

The Hedgehog and the Fox

Isaiah Berlin, 1953

Article by Tom Quirk

Isaiah Berlin's most quoted essay is *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. Berlin's biographer, Michael Ignatieff, explained that Berlin was introduced to a line from the Greek poet Archilochus at a party in Oxford in the 1930s: 'The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' He immediately started dividing the great minds of the past into hedgehogs and foxes. In 1953 his publisher, George Weidenfeld, saw the potential in an obscure essay about Tolstoy's sense of history, retitled it *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, aimed it at a general readership and thus made a memorable contribution to Isaiah Berlin's public reputation.

A single essay is not a popular form these days for a publisher but it is in fact an expandable universe of words that allows what ever the writer judges to be sufficient to fill the space.

Berlin discusses contrasting views of history with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as the canvas. Who or what determines the course of history? Is it the great men or is it the foot soldiers and the ordinary people? How are the large and the small events added together to form progress? The foxes and the hedgehogs play their games and Berlin concludes that Tolstoy was a fox who wished he were a hedgehog.

The real importance of *The Hedgehog and the Fox* is how it illustrates Berlin's sense of human progress. 'Not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible.' Furthermore, these 'collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are...The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable – that is a truism, but conceptually incoherent...We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.'

Humans have long been influenced and led by hedgehogs. Ronald Reagan was a hedgehog. Karl Marx can be seen as the great hedgehog. The world is so complicated that no prescriptive view has any lasting merit. There is not inevitable progress and the greatest perturbations are, in the words of the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, 'events, dear boy, events.'

We are now confronted by another hedgehog – the green hedgehog that has been growing for the last twenty years. We are told that we are steadily wasting the planet, consuming its resources, creating organisms that inhibit nature and chemicals that wreck the atmosphere.

We are told that choices must be made and that we, and that includes the developing world, must give up some part of a possible future.

The choices put to us come from 'experts'. But often these choices have embedded in them assumptions about complicated economic and scientific questions that are not resolved and in some cases may be incapable of resolution. As a result, public discussion is narrow, frequently ignorant and often dominated by experts who would prefer to startle than inform.

Here is a fertile field for hedgehogs and foxes. Tolstoy despised experts. Philip Tetlock, a professor at the University of California, studied expert predictions over twenty years and concluded that 'hedgehog' experts performed significantly worse than 'fox' experts.

We should be wary of those scientists who are 'often wrong but never in doubt.'