Isaiah Berlin on prudence, practical judgement and the sense of history

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INTRODUCTION: BERLIN AS POLITICAL REALIST

A key building block of Isaiah Berlin's political thought is the insight that, in politics, we cannot assume the existence of general laws such as those found in the natural world. Humans are free, and their decisions are not predetermined. Furthermore, human communities—among which Berlin focuses on nations—have different political cultures, just as individuals have different value systems and corresponding customs. To make valid statements about politics, we must pay close attention to specific circumstances without supposing that similar circumstances will necessarily lead to similar results. This lack of certainty characterizes not only observers looking at politics from the outside, but also fully experienced political actors. Politics, both as acted out and as represented, depends on individuals' will, responsibility, and, above all, on their sense of reality and political sensibility.

It is this individual-focused perspective that makes Isaiah Berlin's political thinking *realistic*. This realism is, by its very nature, opposed to the political constructs divorced from reality that form the basis of totalitarian systems. But it is also far removed from those theories of liberalism that tend to be apolitical. If there are not many universally valid political claims, liberalism cannot remain apolitical or merely descriptive. On the contrary, Berlin's liberal theory is an account of politics in which individual activity—decisions taken by agents in time—sustains the community. Political leaders bear special responsibility, which is why Berlin maintains a continuing interest in history. Because every decision need to be taken in the absence of necessary knowledge, imagination, empathy, and a sensitive appreciation of the world remain crucial for him—which is why his realism has its aesthetic component.

This realism, which focuses on individuals and their decisions, belongs to the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy. This tradition distinguishes practical wisdom (prudence) and skillful activity, or *ars*, from different forms of theoretical knowledge. This paper will explore the prehistory of Berlin's notion of judgement as reconstructed by such twentieth-century thinkers as Croce, Gadamer, and Baeumler. It will also return to Aristotle's original ideas, pointing to the similarities and dissimilarities between the practical wisdom of the actor (political agent) and the viewer (the historian or political commentator), an issue also addressed by Hannah Arendt. Ultimately, by tracing the antecedents of Berlin's account of judgement, I hope to highlight its resolutely aesthetic dimension.

I. A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

This understanding of Berlin's approach first arose from a personal encounter I had with the man himself. During the academic year 1987-1988, I spent time as a visiting graduate student at Oriel College, Oxford, starting to study Romantic political thought—a research which turned out to focus on Edmund Burke. Since Berlin was still alive and a member of All Souls, I requested a meeting to discuss his work on the Counter-Enlightenment, which was directly relevant to my research on Edmund Burke and his criticism of revolutionary French philosophy.

What proved more significant than our scholarly discussion was a more political exchange. Coming from behind the Iron Curtain, I sought his advice on what we should do at the end of the 1980s. Berlin's response was sobering:

> Young man, that is a very clever and important question, but I cannot help you answer it at all. Those who are affected by this question must find the answer themselves. No one else can really help them with this question, not even those who study political theory and are familiar with the lessons of political history, such as myself. This is your struggle, and you must fight it yourselves; no one else will or should do it instead of you.

This response shows how seriously Berlin took his own ideas of value pluralism and the impossibility of universal answers to particular questions. But it also reveals Berlin's position as a political realist who refused to offer unfounded hopes or deceive with intellectual constructs. Instead, he encourages facing actual situations and soberly weighing possible alternatives. This is political realism in its truest sense—an approach that shapes his broader philosophical outlook.

II. BERLIN AND COLD WAR LIBERALISM

While most historical canons of liberalism traditionally introduce Berlin as a representative of classical or "individualist" liberalism who defends negative liberty, or as a historian of ideas distinguished by his study of the Counter-Enlightenment and Russian political thought, recent literature has repositioned him as a major voice of Cold War Liberalism (Moyn 2023; Müller 2019; Bessner and Brenes 2026). The biographical argument for this affiliation is obvious. As the descendant of a Russian Jewish family who found a second home in England after the communist revolution, Berlin had experienced the new ideology of both the totalitarian Soviet Union and Nazi Germany first hand.

His corpus also lends itself to the affiliation with Cold War liberalism. The likes of John Gray, David Caute, and George Crowder find his contributions crucial to the intellectual fight against totalitarianism. This is partly thanks to Berlin's two most famous essays—one on negative and positive liberty, the other on historical determinism—and partly thanks to Berlin's own personal engagement in the struggles of his time. Berlin worked for the British Information Services in New York during the war and later became the First Secretary of the British Embassy in Moscow. He also took on more covert tasks, for example in service of the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom.

Recent scholarship on Berlin tries to paint a more nuanced picture of his relationship to Cold War liberalism, however. Arie M. Dubnov's monograph, for instance, focuses on Berlin's Jewish background, Russian cultural roots, and lifelong Zionism. Jan Werner Müller, meanwhile, attempts to reconcile Berlin's work on moral philosophy with his pragmatic politics (Dubnov 2012; Müller 2019).

For this paper's purposes, one of these more recent reconsiderations deserves special attention—the one that focuses on Berlin's views on practical judgement.[1] Twenty years ago, Ryan Patrick Hanley compared Berlin's account of political judgement to Aristotle's practical philosophy (Hanley 2004). Fifteen years later, in their Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, Joshua Cherniss and Steven B. Smith write: "Perhaps most importantly, Berlin emphasized the significance of political judgment as the

central virtue of political theory" (Cherniss and Smith 2018, p. 6). And in other works (e.g. Cherniss 2018), Cherniss connects this emphasis on practical judgment with Berlin's aesthetic sensibility, a connection that Steven Smith endorses in a recent article (Smith 2025). Cherniss, Smith, and Hanley can be taken to represent a reappraisal of Berlin as a thinker whose aesthetic sensibility shapes his political realism, which is itself based on the early modern discourse on aesthetic and moral-political judgement. This paper aims to explore this connection between twentieth century and contemporary realism and the discourse of aesthetics further.

III. LIBERALISM AND AESTHETICS

Berlin presents his most comprehensive narrative of modern political thought in his collection of essays *Against the Current*, published in 1979 (Berlin 1979/1981). The programmatic essay starts the collection with the title "The Counter-Enlightenment." This is followed by essays on Machiavelli, Vico, Montesquieu, Hume, Herzen, Moses Hess, Benjamin Disraeli and Karl Marx, Verdi, and Sorel. The collection ends with an essay on nationalism. This grand narrative, which leads from Machiavelli through the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century to the nationalist challenge of the twentieth century, is remarkable as a shortcut of intellectual history. Berlin cuts out both the French Revolution and Kant, connecting the early modern phase and nineteenth-twentieth century thought directly. This way, Berlin's narrative suggests that a road leads from counter-enlightenment to irrationalist thinkers such as Sorel and nationalists.

The point of Berlin's narrative is to criticize the scientific mentality, which aims to make sense of politics following the pattern established in the natural sciences. He dedicates a separate study to discuss the debate of the early modern period between the humanities and the natural sciences, a debate that was repeated at the end of the nineteenth century concerning the *Geisteswissenschaften* (humanities). Vico, an ardent critic of Descartes, is a safe starting point in this respect: his new science is an alternative to the Cartesian concept of scientific investigation. His concentration on poetry as a form of knowledge and on imagination as a major condition of that form of knowledge is a helpful guide for Berlin to rethink political enquiry as an *ars* instead of a *scientia*.

Berlin's interpretation of Vico focuses on the relevance of culture in political matters. Universal laws cannot be applied if political situations cannot be compared, as they are parts of different cultural contexts that demand particular—or particular*ist*—thinking. The sheer extent of cultural diversity excludes the possibility of *a priori* rules and laws and supports the idea of value pluralism.

Herder's name comes up in this context, even if not in detailed fashion in this collection. In a later writing published in a separate volume, Berlin deals with him more thoroughly (Berlin 1976). Herder is important for Berlin because the German thinker initiates the well-known German emphasis on "culture" as a counter-concept to "civilization." Herder is also a forerunner of nationalism for whom each culture defines a nation, which is why nations should respect each other. In this respect, Herder belongs to the same group of thinkers as the Grimms, collecting German folktales, or Byron fighting and dying for the independence of the Greeks.

Another thinker in this group, of interest to Berlin, is Carlyle. Carlyle's Romanic notion of hero worship follows directly from the young Burke's ideas of the sublime (Burke 1757/1759). Against Kant (1764), the Romantic prefer the sublime to the beautiful. Indeed, the Romantics also overturn the pre-Kantian emphasis on the beautiful, which plays a prominent role both as a transcendental in Christian metaphysics and in Greek philosophy (*kalokagathia*). In all these contexts, the beautiful is seen as characteristic of both objects and subjects. To discern it, a certain sensitivity is required—a certain capacity of perception that is the foundation of aesthetic judgement. Not exactly the way Kant does in his third *Critique,* the Greeks and the Christians attribute a moral dimension to aesthetic judgement. For Aristotle and his medieval readers, morality, aesthetics, and politics constitute interlinked parts of practical philosophy. The same faculty of judgement has authority in aesthetic, political, and moral matters. In what follows, I attempt to show that

Berlin's account of practical wisdom similarly connects judgement across the aesthetic, the political, and the historical.

IV. POLITICAL PRUDENCE AND THE SENSE OF HISTORY

A recent issue of *Modern Intellectual History* attempts to make sense of Berlin's thought in the context of aesthetics. In this collection, Steven Smith directly examines the question of what Berlin's concept of aesthetic judgment looks like (Smith 2025). Smith opens his argument with the claim that "(t)o raise the concept of judgment is almost inevitably to raise the name of Aristotle"—in particular, the Greek philosopher's teaching of the "art of practical judgement" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2014; Strauss 1964). Following Smith's guidance, this section first concentrates on Berlin's essay on judgement, which provides a phenomenology of the political actor, and then turns to his essay on "The Sense of Reality," where he discusses why practical wisdom is required in the activity of the historian of ideas.

a) Political Judgement as Practical Wisdom

The essay on political judgement starts with the question: "What is it to have good judgement in politics?" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 40). Importantly, the question is how the political agent can arrive at good political judgement in a *particular* case, how he can prove to be "politically wise" (ibid.). Berlin doubts that early modern political thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza are right to claim that statesmen need a political science with "systems of verified hypotheses, organised under laws" (ibid.). This is the same (doomed) enterprise taken over both by Enlightenment thinkers and their nineteenth-century followers. Berlin's alternative is explained with the help of the analogy of medicine: it is not enough to know the science of medicine; the "good doctor" needs to have "personal experience and natural aptitude" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 41). The example itself comes from Aristotle, who also emphasizes the practical nature of medical knowledge. If there is no universal pattern or set of abstract principles on which one can rely to solve the practical problem, one has to look at the practice of the best practitioners. Berlin mentions the names of Colbert, Richelieu, Washington, Pitt, and Bismarck—leaders who seem to have all been successful despite the fact that they were rather different characters pursuing different practices, each confronting their own unique challenges. He also refers to counter-examples, mentioning leaders who followed abstract theories and turned out to be totalitarian tyrants, like Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 43). Berlin's conclusion is that instead of abstract knowledge, we must "understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness" (Berlin 1957/1996, pp. 44-45). This is because we cannot "calculate" the situation by modeling it based on abstract characteristics or deduce the correct solution through pure logical operations. We "understand it," as a critic understands a work of art, by her personal faculty of judgement.

Time and again, Berlin uses sensual metaphors to characterize political judgement: politicians have "good political eye, or nose, or ear," "a particular gift, not altogether unlike that of artists or creative writers" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 45). In other words, when we speak of political judgement, we speak of a mode of understanding that is "quasi-aesthetic" in nature (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 46). Aesthetic perception is made possible by our sensuous perception, as opposed to abstract rationality. By implication, politicians must be able to connect with the complex fabric of reality in a sensory way. There again, Berlin uses the language of the Aristotelian tradition on practical knowledge: politicians must exercise "discrimination," determine "what fits with what," develop "natural wisdom, imaginative understanding, insight, perceptiveness, and, more misleadingly, intuition" (ibid.). Berlin underlines the Aristotelian dimension of this line of thought by referring to the opposite of this form of understanding as "theoretical knowledge" (ibid.). He even uses the term "practical wisdom, practical reason," to describe a form of knowledge that resembles the way "trainers know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 47). This form of knowledge is concerned with those parts of reality that are "semi-conscious and unconscious," which excludes the possibility of "tidy classification" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 48). It turns

political activity into a kind of art: political actors have to understand the political medium "as sculptors understand stone or clay"—their knowledge depends on "experience and observation" (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 49). Like the gardener and the cook, the politician learns his skill through habitual activities, not through abstract theories. In all three cases, we cannot strive for a reliable sort of science as "mechanical precision" is simply not possible. But politics requires an *aesthetic* kind of habituation that differs from these other examples and sets "men of good judgement" apart (Berlin 1957/1996, p. 53).

b) The Historian's Sense of Reality

Berlin offers a strikingly similar account of judgement in his account of the historian's skill.

More specifically, his essay on "The Sense of Reality" revolves around three key points. First, Berlin claims that, to understand political affairs, one must rely on a special kind of knowledge that he calls "understanding." Second, Berlin claims that the same kind of knowledge—the same "sense of reality"—is required from the historian. Third, he argues that the knowledge of the political actor and that of the historian are of the same sort: both need to judge the situation on the basis of specific observations, but also with a sense of *style*.

In the first part of the essay, Berlin seeks to make sense of the Holocaust and other cases of mass-murder in the twentieth century. He claims that behind these phenomena rests a false conception of politics. In his view, the main perpetrators—Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler—acted "in the name of their own historical or pseudo-historical theories, the Communists in the name of dialectical materialism, Hitler in the name of racial hegemonism" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 9). These men brought these atrocities into being through changing the thoughts and actions of others. Against historical determinism, Berlin asks: Given that political leaders do shape the course of history, how can statesmen—who refuse to use violence in the way that authoritarian leaders do—shape it for the better? Berlin's positive examples include "Augustus Caesar or Henry IV of France or Richelieu or Washington or Cavour" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 32). These statesmen, Berlin claims, all master the skill of "direct observation," that is, of processing the particulars of specific situations (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 6). Doing so requires a certain kind of experience that most leaders lack: "The most primitive act of observation or thought requires some fixed habits, a whole framework of things, persons, ideas, beliefs, attitudes to be taken for granted" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 15). Chief among these habits, great leaders learn to understand others from within. Understanding the other requires self-knowledge, as well as an ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes, to somehow gain access to "the most deeply ingrained categories" that influence their thinking (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 17). This kind of intersubjective understanding is close to the German concept of "*Verstehen*" (interpretation), which Dilthey and other German humanists oppose to *Erklären* (scientific explanation) in their defense of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Berlin borrows this dichotomy by opposing Newton, who represents scientific thinking at its best, to present Pascal, Dostoevsky, Proust, and St Augustine, who embody the "act of deep-sea diving" that statesmen must master to influence others (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 18).

Once more, Berlin compares political forms of knowledge to artistic practices and even art criticism. He compares the historian's—and, by extension, the political theorist's—capacity for observation to that of the novelist. He claims that the same capacity requires different procedures when executed by different individuals, with different personalities, for different purposes. But it remains the same capacity nonetheless. For instance, Berlin draws Vico and Herder's sensibility to argue in favor of a value pluralism in politics *and* in the arts. In politics as in art, one must develop an appreciation and understanding of cultural particulars. In this respect, Berlin seems to borrow the Viennese School's method and apply it to politics. In both cases, to understand an action is to understand its context. And to make sense of its context, of the "interconnection of different activities," one must know that all these actions spring from a "unique single character or style"—one must grasp the cultural context as a "unity of an aesthetic whole," the parts of which fit harmoniously, as in a portrait or a symphony. For Berlin, the artistic sensibility required to arrive at this kind of judgement is but a refined form of the "common-sense judgement" that we exercise in art

and in our daily lives. These are instances of practical judgement, which retains an inescapably a-theoretical quality no matter its form.

In the second part of the essay Berlin turns to the activity of the historian, with which he associates his own way of thinking as a historian of ideas. Looking into the past, Berlin claims, true historians "fight shy of rigid theoretical patterns" and resist homogenizing frameworks (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 21). Merely listing the facts does not suffice either. Historians too must rely on their imagination as a means of acquiring knowledge, like novelists, painters, or indeed statesmen. To characterize a person or event, historians must similarly project themselves into the mind of another. They must acquire the kind of "adequate insight" or "imaginative insight" that only a distinct form of empathy makes possible (Berlin 1953/1996, pp. 23, 25). They must sense "small, constantly altering, evanescent colours, scents, sounds, and the psychical equivalents of these" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 23). Once more, Berlin finds sensuous metaphors and comparisons to capture the appreciation of particulars. Like the artist and the statesman, the historian seeks an "understanding (of) human beings," which requires a similar sense of taste. Only then can historians "bring a past age to life" and capture "the full texture of real life" (Berlin 1953/1996, pp. 25, 26).

Berlin's phenomenological account resembles Collingwood's or Huizinga's description of the historian's task. Berlin similarly focuses on intersubjectivity and *Lebenswelt*, the network of intersubjective relationships that constitute the "full texture of real life." Berlin's language, which includes phrases like "directly recognisable continuum of experience," borrows directly from continental phenomenology. He draws on this tradition to capture the need for historians to confront "the whole intellectual, imaginative, moral, aesthetic, religious life of men." In history as in politics, Berlin insists on a continuum of moral, aesthetic, and even religious matters. Following Husserl, Berlin argues that the kind of understanding that history and politics require has no place for scientific reasoning. Berlin even uses the German phrase "*nicht Wissenschaft, bloß Kunst*" to emphasize the inescapably aesthetic dimension of the endeavor (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 27).

In the final section of the essay, Berlin brings the judgement of the historian and the judgement of the politician together. For Berlin, the two kinds of judgement—those of the actor and of the spectator—are one and the same. Although Berlin notes that the exercise of that judgement differs in both cases, he insists that the faculty being exercised remains the same. It requires the same "kind of knowledge, or practical genius, which statesmen and historians equally need if they are to succeed in understanding societies" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 33n1). Berlin explains that the historian and the statesman both "in some sense judge the situation, assess it so that he can answer objectors, can give reasons for rejecting alternative solutions, and yet cannot demonstrate the truth of what he is saying by reference to theories or systems of knowledge" (ibid.). One way to understand this, as we will see in the next section, is that Berlin's historian and Berlin's statesman are both engaged in *hermeneutic*—that is, interpretive—tasks of the kind that Hans-Georg Gadamer and other of twentieth-century German philosophers defend (George 2025). While Berlin never makes an explicit reference to German hermeneutics, his comparison of historical-political analysis to textual or literary analysis is telling: "The scholar's process of, say, amending a corrupt text seems to me not altogether unlike the analysis or diagnosis of a social situation" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 33). This passage offers an account of social analysis that is indistinguishable from Gadamer's—an account that pays special attention to Aristotle and his teaching about the virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.[2]

At one point, Berlin came up with a surprising expression: "natural conservatism," which he associated with "hatred of change, unconscious adherence to 'common sense' theories of their own". (Berlin 1953/1996, 32) All of that in connection with the "resistance to doctrine" in politics. To be sure, he explicitly rejected the position of those he labelled as traditionalists, namely Burke, Maistre, Tolstoy and Eliot. As he saw it, "reliance upon tradition, or revelation and faith" is "no substitute for a sense of reality". (Berlin 1953/1996, 34-35) And yet, the concept itself makes it visible, that the realist approach to politics that Berlin endorsed is not far from a certain trend of conservatism.

V. THE GERMAN PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF JUDGEMENT

To understand the conceptual foundations of Berlin's approach to political judgement, we must examine the German philosophical tradition and its development of the Aristotelian understanding of practical wisdom. This tradition, which Berlin inherits through various intermediaries, maintains the connection between aesthetic perception, moral discernment, and political judgment—a bridge that had disappeared in Kant's critical philosophy.

a) Gadamer's Recovery of the Humanist Tradition

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that a wide humanist tradition existed until Kant, who abandoned some of the core concepts of practical philosophy. Gadamer begins his own conceptual overview, which builds on the historical inquiries of Koselleck and Ritter, with the idea of culture (*Bildung*). As we have seen, this concept is also key for Berlin, together with another term that Gadamer also uses time and again: common sense, or *sensus communis*. Gadamer reconstructs the early modern discussion of these concepts, and like Berlin, links them to Vico. Gadamer draws attention to the distinction between the scholar and the wise man, claiming that the latter needs both *sensus communis* and "the distinction between the ideas of *sophia* and *phronesis*" as "it was first elaborated by Aristotle" (Gadamer 1975/2021, p. 19). Gadamer shows that this distinction survives in Roman legal practice, whose conception of the law is "closer to the practical ideal of phronesis than to the theoretical ideal of sophia" (ibid.). Gadamer, anticipating Berlin, points out that the practice of phronesis requires "another kind of knowledge… directed towards the concrete situation… [that must] grasp 'the circumstances' in their infinite variety" (p. 20).

It is through Shaftesbury that Gadamer recovers the political meaning of *sensus communis*, which comes with "love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness" (Gadamer 1975/2021, p. 23). Here again, Gadamer comes close to Berlin's account: *sensus communis* is "a virtue of social intercourse," or an intersubjective quality (ibid.). It is in this context that Gadamer brings up the notion of judgement, or *iudicium* in the Roman legal context. The term, Gadamer shows, is equally applicable to the moral, philosophical, and aesthetic realm. As Gadamer puts it, "moral and aesthetic judgments do not obey reason, but have the character of sentiment (or taste)" (p. 29). He adds that "what judgment recognizes is the sensible individual, the unique thing" (ibid.). The wise man, in other words, *is* the sensible individual for Gadamer as for Berlin. In both cases, those who have *sensus communis* show "moral and civic solidarity" that finds expression in their right judgements (p. 30). Right judgement leads one to choose appropriately, in art as in politics.

For Gadamer, this connection between aesthetic and moral judgement is the one that Kant obscures. That is, Kant erases the connection between judgement and *sensus communis*.[3] For Kant, this connection only applies to questions of aesthetic taste—not to moral questions. Gadamer insists that this marks a fundamental break with the history of the concept of taste, which "was originally more a moral than an aesthetic idea" (p. 32). Against the Kantian view, Gadamer seeks to recover the link between aesthetics, morality, and politics—or between *Bildung* and *sensus communis*, or judgement and taste—to revive the Aristotelian tradition's account of practical knowledge, which the Romans and the humanists both develop. Berlin's own account of judgement belongs to this very tradition.

b) Baeumler and the Pre-Kantian Aesthetic Tradition

Gadamer was not the first to reconstruct the birth of aesthetics from the humanist tradition. His own narrative was preceded by Alfred Baeumler's (Baeumler 1923/1967). Before becoming an odious defender of the Nazi party, Baeumler wrote on the history of pre-Kantian aesthetics in a way that influenced Gadamer—Gadamer only refers three times to Baeumler, but always positively—and, indirectly, Berlin.

Baeumler, who studied both philosophy and art history, develops a narrative of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century culture as dialectic between aesthetic appreciation and logical analysis. He focuses on taste, imagination, and "genius," in the French and German tradition (especially Boileau, Bouhours, Leibniz, Crousaz, and Dubos, among others). His work looks at aesthetics and logic as two sides of the same coin, irrational and rational. All his early works include chapters on judgment or *Beurteilskraft*, the German equivalent of *iudicium*, which he explicitly relates to Herder.

The important novelty in Baeumler's account, which applies to Berlin as well, is that he focuses on prerational deliberation. Although "'the art of judgement' extends to everything, even hoop skirts and wigs" (König 1745, p. 7), he insists on the primacy of sensory perception as a prism through which we encounter unique particularities. This mode of judgement, which begins with sensory encounters mediated by experience and phronesis, is strikingly similar to Berlin's account. In both cases, the detailed observation of particulars requires an aesthetic sense that excludes strictly rational modes of deduction or evaluation. Baeumler explicitly connects judgement to taste and sentiment, which he regards as necessary "irrational elements." He traces this emphasis on taste back to Dubos, Muratori, and Pascal, whom Baeumler presents as precursors to the discipline of aesthetics. Baeumler makes much out of Pascal's two most famous pronouncements: "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know," and "the heart has its own order; the intellect has its own, which is by principle and demonstration" (Pascal 1670/1958, §§277, 283). This culture of "*la pensée delicate*" that Baeumler and later Gadamer revisit provides the explicit background of Berlin's own account of practical knowledge.

VI. BERLIN AND ARISTOTLE'S PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

During Berlin's time, Aristotle was part and parcel of the Oxford philosophy curriculum. In one of his early essays, titled "Some Procrustations," Berlin explicitly acknowledges his debt to Aristotle—a debt whose manifestations are manifold. Berlin's value pluralism is, in some sense, in line with Aristotle's well-known effort to collect all the constitutions of the Greek world in order to compare them and see their similarities and dissimilarities. Further, Berlin's critique of scientism in social and political matters follows Aristotle's warning about the limits of knowledge in moral and political matters. For our purposes, what matters most is the influence of Aristotle's account of judgement and practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, on Berlin's thought. Aristotle uses the related term *krisis* to mean selection, judgment, opinion, or decision. He identifies the right sort of practical knowledge with the view of the wise man, because "each person correctly discerns the things he knows and is a good discerner of these" (Aristotle 2014, 1094b27). This is the sort of "observation that Berlin talks about. For Aristotle, the "excellent person discerns correctly," where excellence means virtue. Aristotle calls this capacity for discernment "a sort of sight by which to discern correctly and choose what is truly good" (Aristotle 2014, 1114b7). Discernment is connected to "perceptual capacities" and among those, the capacities of touch and taste, which must be refined by moderation to cultivate the observer's judgement on all matters.

Aristotle does not distinguish aesthetics from other forms of practical activity. Indeed, he refers to some of the great artists of his age in Athens when describing the achievements of practical wisdom. As he sees it, artists must themselves possess good judgement and practical wisdom, which is why he calls "Phidias a wise sculptor in stone and Polyclitus a wise sculptor in bronze" because they are "the most exact practitioners of the relevant craft" (Aristotle 2014, 1141a9-11). Politics, for Aristotle, is but another craft concerned with the city; those who are engaged in politics do what is "practical and deliberative… the way handicraftsmen do" (Aristotle 2014, 1141b24-28). Further, Aristotle notes that "practical wisdom is concerned also with particulars, knowledge of which comes from experience" (Aristotle 2014, 1142a13-14). As with Berlin, Aristotle distinguishes the form of knowledge that politicians acquire from the kind that he calls scientific knowledge. Political actors know what is to be done via perception rather than via science. What practical wisdom requires is good deliberation, which in turn requires the right character, the right

habits, and the right sense of taste. Only then can the wise man achieve "correctness in accord with what is beneficial and about what to do, how to do it, and when to do it" (Aristotle 2014, 1142b).

Like Berlin, Aristotle also differentiates the ability to achieve one's ends in politics—as in the case of Hitler or Stalin—from practical judgement. Aristotle claims that there is a capacity that helps to hit a proposed target, which he calls cleverness (*deinos*). While cleverness finds the means to an end, it does not qualify as practical wisdom because it does not allow for proper deliberation about the end itself. To have practical wisdom, the artist and the statesman both need something more than (political) cleverness—they need virtue: "it is impossible to be practically-wise without being good" (Aristotle 2014, 1144a35). Tyrants can never be practically wise, no matter how effective they are.

Of course, Aristotle also insists that the right end does not justify evil means. In aesthetics as in politics, practical judgement must be capable of adjudicating both means and ends. While there is scholarly disagreement as to the extent of Aristotle's realism, it is fair to say that Berlin makes more room than Aristotle for the possibility of "dirty hands"—of the kind discussed by realists from Machiavelli to Bernard Williams. Aristotle admits that there is a role for self-interest and compromise in politics, but Berlin goes further. Berlin, for instance, praises Bismarck as a wise statesman knowing that the Iron Chancellor sometimes used unlawful or downright immoral means. This is arguably because Berlin considers the particularity of situations—and thus of the aesthetic-moral judgement necessary to navigate them—to matter even more than Aristotle. But this leaves us with the question of how Berlin can judge these leaders at all.

VII. THE HISTORIAN AND THE STATESMAN

Berlin considers Bismarck, Lincoln, and Roosevelt to represent examples of successful rule. But what exactly are his criteria for success in politics—in different countries, in different periods? And further on: how does the historian's procedure of evaluation relate to that of a politician? Does the historian's judgment of the case depend on the same sort of practical wisdom as the judgement of the political leader?

Berlin claims so. As we have seen, he argues that both the historian and the statesman assess their own subject matter in a similar way: they "in some sense judge the situation, assess it," "can give reasons for rejecting alternative solutions, and yet cannot demonstrate the truth," "by reference to theories or systems of knowledge" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 33). But his identification of practical judgement as an aesthetic-moral faculty shared between the statesman and the historian is contestable. Below, I will explain an approach that, drawing on Arendt and Ricoeur, posits a different kind of relationship between the political actor and the political observer (Arendt 1982; Ricoeur 2000).

1. Action and reflection. An actor participates in the flow of events, while an observer does not get involved. Political actors can change reality, the conditions of their respective societies. Observers do not have that chance. As soon as someone participates in an event, she will immediately see it in a different light when compared to those who remain outside of it. It is like watching a theatrical performance and actually playing a part in it, to watch a kiss or to kiss someone. This is the difference between activity and passivity, the view of the insider and that of the outsider.
2. Medium. To lay the groundwork for action, one must meet different criteria than those used to interpret an event that has already concluded. Aristotle speaks of "practical syllogism" (*syllogismos praktikos*) to capture the idea that action imposes much stricter limits on our thought-processes than mere reflection.
3. Responsibility. With action comes responsibility. Without actual involvement, there is no way to take responsibility for an outcome. And if one is responsible for the consequences, one will focus on different considerations while deliberating. To be responsible for the outcome and lacking responsibility define two different ways of deliberating.
4. Method. Even if they investigate the same state of affairs, the politician preparing for action and the historian preparing to give her account of it will apply different modes of thought. The political actor's approach is necessarily pragmatic and practical: he is not interested in what the

truth is, but rather in what he needs to do in a given situation. In other words, he is interested in circumstances that help him carry out his plans and those that hinder his activities. On the other hand, the historian approaches the subject with the lamp of truth. She must not be diverted from this path, even if what she reveals casts a negative light on her political community or her beloved heroes. Her ultimate yardstick is whether her historical reconstruction stands up to the test of truth.

5. Temporality. One cannot know something in the same way before and after an event. An insider's view will not be able to catch certain aspects of the situation, which can only be discovered in retrospect. Political actors can hardly plan for the long-term; they only make sure they control the moment. Their afterlife, however, is in the hands of the historian.
6. Power. Berlin's great essay on Machiavelli focuses on power and knowledge. There, Berlin claims that Machiavelli seeks the "assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction" (Berlin 1981, p. 44). Knowledge and power—to be a successful politician, one needs a sort of knowledge that is power-oriented. On the other hand, the historian does not usually have access to power in the political sense. And to the extent that the historian does wield power, as when she acts as the custodian of a dead statesman's reputation, the knowledge required to wield that power is not itself power-oriented in the same way.

CONCLUSION: SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Jane Austen's 1811 novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, has a somewhat puzzling title that can help us to summarize what this paper wants to show concerning Isaiah Berlin's realism. We based here our view of the realist Berlin on three of his papers that explain three crucial terms: "sense of reality," "political judgement," and "realism in politics." These are interconnected terms that capture an attitude that, according to Berlin, determines the thinking of successful politicians.

How can we summarize that attitude? Let us start from Austen's own interpretation of her title. Sense is meant to represent reasonableness and good judgement, while sensibility means an emotional, even passionate approach to love and life. The ideal the novel proposes is to balance those two approaches. Berlin's own narrative consists of a criticism of a scientific, Utopian attitude toward politics. Instead, he proposes another attitude that characterizes the likes of Richelieu, Napoleon, Lincoln, Bismarck, and Roosevelt. This is the kind of practical rationality that Aristotle and the early-modern humanists defend: a particularistic approach to reality that cultivates a sense of judgement to apply it to specific situations.

Berlin characterizes this kind of rationality in aesthetic terms. Whenever he attempts to give a picture of political judgement, Berlin reaches for metaphors or comparisons to the realm of art and aesthetics. For him, great statesmen possess the same kind of knowledge as artists, sculptors, musicians, novelists, and—most surprisingly—historians. All these professions and disciplines require a wealth of experience and a sense of taste. As we showed, Berlin's claim is based on an Aristotelian-humanist understanding of sensual cognition, as it works in judgements of taste and moral sense. Yet, as I tried to suggest in the final section, practical activity and passive observation often require two different fields of vision.

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NOTES

1 Henry Hardy and John Gray had already paid attention to this aspect of his thought. Hardy edited the volume of essays entitled *The Sense of Reality*, in which Berlin's essay on political judgement appears (Berlin 1996). Gray's monograph, for its part, connects Berlin's pluralism with his pragmatic, context-sensitive approach to politics (Gray 1995).

2 At one point, Berlin distinguishes his view from "natural conservatism," which he associates with "hatred of change, unconscious adherence to 'common sense' theories of their own" (Berlin 1953/1996, p. 32). Berlin admits that this disposition comes with the "resistance to doctrine" in politics that he otherwise praises. Nonetheless, Berlin rejects the traditionalism of Burke, Maistre, Tolstoy, and Eliot. As he sees it, "reliance upon tradition, or revelation and faith," is "no substitute for a sense of reality" (pp. 34-35). Yet his emphasis on practical wisdom and particulars seems to bring Berlin's realism close to certain trends within the conservative tradition.

3 A strong claim given the famous reference to *sensus communis* in the *Critique of Judgement*.