disincentives, in the form of carbon taxes and other resource-use payments, encourage people to modify their consumption. Yet their depiction of equitable structures for education, health and social security, to mention just three examples, includes few constraints against excessive use.

More seriously, their almost universal prescription of more government control and spending ignores the 'crowding out' effect that this has on personal responsibility and involvement.

This mismatch of incentives also applies to the political process. For example, the authors argue that Australian aid for overseas countries should be increased dramatically. At the same time, they also argue that the political system has to change to reflect the grassroots interests and aspirations of people. Yet substantial channels already exist for people to donate privately to overseas aid. If Australian people privately are less disposed to support overseas aid projects, why should they publicly demand it?

The answer is that people perceive the costs and benefits to be borne by different groups under the political process. People demand more goods when the public purse pays for it. The lure of the political process is that a 51 per cent majority can impose decisions on the whole population. Thus by supporting a political framework for special environmental measures or more overseas aid, voters recognise that the costs will be borne across society, and, with a promise of more progressive taxation, basically paid for by the rich.

Thus while the authors talk of a new green ethic that enables people to make wiser resource use decisions and the need for more grassroots consultation, the tools chosen to implement change are almost invariably authoritarian and top down; more government control and spending, and higher taxes to pay for the spending. The mismatch of incentives are not only used to attract votes, but are essentially biased in one direction.

The third major deficiency is a failure to specify the various roles of government. Not recognising problems of government failure and inefficiency and not setting out clearly defined goals for government is effectively to treat government as a modern tooth fairy, capable of meeting unlimited desires.

Perhaps not surprisingly, economic analysis emerges as a fourth major deficiency, although it is a substantial improvement on earlier economic policies of the green parties in Australia. The authors are critical of economic rationalists, privatisation, competition policy, free trade initiatives, multinational corporations and big business, especially in the areas of forestry and mining. The book demonstrates enthusiastic criticism rather than any ability to manage a complex economy.

The most serious failure, though, is to downplay the real benefits of economic growth. Saying that the present generation is no happier than that of our grandparents ignores undoubted progress in health, living conditions and aspirations. Setting aside the costs for a moment, economic growth provides a lot more benefits than access to Coca-Cola and American culture. For example, it is no coincidence that population growth generally slows as economic development and living standards rise.

The overwhelming message that emerges from *The Greens* is that their policies and appeal are pitched towards the far left of the political spectrum rather than towards the mainstream of voters with environmental concerns. The political message, though, is superficial, and the real purpose of the Greens is to act as a pressure group. It is perhaps the ultimate irony of the book that its authors depict most environmental problems as stemming from a mismatch of costs and benefits to different parties (including future generations), yet the ultimate tactic of the Greens is to promise benefits to their followers that will be paid for by the rest of the Australian population.

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Isaiah Berlin
by John Gray,
HarperCollins, London,
1995, 183pp.
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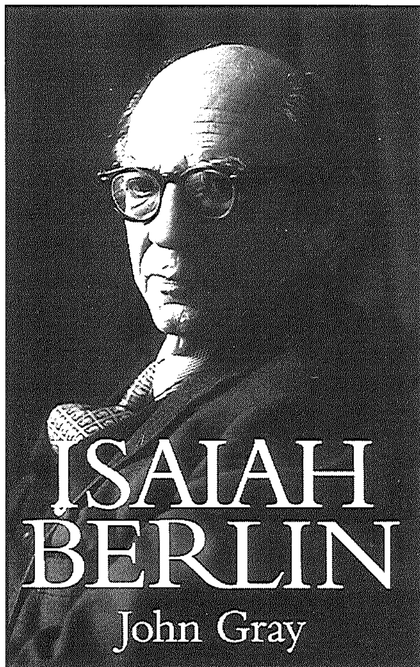
(pb) $16.95.

Sir Isaiah Berlin has taught for most of his working life at Oxford University where he held the Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory (1957-67). Not surprisingly, he has been a major influence within British intellectual life and a good number of his essays (such as his *Four Essays on Liberty*, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', and his marvellous commentary on Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*) have been widely disseminated and are much appreciated. Yet, this acknowledgment does not seem enough to sufficiently credit Berlin. He is such an important intellectual that more needs to be said.

In this book John Gray sets out to remedy this situation by identifying

Berlin's enduring contributions to political thought. He begins by acknowledging his own debt to Berlin, explaining that '[f]or over twenty years my thoughts have grown under the stimulus of his extraordinary conversation (p.viii)'; and then he speculates about why Berlin's general influence has not been more decisive. One possibility, that Gray considers, is that Berlin shifted most of his attention from philosophy to intellectual history at an early stage in his career. Thus, the scope of his interests and his tendency to focus on obscure texts



rendered his most important works largely inaccessible to those for whom European intellectual history is not a primary focus. Certainly undergraduates are not regularly asked to read Berlin (apart from the few well-known essays already identified) as they are often made to read the works of other major theorists such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Joseph Raz, Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre. Significantly, also, Berlin has not articulated his political philosophy in a systematic way. Indeed, he has denounced this kind of theorising.

Gray thinks there is another more important explanation for Berlin's relative obscurity – that his work is subversive of the foundational tenets of the dominant liberal intellectual traditions. Indeed, he recommends Berlin to us precisely because he celebrates the power of Berlin's critique of the work of other liberal writers. Gray thinks Berlin's scepticism about the competing contemporary liberalisms is itself an important contribution that urgently needs to be brought to the attention of a broader audience. For one thing, he agrees with Berlin that most modern liberal writers too uncritically accept the inheritance of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather than a reworking of the classical liberal traditions that are associated with the works of writers such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, Gray tells us that we need a quite different defence of liberty. And he claims to discover just such a pragmatic, more historically situated, liberal theory in Berlin's work.

Gray claims that Berlin's liberalism is challenging in its affirmation of the reality of a deep conflict between human values that cannot be resolved by appeals to reason or by identifying any enduring elements in a universal human nature. According to Gray, who attributes this view to Berlin, there is no rational way of settling conflicts over incommensurable values so nothing can be said against those who sincerely affirm values that are in conflict with liberalism. No appeal to reason can resolve such disputes. Berlin's work is important, according to Gray, for affirming this thoroughgoing form of scepticism.

If reason is impotent, as Berlin claims, must we all succumb to the most passionate amongst us? Gray thinks that Berlin's liberalism is not vulnerable to this line of attack because it is too well-anchored historically. Certainly we can have little meaningful to say to those with whom we share nothing in common, but in most contexts when we are discussing policy choices where we face incommensurable conflicting values we are in a dialogue with people with whom we have a common history. As a practical matter, in societies like the United Kingdom and Australia, we do share common experiences and many values with fellow citizens. Thus, we understand enough about our common history to make the necessary compromises in a reasoned manner.

In seeing liberalism as a pragmatic response to modern circumstances, Berlin's position (as Gray presents it) is quite close to the political approach adopted by John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism*. But Berlin's approach is more successful, according to Gray, because he eschews any temptation to do political philosophy 'as if it were an accident that human beings have histories' (p. 103). As Gray presents his orientation, Berlin seems to have a lot more in common with the post-modern scepticism of writers like Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty who accept that we have no choice but to go on doing what comes naturally – that is, participate in a liberal dialogue about various policy choices unapologetically and without seeking to claim a morally privileged status for liberty (pp. 161-2).

According to Gray, Berlin's challenge to all forms of rationalism successfully takes up the task that John Stuart Mill set for himself, of forging a synthesis between the liberalism inherited from the Enlightenment, which is based on the notion that all problems are solvable by human intelligence, with the vision of social life and history found in the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment, which tends to elevate passion above reason (p. 156).

Unlike Mill, however, whose attempted reconciliation is flawed

because of an emotional commitment to remain true to indefensible utilitarian doctrines (p. 61), Gray tells us that Berlin succeeds precisely because he makes the opposite judgment conceding almost all the intellectual points to the Romantics.

Gray tries to explain the advantage this rejection of Benthamite rationalism secures for Berlin, claiming that Berlin offers a pragmatic political approach rather than an intellectually defended one. According to Gray, Berlin thinks we are right to proceed intuitively. Nor can the value of liberty have any special claim on us. Rather we reach compromises between competing values within our given historical situation which somehow dictates the force of rival claims – so much for this and so much for that is appropriate in this context (p.167). The priorities between competing values we must choose can never be final and absolute or articulated in the light of an abstract political theory; rather, they are revisable over time and are always established in the light of historical understandings and the empathy we feel for the beliefs and values of others.

Gray claims that Berlin's historically based liberal pragmatism is more effective than Mill's attempted utilitarian calculus precisely because he takes liberalism's greatest critics more seriously. By carefully exploring Berlin's ideas on freedom, pluralism, history and nationalism, Gray presents Berlin as offering us a defence of political liberty and intellectual emancipation that he calls agonistic liberalism (from the Greek word agon, 'whose meaning covers both competition and rivalry and the conflicts of characters in tragic drama' (p. 1)).

This point of view is never spelt out by Berlin himself, who has held back from systematically articulating a liberal theory; indeed, Berlin would probably argue that attempts to do this kind of philosophy are misconceived and unnecessary.

Thus, Gray's essay is not so much an introduction to Berlin's thought as a reconstruction and defence. It develops a political theory of which Berlin himself would not necessarily approve. Yet the inspiration is the result of Gray's enormous intellectual debt over twenty years working at Oxford, first as a student and later as a colleague.

This is a brilliant book that raises many pressing issues in contemporary political philosophy. But it does not fully succeed in recommending Berlin's liberalism as 'the most profoundly deliberated, and most powerfully defended, in our time, or, perhaps, in any time (p.145)'.

The problem is that Gray has presented Berlin's agonistic liberalism as hopelessly question-begging. Everything depends on our having a liberal disposition to begin with. An agonistic liberal can have little to say to those who value traditional and other ways of living more than they value liberty. But the political problem we face today is that many millions of people feel threatened by liberty and they vehemently reject liberal strategies that institutionalise mechanisms for peaceful social evolution and change. They see that the values they cherish (for example, a moral culture in which homosexuality is seen as sinful and in which abortion is prohibited, a community that speaks French, a more equal society, the maintenance of an indigenous relationship to land, the preservation of a distinct Australian identity, the elimination of patriarchal attitudes) are unsustainable in a context that requires freedom of speech, freedom of association and movement, and the freedom to enter into various economic relationships. Thus, they tend to place very little priority on sustaining liberal political and social processes, denouncing 'economic rationalism' and the political institutions and conventions that make possible the pragmatic accommodations that Berlin favours.

To meet this challenge, liberals need to show that liberal arrangements offer better prospects in the longer term, or that liberal institutions are likely to result in outcomes that are more just than those that would emerge if liberty were to be abandoned. This task of justifying liberal institutions is surely one we must ask liberal political theorists to address. But it is not a task that Berlin and Gray seem to think feasible. According to the agonistic liberalism Gray attributes to Berlin no defensible claims about the superiority of liberal social and political arrangements can be offered.

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