

Views and Reviews of *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* (Bloomsbury, 2020) by Johnny Lyons

One couldn't wish for a more enlightening or readable account of Berlin's philosophy. Beginners will learn from this excellent book and Berlin aficionados will be stimulated by it. It is hard to imagine anyone reading Lyons on Berlin and not wanting to read more Berlin or, for that matter, more Lyons. Highly recommended.

Quassim Cassam, former Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge and author of *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political*.

Isaiah Berlin is generally recognised as one of the most important political thinkers –and best essayists – of the last hundred years. But what is less well known is that his celebrated defence of pluralism and liberalism is informed by an original if not fully explicit conception of philosophy. In *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* Johnny Lyons excavates the hidden theoretical foundations of Berlin's ideas, transforming our understanding of his political thought. In linked chapters on philosophy, contingency, freedom and authenticity, Lyons exhibits not only a mastery of Berlin's writings but a convincing appreciation of their place in the wider debates that continue to dominate philosophy, political theory and intellectual history. His book provides an exceptionally clear and faithful account of Berlin's philosophical outlook as well as an accessible and lively introduction to philosophy as a humanistic discipline.

John Gray, Professor Emeritus of European Thought at the London School of Economics and author of *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought*.

Lyons's book draws our attention anew to one of the keenest philosophical minds of the twentieth century, or indeed of any century. Isaiah Berlin was unduly modest about his philosophical writings, and in this original, lucid and compelling study, Lyons shows that Berlin was a far more consistent and integrated thinker than perhaps even he himself realised. His book is required reading for anyone interested in Berlin, and in the life of the mind.

John Banville, winner of the 2005 Booker Prize.

Every now and then in life one encounters a book that stands head and shoulders above its surroundings. For me Johnny Lyons's study of Isaiah Berlin's ideas is such a book. Its style and content gripped me from the start, and the author seems to me to display considerable originality and ingenuity in understanding the various threads of Berlin's thought, uniting them, and displaying the result as a consistent, satisfying whole that tells us something new and profound about the human condition.

Henry Hardy, Honorary Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, principal editor of Isaiah Berlin's writings and author of *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*.

As a convinced liberal, I confess that I am not an entirely objective reader when it comes to Isaiah Berlin, though this also makes me a critical reader of books about him. Johnny Lyons shows, in a most attractive and readable style, how Berlin was not just a student of the history of ideas, but a product of that history, as well as a very significant contributor to the world of ideas. If you want to get a sense, not only of the key elements of Isaiah Berlin's thinking, but of why he is so important, you could not do better than to read this new book. It not only sets out Berlin's ideas, but gives context to them, and that provides a particular depth and richness to the work, and to an understanding of Berlin.

Lord Alderdice, former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly 1998-2004, leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland 1987-98 and currently Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford.

The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin by Johnny Lyons is a deeply engaged encounter with the writings of Isaiah Berlin. Based on the assumption that Berlin's work was grounded in a unified and wide-ranging philosophical perspective, the book provides one of the few sustained systematic accounts of that perspective, demonstrating the originality and depth of Berlin's ideas. Lyons relates Berlin's thought to some of the most urgent questions of contemporary philosophy in an impressively scholarly yet accessible manner.

James L. Hyland, Lecturer (retired) in Political Science, Trinity College Dublin, and author of *Democratic Theory: The Philosophical Foundations*.

Isaiah Berlin was an intellectual colossus who ranged over disciplines and topics with great verve and vivacity. No academic straightjacket could ever restrain his breadth of thought and thinking. The same could be said for Johnny Lyons's account of the philosophy of Isaiah Berlin as it excavates the true essence of Berlin's outlook.... A magisterial work.

Matthew Flinders, Professor of Politics and Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics, University of Sheffield, UK.

If you thought the philosophical legacy of Isaiah Berlin came to little more than his renowned distinction between positive and negative liberty, Johnny Lyons's *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* will make you think again. Central to Lyons's discussion is Berlin's thesis of value pluralism, which Lyons places firmly in a dialectical and revealing conversation with Rorty, Dworkin, Putnam and others, and for which he makes a most persuasive case. An elegant, scholarly and engaging introduction to the thought of a neglected philosopher, *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* is in its own right a significant and sophisticated treatise in political philosophy.

Gerard Casey, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University College Dublin, and author of *Freedom's Progress?*

A clear, reliable, and wide-ranging examination of Isaiah Berlin's philosophy
Nigel Warburton, author of *A Little History of Philosophy*.

A deeply impressive book. Broad in its field of references - the book quotes poets and novelists and journalists as well as a huge range of philosophers - it's an exemplary work of humanistic thought... Lyons's great achievement is to condense and clarify Berlin's thought and excavate the tragic insights that underlay this historian of ideas' idea of history.

Christopher Bray, *The Critic and author of 1965: The Year Modern Britain Was Born*.

The conventional story is that after a period in which Berlin engaged in the highly analytic style of philosophy practised in Oxford and elsewhere in the 1940s and 1950s, he broke away and turned to the history of ideas, hoping as he put it himself "to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun". Not so, according to Lyons: what happened instead was that Berlin began to do philosophy in a different, more fruitful, more humane form. ... Lyons makes the best possible case that Berlin never really abandoned philosophy, but instead switched to a different way of doing it.

David Miller, Professor of Political Theory and Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. Among his books are *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

Johnny Lyons, the author of *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin*, announces with disarming modesty that his account of Berlin as a willy-nilly systematic philosopher will be "unapologetically sympathetic" and dispense with the nitpicking of more conventionally analytic styles of commentary. His defence of Berlin has the virtue of showing both how the argument for liberalism can be made to work on the critics' terms, and how it can be strengthened by attending to what was most distinctive about Berlin's historical mode of argumentation.

Nikhil Krishnan, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 2020.

The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin is a thorough and trenchant piece of scholarship, moving over a vast range to match that of Berlin himself... Barring the obvious scholarly value of Lyons's book, restating the case for liberalism has merit in itself and may well be worthwhile in our current political climate. Lyons's book is a wonderful explication of the hidden philosophical reasoning which underpins what we take to be the "obvious" political dispositions of tolerance, freedom and equality. *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* should pique the interest of those who perhaps need to do some soul-searching and return to a philosophical justification for the liberalism which has become so much part of the political and social everyday it is no longer visible. A book like Lyons's serves a function beyond the explication of the thought of one of liberalism's most contemplative, meticulous and erudite defenders.

Adam Boate, *Dublin Review of Books*, September 2020.

Lyons regards philosophy as an engagement that involves more than the parsing of terms that is found so frequently today, and instead requires a wholehearted commitment to truth. From this perspective, Lyons interprets Berlin's essays as instances of philosophical inquiry for others to emulate, as they exemplify a searching exploration of questions that are, if not timeless, persistently perplexing... Lyons's book is a noteworthy contribution to Berlin scholarship and merits the attention of anyone interested in these issues.

Jason Ferrell, *The Review of Politics* (Issue 3, 2021)

If we want to understand liberty, is it wise to turn to Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty and to the priority he accords to the former? To answer that question may be the best reason to read Berlin today. Liberty and liberalism, along with "value pluralism," are the concepts with which he is most closely associated. ... Most readers of this journal will probably agree that it is possible to philosophize while writing about important figures in the history of philosophy. Johnny Lyons agrees and takes it as his main purpose in *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* to argue for the depth of Berlin's thought. Lyons taught political theory at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, before beginning work in corporate communications; but separation from academia has not prevented him from producing a densely argued book.

David Fott, *Interpretation* (Issue 3, 2021) a journal of political philosophy

In *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin*, an encompassing study of Berlin's extensive oeuvre, Johnny Lyons makes an original suggestion for how to address the sustained riddles of Berlin scholarship. For Lyons, the key to understanding Berlin's political theory is his particular notion of philosophy. The author seeks to show "that it is only by unearthing Berlin's conception of philosophy that we can make sense of his political theory". ... [O]ne of the book's great merits is that Lyons is familiar not only with Berlin himself but also with many of those writers who can help us tackle some of the most pressing issues that Berlin raises without providing satisfactory solutions (Ronald Dworkin, David Wiggins, and Susan R. Wolf, among others). Moreover, Lyons uses a couple of less well-known texts by Berlin to offer new perspectives on some of the latter's key themes, such as liberty. ... Lyons's book is a comprehensive and innovative treatment of Berlin's philosophy that will be enjoyed by Berlin enthusiasts and is obligatory reading for any serious scholar of Isaiah Berlin.

Mario Clemens, *Literature and Philosophy* (Volume 47, Number 2, 2023)