

Pen Portraits of Isaiah Berlin and his Philosophical Contemporaries*

Johnny Lyons

*These pen portraits do not appear in my *Isaiah Berlin and his Philosophical Contemporaries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

Isaiah Berlin

Life and Times: Isaiah Berlin was born on 6 June, 1909 in Riga, then capital of the governorate of Livonia which formed part of the Russian Empire. As a youngster he lived through the February and October Revolutions in 1917 and, during the first, witnessed on a walk with his governess in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) a policeman being dragged away by a mob to his certain death. The memory of seeing this event with his own eyes “gave me [Berlin] a permanent horror of violence which has remained with me for the rest of my life”. The turbulence of Bolshevik rule led the Berlin family to emigrate from Latvia to England in 1921. Isaiah was educated at St Paul’s School in London from which he went up to Oxford. He succeeded in obtaining first class honours in both Greats (Classics) and PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) and being the first Jew to win a prize fellowship to All Souls College. With the onset of war, Berlin’s life became far more exposed to and involved in worldly affairs. He served in British Information Services in New York followed by assignments in the British embassies in Washington and Moscow between 1942 and 1946. During his wartime diplomatic service, he met the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad, an episode which marked him for life and prompted her to describe him as a ‘guest from the future’ in her ‘Poem without a Hero’. Following the war, Berlin abandoned philosophy, or, at least, the Oxford school of ordinary language philosophy, for the history of ideas on the basis that the latter offered a better opportunity ‘to know more at the end of one’s life than when one had begun’. His stature as a scholar and as an ebullient public intellectual rose to stellar heights during the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time, Berlin also discovered a new form of contentment when he fell in love with Aline Halban, whom he married in 1956. He died in Oxford on 5 November 1997. Following his death, his life-long pal, Stuart Hampshire, described him as a ‘life-creating friend’ while Robert Silvers, the co-founder and editor of the *New York Review of Books*, ended his tribute to Berlin by saying ‘If we are lucky, we find a friend whose sense of life is so intelligent and original and has such authority that we can’t help thinking constantly of what *he* would think. We want to walk, so to speak, in the corridors of his mind. And then a panicky moment comes, as it did with Isaiah, when it seems the friend is no longer there. But he is.’ In the words of his native Russian, Berlin was a *svetlaya lichnost* (luminescent personality). When asked what animal he would want to be, Berlin replied: “A penguin. Because when the penguin remains alone, he dies.”

Claim to Fame: centres on his pluralist and historically nuanced defence of liberalism.

Seminal Work: *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969)

What you might expect: (joint) winner of the John Locke Prize (1928), Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory (1957-67) at Oxford, knighted (1957), President of the Aristotelian Society (1963-4), President of Wolfson College (1966-75), appointed Order of Merit (1971), President of the British Academy (1974-78) and awarded the Jerusalem Prize (1979).

What you mightn’t expect: Had a stillborn older sister, failed to get admitted to Balliol College, Oxford (twice), joined Section D (covert political operations) in WWII, leaked an Anglo-American Declaration on Palestine to highly-placed US Jews in 1943 in order to thwart it (successfully), hated work, loved ice cream. used an exercise bike, declined a peerage offered by Thatcher, was a lifelong teetotaler who found conversation ‘quite sufficiently exciting’ and, according to Joseph Brodsky, spoke Russian faster than English.

Characteristic Quote: ‘A very great deal of good, undoubtedly, was done, and suffering mitigated, injustice avoided or prevented, ignorance exposed, by the conscientious attempt to apply scientific methods to the regulation of human affairs... But the central dream, the demonstration that everything in the world moved by mechanical means, that all evils could be cured by appropriate technological steps, and that there could exist engineers both of human souls and of human bodies, proved delusive.’ *The Age of the Enlightenment* (1956: 1979 ed.), 29.

Major Writings: *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), *Russian Thinkers* (1978), *Concepts and Categories* (1978), *Against the Current* (1979), *Personal Impressions* (1980), *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (1990), *The Sense of Reality* (1996).

A. J. Ayer

Life and Times: Alfred Jules, A.J. or Freddie Ayer was born on 29th October 1910, in London. His father came from a Swiss background while his mother was a Dutch citizen of Jewish descent who was a member of the Citroen automobile dynasty. A clever, precocious, and impish child, he was sent to boarding school at the age of seven, eventually winning a scholarship to Eton College, where he excelled in the classics. From there he won another scholarship to the University of Oxford, where he came under the influence of the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who described Ayer as “the best student I have yet been taught by”. Wittgenstein famously said of him that ‘the trouble with Freddie Ayer is that he is clever *all* of the time.’ It was Ryle who also convinced his star pupil to make his way to Austria and study under Moritz Schlick, a leading light of the Vienna Circle. Ayer’s direct exposure to the Viennese school of logical positivism gave him the foundation and confidence to write his first and most influential work, *Language, Truth and Logic*, a book that Isaiah Berlin urged him to write: indeed Berlin was among those who ‘discussed with me [Ayer] every point in the argument of this treatise’. It was a *succès de scandale* which brought Ayer immediate and lasting fame. Following the war, during which he was involved primarily in military intelligence, Ayer ascended the academic ladder with seemingly effortless ease, being appointed Grote Professor of Mind and Logic at University College London in 1946 and eventually returning to Oxford as Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1959. Between then and his death in 1989 he copper-fastened his reputation as a gifted lecturer, public intellectual and one of the most eloquent writers of philosophical prose in the English language. Ayer’s vanity was obvious and enduring. He made a distinction between vanity and egotism; an egotist, he said, felt he should have more medals, whilst a vain person just liked exhibiting all the medals he had. Asked by his former pupil, Ted Honderich, before he died, what he had pursued above all in his career, Ayer responded, “I suppose truth. I suppose truth. I suppose that I care more about having got some things right in philosophy, if I have got anything right, than having written elegantly. Although I like that too.”

Claim to Fame: articulating a concise, exact and vivid formulation of the Vienna Circle’s doctrine of logical positivism in English prose of peerless clarity, freshness and grace.

Seminal Work: *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956).

What you might expect: Appointed Grote Professor of Mind and Logic at University College, London in 1946 before succeeding H. H. Price to the Wykeham Professorship of Logic at the University of Oxford; President of the Aristotelian Society (1951-2); Fellow of the British Academy (1952); Knighted in 1970 and made a Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur in 1977.

What you mightn’t expect: Ayer did not conform to the conventionally austere image of the solitary and unworldly philosopher. He was an unblushing and lifelong *bon viveur*. In addition to being married four times, he managed to have a string of affairs while also maintaining an active social life in the London club and pub scene as well as the salons of high society. As a guest at a party hosted by a fashion designer in Manhattan, a very elderly Ayer came to the rescue of the women whom he had been told was being assaulted in a bedroom by Mike Tyson; Ayer asked Tyson to refrain to which his interlocutor responded ‘Do you know who the fuck I am? I’m the heavyweight champion of the world.’ Ayer replied ‘And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent in our field; I suggest that we talk about this like rational men.’ While they talked, the soon-to-be super model, Naomi Campbell, made a furtive exit.

Characteristic Quote. ‘The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose and method of a philosophical enquiry. And this is by no means so difficult a task as the history of philosophy would lead one to suppose. For if there are any questions which science leaves it to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery.’ Opening paragraph of *Language, Truth and Logic*.

Major Writings: *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge* (1940), *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956), *Philosophical Essays* (1963), *Metaphysics and Common Sense* (1969), *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (1973).

J. L. Austin

Life and Times: John Langshaw or J.L. Austin was born in Lancaster on 26 March 1911. His exceptional cleverness was obvious from early youth: he won scholarships in classics to Shrewsbury and later to Balliol College, Oxford. After graduating with an inevitable first in his finals he was elected to a fellowship by examination at All Souls College which he held for two years before taking up a tutorial fellowship at Magdalen College in 1935. It was during his time at All Souls that he befriended Isaiah Berlin. One of the consequences of this friendship was their decision to organise a weekly philosophical discussion group in Berlin's rooms, known humorously as the Steam Intellect Society, that included A.J. Ayer and Stuart Hampshire. Berlin would later describe these meetings as ones where: 'We had a feeling which was perhaps rather vain, perhaps rather conceited, that no better discussions of philosophy were occurring anywhere in the world at the moment ...than in my rooms on those evenings.' Another notable feature of these memorable discussions was the intellectual collisions that took place between Austin and Ayer which Berlin also vividly describes: 'Ayer like an irresistible missile, Austin like an immovable obstacle – the result was not a stalemate, but the most interesting, free and lively discussions of philosophy that I have ever known.' The onset of war brought a temporary halt to these meetings and resulted in Austin spending the next six years in the Intelligence Corps. It was only after the war that he established his reputation as an analytic philosopher of the first rank, the doyen of Oxford-style ordinary language philosophy. His major contributions to philosophical thinking lay mainly in his assiduous and stridently piecemeal application of the method of linguistic analysis to various philosophical problems including those of perception and the theory of action as well as in his more systematic theory of speech acts, the latter of which became immensely influential in the philosophy of language. However, Austin's distinguished philosophical career was brought to a tragically premature end in 1960 when he died of cancer at the age of forty-eight.

Claim to Fame: resides chiefly in his assertion that statements (claims to truth) are only one form of linguistic utterance, others being questions, aspirations, threats etc or what he called performative utterances: e.g. "I take this woman as my lawful wedded wife by saying I take this woman as my lawful wedded wife." In this instance we really are *doing things with words*.

Seminal Work: *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

What you might expect: Prize Fellow of All Souls College, appointed White's Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1952, President of the Aristotelian Society 1956–57, delivered the William James Lectures in Harvard in 1955 and elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1958.

What you mightn't expect: Austin ended the war as a lieutenant-colonel and received decorations for his distinguished services including the French Croix de Guerre and US Officer of the Legion of Merit. As part of his war effort in preparations for D-Day, he compiled 'a kind of guidebook' for the use of invading troops.' He gave it the title *Invade Mecum*. He coined the phrase *Le style, C'est Ryle* in a review of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* for the *Times Literary Supplement*. During a lecture in the US attended by the American philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, Austin argued that while a double negative in English implies a positive meaning, there is no language in which a double positive implies a negative. Morgenbesser responded to Austin's observation by exclaiming, "Yeah, yeah"

Characteristic Quote: 'Certainly ordinary language has no claim to be the last word, if there is such a thing. It embodies, indeed, something better than the metaphysics of the Stone Age, namely, as was said, the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men... [But] certainly ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first* word.'

'A Plea for Excuses', *Philosophical Papers*, 185.

Major Writings: *Philosophical Papers* (1961), *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), all of which were published posthumously.

P. F. Strawson

Life and Times: Peter Frederick Strawson was born in London on November 23, 1919, the son of two schoolteachers. His father died when Peter was seventeen leaving the family 'rather poor'; his widowed mother had to resort to teaching local kids for two shillings an hour to make ends meet. Gaining a scholarship to university was more of a necessity than an option for Strawson which he managed to do with flying colours; he won a State scholarship as well as an open scholarship to St. John's College, Oxford. However, he did not cover himself in glory in his final exams – Berlin, one of his examiners, wanted to award him a First but couldn't convince the older examiner, A.D. Lindsay, who felt Strawson deserved only a Third – they compromised on a Second. As a result, Strawson's hopes of becoming a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Oxford were dashed. In any case, he was called into the army in 1940 where he served for six years rising to the rank of captain. Shortly after being demobilised he performed 'the most judicious action of my life' by persuading Grace Hall Martin, whom he called 'Ann', to marry him. His good fortune continued due to the intervention of his former tutor John Mabbott ('my guardian angel') who helped get him appointed to a teaching post in philosophy at the University of Wales at Bangor. Within a year Strawson wrote a couple of published articles and won the prestigious John Locke Prize at Oxford. One of the examiners, Gilbert Ryle, was sufficiently impressed with Strawson's exam papers to recommend him for a vacant lectureship in philosophy at University College, Oxford. So, by 1947 Strawson had achieved his pre-war ambition. With the publication of two seminal articles in 1950 'On Truth' and 'On Referring', Strawson quickly established a reputation as a new and major philosophical presence in the post-war era. Indeed, from the 1950s he very quickly became the pre-eminent figure of Oxford analytic philosophy and in 1968 succeeded Gilbert Ryle as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy. He was the epitome of grace, elegance and effortless intelligence and, as Quine said admiringly, the personification of Oxford analytic philosophy. He related in his 'Intellectual Autobiography', "All in all, I count myself extremely lucky. Above all, I am fortunate in my friends and my family. ... Philosophy, friends, and family apart, my life has been enriched by the enjoyment of literature, landscape, architecture, and the company of clever and beautiful women. So far every decade has been better than the one that went before, though I recognize that, in the nature of things, this cannot continue indefinitely." Following his death in 2006, the obituary in *The Guardian* stated that, "Oxford was the world capital of philosophy between 1950 and 1970, and American academics flocked there, rather than the traffic going the other way. That golden age had no greater philosopher than Sir Peter Strawson."

Claim to Fame: lies primarily in his restoration of metaphysics or what he called 'descriptive metaphysics' as a legitimate and crucial component of the analytic philosophical enterprise.

Seminal Work: *Individuals: An essay in descriptive metaphysics* (1959)

What you might expect: Elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960, President of the Aristotelian Society 1969-70 and knighted in 1977 for his services to philosophy.

What you mightn't expect: After Strawson's father died his mother gave lessons to children at two shillings an hour to help make ends meet. He also admitted that if given the choice he would have opted to be a notable poet rather than a distinguished philosopher. And he is a member of the distinguished club who failed to win a fellowship to All Souls College, including such luminaries as A. J. Ayer, Herbert Hart and Strawson's philosopher-son, Galen.

Characteristic Quote: 'Not every accepted belief or purported piece of information can be checked or tested against the evidence of our eyes and ears; but some can and should be. A radical and all-pervasive (i.e. a philosophical) scepticism is at worst senseless, at best idle; but one of the things we learn from experience is that a practical and selective scepticism is wise, particularly when what is in question are assertions of interested parties or of people with strong partisan or ideological views, however personally disinterested they may be' *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (1992), 96.

Major Writings: *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952) *Individuals* (1959), *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), *Freedom and Resentment and other essays* (1974) and *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (1985). *Analysis and Metaphysics* (1995).

Quentin Skinner

Life and Times: Quentin Robert Duthie Skinner was born in Oldham, Lancashire on November 26, 1940. Like many children of colonial administrators, Skinner was sent to boarding school from which he followed his elder brother's footsteps in winning a scholarship from Bedford School to Gonville and Caius College at the University of Cambridge. After being awarded a Double-Starred First in History in 1962, he was offered a teaching fellowship at Christ's College where he remained until his retirement in 2008. Alongside his exact contemporary, John Dunn, Skinner began what would later become known as the Cambridge School of the History of Political Thought. He perceived his task as twofold and he pursued it with unparalleled intellectual brilliance, energy and even a certain ruthlessness: firstly, to expose the blatant ahistoricism and anachronism of most history of political thought and, secondly and more constructively, to argue in theory and demonstrate in practice what a genuinely historical account of the history of political thought amounts to. After establishing his reputation with the publication of several of his most influential papers on Thomas Hobbes and on historical methodology in the 1960s, Skinner spent five years in the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton where he became a colleague and, in several cases, a lifelong friend of several of the most distinguished thinkers of the time, Thomas Kuhn, Albert Hirschman, Raymond Geuss, Clifford Geertz and Richard Rorty, each of whom had a major influence on his ideas. His return to his *alma mater* in 1979 coincided with the appearance of his magnum opus, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Skinner proceeded to cement his reputation as the high-king of contextual intellectual history over the subsequent decades producing a consistently impressive and steady stream of original historical writings as well as authoritative editions of the works of past political thinkers. In 1996 he was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge and became Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University in 1999. He is married to the philosopher Susan James with whom he has a son and daughter. In 2008 he was appointed Barber Beaumont Professor of the Humanities at Queen Mary, University of London, which he has played a leading role in establishing as a centre for the study of the history of political thought. He celebrated his 80th birthday in November 2020 at which time he continued to be an energetic teacher and prolific scholar.

Claim to Fame: centres on being the principal founder and driver of the influential Cambridge School of the History of Political Thought which is dedicated to producing authentically historical accounts of past political thinkers and their ideas.

Seminal Work: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*: Two Vols. (1978).

What you might expect: Cambridge Apostle, appointed Professor Political Science (1978) at the University of Cambridge, winner of the Wolfson History Prize (1979), Fellow of the British Academy (1981), appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge (1996), Visiting Professor at the Collège de France (1997), Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2003-4), winner of the Balzan Prize (2006).

What you mightn't expect: Skinner's reputation for practicing what he preaches is not limited to his scholarship. A committed republican, Skinner declined the offer of a knighthood in 1996 on being appointed Regius Professor of Modern History. When the university urged him to accept the knighthood for the good name of Cambridge, he responded, "But I'm a Republican. I can't do that - my friends would never speak to me again." Other notable academics who have declined a knighthood include Gilbert Ryle and Amartya Sen. Incidentally, Skinner's fellow native of Lancashire, the artist L.S. Lowry, holds the record for declining such honours.

Characteristic Quote: 'But to learn from the past – and we cannot otherwise learn at all – the distinction between what is necessary and what is contingently the product of our own local arrangements is to learn one of the keys to self-awareness itself.' From 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method*: Vol.1: 89.

Major Writings *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 Vols., (1978), *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, (1996), *Liberty before Liberalism*, (1998), *Visions of Politics*, 3 Vols., (2002), *Forensic Shakespeare*, (2014), *From Humanism to Hobbes* (2018).

Bernard Williams

Life and Times: Bernard Arthur Owen Williams was born on September 21, 1929, a month before the Wall Street Crash. An only, doted child Williams won a scholarship to Oxford from which he graduated with a congratulatory first. His intellectual quickness were recognised by everyone who came into contact with him and his mentor, Gilbert Ryle, described it vividly saying that he ‘understands what you’re going to say better than you understand it yourself, and sees all the possible objections to it, and all the possible answers to all the possible objections, before you’ve got to the end of your sentence.’ His precocious brilliance led some to say in his later career that he had been the cleverest undergraduate in Oxford and still was. After spending two years of national service in Canada flying Spitfires for the Royal Air Force, he returned to Oxford where he took up a fellowship at All Souls College and subsequently at New College. He married his first wife, Shirley Catlin (the Labour MP and member of the SDP ‘Gang of Four’, Shirley Williams) in 1955 and moved to University College London. He was appointed to the Knightbridge chair of philosophy at Cambridge in 1967 and a fellow of Kings College of which he would become Provost in 1979. During this period his first marriage hit the rocks; he had an affair with Patricia Skinner, an editor at Cambridge University Press and then wife of the Cambridge historian, Quentin Skinner, whom he married in 1975. In 1988, he joined the brain drain from the UK to the US taking up the post of Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at University of California, Berkeley. He returned to Oxford in 1990 as White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy where he remained until 1996 at which point he returned to All Souls College. By then Williams had established a reputation as one of the leading philosophers and public intellectuals of his time. He was a regular, versatile and consistently arresting contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and *London Review of Books* where he reviewed most of the leading philosophical publications of the day. One philosopher described him well by saying he was ‘an analytical philosopher with the soul of general humanist.’ It is not too fanciful to suppose that his life and thought were informed by D H Lawrence’s advice (which he refers to in his book *Morality*) to “find your deepest impulse, and follow that.” He died in Rome on June 10 2003, the same day as NASA launched its Spirit Rover Mission to the planet Mars.

Claim to Fame: resides chiefly in demolishing, occasionally in a haughty manner, much of the philosophical pretensions of traditional moral theory and pointing towards the need for a more honest, imaginative and humanistic approach to ethics and philosophy as a whole.

Seminal Work: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (1985).

What you might expect: A Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, Knightbridge Professor Philosophy and later Provost of King’s College Cambridge, elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1971, made an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1983, served on several Royal Commissions and was knighted in 1999.

What you mightn’t expect: He despised intellectual smugness, especially in its scientific form and therefore had a problem with thinkers such as Steven Pinker whom he regarded as “a very smooth performer, very clever, but utterly glib.” He also had the humility and wisdom to recognise when he didn’t have the requisite skills to take something on, such as his autobiography, “Bill Buford got me to write something about my schooldays and he explained why this wasn’t going to be a success as writing. I learned a lot from that – mostly negative.”

Characteristic Quote: ‘If the passion for truthfulness is merely controlled and stilled without being satisfied, it will kill the activities it is supposed to support. This may be one of the reasons why, at the present time, the study of the humanities runs a risk of sliding from professional seriousness, through professionalization, to a finally disenchanting careerism.’ *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), 3.

Major Writings: *Moral Luck* (1981), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (1985), *Shame and Necessity*, (1993), *Truth and Truthfulness*, (2004), *In the Beginning Was the Deed* ((2005), *The Sense of the Past* (2006), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, (2008).