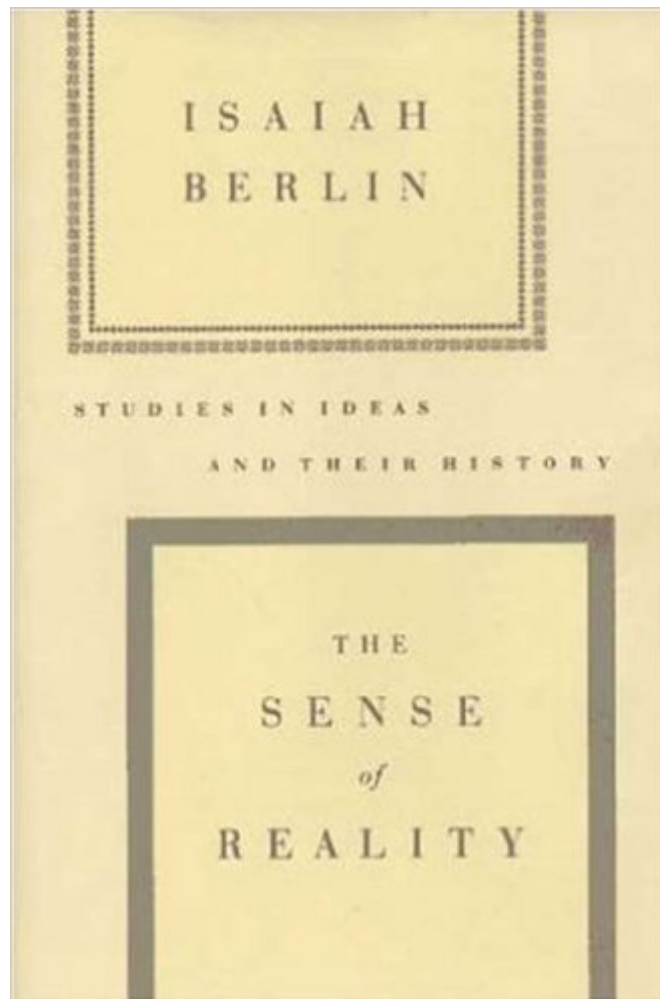


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The Sense Of Reality: Studies In Ideas And Their History



Synopsis

Berlin's "The Sense of Reality" made available, in the months before the author's death, an important body of previously unknown work by one of the century's leading historians of ideas, and one of the finest essayists writing in English.

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Essays

Customer Reviews

All of Isaiah Berlin's books are good. But this one is his best. "The Sense of Reality" is a collection of nine brilliant essays on "ideas and their history." Each essay is a powerhouse of intellectual electricity! In a style that is stimulating, compelling--and, in the end, irresistible--Berlin writes about ideas with all the nervous energy of an enthusiast. Yet he is clear to the end. He is a great explainer. He distinguishes one thing from another. He takes on the knots, unties them, and lets go of the rope. The effect on the reader is one of exhilarating liberation. One can breathe a little freer. At the same time, one must breathe a little harder. Up here, at high altitude, in the Sierras of the cerebellum, the air is crisp as paper. And our guide, our cicerone, our Isaiah, keeps us skipping--at a dizzying pace!--from mountaintop to mountaintop. As the pages turn, they envelop the reader in a whirlpool of words that round up the ideas--only to plunge them into a deep sea of profound thought. Once again, we gasp for air. Indeed, it seems that, wherever Berlin takes us--the mountains, seas, skies, stars of the mind--we are left dazzled, breathless, tottering on the edge of horizons that become elastic, expansive, infinite . . . In the title essay, Berlin writes of the "disturbing experience," the "electric shock," of "genuinely profound insight"--which he likens to the touching of nerves

deeply embedded in our most private thoughts and basic beliefs. This is not Science. This is the Humanities. Not the mechanics of Newton. But the Pensees of Pascal. Not knowledge. But knowing that "there is too much we do not know, but dimly surmise." Very well. But what does Berlin mean by the "sense of reality"? In his essay "Political Judgement," he drops a few more clues. It is "a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life." Or: "natural wisdom, imaginative understanding, insight, perceptiveness, and...intuition." Or: "practical wisdom,...a sense of what will 'work' and what will not. It is a capacity...for synthesis rather than analysis, for knowledge in the sense in which trainers know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras, as opposed to that in which chemists know the contents of their test tubes, or mathematicians know the rules that their symbols obey." Outside the sphere of science--i.e., in real life (personal and political)--the scientific method fails. But a "sense of reality" can work. Really? Why? How can that be? Perhaps it is because a "sense of reality" allows one to grope, feel, touch, grasp...the important things in life..., which slip through the fingers of science. The search for truth, or for what works, whether by scientific method, or by a "sense of reality," is one thing. But will is another. Will asserts and expresses not truth but self. According to Berlin, will manifests itself individually in Romanticism ("The Romantic Revolution") and collectively in Nationalism ("Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism"). Berlin tasks the enlightened rationalists for failing to anticipate the rise of nationalism. But who can foresee the unpredictable? Who can see the invisible? Will is wind--a forceful, violent, overpowering impulse that cannot be grasped. Will without strength, however, is of no effect. The strong devour the weak. This truism is so obvious that it is almost always overlooked. But Berlin does not overlook it. He brings it to light. You can feel the fire in his essay on Indian Nationalism ("Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality"). And these flames from the east are reflected in the west by writers such as Machiavelli, de Maistre, de Sade, Nietzsche, and other "irrationalists" who see sharp teeth glistening behind big smiles. Being strong of will, but weak of strength, I am drawn to Berlin's discussion of the disgusting emotions: shame, humiliation, degradation, frustrated desire, and a desperate need for recognition. Berlin holds up the mirror, and I see myself--my own desperate need for recognition compelling me to write this review! Regardless, I read Berlin not to gain knowledge, but to hone my wits--and sharpen my teeth! The important thing is not to remember what he wrote, but to profit from reading him. And the profit I get from reading Berlin is this: I look deeper, see clearer, and believe less. I come away from this book with a keener "sense of reality"--and a more open sense of wonder. Wonder! Not at the glittering galaxies of human achievement. But at the void, the abyss, the infinite space of the unknowable . . . In the final analysis, there is no final analysis. Berlin does not wrap up, tie down, nail shut. Rather, he picks

locks, pries open, leaves ajar...There is no "closure"--i.e., no death--in these pages. Reading them, one gets the feeling that Berlin likes his human beings free and alive. And that puts him at odds with those deadly human engineers who like cadavers and control.

This is exactly one of the best books of Isaiah Berlin. Especially in the paper of "Philosophy & Government Repression", Berlin explained clearly in a British/Oxon point of view about those very basic, but very important questions, such as what the real subject of philosophical studies should be, what philosophy is, what kind of philosophers are the first class ones? etc. etc. A clear-headed statement for all people who interested in philosophical topics or even try to "teach" philosophy.

I have, since first reading this book a few years ago, made an effort to add it to the libraries of all my friends whenever a holiday occurs. It is a book that I reread whenever I want to be stimulated. The opening essay, "The Sense of Reality", is a masterful study of historical thinking. Berlin is able to pick apart massive themes and shape them to his interests. There is a good reason that he has been labeled by many as one of the greatest essayists of all time; this collection certainly rivals "The Hedgehog and the Fox".

This profound and enlightening book is one of several anthologies of Isaiah Berlin's essays and speeches. All of the nine pieces in this book are informed, perceptive discussions of concepts ("ideas"), either about history itself, in a broad sense including politics and philosophy, or related to a particular historical time. About half of the pieces are general and are the most relevant to the modern reader and the rest are more specific. The first three pieces are about human sensing of reality as it is relevant to history, politics and repression. The next two deal with socialism and nineteenth century Marxism. The last four pieces deal with the real Romantic revolution, the Russian legacy of artistic commitment, Kant and nationalism, and Tagore and nationality. This anthology collects unpublished works and was edited near the end of Berlin's life and so does not necessarily reflect how Berlin himself might have published the material. Berlin's erudition, understanding and mountain-top perspective are a pleasure to experience. His sentences are the opposite extreme of the pabulum style of modern twelve-steps-to-whatever books; they are long and rich with thoughtful clauses and parentheses. For example, in a sentence about what makes statesmen successful comes a parenthetical remark that Vico was really a "theologian in historical clothing". The structure of his reasoning is not spelled out in advance. Appreciating Berlin's elaborate style is a matter of taste; some of his musings will hide the simplicity of the underlying

point for a modern reader unused to this disappearing style. For example, one could reduce his first essay to the truism that increased abstraction reduces the predictive capacity of a model, but the value of Berlin's text lies exactly in the details. This is the point of his essay: details are important to understand reality and furthermore, "men of genius" have the imaginative insight to see beyond the details to perceive the fundamental assumptions and underlying thinking of a society that others miss. Although it was no drawback, I personally found little of the humour that some ascribe to his text. Perhaps it came through in his speeches. Berlin makes recurring observations about the revolutionary and moral aspects of an idea. He shows us, for example, that some concepts that people have attempted to force on society are fundamentally insufficient (e.g., Marxism) and their imposition on society is immoral because of the resulting suffering. One wonders if his observation of morals is one of the reasons why he did not describe himself as a historian. Most of the Berlin anthologies focus on specific themes such as liberty, categories or Russian thinkers. This particular anthology is subtitled "Studies in Ideas and their History", which is accurate enough but, aside from the first three, the pieces in this book are not strongly connected by common themes. I highly recommend reading "The Sense of Reality". Further Berlin essays on the history of ideas can be found in "Against the Current". If you have time for only one Berlin anthology, you may wish to start with some of his most famous pieces that are collected in "The Proper Study of Mankind". This concludes my review of this book. The following is a summary of some of the key ideas of the first three essays, starting with "Sense of Reality", after which the book is

named.-----Any given historical era or time point can be characterised by the known economic, social, linguistic and environmental situation of that time. A profound understanding of that time, however, requires knowledge and insight of the underlying assumptions, the implicit realities, "the network of habits and thoughts and feelings" in which the inhabitants of the time lived, which they felt were "too obvious to need mentioning." "...The quality of depth in thinkers who are professional philosophers or novelists, or men of genius of other kinds, precisely consists in penetrating to one of these great assumptions, embedded in some widespread attitude, and isolating that and questioning it... Everyone will know the quality that I refer to. ...Newton ...altered many men's outlooks, no doubt, but nothing that he said directly touched their innermost private and quintessential thoughts and feelings. But Pascal questioned those categories, touched those half conscious, or altogether unconscious habits of thought, beliefs, attitudes in terms of which the inner life, the basic components of their private worlds, presented themselves to the men of his time. ...Locke... has never been regarded as an exceptionally profound thinker; this despite his originality, his

universality, his massive contribution to philosophy and politics as compared with the isolated fragments left by Pascal. It is so too with Kant... he was... one of the few authentically profound and therefore revolutionary thinkers in human history: one who... answered not merely what was generally being asked, but pierced through a layer of suppositions and assumptions which language itself embodies to habits of thought, basic frameworks in terms of which we think and act, and touched these. Nothing can compare with the experience of being made aware of the characteristics of the most intimate instruments with which one thinks and feels... of the innermost terms, the most deeply ingrained categories, with which, and not about which, one thinks..." ... "With great patience, industry, assiduity we can delve beneath the surface - novelists do this better than trained 'social scientists' ... Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Nietzsche have penetrated more deeply than John Buchan, or H.G. Wells or Bertrand Russell..." "It is a truism to say that it is the differences and not the similarities that constitute the completeness of an act of recognition, of a historical description, of a personality - whether of an object or an individual or a culture. ... There is a Greek or German way of talking, eating, concluding treaties, engaging in commerce, dancing, gesturing, tying shoelaces, building ships, explaining the past, worshipping God, permeated by some common quality which cannot be analysed in terms of instances and general laws or effects of discoverable causes, recurrent uniformities, repetitions which allow common elements to be abstracted and sometimes experimented upon. ... We recognise these manifestations as we recognise the expressions on the faces of our friends. The interconnection of different activities which are seen to spring from, or constitute, a unique single character or style or historical situation is much more like the unity of an aesthetic whole, a symphony or a portrait; what we condemn as false or inappropriate is much more like what is false or inappropriate in a painting or a poem than in a deductive system or a scientific theory..." "The ideal of all natural sciences is a system of propositions so general, so clear, so comprehensive, connected with each other by logical links so unambiguous and direct that the result resembles as closely as possible a deductive system... it has always been the case that the more general and logically satisfactory a system was, the less useful it was in describing the specific course of the behaviour of a particular entity in the universe... Historians, whose business is to tell us what actually happened in the world, consequently fight shy of rigid theoretical patterns into which the facts sometimes have to be fitted with a good deal of awkwardness and artificiality. ... what a historian wishes to bring out is what is specific, unique, in a given character or series of events or historical situation... The historian is concerned to paint a portrait which conveys the unique pattern of experience, and not an X-ray photograph which is capable of acting as a general symbol for all structures of a general type." "The Sense of Reality" is

the sense "acquaintance with particulars" as opposed to idealised entities. It is "the kind of semi-instinctive integration of the unaccountable infinitesimals of which individual and social life is composed... in which all kinds of skills are involved - powers of observation, knowledge of facts, above all experience - in connection with which we speak of a sense of timing, sensitiveness to the needs and capacities of human beings, political and historical genius, in short the kind of human wisdom, ability to conduct one's life or fit means to ends" which is not at all like the mere knowledge of facts. ... there is an element of improvisation, of playing by ear, of being able to size up the situation, of knowing when to leap and when to remain still, for which no formulae, no nostrums, no general recipes, no skill in identifying specific situations as instances of general laws can be a substitute." "What I am attempting to describe is ... that capacity called imaginative insight, at its highest point genius - which historians and novelists and dramatists and ordinary persons endowed with understanding of life (at its normal level called common sense) alike display. ... It is when a historian so describes the past that we are conscious of having brought before us not merely attested facts but a revelation of a form of life, of a society presented in sufficiently rich and coherent detail, sufficiently similar to what we ourselves understand by human life or society or men's intercourse, that we can continue - extrapolate - for ourselves, go on by ourselves, understand why this man did this and that nation that, without having to have it explained in detail. ... it is then that we recognise what we have been given as being history, and not the dry rattle of mechanical formulae or a loose heap of historical bones." The "Sense of Reality" essay walks us through some fundamental notions of history. People tend to think of history as growing in inevitable stages "although they do not, perhaps, believe in the machinery of determinism." We believe that we have methods to distinguish the real from the illusory, and here the various historical theorists provide their various models or principles: Hegel, Marx, Comte, Darwin and so on. According to this belief, to be Utopian, "to be unrealistic, not to understand history or life or the world, is to fail to grasp a particular set of laws and formulae which each school offers as the key to its explanation of why what happens must happen as it does..." And yet no attempt to provide such a key in history has worked so far. We still rely on those historical researchers "who spend their lives in painfully piecing together their knowledge from fragments of actual evidence, obeying this evidence wherever it leads them, however torturous and unfamiliar the pattern, or with no consciousness of any pattern at all." Furthermore, those who have attempted to apply general laws of a political theory, such as Marxism, comprehensively to history and on society have always failed and have hurt innumerable innocents. Life is not simple. Successful "Political Judgement", the title of the second essay, depends on political instinct, flair and acute appreciation of the details. This is the opposite of the

belief of eighteenth and nineteenth century dogmatic thinkers that universal laws, patterns and methods were the key to governing. To some extent, everyone has to integrate "the fleeting, broken infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life at any level ... without stopping to analyse how he does what he does... Everyone must do it, but Bismarck does it over a much larger field, against a wider horizon of possible courses of action and with far greater power - to a degree, in fact, which is quite correctly described as genius." One can imagine what Berlin would say of the modern phenomena of government by fear of tabloids or government by opinion polls. The point about "Philosophy and Government Repression", the third essay, is that real, "first-rate" philosophers necessarily make radical reassessments of life in the context of the specific society in which they live and so governments, fearing change, naturally try to repress them. The business of State control "is to preserve the status quo - to guarantee some established situation...." and to protect prevailing interests. "The principle function of philosophy is to break through, liberate, upset. ... Philosophers are necessarily subversive." Although mild in appearance, the philosopher is likely to be more destructive and revolutionary than those in society who make far more noise. Contrary to what eighteenth century thinkers believed, "we have learned that not all good things [such as freedom, order, justice, virtue, equality, pursuit of happiness] are compatible with one another; and that if we seek them, we seek them for their own sakes and not because they form a part of some imaginary harmony which a baseless optimist idealism has led us to expect and the attempts to introduce which into the world have already caused it so much needless suffering and frustration." Philosophy is an attempt "to find ways of thinking and talking which, by revealing similarities hitherto unnoticed, and differences hitherto unremarked... cause a transformation of outlook sufficient to alter radically attitudes and ways of thought and speech, and in this way solve or dissolve problems, redistribute subjects, reformulate and reclassify relationships between objects, and transform our vision of the world. This, as in the analogous case of the arts, is something which can be performed only within and for each generations separately, for the vision of one generation must always, if formulated in words, frozen into techniques, established as an orthodoxy, become a prison-house for the next or next but one; and therefore no 'progress' in the precise sense can be expected; each generation requires its own... new insights, its own self-liberation, its own powerful men of genius to transfigure its vision..." That is why, in most professions, including historians, one can be second rate or third rate and yet still make a positive contribution, but a second-rate philosopher continues with old techniques, adds to the old orthodoxy and thereby obstructs progress. "... all enemies of freedom automatically round upon intellectuals." Any attempt to suppress the freedom of philosophers "is a genuine suppression of a basic interest and need and

craving of human beings. That is why periods of conformity ... are the blankest patches in the history of human thought."

Another excellent collection of I. Berlin essays.

great

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