The Liberalism of Fear

It is an honour and a special pleasure to give a lecture in honour of my friend Isaiah Berlin. I have known him for more than forty years. I still recall the first occasion on which I spoke to him. It was after an undergraduate lecture, in the East Schools, then as now presenting problems of audibility. Berlin had been talking about the polarity or contrast principle, and Thales. I made a pushy objection.

There is something appropriate about that occasion. Berlin was denying (admittedly in a rather untypical context) that everything is one thing. It is odd that I should have been disagreeing, although not that I should have been disagreeing with him. I have managed to do that on various occasions: on the relative appeal of the operas of Rossini and Wagner, for a start. We have also disagreed on certain philosophical matters. It is odd rather that I should have been disagreeing on that. One of our strongest intellectual affinities was in our distrust of system: our commitment to non-reducibility, to pluralism, to conflicts of values, our general fox-like dispositions. I recall a remark made to me by Stefan Körner, which I found a compliment, after a paper on moral conflict: “You said it’s all a mess, and it is all a mess.”

There is a problem with this kind of view: how does one carry on the subject—the subject, that is to say, of philosophy? I had a conversation recently with Michael Stocker, an American philosopher of similar temper. We were in the bar of a melancholy modern hotel in a melancholy run-down city in upstate New York. After one glass of bourbon, we agreed that our work consisted largely of reminding moral philosophers of truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings except moral philosophers. After further glasses of bourbon, we agreed that it was less than clear that this was the most useful way in which to spend one’s life, as a kind of flying mission to a small group isolated from humanity in the intellectual Himalaya.

Fifty or sixty years ago, there was a more general problem than this about the identity and survival prospects of philosophy. There seemed to be three analytical options. The first was positivist. This required one to act like the character in the film La femme Nikita, Victor le nettoyeur, cleaning up after and around natural science. The second was Wittgensteinian, which in some forms became what Karl Kraus said psychoanalysis
was, the disease of which it was itself the cure, but to which the most authentic witness was the master himself, who regarded the subject as an academic enterprise with complete contempt and periodically retired from it altogether. The third was the option offered by Berlin’s friend J. L. Austin, who coined the memorable phrase “linguistic phenomenology” but did not live to distinguish in his work between a phenomenology guided by language, which is what a lot of philosophy is, and an activity of which the point is less clear: the phenomenology of the use of language itself, the tracing of the shudder of an exquisite distinction.

These very general problems barely exist now, in such forms. Philosophy has regained a confident institutional identity, in some cases in rather scientistic forms. There is, admittedly, some “end of philosophy” talk, but that is about the end of the philosophy outside (broadly) analytic philosophy. Other and more specific problems, however, do exist, such as that about the identity of moral philosophy and, I suggest, a different problem about the identity of political philosophy.

Berlin dealt with the problems of that earlier time at a relatively early age by, as he puts it, getting out of philosophy. This is not altogether true, although he did get out of it as it was then understood. The turn to intellectual history gave him something more satisfying to do than that philosophy, something closer to human idiosyncrasy. But it also in fact provided a way of continuing philosophy by other means. It registered the point that political philosophy requires history. This is a point better recognized now, and certainly better recognized than it is with regard to moral philosophy, where I believe it is also true.

But it is not altogether registered even now. In a curious way, it is concealed in the work of two notable political philosophers who both accept it but for quite opposite reasons are not taken to express it. One is Berlin himself, who led people to agree with him that he got out of philosophy, so that his work is taken to be history and not philosophy, and reasonably so, since a lot of it consists of history.

The other is John Rawls, who has only more recently said emphatically that the elaborate reflections of A Theory of Justice are reflections for a particular time and apply to a particular political formation, the modern pluralist state. His work is taken to be philosophy rather than history, and reasonably so, since most of it consists of philosophy and very little of it looks like history. But it does presuppose, and now explicitly, an historical story.

The idea that this end of philosophy—at least, of political philosophy and (I claim) moral philosophy—has close relations with history overlaps with a more ambitious view held by a consistently underestimated Oxford philosopher, R. G. Collingwood. The trouble with Collingwood’s kind of commitment is that it requires one to know some history. My two associ-
ates in the view I am sketching are Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. They are both Roman Catholics, though of different sorts. I used to find this a disquieting fact but no longer do so. All three of us, I could say, accept the significant role of Christianity in understanding modern moral consciousness, and adopt respectively the three possible views about how to move in relation to that: backward in it, forward in it, and out of it. In any case, we all assume some historical commitments, they on a more ambitious scale than I, and perhaps there is a rather nervous competition for who writes the most irresponsible history.

There is a double relation of political philosophy and history. One can put the first in terms of a sense of the past and a sense of the present. The sense of the present, of course, also involves a sense of the past. Another way of putting it would be distinguish what you are talking about (Berlin) and whom you are talking to (Rawls). The second is the question of the audience of political philosophy. Any work of any consequence in the subject raises the question of who is being addressed. Who does the author suppose needs to know this philosophy, and for what purpose?

This point arises also with moral philosophy. In that case, this is one thing that particularly presses the question, on which I have insisted, of the point of ethical theory: who needs such a theory? What for? What relation might it have to someone’s life? But that is not the sort of question to be pressed with political philosophy. With political philosophy, there may indeed be some clearer answers about what some kinds of theory might do in some kinds of circumstances. But we have to be clear about these circumstances.

I am going to suggest later that the idea of the audience of a work of political philosophy is complex, in a way that is very relevant to an understanding of what political philosophy might and might not achieve. But that is for later, since I want to approach it through an example which is indeed the subject that I principally want to discuss. This is a certain style of liberalism, the liberalism of fear.

For this liberalism, the basic units of political life are not discursive and reflective persons, nor friends and enemies, nor patriotic soldier-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful. And the freedom it wishes to secure is freedom from the abuse of power and the intimidation of the defenceless that this difference invites. . . . The liberalism of fear . . . regards abuses of public powers in all regimes with equal trepidation. It worries about the excesses of official agents at every level of government, and it assumes that these are apt to burden the poor and the weak most heavily. The history of the poor compared to that of the various elites makes that obvious enough. The assumption, amply justified on every page of political history, is that some
agents of government will behave lawlessly and brutally in small or big ways most of the time unless they are prevented from doing so.¹

These are the words of the late Judith Shklar, who invented the phrase “the liberalism of fear.” She died, relatively young, and at the height of her powers, two years ago. She was professor of government at Harvard. She was a splendid person and an admirable scholar. She was a friend of mine and Berlin’s; indeed her family, like his, came from Riga. Her views, as you can already see, are not unlike Berlin’s in certain respects, although the political implications of “the liberalism of fear” and the ideas associated with “negative liberty” are in several respects different. The liberalism of fear makes fewer presuppositions, if any, about moral pluralism, and has stronger implications about a pluralism of powerful institutions.

The liberalism of fear is “entirely nonutopian,” and it differs from other forms of liberalism in that respect. Shklar separates it from two in particular. The first is the liberalism of natural rights. This was the reference to “energetic litigants”: “the liberalism of natural rights envisages a society composed of politically sturdy citizens, each able and willing to stand up for himself and others.” There is a contrast, equally, with the liberalism of personal development. “Morality and knowledge can develop only in a free and open society. There is even reason to hope that institutions of learning will eventually replace politics and government.”

It would not be unfair to say that these two forms of liberalism have their spokesmen in Locke and John Stuart Mill respectively, and they are of course perfectly genuine expressions of liberal doctrine. It must be said, however, that neither one of these two patron saints of liberalism had a strongly developed historical memory, and it is on this faculty of the human mind that the liberalism of fear draws most heavily. The most immediate memory is at present the history of the world since 1914. In Europe and North America, torture had gradually been eliminated from the practices of government, and there was hope that it might eventually disappear everywhere. With the intelligence and loyalty requirements of the national warfare states that quickly developed at the outbreak of hostilities, torture returned and has flourished on a colossal scale ever since. We say “never again,” but somewhere someone is being tortured right now, and acute fear has again become a common form of social control. To this the horror of modern warfare must be added as a reminder. The liberalism of fear is a response to these undeniable actualities and therefore concentrates on damage control.²

² Ibid., 26–27.
The liberalism of fear has its own founding fathers and heroes. Montaigne, for one, himself scarcely a liberal, but someone whose scepticism against fanaticism and sense of the impositions of cruelty put him in this line. Montesquieu, Constant. It is a fine lineage.

A good deal can follow within the ambit of the liberalism of fear. Rights, for instance, in the first instance because entrenched rights are one necessary protection against the threats of power. But it will inevitably be said that not enough follows from it. It is negative: the old liberal idea that the only enemy is the state. Or again it will be said that either what it requires can be taken for granted; or if not, it is obvious enough but represents only a minimum basis.

These are serious and familiar criticisms. Before we can assess them, we have to consider what the theory, indeed what any such theory, is for. This brings us back to the question of the audience of a given piece of political philosophy, a notion which I said was complex. We have to distinguish between, on the one hand, people who may be expected or hoped actually to read and be influenced by such a text, and the people or person whom, in terms of its content, it purports to address. We are familiar with a distinction, particularly with respect to the novel, between the author and the narrator. (This is a distinction not unknown in philosophy. Consider for instance the differences between the *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method*.)

What I have in mind is a second-person analogue to that. The second-person analogue to the author comprises the people actually expected to read the text, the audience. The second-person analogue to the narrator, the person purportedly addressed, is the listener. There are several traditional types of listener to works of political philosophy. One is a prince, who is being told what to do or how to conduct himself. Another is a concerned citizenry, which may be the citizenry in general, as in the case of Paine’s *Common Sense*, or some set of them, as in the case of Burke’s address to the electors of Bristol. As in one of these examples, *Common Sense*, a pamphlet, the audience and the listener may coincide: the text is explicitly directed to just the people who may be expected to read it. If every text were like that, there would be no point in the distinction, but it is not so. In Burke’s case, the listeners, the electors of Bristol, constitute part of the audience. (A similar case on a grander scale is a papal address which has the faithful as its listeners but is directed to a wider audience.)

The distinction will actually be more helpful if we extend the idea of the listener a bit from those whom the text addresses in the second person to people to whose particular attention the text will, if properly understood, be best taken to be directed, in terms of what it actually says. Thus Machiavelli’s *Prince* is not addressed vocatively to a prince; it does not, as it were, take the form of a letter to one. But it can be read as a third-
personal version of such a thing, a text which is presented as something which a prince would specially profit from reading. Its intended actual audience, of course, is something else again. They consist of the people whom Machiavelli thought could be instructed in the nature of politics and its relations to virtue by reading a text which says those things about princes in a way that purports to provide instruction to a prince.

One might include under a similar conception some examples of what might be called founding father political philosophy. Perhaps there are texts which explicitly claim to address such people in the second person. More commonly, they figure as people in such a situation likely to benefit from such a text. Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* is to some degree like this. It is about such people, of course, in a particularly fanciful situation. But rather as *The Prince* presents itself in a way that seems especially designed to help princes, so *A Theory of Justice* presents itself in such a way that could best help such people to go about their business. Its audience, of course, Rawls must hope, is the concerned and well-disposed citizenry of a modern pluralist state. The question then immediately arises why those people should interest themselves in a text that presents itself in this way: why should this audience interest itself in a text addressed to that kind of listener? Rawls has an answer to this: that those founding, indeed Pilgrim, fathers, the listeners, are the audience’s own Kantian selves.

If we confine ourselves to the present time, and to what is indeed political philosophy, and we leave out the many items which are professional exercises of various kinds, the audience is almost always supposed to be the public at large: the public, indeed, in some cases—but not typically in American cases—of more than one state. The aim of addressing such a diffuse public is a diffuse effect, an effect of diffusion: the influence of ideas of which, in a very Millian spirit, Keynes wrote at the end of the *General Theory*: “[T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is greatly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval.”

But if this is the intended audience, there is a question of whether the text presents itself as though this were, equally, the listener. The answer to this is very often, perhaps more often than not, no. Above all, the text seems to address itself to the attention of someone who has power, who could enact what the writer urges on him. A particular example of this is

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where the reader seems (as in the writing of Ronald Dworkin) to be a constitutional court: the argument seeks to persuade the listener that a certain set of provisions would be the best and most harmonious interpretation of a set of values that the writer and listener are taken to accept. Similarly with some at least of founding father literature: the reader is being told how best he or she can start from the ground up, perhaps not in a state of nature, but at least having just got off the boat.

Maybe such political philosophers do think of an audience who might coincide roughly with these powerful listeners: by the processes that Keynes referred to, or more directly, their writings might come to Supreme Court justices, or ministers short of ideas for policy, or legislators. If so, this perhaps makes some sense of the fact that they address an empowered listener when in fact that audience will for the most part be unempowered. But it will make less sense of the fact that they address an empowered and very patient listener with a great appetite for argument and very few political restrictions on what he can do. Supreme Courts and founding fathers have fewer purely political restrictions on what they do than politicians generally do. It is typical of such political philosophy that the others are not there.

This is related to the absence from much political philosophy of any sense of political contest, which has been noticed in a recent book by Bonnie Honig, who notes incidentally that there are some who have been able to resist, in part, this influence: among others “Stuart Hampshire (who gets there via Machiavelli) . . . Stanley Cavell (via Emerson), Michael Walzer (via Rousseau) . . . Isaiah Berlin (via John Stuart Mill), Bernard Williams (via Isaiah Berlin).”

The displacement of politics is not merely the effect of the listener’s being taken to be empowered. For consider The Prince. This explicitly has an empowered listener, if not directly addressed. But it hardly leaves out the politics relevant to his situation. This is because it addresses itself precisely to the politics of his situation, above all to the question of how he should remain empowered. The relation between listener and audience which alienates politics from political philosophy rather involves this: that such political philosophy deals in ideals, or natural rights, or virtue, and also addresses a listener who is supposedly empowered to enact just what such considerations enjoin. And no actual audience, no audience in the world, is in that situation, not even the Supreme Court.

The liberalism of fear can be construed as having any one of the traditional listeners: prince, citizens, founding fathers. There is no reason why it should not be addressed to a listener conceived of as empowered,

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though it is likely to express some anxiety about how much notice will be taken of what it says. But even when it is so conceived, it does not displace politics, because like *The Prince*, but in a contrasting sense, it serves to remind its listener of the existence of politics. Like *The Prince*, it takes seriously power and the surrounding distributions and limitations on power in any given situation. It is a close relation of Machiavelli (in that incarnation, not in his virtuous republic persona); very roughly, it has the same sense of what is important and is on the other side.

The liberalism of fear has historically been taken to have such listeners. But when it is so taken, it naturally attracts the traditional criticisms, because what it can be taken to enjoin is the extreme limitation of state power, the message that indeed it has traditionally conveyed. And that will not do for us, now, because it is not state power that we have most to fear. And when we ask what it has to tell legislators who are in that situation, it is less than clear what it has to add.

The liberalism of fear can be taken as having a different and much wider set of listeners: roughly, everybody. Indeed, its relations to its listeners and its audience are the reverse of the other traditional options. Its listeners, unusually, form a much larger group than its expected audience. It speaks to humanity. And it has a right to do this, a unique right, I think, because its materials are the only certainly universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities. What it offers or suggests in any given situation depends on that situation: it depends, in particular, on the politics of that situation. The liberalism of fear, once more like its natural counterpart, *The Prince*, does not displace politics, but is understood only in the presence of politics, and as addressing its listeners in the presence of their politics.

One consequence of the fact that the liberalism of fear’s listeners are not empowered figures of a given state, or the founding fathers of a possible state, is that it has no inbuilt restriction of its concerns to a given state, such as a nation-state. Of course, the liberalism of fear offers an account of *politics*, and since political power is largely conceived in terms of the nation-state—and little can be done, as Presidents Carter and now Clinton have discovered, even by a powerful state to curb outrages elsewhere—much of the concerns of the liberalism of fear at any given time will have to stay at home. But that is, so to speak, an externality, and recognized as such by the liberalism of fear. It is therefore all the more timely, for the politics of now are manifestly to a diminishing degree those of the nation-state. The centres, certainly, of economic power are international.

The traditional criticism, that the liberalism of fear stands for the normative limitation of state power, is under this emphasis misconceived. By its genuine universalism, and its awareness of politics, it is better placed to recognize the actual limitations of state power than are political theories
addressed to listeners assumed to be, within a given state, at the relevant level (the level set by the theory) omnipotent.

But certainly, there is a politics of the relatively happier and better ordered society, and the question raised by the traditional critics must be faced, of what if anything the liberalism of fear has to say to people so placed. Even if we read the liberalism of fear as not trying to say that its concerns are not all the concerns of politics, but those that must be attended to first, there remain questions of what should be attended to second, when what must be attended to has been, at least to a decent extent, locally attended to. Liberalism, one might hope, would have something to say now. Indeed, this is the point at which the liberalisms of rights and virtues for the first time have something to say: Rawls’s minimum conditions. This fits the condition of their assumed listeners.

Well, one thing that the liberalism of fear does is to remind people of what they have got and how it might go away. As Shklar said: “To those American political theorists who long for either more communal or more expansively individual personalities, I now offer a reminder that these are the concerns of an exceptionally privileged liberal society, and that until the institutions of primary freedom are in place these longings cannot even arise. Indeed the extent to which both the communitarian and the romantic take free public institutions for granted is a tribute to the United States, but not to their sense of history.”

There is a real lesson here. As Stephen Holmes has admirably shown in “The Permanent Structure of Anti-liberal Thought,” the language of communitarian opponents of liberalism, themselves perhaps of a most respectable kind, can bear an unnerving resemblance to that of Carl Schmitt or Gentile. In our own country, a more demure and less theoretical temper combines with large reserves of resentment, individual and national, to yield another but again disquietingly familiar tone on the anti-liberal right, the tone of Vichy.

But the liberalism of fear is not confined to uttering warnings and reminders. If indeed primary freedoms are secured, and basic fears are assuaged, then the attentions of the liberalism of fear will move to more sophisticated conceptions of freedom, and other forms of fear, other ways in which the asymmetries of power and powerlessness work to the disadvantage of the latter. There is much to be said about how these processes of extension and sophistication should work. In particular, the fears that are most basic in human terms do not map neatly onto fears that are most basic in political terms. This is the point that has always been urged by

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radicals and revolutionaries against the liberalism of fear and other kinds of moderate liberalism: the erst kommt das Fressen principle, the conception of freedom as freedom from—from unemployment and want and so on. These are indeed aims which any modern state will seek to forward by political means. But its unsuccess as such does not necessarily show that it is a despotic government, whereas its misuse of its own powers or its failure to curb people’s use of their powers to subordinate others is directly that, for that is what the state first is.

Similar ideas have to be pursued in relation to freedom. The basic sense of being unfree is being in someone else’s power, and that in the basic sense implies that what you do is directed by another person’s intentions even if you do not want to do those things. (Note how this conception coincides neither with “negative” nor with “positive” freedom.) But things that people reasonably fear are often side effects, not the product of intentions directed at them; and they may be more severe in their impact than the direction aimed at them, or the direction aimed at others to help in curing the first people’s situation. This is not a necessary problem for the liberalism of fear unless it is construed as a complete political doctrine for all circumstances. It does not have to think that freedom, in particular freedom defined narrowly by the political, is the only value that matters.

There is room for general, philosophical reflection on these themes. But the particular arguments that carry forward liberal policies in particular situations must be not just practically but conceptually a matter of those circumstances. This is the truth in anti-universalism, insisted on by some of liberalism’s opponents. The liberalism of fear can combine this with its own universalism. It does so in the form of its constant reminder of the reality of politics, that there is a political reality out there.

Relatedly to that, the approach of the liberalism of fear is bottom-up, not top-down. Just as it takes the condition of life without terror as its first requirement and considers what other goods can be furthered in more favourable circumstances, it treats each proposal for the extension of the notions of fear and freedom in the light of what locally has been secured. It does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances and then apply it. It regards the discovery of what rights people have as a political and historical one, not a philosophical one.

It asks, too, how secure what has been secured is. It is disposed not to be too sanguine about that, particularly since it remembers to look beyond national boundaries. It is conscious that nothing is safe, that the task is never-ending. This part of its being, as Judith Shklar said, is resolutely nonutopian. But that does not mean that it is simply the politics of pessimism which has not collapsed into the politics of cynicism. In the words that Shklar quoted from Emerson, it is very importantly the party of memory. But it can be, in good times, the politics of hope as well.