

**Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas**  
**Lecture One: Oxford, 19 January 2010**  
**“What is (and to what end do we study) the history of ideas?”**

1. **Williams**  
“This is a study in the history of philosophy rather than in the history of ideas. I use these labels to mark the distinction that the history of ideas is history before it is philosophy, while with the history of philosophy it is the other way round.”<sup>1</sup>
2. For the history of ideas “the question about a work *what does it mean?* is centrally the question *what did it mean?*, and the pursuit of that question moves horizontally in time from the work, as well as backwards, to establish the expectations, conventions, familiarities, in terms of which the author could have succeeded in conveying a meaning.”
3. The history of philosophy “... has to constitute its object, the work, in genuinely historical terms, yet there is a cut-off point where authenticity is replaced by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas.”<sup>2</sup>
4. “rational reconstruction ... where the rationality of the construction is essentially and undisguisedly conceived in contemporary style”.<sup>3</sup>
5. The approach to texts taken by the history of ideas is the equivalent of “playing seventeenth-century scores on seventeenth-century instruments according to seventeenth-century practice”<sup>4</sup>, while, in the case of the history of philosophy “the musical analogy is, as an ideal, Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella*, in which the melodic line is Pergolesi’s, the harmony and orchestration Stravinsky’s”.<sup>5</sup>
6. **Chladenius:**  
“An interpretation is, then, nothing other than teaching someone the concepts which are necessary to learn to understand or to fully understand a speech or a written work.”
7. Three general points:
  - (i) What does “justice” mean? vs What does Rawls mean by “justice”?
  - (ii) Understanding a philosophical term as grasping a pattern in a text
  - (iii) The enthymematic nature of philosophical arguments
8. “Rational reconstruction” as “reverse engineering”

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.9

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Descartes*, pp. 9-10

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Descartes*, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Descartes*, p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Descartes*, p. 10

9. **Mill:**  
 “The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it... No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good.” (*Utilitarianism*, Ch.4)
10. “Mill has made as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire.” This fallacy is “so obvious, that it is quite wonderful how Mill failed to see it.”<sup>6</sup>
11. **Mill’s “proof” reconstructed:**
- (1) Whatever is desirable (in the sense that it *ought*) to be desired is desirable in the sense that it *can* be desired
  - (2) Whatever *can* be desired *is* desired
  - (3) Only happiness is desired
- Therefore:
- (4) Only happiness is desirable in the sense that it ought to be desired (strictly: if anything ought to be desired, happiness is the only thing it can be).
12. **The Problem of Development:**
- (1) If a final state (FS) is a *development* from an initial state (IS) then there will be some features of FS by which it differs from IS.
  - (2) But then what relationship do those aspects of FS bear to IS?
  - (3a) Are these apparently novel elements to be held to be somehow already present, implicitly, but not apparently, in IS? If so, then they are not really something new.
  - (3b) On the other hand, if the novel features of FS are *not* to be found already in IS, then they must be something that is – in relation to that antecedent state – arbitrary, and, hence, unexplained.
- Thus,
- (4) it seems that either FS is inexplicable in relation to IS or else it is not really a *development* from IS at all.
13. **Herder:**
- “Bearing in mind these transformations, these living operations in the egg of the bird or in the womb of the mammal, I feel we speak imprecisely if we talk of

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<sup>6</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Sect. 40

seeds that are merely *evolving*, or of an *epigenesis* by which the members are superadded externally. It is *Bildung* (genesis), an effect of growing, inward *Kräfte*, brought together in a mass by Nature in order that they might manifest themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

14. **Skinner:** “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”:<sup>8</sup>

“The danger here is not merely that of “seeing” far too readily the “modern” elements which the commentator has thus programmed himself to find; there is also the danger that such interpretations may part company with anything that could in principle be a plausible account of what Machievelli’s political writings were meant to achieve or intended to mean....The surest symptom, in short, of this mythology of prolepsis is that the discussions which it governs are open to the crudest type of criticism that can be levelled against any teleological explanation: the action has to await the future to await its meaning.”

(p. 24)

15. “The relevant logical consideration is that no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done. This special authority of an agent over his intentions does not exclude, of course, the possibility that an observer might be in a position to give a fuller or more convincing account of the agent’s behaviour than he could give himself... But it does exclude the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent’s behaviour could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself. For if a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of description which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and clarify what he was doing. Otherwise the resulting account, however compelling, cannot be an account of *his* statement or action.”

(pp. 28--29)

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<sup>7</sup> [Siehet man diese Wandlungen, diese lebendigen Wirkungen sowohl im Ei des Vogels als im Mutter-leibe des Tiers, das Lebendige gebäret, so, dünkt mich, spricht man uneigentlich, wenn man von Keimen, die nur entwickelt würden, oder von einer Epigenesis redet, nach der die Glieder von außen zuwachsen. Bildung (genesis) ist's, eine Wirkung innerer Kräfte, denen die Natur eine Masse vorbereitet hatte, die sie sich zubilden, in der sie sich sichtbar machen sollten.] *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Werke, 6 (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989) Bk V, Ch. 2, p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3--53.