearly at the root of what we today call identity politics. Here, I believe, Berlin took over, too uncritically. Herder's unremittingly holistic view of cultures. (This sort of poor man's sociology is all too common among present-day writers impressed by cultural differences.) He never asked to what extent cultures are always clusters or assemblages of heterogeneous elements of varying origins, which differ from one another more as ecosystems or climactic regions than as nation states divided by frontiers. He had, at least in this sector of his thinking, a mosaic or patchwork rather than a hodge-podge view of cultures.[8]

Third, there are what I shall call *rationalist* hedgehogs. They are, once more, to be found among the *philosophes*, the majority of whom, he claims, believed that 'the true, the only true, ends that all wise men sought at all times – in art, in thought, in morals and manners' were 'timeless and universal, known to all reasonable men' and that 'the light of the truth, *lumen naturalis*, is everywhere and always the same, even if men were often too wicked or stupid or weak to discover it, or if they did, to lead their lives by its radiance'.[9] Some, like Voltaire and Rousseau, were of course pessimistic about progress towards truth, virtue and happiness. Others, like Condorcet (for whom these were linked in an 'indissoluble chain') and Helvétius, were more sanguine. He qualifies this caricatural description by mentioning various forms of scepticism abroad in the eighteenth century, among the *philosophes* themselves as well as beyond. But what he called 'the central tradition of the Enlightenment' invested massively, he plausibly claimed, in such hopes.

And here we come to Berlin's favourite foxes: Hamann, passionate Christian pietist, violently opposed to all abstract and conceptual thought and apostle of feeling and direct perception through faith; and Joseph de Maistre, whose world was 'much more realistic and more ferocious than that of the romantics'. For Maistre reason was but a 'flickering light'. He exhibited 'the doctrine of violence at the heart of things, the belief in the power of dark forces, the glorification of chains as alone capable of curbing man's self-destructive instincts, and using them for his salvation, the appeal to blind faith against reason, the belief that only

what is mysterious can survive, . . . the doctrine of blood and self-immolation, . . . of the absurdity of liberal individualism, and above all of the subversive influence of uncontrolled critical intellectuals'. All this, Berlin observed, was at the heart of modern totalitarianism and sounded the earliest note of modern militant anti-rational Fascism.[10]

Then, alongside and in succession to Hamann were other anti-rationalist German romantic thinkers; and then, of course, Sorel, for whom violence was the prelude to regeneration and for whom irrational susceptibility to myths was inseparable from the collective action but who was 'a penetrating and cruel critic of the vices of parliamentary democracy and bourgeois humanitarianism'.[11] These too were his fellow foxes, in whom he was interested, as he explained in an interview with me, because they are 'hostile thinkers. I am against them, but they said things that make one think'.[12] As Michael Ignatieff remarks, 'Berlin was the only liberal thinker of real consequence to take the trouble to enter the mental worlds of liberalism's sworn enemies'.[13]

Fourth, there are what we will call the *monist* hedgehogs – and here we come to what was perhaps the centre of Berlin's preoccupations (if a fox, and he clearly was a fox – but I will come to that – can be allowed to have a central preoccupation): what he variously calls 'monism', the '*philosophia perennis*' and 'the old perennial belief in the possibility of realising ultimate harmony'.[14] What, according to Berlin, does a monist believe? That 'all positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another'. And, to illustrate the Enlightenment's alleged commitment to this belief, he cites Condorcet – 'one of the best men who ever lived' – who famously wrote that 'Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together by an indissoluble chain'. (He came to see that he had been unfair to Condorcet's nuanced views on these matters.)[15] Other *philosophes*, he suggests, thought similarly of liberty, equality and justice. Implicit in this belief, he thought, is a much more dangerous one: that 'it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled, and that it is towards this unique goal that we must make; that we can uncover some single central principle that shapes this vision, a principle which, once found, will govern our lives'.[16] And this latter belief, he famously asserted, is responsible more than any other for 'the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals',[17] including liberty itself. ('More than any other'? Here is quite a different account of the ideological roots of modern totalitarianism, in striking contrast with what he says about de Maistre, the Romantics and Sorel.)

Against this bundle of beliefs he defended what he called the pluralism of values – the position that we are 'faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others'; that 'the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other', so that 'the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social' and 'the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition' and that 'human goals are not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another'. For in the end 'men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do because their life and thought are determined by fundamental categories and concepts that are, at any rate over long stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity, part of what makes them human'.[18]

Several of his favourite foxes exhibited value pluralism: Machiavelli, who saw that for the Prince two moral outlooks and sets of virtues, the Christian and the pagan, 'were not merely in practice but in principle incompatible', thereby planing 'a permanent question mark in the path of posterity', stemming from his recognition that 'ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collison without possibility of rational arbitration ... as part of the normal human situation'.[19] And John Stuart Mill, the 'disciple who quietly left the fold', 'acutely aware of the many-sidedness of the truth and of the irreducible complexity of life', whose 'conception of man was ... deeper, and his vision of history and life wider and less simple than that of his utilitarian predecessors and liberal followers'.[20]

There is much more to say about this distinction between monism and pluralism but I would here just like to observe (in a fox-like spirit) that there are various different ideas here and they do not obviously all hang together. So a monist can deny and a pluralist assert at least the following different things: that values are plural – that is, diverse, not forms or derivatives of, or reducible to, a single value or set of values; that they can be incompatible, that is, not jointly realizable within the confines of a single life or single society; that they can contradict one another (as military glory contradicts Christian meekness, or deference to hierarchy comradely equality); that they can be incomparable – there may be no relevant respect in relation to which one valued alternative can be judged in relation to another; and they can be incommensurable, in the separate senses that there is no common standard in terms of which to rank them, or that to rank them is to misunderstand or corrupt them.

So Berlin was a critic of positivism and scientism, and yet he remained staunchly loyal to his early empiricist outlook and was never much troubled by post-empiricist philosophies of science or the hermeneutic circle – by the thought that all the facts are theory-laden or that interpretations are mutually interlocking or that they might be indeterminate. His views about these matters were, in practice, rather Popperian. He remained, as Stuart Hampshire well put it, 'a convinced and calm empiricist, who insisted that the stuff of our day-to-day experience, whether in personal experience or in politics, is the true stuff of reality ... He took the furniture of the world, both the natural and the social furniture, medium-sized objects on a human scale, to be entirely real and to exist more or less as we perceive them.'[21] So, although he had a prejudice against the subject of sociology, he was never inclined to follow foxes like Paul Feyerabend or Clifford Geertz into radical anarchist or 'anti-anti-relativist' doubts about objectivity in the social sciences, let alone science in general.

He was against uniformitarian universalism. Yet, despite his extremely sympathetic account of Herder, he was himself never attracted to anything like social constructionism – to, for instance, the view of Richard Rorty that 'we must avoid the embarrassment of the universalist claim that "human being" ... names an unchanging essence, an ahistorical natural kind with a permanent set of intrinsic features', that 'socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down – that there is nothing "beneath" socialisation or prior to history which is definatory of the human' – that 'the self, the human subject is simply whatever acculturation makes of it'.[22] Berlin believed that human nature set limits to the intelligible ends that human beings can pursue, so in his interview with me, he remarks that 'the number of ends that human beings can pursue is not infinite ... in practice human beings would not be human if that were so'.[23]

He was a critic of Enlightenment rationalism (as he construed it) – and also of what he saw as the excessive rationalism of some contemporary liberal thinkers, notably John Rawls,[24] yet he firmly believed in the place of reason in ethics and in the objectivity of values, and he was never attracted by the various varieties of subjectivism and emotivism in ethics or in later years by existentialism. And he certainly showed no sympathy for those contemporary post-Nietzschean, postmodernist foxes who have taken the notion of incommensurability far further than he

ever did, as when Lyotard says that 'to speak is to fight' and suggests that there is an irreducible incommensurability across discourses and narratives since these 'define what has the right to be done and said in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do'.[25]

And he was a value pluralist, yet he came to attach much importance to distinguishing his view from relativism. Pluralism, he insisted, is not relativism – which we could (following the happy phrase of the late Martin Hollis) encapsulate in the slogan 'Liberalism for the liberals, cannibalism for the cannibals'.[26] His final position was, I believe, something like this. Over large areas of our practical life, above all in the sphere of public policy, we engage in trade-offs, weighing goods and engaging in compromises that prevent intolerable alternatives from rising. But moral dilemmas and tragic choices are ineliminable. As Ignatieff well says, 'Berlin made human dividedness, both inner and outer, the very rationale for a liberal polity. A free society was a good society because it accepted the conflict among human goods and maintained, through its democratic institutions, the forum in which this conflict could be managed peacefully'.[27]

But I disagree with Ignatieff's view that Berlin, whose own self was 'labile, multi-faceted' and 'sharply divided', was 'a fox who longed to be a hedgehog'.[28] I would rather say that he remained what these days looks like a rather old-fashioned fox, who saw many things we hedgehogs wouldn't normally see: an empiricist, realist, objectivist, anti-irrationalist, anti-relativist fox.

Notes

1. Steven Lukes, *Individualism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1973.
2. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, 1957, p. 7.
3. Ibid., pp. 25–6.
4. Ibid., pp. 106–07.
5. Isaiah Berlin, 'Giambattista Vico and Cultural History', in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. by Henry Hardy, London: John Murray, 1990, pp. 59–60, 62–3.
6. Isaiah Berlin, 'Vico's Concept of Knowledge', in Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*', ed. with a bibliography by Henry Hardy, London: The Hogarth Press, 1979, p. 116.
7. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Counter-Enlightenment', in Berlin, *Against the Current*, p. 12.

8. For an elaboration of this distinction (which implicitly refers to Salman Rushdie's version of the 'hodge-podge' view), see the intro to C. Joppke and S. Lukes, eds, *Multicultural Questions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Also see chapters 2 and 3 of the present volume.
9. Isaiah Berlin, 'Giambattistas Vico and Cultural History' in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, p. 52.
10. Isaiah Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, pp. 158, 122, 127.
11. Isaiah Berlin, 'Georges Sorel', in Berlin, *Against the Current*, p. 327.
12. Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, Fall 1998, p. 90.
13. Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1998, p. 249.
14. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, p. 17.
15. Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 167. He was persuaded by Emma Rothschild: see her *Economic Sentiment: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, chapter 7, 'Condorcet and the Conflict of Values'.
16. Intro to Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. lv.
17. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 167.
18. Ibid., pp. 168–9, 171–2.
19. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli', in Berlin, *Against the Current*, pp. 69, 74–5.
20. Isaiah Berlin, 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', The Council of Christians and Jews, London, 1959, pp. 6, 21, 34.
21. Stuart Hampshire, address delivered at the Commemoration in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 21 March 1998.
22. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 7; 'Feminism and Pragmatism', *Radical Philosophy*, 59, Autumn 1991, p. 5; *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. xiii, ck. See chapter 2 of the present volume.
23. 'In Conversation with Steven Lukes', pp. 104–05. On this issue, Michael Ignatieff comments that for Berlin:

    > . . . we are moral beings; we would not qualify as human if moral considerations, however false or inadequate, were absent from our deliberations. And from this common ground – of a shared body and a shared language of moral discourse – we know the inhuman when we encounter it. He had no convincing argument as to why men and women, who had imbibed the culture of Western universalism through Goethe and Schiller, should have treated their fellows as so much vermin. All he could says was that to regard human beings as vermin was to reason from demonstrably false premises. But why such reasoning should have become persuasive to the entire political class of a great nation, and to millions of their supporters in Europe, he could not say. But then, who can? (*Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, pp. 249–50)

24. See 'In Conversation with Steven Lukes', p. 113.
25. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979, pp. 23, 42–3.
26. Berlin's repeated attempts to define a pluralism untainted by relativism date from