

# Isaiah Berlin and the Humanity of History

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: November 29, 2012  
© The British Scholar Society

Citation advice: Helene von Bismarck, 'Isaiah Berlin and the Humanity of History'. Essay for The British Scholar Society, November 2012,  
<http://britishscholar.org/publications/2012/11/29/isaiah-berlin-and-the-humanity-of-history/>



**Helene von Bismarck**

Ideally, every historian ought to give his own methodology the same amount of consideration that he dedicates to the historic events he is examining. A good way to start is to read some of the writings by Isaiah Berlin, one of the most famous, yet also controversial thinkers of the twentieth century. It is not easy to place the Russian-born Berlin, who came to Great Britain at the age of eleven in 1921 and spent the largest part of his very distinguished career in Oxford, into an intellectual category. As a philosopher, political theorist, historian of ideas and essayist, he left his distinct mark in several academic fields and schools of thought, without ever really fitting into one of them.<sup>[1]</sup> While he is probably best and most widely known for his famous, and indeed fascinating, discussion of 'Two Concepts of Liberty', two other essays of his are especially relevant to historians, because they explore two of the most fundamental questions we should all ask ourselves at least once: 'Historical Inevitability', originally a lecture Berlin delivered at the London School of Economics in 1953, and 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', which was published in the same year.<sup>[2]</sup> The first essay concerns the nature of history, the second the role of the historian.

In 'Historical Inevitability', Isaiah Berlin discusses the most basic question of all in very great depth: What or who drives history? In order to do his job of finding out what happened, the historian is bound to think about who or what is ultimately responsible for the course of events. According to Berlin, there are two fundamentally different ways of answering this question. One is to subscribe to the personal, the other to accept the impersonal theory of history. Ultimately, it is the choice of whether human beings play an active, or a passive role in the shaping of the world. It is important to stress that to accept the personal view of history is not necessarily the same as to argue that great men make great history. The notion that exceptional individuals influence the course of history more decisively than ordinary people, Berlin points out, is but one version of the personal theory of history. Another variation on the same theme is to argue that it is not 'identifiable individuals', but large groups of 'unspecified persons', whose wishes and actions shape the course of events; as long as it is acknowledged that these wishes and actions are, in the last analysis, a matter of personal choice, and not pre-determined by impersonal factors such as the environment, the economy, the climate or the situation of 'larger units' such as class, race, nation, culture or civilization. The impersonal

theory of history, on the other hand, argues that all human behaviour is ultimately not a question of choice or responsibility, but the result of larger forces that drive history forward.

In 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', Berlin discusses another essential question every historian ought to ask himself at some point, namely what kind of historian, or more generally, what kind of intellectual he wants to be. Berlin quotes a fragment by the ancient Greek poet Archilochus to sum up his argument that almost all writers and thinkers can be put into one of two different categories: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' The main distinction between the two different types of intellectual personalities is that the foxes study a great variety of subjects without trying 'to fit them into, or exclude them from, any unchanging, all-embracing, [...], unitary inner vision', while it is precisely such a vision to which the hedgehogs relate everything and which defines the significance of 'all what they are and say'. At first glance, the approach of the hedgehog may appear to be much more appealing. After all, what use is the study of historic events if we do not try to make sense of them, if we do not believe that there is one ultimate truth that we can learn from the study of the past, a pattern or regularity of developments, an insight into the nature of humanity or even an understanding of the direction of history that might help us to know what to expect of the future? Compared to the all-encompassing method of the hedgehog, who studies something to understand everything, the open-ended, multi-layered and often confusing journey of discovery of the fox can seem frustrating and even pointless. On the other hand, the intellectual dangers of being a hedgehog are very great indeed, because this approach easily results in a tendency to look for facts to support the historian's own conclusions.

The appeal of Berlin's writings is not that they offer easy answers to the big questions they explore, but that he shows us their importance and their far-reaching implications. A reader hoping to find a general methodology for the study of history that is applicable to any subject should expect to be disappointed. Berlin's most important achievement with these two essays is that he reminds us of the consequences of our studying a discipline of the humanities. Humans are no logical beings and even the behaviour of the cleverest and most disciplined ones is never free of bias, stupidity, mistakes, emotions, irrationality and the cultural and social influences of our surroundings. This is as true of the historian himself as it is of the subjects he is studying. As a result, the careful consideration of our own methodology and the critical examination of all-to-easy overreaching explanations of history will always remain essential.

---

[1] Cherniss, Joshua and Hardy, Henry, "Isaiah Berlin", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>.

[2] A shorter version of this essay appeared in 1951 under the title 'Lev Tolstoy's Historical Scepticism' in *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 2. See Henry Hardy, Editorial Preface, in: Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind. An Anthology of Essays*, ed. by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, New York 1997.

This entry was posted in [News](#), [Op-Ed](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Both comments and trackbacks are currently closed.