This essay is a brief comparison of Isaiah Berlin and Andrzej Walicki as intellectual historians and liberal philosophers, written in response to G. M. Hamburg’s major essay, “Closed Societies, Open Minds”.

Key words: Russian intellectual history; Russian intelligentsia; liberalism; negative liberty; positive liberty; personhood; human dignity; law; Marxism; communism; totalitarianism; romanticism; Hegelianism; Alexander Herzen; Vissarion, Belinskii; Slavophilism; Ivan, Kireevskii; Kant; George, Kennan.

I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on Professor Hamburg’s essay, which at once impressed me as a brilliant comparative analysis of two great historians and as a major work in its own right in historiography and intellectual history. The paper took me back to my first year in graduate school at the University of Notre Dame. Although I had read some of Professor Walicki’s books before coming to Notre Dame, my first so-to-speak “live” intellectual experience with him was reading Berlin’s essay “Two Concepts of Liberty”, which he had assigned for his graduate seminar in Marxism. That was 1988. A year earlier he had published his magisterial Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism and was writing what would become the definitive liberal critique of Marxist theory and practice, Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom.¹ These works made it clear that Walicki was not only a preeminent intellectual histo-

¹ Andrzej Walicki, Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism (Oxford University Press, 1987); idem, Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia (Stanford University Press, 1995).
rian—of that there was never any doubt—but was also, like Berlin, a liberal philosopher. As Hamburg makes clear, some of the remarkable similarities between Berlin and Walicki emerged before their first conversation in 1960. Hamburg has masterfully demonstrated that by then the two thinkers shared a similar overall approach to Russian intellectual history. Their deep interest in the same Russian thinkers—Belinskii, Herzen, and Turgenev—revealed, moreover, a common liberal philosophy of history that rejected historical necessity and affirmed their own moral responsibility as historians to remember the precious liberal currents in Russian culture that communist totalitarianism sought to efface. Hamburg also shows, in an incisive and original analysis, how Berlin’s study of Russian intellectual history and encounter with Soviet totalitarianism shaped the political philosophy that he famously formulated in his 1958 essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty”. Walicki then employed Berlin’s distinction in Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism and in Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom, where it forms part of his overall conceptual framework.

Hamburg’s approach to Berlin and Walicki’s 1960 conversation was to read it backwards. His intellectual history of that one conversation comprises eighty-five pages in manuscript. At that rate, taking the alternative approach—reading the conversation forward—would result in many large volumes. I won’t attempt that, but I would like to look forward from 1960, focusing not on the similarities but on what I see as some of the main differences between Berlin and Walicki as intellectual historians and liberal philosophers.

First is their respective understandings of romanticism and Hegelianism. Berlin blames German romanticism for the destructive ideology of the Russian intelligentsia and ultimately for the Russian Revolution, but his understanding of it is vague and indiscriminate. In particular, he tends to collapse Hegelianism into romanticism. Hamburg points to the quandaries that result, for example in Berlin’s treatment of Herzen, where German Romanticism and/or Hegelianism—it’s not clear which—is both the source of the intelligentsia’s ferocity and, in Herzen, its antidote. Romanticism is notoriously difficult to concisely define, but one constituent element is its rejection of philosophical rationalism, the view that in principle nothing is beyond the powers of logical or discursive reason. Romanticism insists rather that fundamental dimensions of being—human, cosmic, and divine—are not accessible to reason alone and can be revealed, if they can be, only by non-rational faculties or intuitions such as aesthetic sensibility, morality, love, and religious devotion. The exercise of at least some of these faculties requires a community of shared experience rather than the individual standing on his or her own, atomistically. There was some overlap between German idealism and romanticism, but the two were not the same. Fichte and Schelling can be called romantics, Hegel cannot. This is a crucial distinction in understanding nineteenth-century Russian intellectual history, especially the “remarkable decade” of the 1840s, as Walicki makes clear in The Slavophile
Controversy, first published in Polish in 1964. Slavophilism was, of course, the most important romantic movement in Russia. Walicki demonstrates that the Slavophiles formulated some of their main theses in opposition to Hegelianism, which had a formative role in the intellectual development of the leading Westernizers. If Hegelianism is conflated with romanticism, a crucial aspect of the controversy between Slavophilism and Westernism is lost.

Walicki’s precise differentiation between Russian Hegelianism and romanticism led him to rather different conclusions than Berlin about which elements of Russian thought could be aligned with liberalism and serve as potential antidotes to totalitarianism. Berlin celebrates the Westernizers’, and especially Herzen’s, rejection of historical determinism, but he is not very clear about how they arrived at that position through Hegelianism. Walicki is clear about it, and moreover shifts the emphasis from philosophy of history to the philosophy of man and the nature of the human person. In The Slavophile Controversy and A History of Russian Thought, he shows how the future Westernizers, after initially sharing with the Slavophiles an interest in romanticism, passed to Hegelianism. They then traversed a broadly Hegelian trajectory from a right-wing “reconciliation with reality” to a left-wing philosophy of action. As Belinskii put it in March 1841:

I have long suspected that the philosophy of Hegel is only a phase, although a great one, but that the absolutism of its conclusions is not good, that it is better to die than to be reconciled to them. . . . The individual with him is not an end in itself but a means for the momentary expression of the universal.... I have particularly weighty reasons for raging against Hegel, for I feel that I was faithful to him (in a sense) in reconciling myself with Russian reality.... The destiny of the subject, of the individual, of the person, is more important than . . . the whole world.

In these words Belinskii vindicates the particular (the real, living person) against the “tyranny of the universal”. His affirmation of the autonomous individual against totalizing philosophical systems came at the cost, however, of a certain tendency toward materialism, Ludwig Feuerbach’s ideas in particular.

Herzen followed a similar path. He was shocked by Bakunin’s and Belinskii’s “reconciliation with reality”, but since it claimed the authority of Hegel, he undertook his own study of the German philosopher. The result was two long cycles of essays, Dilettantism in Science (1843) and Letters on the Study of Nature (1845), the best products of Russian Left Hegelianism. In them

---


Herzen argues that the self comes into its own through concrete active participation in history, and through reconciling in itself the particular and universal. Naturalistic empiricism (materialism) fragments the human personality, while idealism crushes it under the weight of the universal. The idea of the person, Herzen concluded, required a synthesis of empiricist and idealist principles.\(^5\)

In his classic histories of Russian thought, Walicki thus emphasizes that one of the main ideas of Russian Hegelianism, particularly in Belinskii and Herzen, was the defense of the autonomous personality, which realizes itself through free, conscious action in history. Years later, in 1989, Walicki published a valuable essay entitled, "The Intellectual Tradition of Pre-Revolutionary Russia: A Reexamination".\(^6\) In it he identified the idea of the free, autonomous person as a key liberal element in Russian thought, one that was deeply resistant to totalitarianism.

The free, autonomous person was one of the banners around which the Westernizers organized themselves in opposition to Slavophilism. The Slavophiles, too, had their theory of personhood, to which Walicki also gives full due in his works. They emphasized not the autonomy of the self but rather its inner unity, integrity, and wholeness. According to the Slavophile theorist Ivan Kireevskii, the one-sided development of abstract knowledge, the false autonomy of reason, came at the expense of broader spiritual sensitivity and "faith", or the capacity to intuitively grasp substantial reality and attain to "integral knowledge". Rationalism operates at the level of abstract relationships and mere phenomena; by definition it isolates the subject and object of knowledge. Integral reason, or "believing reason" as Kireevskii called it, is capable of bringing them together in an immediate, concrete connection. It is a kind of revelation or immediate apprehension that penetrates to the essence of reality, ultimately to God. These ideas would have great influence on Russian religious philosophy later in the nineteenth century. Slavophile epistemology and philosophy of man drew heavily on European romanticism, especially the later Schelling's philosophy of revelation—in opposition to Hegel, in whom both Schelling and the Slavophiles saw the culmination of European rationalism.\(^7\)

Berlin, as Hamburg recounts, held German romanticism responsible for everything wicked in the Russian intelligentsia, a strange judgment that was apparently meant to apply to the Slavophiles. Walicki, in his 1989 essay reappraising the Russian intellectual tradition, drew precisely the opposite conclusion, writing that the mainstream tradition of anti-rationalist religious philosophy in Russia, beginning with Slavophilism, was a "deeply anti-totalitarian spiritual force", in large part because of its Christian personalism.

\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 127–134.
\(^7\) Walicki, A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism, pp. 99–103.
Walicki’s increasing emphasis on personhood or human dignity as the absolute value underlying liberalism is the second broad difference I would observe in comparing him to Berlin. I do not want to suggest that this value was absent in Berlin, although he was reluctant to pronounce any value as absolute. There is at least one place where he did so—his February 1951 letter to George Kennan. This is a fascinating exchange, reconstructed by Professor Hamburg, who reproduces the text of Kennan’s letter from the archives. Berlin’s response was published by Henry Hardy in 2002. First, it is remarkable that Berlin confesses “to a certain reluctance to face the fundamental moral issue on which everything turns”. We may wonder why he was reluctant to face it, but that fundamental moral issue is human dignity, which, he also writes here, is the “whole of Kantian morality”. He continues that human dignity is what ultimately refutes utilitarianism and what makes Hegel and Marx such monstrous traitors to our civilization. When . . . Ivan Karamazov rejects the worlds upon worlds of happiness which may be bought at the price of the torture to death of one innocent child, what can utilitarians, even the most civilized and humane, say to him? After all, it is in a sense unreasonable to throw away so much human bliss purchased at so small a price as one—only one—innocent victim . . . what after all is one soul against the happiness of so many?

It may be unreasonable but it would also be immoral, and so Berlin declares that Ivan Karamazov “speaks for us all”. “The one thing”, he says, “which no utilitarian paradise, no promise of eternal harmony . . . will make us accept is the use of human beings as mere means”. This is indeed a powerful statement of the absolute value of personhood, of human dignity, of being an end-in-yourself. It was expressed in a private letter. Berlin’s published writings are more circumspect.

Some of the language from Berlin’s letter to Kennan does appear in “Two Concepts of Liberty”, but the overall approach is different, in some ways strikingly so. Personhood, it seems clear, is the value that negative liberty seeks to protect, through the rule of law and human rights; it, in other words, is the ultimate justification for negative liberty. Berlin does not directly say this but rather skirts around it. He writes, “We must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to ‘degrade or deny our nature’ . . . . What then must the minimum be? That which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature. What is this essence? What are the standards which it entails? This has been, and perhaps always will be, a matter of infinite debate”. In this way Berlin tries to dispense with the whole matter.

---

In his essay Berlin is also highly ambivalent about Kant. On the one hand he uses Kantian language, and language from his letter to Kennan, in discussing the dangers of positive liberty. Hamburg quotes from the relevant passage:

To manipulate men, to propel them towards goals which you—the social reformer—see, but they may not, is to deny their human essence, to treat them as objects without wills of their own, and therefore to degrade them. That is why to lie to men ... to use them as means for my, not their own, independently conceived ends, even if it is for their own benefit, is, in effect, to treat them as sub-human. ... In the name of what can I ever be justified in forcing men to do what they have not willed or consented to? Only in the name of some value higher than themselves. But if, as Kant held, all values are made so by the free acts of men, and called values only so far as they are this, there is no value higher than the individual.\(^\text{10}\)

On the other hand, Berlin thinks that Kant himself is a source of the pernicious doctrines of positive liberty. The basis for this odd view is Kant’s theory of moral freedom, which states that we can follow our conscience and do what we ought to rather than give in to our sensuous inclinations and impulses. The exercise of this freedom is part of self-realization and, according to Kant, our link to the noumenal world. Moral freedom does not, of course, diminish the importance of negative liberty, which Kant firmly upholds, as Berlin himself is forced to admit.\(^\text{11}\) But Berlin believes that Kant’s idea of self-realization led to the core notion of positive liberty, that people who cannot or will not do it on their own should be forced to realize their higher or true self. In this way, with positive liberty, “self-realization” actually becomes “other-realization”, that is, another’s realization of whom I should be and his forcing me to become it. To hold Kant responsible for this transformation is preposterous. Worse, it denies Berlin his surest philosophical ally, since authentic self-realization (i.e., of my fullest potential as a person) is the highest value of negative liberty and its ultimate justification. Berlin’s association of positive liberty with “self-realization” badly obscures this point. Sometimes self-realization really is self-realization, not “other-realization”, and when it is we are talking about negative liberty. “Everything is what it is”, as Berlin himself says in a slightly different context.\(^\text{12}\)

It is not clear what led Berlin into this trap, but I would suggest the baleful influence on him of analytic philosophy, with its fear of absolutes. We have seen that in his letter to Kennan he confessed to a certain reluctance to face the fundamental moral issue, human dignity. Why? Possibly because he realized it would take him to the realm of metaphysics. Similar motivations may explain

\(^{10}\) Ibid., p. 137.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 153n.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 125.
his use of the term "value pluralism", as if that makes any sense without the underlying absolute value of the human person.

To this whole set of problems, Walicki's approach is, I believe, more straightforward and consistent than Berlin's. A child—innocent or not—cannot be sacrificed for the happiness of all humanity because it would be immoral. There is no other way of putting it. The absolute value of every human person is an irreducible moral idea. Walicki's teacher Sergius Hessen referred to this as the "autonomy of the good", and drew from it theistic conclusions, as did the other neo-idealist philosophers about whom Walicki writes in *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism*. In this respect all of them, even the Hegelian Boris Chicherin, generally followed Kant. For them, recognizing that human persons are absolute entailed recognizing the Absolute. It may well be that their legal philosophies are so powerful precisely because they had so keen an appreciation of the absolute value of what they were trying to protect. So does their historian.

Gary Hamburg closes his essay with some reflections on "serendipity, pain and wisdom". Here he brings to bear the approaches of intellectual history to explain the similar *Weltanschauungen* of Berlin and Walicki in 1960. Let me respond, and conclude, by quoting one of my favorite Russian philosophers, Sergei Trubetskoi. In 1900 he wrote the following words, ones with which I'm sure Professor Hamburg will wholeheartedly agree: "Genius cannot be explained without the historical conditions within which it acts and develops. But its whole peculiarity consists precisely in the fact that it cannot be explained by them alone."14

---

14 S. N. Trubetskoi, *Uchenie o Logose v ego istorii* (Moscow 1900), pp. 380–381.