

Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin

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Intellectual giants of our times are departing, first Popper went at the age of 92, then Berlin at the age of 88; I have known them both, not intimately but well enough. Popper's intellect was penetrating while Berlin's mind was scintillating. Popper drilled with an amazing single-mindedness. Berlin continually burst with ever new effervescent flowers - jumping from one subject to another; a movable feast of ideas.

With Popper you always discussed his ideas. You were for him. He was helping you to discuss his ideas; at best you helped to articulate his ideas, which were always most important. Berlin was always for you, generous to a fault. Always drawing ideas from a very vast historical canvass and connecting them in fascinating patterns.

In the early 1960s I was a struggling Polish student at Oxford. After we met at a party Berlin said: we must discuss ideas further. And so we did. Many times. First in his rooms in the tower of All Souls College. Then at his residence at Headington House, Headington, just outside Oxford. He usually set aside an hour for our talks. I really was a nobody to be invited to these intellectual dialogues - just a Polish student who managed to get a fellowship at Oxford. He did most of the talking - on all subjects. One of the subjects which recurred was Herzen and other 19th century Russian thinkers. We read them all in Poland, and sort of appreciated them. But they were claimed by the Soviets as precursors of Marxism-Leninism. So we, independent Poles, could not take them too seriously. The curious thing is that before every meeting with Sir Isaiah we had an agreed subject to discuss. Somehow we never managed to discuss the subject agreed upon earlier, which was no great loss to me because all other subjects were equally fascinating, if not equally important.

Without a doubt, Sir Isaiah was the most important influence while I was at Oxford. He revealed to me what Oxford was about: brilliance, independence, the capacity to articulate (and quite a bit of flippancy). He was not my supervisor and I did not attend any of his seminars. Yet when the time came to leave Oxford for the USA, he was the one to write a letter of recommendation for me - not philosophers under whom I worked.

Both Berlin and Popper had a problem with the notion of truth. During one of our discussions Sir Isaiah said: 'well this concept of truth, what is it?' And he immediately added 'I know, I know, Socrates thought it was a very important idea. But did he know what he was talking about?' And then he went to argue with himself whether Socrates was right. It was a very interesting spectacle. I did not press my point about the importance of truth, although he knew it was an important idea for me. He was visibly uncomfortable with denying Socrates. But also with accepting the idea of truth. Something was gnawing him very deeply, something much larger than the issue whether Socrates was right on the point of truth and wisdom. Yes, wisdom was another notion he was uncomfortable with, at least during this occasion.

Popper's problem with truth was of a different kind. He wanted to preserve the classical or correspondence concept of truth: a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts it purports to describe. Yet Popper felt that after Einstein's physics superseded Newtonian physics, it was no longer possible to uphold the classical notion of truth in its traditional formulation. Therefore he introduced the idea of approximation to truth. Yes, he claimed, objective truth is possible, the idea is valid. But what we can do in our research is to

approximate this truth, not actually reach it. During the very first seminar of Popper I attended in the autumn of 1963, the idea of truth was discussed. I pointed out to Popper that the idea of approximation to truth somehow implied the relativity of truth. Popper was furious with this suggestion. He really exploded and went on and on, putting me in my place and decrying relativism of truth. I listened to his tirade with some disbelief and noticed that there was so much passion and pugnacity in this otherwise sedate man. In the end I was not convinced by his arguments.

After the seminar Popper confided to Imre Lakatos, his right-hand man, by saying: 'I do not handle people well, do I?' referring to his outburst against me. On the other hand, Sir Isaiah handled people superbly well. It was not only his personal charm that won the hearts of others. There was something in his Olympian mind that made one bow to its splendiferous virtuosity.

Yet in the long run, I found that it was Popper's mind, a *logos* incarnate of our times, that exerted a most significant influence on me. I have not become a Popperian (except for a brief spell) but I realized that one could build on Popper's scaffoldings. Popper advocated continuous *plus ultra* (a permanent intellectual revolution), which I have recently translated as continuous transcendence. I first transcended analytical philosophy, then Popper's philosophy, then philosophy of Science - as a most important framework of our thinking. And finally came to the conclusion that we are only at the beginning of a transcendent philosophy which promises to liberate us from the shackles of post-modernism and also promises to lead us into a world view which truly explains the destiny of the cosmos and our own together.