Isaiah Berlin’s writings have impinged upon so many distinct spheres of thought and enquiry, and have ramified in such different and at times unexpected directions, that a question may be raised as to what leading conceptions have ultimately guided or held together his varied excursions into these apparently disparate intellectual domains. This is not as straightforward a question as it might look; indeed, in the eyes of some of his admirers it may seem to be quite inapposite, missing the essential point. For they might claim that much of the distinctive value of his achievement lies precisely in the notable absence it displays of any unitary ambitions or systematic pretensions; the range and sheer diversity of what he has written, involving amongst other things a constant readiness to consider on their own terms both sharply conflicting beliefs and the points of view of those holding them, have played a key role in enlarging the horizons of his readers and in loosening the grip of obstructive prejudices or dogmas.

Berlin himself has characterised as ‘doctrinaire’ a person who is ‘liable to suppress what he may, if he comes across it, suspect to be true’,¹ and it is certainly the case that his own outlook stands in complete contrast to this. Even so, and notwithstanding the openness and objectivity of approach he has consistently shown, it seems possible to discern in his work the outlines of particular

¹ See p. 161 below. Subsequent references to Berlin’s text are by page number alone.
preoccupations and themes that give it an inner coherence not the less impressive for being relatively unobtrusive and unemphatic. What at first sight may appear to be stray or unrelated strands in his thinking frequently turn out on closer examination to be threads in a wider pattern, forming parts of a more inclusive whole. They can be seen, in other words, as contributing to an intricate complex of subtly interconnected ideas rather than as belonging to the framework of some rigid theoretical system. Furthermore, the complex in question can itself be said to reflect the presence of certain overarching concerns whose pervasive influence has manifested itself in various ways throughout Berlin’s intellectual career.

One of these recurrent concerns is with the nature and significance of history, a subject which is central to the title essay of the present collection. Berlin has often denied that he is or ever has been a historian, and it may be that there is some accepted if restrictive sense of the term in which this is so. The fact remains, however, that he has made a unique and celebrated contribution to the history of ideas, and hence possesses an intimate working knowledge of issues and problems of the kind to which this branch of enquiry into the human past gives rise. Moreover, in pursuing his studies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought he has inevitably been confronted by widely varying theories concerning both the character of the historical process and our cognisance of it. Thus, when writing his first book, on Karl Marx, he was obliged not only to come to grips with Marx’s own highly influential accounts of the forces governing historical change and development, but also to read the works of such important predecessors as Helvétius, Condorcet, Saint-Simon and Comte. In one way or another these writers shared the conviction, widely current among thinkers of the French Enlightenment, that scientific methods and categories of the type that had proved so successful in advancing our knowledge of the natural world should be extended to the study of humanity and its history.
Berlin has described elsewhere how, in the course of investigating the sources of these and allied claims, he sought to understand from within the problems that obsessed those who had propounded them; the ideas of the past (he felt) could be brought to life only by ‘entering into’ the minds and viewpoints of the persons who held them and the social or cultural contexts to which they belonged. In following this procedure, however, he was aware of engaging in a kind of thinking that seemed far removed from what was proposed by the writers he was immediately concerned with, imaginative and empathetic understanding of the sort in question having no apparent parallels or analogues within the natural sciences. Where, on the other hand, he did discern a responsive echo was in the works of two eighteenth-century thinkers of quite a different cast of mind.

Vico and Herder were in various respects conspicuously at odds with the prevailing temper of their time, and not least in their attitude to what they held to be the distinctive character of the historian’s subject matter. This, in their view, made attempts to assimilate historical methodology to that of the sciences misconceived in principle. For whereas in the case of the latter we could never obtain more than a purely ‘external’ knowledge of the phenomena with which they dealt, the cognitive relation in which we stood to the phenomena specific to history was of a wholly dissimilar order. Here it was possible to achieve a direct or inward grasp of the mental processes that found expression in the doings and creations of historical agents; the underlying humanity historians shared with those they sought to comprehend enabled them to ascertain from the inside what it was that moved and activated the subjects of their enquiries, even when – as was frequently the case – this was a matter of recapturing through imaginative effort the interior life of other periods or cultures whose pervasive outlooks and preconceptions

1 See e.g. 374, 378.
differed profoundly from their own. Both Vico and Herder, albeit in varying ways, implied that such an approach was fundamental to any meaningful pursuit of the human studies, and it is a conception of historical practice whose cardinal importance Berlin – in common here with their twentieth-century admirer and follower Collingwood – has likewise insisted upon.

The influence of such contentions, involving an emphasis on the essential autonomy of historical thought and understanding, may be said to lie behind some of the theses advanced in ‘The Sense of Reality’, where the contrast drawn between history and other disciplines recalls the attention Berlin has accorded to various aspects of this complex topic in a number of notable essays. Nevertheless, in the present instance he approaches it from a direction that diverges in significant respects from ones taken in some of his other discussions, his perspective here having more general implications and encompassing practical as well as academic issues. The title given to the piece is indeed indicative of this, and partly reflects his characteristic suspicion of attempts to simplify, or reduce to artificially abstract terms, the ‘dark mass of factors’ that constitutes human existence, whether these are undertaken for purely theoretical purposes or whether with a view to implementing comprehensive plans of a political or social nature. He has always shown himself to be acutely aware of the perennial fascination exercised by the prospect of discovering some infallible formula or universal prescription capable of resolving the multifarious problems presented by the human condition in a way that would leave no loose ends or dangling uncertainties. And in this connection he has also stressed the extent to which in the modern period – that is, roughly since the end of the seventeenth century – such an aspiration has often found expression in efforts to demonstrate that the historical process conforms to ineluctable laws or uniformities which can

1 46.
be understood to hold for the future as well as the past, thus possessing predictive as well as explanatory potential. But he considers none the less that the fascination alluded to represents a temptation which should be resisted, and that the difficulties underlying some of the projects it has given rise to are rooted in misunderstandings that extend beyond the bounds of historical interpretation and methodology, ultimately reaching into the depths and texture of all human life and experience.

As Berlin points out, historical theorising of the type he has in mind by no means conforms to a single pattern, representative accounts ranging from ones founded on mechanically conceived regularities to others that invoke ‘organic’ or evolutionary laws of development. In the present context, however, his concern is not with distinguishing and commenting on different examples of the genre; rather it is that of questioning the whole notion of constructing a law-governed or systematic theory that would be capable of fitting into a unified scheme the multiplicity and variety of heterogeneous elements of which the historical process is composed. On the latter point he refers with approval to Tolstoy, and it is noteworthy that much that he says on this theme echoes the tone of the Russian writer’s views on history as presented at the close of War and Peace. Not only did Tolstoy exhibit considerable scepticism with regard to the crude simplifications and bland generalities he attributed to the various philosophies of history and society that had so far been produced; he further implied that all projects involving the use of abstractions and schemata of the kind favoured by speculative theorists were bound in the end to founder, their being intrinsically unfitted to comprehend the continuum of ‘infinitesimals’ — the series of countless, minute and interrelated actions and events — that made up the life and story of humanity. In Berlin’s own treatment of the subject one finds a similarly critical attitude taken

\[1\] 41; cf. HF2 34, 37, 40/2.
up towards previous ‘pseudo-scientific histories and theories of human behaviour’, together with a comparable, though by no means identical, emphasis on the manner in which the dense material of history may be expected to resist the imposition of procedures originally adapted to radically different areas of concern and enquiry.

Such affinities are hardly surprising, Tolstoy’s particular gifts as a creative writer making him in Berlin’s eyes especially well equipped to appreciate the richness and diversity of human reality as it is lived and known: the endless variety and individuality of things and people, the subtle cross-currents of feeling involved in both social intercourse and personal relationships, the depths of self-regard and the confusions of aim lying beneath the surface of public life – these were amongst the myriad phenomena which his exceptional powers of observation and imagination captured, and which led him to look through the smooth and regular outlines drawn by history’s self-proclaimed interpreters to the uneven and often chaotic details of actual experience that they concealed. As is well known, such aspects of Tolstoy’s achievement are eloquently portrayed in Berlin’s penetrating study, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. There, however, he was largely concerned to contrast Tolstoy’s artistic insight and flair with another, quite opposite, side to his outlook and personality, one that hankered after some monistic or unitary truth which would altogether transcend the problems and distractions that plague our mundane existence. In the present context, on the other hand, he wishes to indicate the relevance of the novelist’s specifically literary abilities to the essay’s general theme, relating them not merely to the activities of historians engaged in reconstructing the past, but also to those of politicians and so-called ‘men of action’ in their dealings with the world of practical affairs. Thus

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1 49.
2 9, 44, 45. 48, 55, 217, 233, 307.

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in ‘Political Judgement’, which follows ‘The Sense of Reality’ as a companion piece and elaborates on some of its points, Berlin suggests that qualities of mind analogous in certain respects to ones possessed by imaginative writers can be said to play a role both in the study of history and in the conduct of what he terms ‘statecraft’.  

Like the trained historian, the effective politician needs a developed capacity for a ‘non-generalising assessment of specific situations’. A finely attuned sensitivity to the shifting contours or levels of social existence, and, combined with this, an intuitive feel for what is empirically feasible and for what hangs together with what in the intricate and frequently recalcitrant sphere of particular facts or circumstances, have perennially been amongst the distinctive characteristics of outstanding political leaders. Berlin notes that such ‘practical wisdom’ or genius has tended to be treated by the great systematisers of history as representing a haphazard ‘pre-scientific’ approach which is no longer acceptable on theoretical grounds and which stands in need of radical reform or replacement. But he also points out that some of their proposed improvements can scarcely be felt to have constituted an encouraging response to this alleged requirement, the utopian-style experiments they have inspired resulting in unanticipated consequences of a kind with which – ironically enough – history itself has made us only too familiar.

Taken together, these two articles have an ample sweep and scope that exemplify their author’s singular range and illuminating breadth of vision. They were originally written in the 1950s, and the various allusions they contain to speculative social theories and blueprints may therefore partly be viewed as reflecting the preoccupations of a period acutely conscious of the totalitarian ideologies that continued to hold sway over much of the political landscape. Even so, it would be a mistake

\[ ^{1} \text{40.} \quad ^{2} \text{49.} \quad ^{3} \text{58.} \quad ^{4} \text{46, 48.} \]
to regard such references as possessing no more than a limited or transient significance when judged within the overall perspective of Berlin’s thought. He was, almost from the first, alert to the dangers inherent in a misplaced scientism and the blurring of boundaries it is apt to engender, an early resistance to reductionist trends in epistemology and the philosophy of language prefiguring in some ways the objections he was later to raise against influential doctrines in political and social theory. He has never denied that it was proper and indeed estimable to salute and seek to emulate methods that had promoted the success of the natural sciences within their own domains; but it was another thing entirely to advocate an uncritical extension of these to alien fields of investigation or to quite separate levels of experience. As we have seen, he has attributed misconceptions on the latter score to certain eighteenth-century *philosophes* and their followers in the approach they adopted to human affairs. That, however, has not been the sole source of his dissatisfaction with the views of such thinkers, the wider reservations he has from time to time expressed in his writings raising questions about his attitude to the Enlightenment as a whole. The nature of some of the uncertainties that have been felt may be gleaned from other essays included in the present volume.

In actual fact, and despite what is on occasions supposed, Berlin has been far from reticent in characterising his own, admittedly complex, position on the subject. Thus he has gone out of his way to praise representatives of the Enlightenment for their courageous opposition to many of the evils of their time, including ignorance, oppression, cruelty and superstition, and for their support for ideals like reason, liberty and human happiness; as he succinctly remarked to an interlocutor,¹ this put him on their side. At the same time, though, and notwithstanding the

attachment he feels to much that they stood for, he also considers that they were prone to give dogmatic credence to assumptions—often traditional in origin—which were by no means self-evident and whose validity their professed respect for empirical principles might have led them to query. These included specific conceptions of a uniform and basically unchanging human nature, together with closely related beliefs in the existence of universal values which were harmoniously realisable by human beings in the course of their lives.

Some of the issues arising from such preconceptions are examined in ‘The Romantic Revolution’: here it is argued that the emergence of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century constituted a dramatic change in the intellectual climate of the time, the objective status of accepted standards and norms being challenged by subjectivist doctrines in a fashion that had momentous repercussions within the spheres of ethics, aesthetics and politics. In concluding this arresting discussion Berlin suggests that one long-term effect of the resultant clash of outlooks has been that we find ourselves today to be the heirs of two traditions, with a tendency to ‘shift uneasily from one foot to the other’. Equally, however, he maintains that the novel and subversive ideas introduced by the movement indisputably deepened and enriched the understanding of people and societies, both exposing limitations or lacunae discernible in the Enlightenment inheritance and simultaneously opening up fresh possibilities of thought and feeling which had hitherto lain beyond the bounds of the European imagination.

Berlin’s treatment of the above tension between these different standpoints is consonant with the combination of acuity and empathetic insight that pervades his approach to the history of ideas as a whole. On the one hand, he has shown an exceptional ability to grasp from within, and appreciate the force of, intellectual

1 2.45; cf. 223.
and cultural outlooks that are often opposed to ones to which as a person he feels most sympathetic. On the other, he has been quick to recognise and pinpoint the sinister implications latent in a number of the positions he has so vividly portrayed: not least the shapes of irrationalism and of aggressive forms of nationalism that lurk within some of the doctrines belonging to what he has called the Counter-Enlightenment. On the latter score, what he writes towards the end of his essay on Rabindranath Tagore is indicative of the line he wishes to draw between the beneficent and the destructively chauvinist guises in which nationalism can appear. Here as elsewhere, he comments, Tagore tried to tell the truth without oversimplification, and to that extent was perhaps listened to the less, for – as the American philosopher C. I. Lewis recognised, there is no a priori reason for thinking that, when we discover the truth, it will prove interesting.\(^1\) Berlin quotes this observation with approval. In his own writings, however, it can truly be said that the truth invariably proves to be so.

\(^1\) See 337/1.