

Timo Meynhardt

Internal Freedom: The Fox and the Hedgehog

Being free and feeling free are not the same thing. What is the point of freedom to supposedly do whatever you like, if you cannot recognize the opportunity or feel overwhelmed by it? Conversely, the ways in which people can maintain their internal freedom, while external restrictions and constraints seem to be impeding it, are well established. Internal and external freedom cannot simply be equated, so anyone who thinks or writes about the shifting concept of freedom, or even makes economic or political decisions “in the name of freedom,” must not forget that freedom is essentially an individual experience that can easily elude the externally applied attributes of “free” and “unfree.” The statement “I feel free” is highly subjective and full of assumptions to an extent that we ourselves often hardly appreciate. Anyone who dares to venture into the vast sphere of freedom can quickly get into trouble when it comes to generally applied determinations and evaluations of what can be considered “free,” what freedom should be measured against, or who makes the decisions.

It is up to us: it is within our grasp to become a little more “free” and independent, at least internally, if we recognize our individual capabilities and limitations and understand ourselves better. In his striking distinction between hedgehogs and foxes, the Russian-Jewish philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin made the case for this widely accepted idea of self-knowledge in a remarkable way.¹

Against the backdrop of Berlin’s initial analysis, I would like to show where and how his idea can be applied. As a result, it will become clear how instructive this distinction is to this day, a distinction which Berlin himself claimed was “one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general.”²

A Compelling Idea

In his brilliant work *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*, Berlin contrasts two ways of thinking. On the one hand it’s about trying to recognize connections, dependencies, and causes; on the other it’s about attempting to grasp the uniqueness and special qualities of the things that surround us. Berlin vividly traces these two styles of thought through Leo Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*, using a fragment of verse by the Greek poet Archilochus (680–645

BCE): “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”³ As the history of this essay’s impact shows, Berlin succeeded very well in presenting two very different approaches side by side without classifying one as superior to the other.

Berlin’s starting point is the following observation:

For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. These last lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.⁴

To put it extremely simply: the hedgehog has answers, while the fox has questions. The former often knows the answer before the question is asked, while the latter has yet another question for every answer. For Berlin, Tolstoy was a fox who “believed in being a hedgehog” (ibid., p. 438). In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy was clearly able to use the conflict resulting from this productively to criticize any attempt to “explain or justify human action or character in terms of social or individual growth or ‘roots’ in the past” (ibid. p. 443) as superficial or inadequate.

In the epilogue to the second part of the novel, Tolstoy offers an incisive explanation of how history develops:

The new history is like a deaf man replying to questions which nobody puts to him . . . the primary question . . . is, what power is it that moves the destinies of peoples? . . . History seems to presuppose that this power can be taken for granted, and is familiar to everyone, but, in spite of every wish to admit that this power is familiar to us, anyone who has read a great

many historical works cannot help doubting whether this power, which different historians understand in different ways, is in fact so completely familiar to everyone.⁵

According to Berlin, Tolstoy exhibits this skeptical, nihilistic attitude towards decisive action, the formative role of the individual or towards assigning blame as a sharp-eyed fox who wants to expose legal statements as hollow, regards practicability as an illusion, and refuses all abstraction or synthesis. Instead, he is concerned with “‘live’ experience,” whose uniqueness he describes with an almost unsurpassable precision.

Tolstoy does an excellent job of pointing out the weaknesses of the hedgehog, who misses a lot because he finds it difficult to think outside the conceptual box, to be surprised, to think in terms of alternatives, and not to insist on a valid explanation. At the same time—and this is the productive power of the conflict—Tolstoy was well aware of the fox’s equally limited vision and spent his life searching—desperately in the end—for a monistic view of life “bitterly intent upon seeing in the manner of a hedgehog” (ibid., p. 493). But here Tolstoy ultimately failed, or in Berlin’s words: “Tolstoy’s sense of reality was until the end too devastating to be compatible with any moral ideal” (ibid., p. 498). In the end, the great artist and highly revered writer is “a desperate old man, beyond human aid, wandering self-blinded at Colonus” (ibid., p. 498).

Berlin sees in Tolstoy

a bitter inner conflict between his actual experience and his beliefs, between his vision of life and his theory of what it, and he himself, ought to be if the vision was to be bearable at all; between the immediate data, which he was too honest and too intelligent to ignore, and the need for an interpretation of them which did not lead to the childish absurdities of all previous views.⁶

These extremes demonstrate how mutually conflicting different motives and ways of thinking can be. In general, Berlin succeeds remarkably in using the hedgehog–fox distinction to grasp the contradictions inherent in the person of Leo Tolstoy and thus make comprehensible the way of thinking that shapes the understanding of history in *War and Peace*. This is all the more exceptional because other completely different theoretical frames of reference would have been available. We might think, for example, of an explanation using the history of political science or an interpretation using psychopathology, in particular of an affective disorder like manic depression.

The great strength of the hedgehog–fox distinction is that it neither evaluates content (as in the history of political science) nor judges normatively (as in a psychopathological view).

Overall, in his widely acclaimed work on Tolstoy's tragic foxiness, I think that Isaiah Berlin made a contribution to understanding human (un)freedom that was at least as important as his distinction between positive and negative freedom.⁷ His essay on Tolstoy shows one thing above all: it is up to us to recognize the characteristics of our view of ourselves and the world and to move the boundaries.

Current Relevance

Since it was first published, Isaiah Berlin's basic idea has developed a life of its own and has long since become disconnected from its original context. For example, in his study on predicting political events, the psychologist Philip Tetlock has showed that those experts whose style of thinking corresponded to that of the fox made more realistic judgments.⁸ Apparently it pays to be open to different points of view, to resist hasty generalizations, and to be able to accept several versions of the truth. However, according to Tetlock's findings the hedgehog is given more public recognition for his clarity and visionary power. It is therefore not surprising that fewer foxes than hedgehogs occupy the top positions in business and politics, as another study suggests.⁹ If you want to get to the top, you obviously need a clear profile. Ambiguity and doubt are quickly interpreted as weakness. Inevitably, alternative ways of thinking have to take a back seat and contradictions minimized. In a complex world, you must be careful when reducing actions or events to a few basic principles. Typical hedgehog attitudes are reflected in statements such as: "At the end of the day, it's always just about ABC" or "Ultimately, only XYZ counts."

While Tetlock assumed in his study that there is a continuum and that more hedgehog-thinking leads to less fox-thinking, it has now been shown that some people are perfectly able to move back and forth between the two ways of thinking, or are able to think along the lines of the other side.¹⁰ This surmounting of the dichotomy is also much closer to Berlin's characterization of Tolstoy's thinking. However, he found it impossible not just to perceive the hedgehog side as a blank space, but to cast it in a positive light. The manifestation of such a hybrid way of thinking obviously requires the meta-ability of being mindful of one's own style of thinking and the mental flexibility to consciously adopt the other perspective. This is an ideal that has to be carried out in practice and can often be triggered only by a specific change in social context or a crisis of the individual. In this sense, it is less about what a person thinks and more about how they deal with information and organize experiences.

There now exists a tried and tested procedure for analyzing one's own way of thinking.¹¹ Based on the individual's own assessment of the extent to which the following statements apply, each person's tendency can be reliably identified:

1. I usually make important decisions quickly and confidently.
2. Even after I have made up my mind about something, I am always eager to consider a different opinion.
3. I prefer interacting with people whose opinions are very different to my own.
4. It is annoying to listen to someone who cannot seem to make up his or her mind.
5. When considering most conflict situations, I can usually see how both sides could be right.
6. Having clear rules and order at work is essential for success.

Instructions on how to carry out and evaluate this analysis can be found in the Notes.¹²

A few examples show how stimulating this analysis of thinking style is for the questions being asked today in a wide variety of disciplines. While Stephen Jay Gould¹³ uses the image of the fox and the hedgehog to illuminate the relationship between the humanities and the natural sciences, Jim Collins¹⁴ sees the "hedgehog concept" as one secret to the success of good management. In a similarly positive approach to hedgehog thinking, Ronald Dworkin¹⁵ calls for "justice for hedgehogs" and argues for mutually supportive values that together create a truth about living well. By contrast, John Kay¹⁶ points out the fox's advantage in taking detours to reach its destination, and Nate Silver¹⁷ shows how hedgehogs are often their own worst enemies when it comes to their predictions. Daniel Kahneman¹⁸ too takes a critical approach to the "hedgehog effect."

Mitchell and Tetlock argue¹⁹ that judges with a preference for fox-thinking view problems from different perspectives and consider a variety of information and interests. Judges with hedgehog tendencies are less likely to think in this way, focusing on just a few key pieces of evidence, and aiming less frequently for compromise.

We could easily add to this list. In conclusion, two findings from basic psychological research are worth noting. It has been found that hedgehogness in thinking tends to increase with age, which seems entirely plausible. It was also found that those people who think in a hybrid way (high levels of both orientations at the same time) perceive the contribution of their organization to the common good more powerfully. This was recorded across a variety of dimensions. This finding is interesting because

it shows how perceiving diversity and unity simultaneously can combine to form an overall impression (in this case the common good).²⁰

In sum, we cannot ignore how, especially in the Anglo-American world, Archilochos' line of verse as used by Isaiah Berlin is applied again and again to describe and explain very different phenomena in mental activity. It obviously gets to the heart of something that is intuitively understandable and at the same time offers added value in terms of analysis. Berlin—himself a fox—wasn't sure at first how far the distinction would go. The reason for its continued success may lie in the combination of the idea's openness to interpretation and the symbolic power of the animal image.

On the Road to Internal Freedom

Isaiah Berlin began his essay by citing the following phrase: "A queer combination of the brain of an English chemist with the soul of an Indian Buddhist," and his entire text can be read as an attempt to do justice to both. This requires internal freedom and equanimity to tolerate and accept the other person's view of things.

Examining one's own patterns of thought and reaction is not always pleasant; the results may be rejected or even suppressed. However, the best outcome enables a gain in freedom that should not be underestimated: by discovering something as "typical" for me, I can distance myself from it and look at it from a different perspective. The crucial thing is to question your own point of view and no longer see it as immutable. At the same time, this can increase the chances of finding new solutions, but it can also be deeply unsettling if what was previously taken for granted is lost.

As Berlin argues, throughout his life Tolstoy did not find a viable way of balancing his pronounced foxiness and reducing dissonance in such a way that diversity and unity could exist side by side on an equal footing. However, without a heightened awareness of the conflict, he probably would not have attained his enormous success as a writer, of which *War and Peace* is a unique testimony. In this respect, gaining internal freedom by better understanding one's own way of thinking remains a double-edged sword.

Bearing in mind the opportunities, however, it is true that the ability to mediate between the two styles, to recognize both as valuable, and to transcend the conflict between one's own preferences cannot be overestimated. In particular, achieving a hybrid style of thinking has its advantages. Philip Tetlock even suggests that super-forecasters (people who can predict events as they develop much better than the general public or experts) "combine the best of foxiness and hedgehoginess."²¹

Dealing with our own mental flexibility should allow us to break down prejudices against other points of view, to treat them with respect, and to be able to let differences remain. This is perhaps the most important outcome of a self-generated, internal freedom: you are free if you liberate yourself from either-or thinking, hasty evaluations, and knee-jerk reactions. In a world full of contradictions and conflicts, the internal freedom gained through self-reflection is more important than abstract declarations of freedom. This can be seen in a confident way of dealing with other points of view and in not limiting oneself through emotional overreactions (anger, aggression, or fear). This does not mean enduring everything with stoic equanimity or regarding every truth as relative, but it does mean accepting the irreconcilability of values—Berlin called this “objective pluralism”—and constantly searching for what we mean by humanity and a shared humanity. Committing oneself to such a common good does not mean abandoning the self. Rather, it is in one’s own interest, since no one can live without a conducive and supportive environment.

This topic is particularly explosive today in light of current crises, in which it is unclear where the limits to expressing a variety of opinions lie and where a uniform perspective places disproportionate restrictions on the freedom of the individual. These limits have to be renegotiated time and again when embarking upon new territory. Even if the transitions are fluid, pragmatic demarcations remain necessary in order to defuse any conflicts that might arise. To do this we need individuals who are internally free and independent, who appreciate both sides (hybrid way of thinking), and who use common sense to contribute to a common good that strengthens the individual. Conversely, however, there should also be room for different styles of thinking—for hedgehogs and foxes alike—in our notions of the common good.

Let’s sum up the thesis of this article. Our personal idiosyncrasies—using the example of our way of thinking—make us “unfree” if they prevent us from taking on board other perspectives. The example of Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between the fox and the hedgehog has made it clear how appealing but also challenging it can be to throw old certainties overboard. The hedgehog’s great strength is that he can get straight to the point, while the fox benefits from being able to accept multiple perspectives at the same time. However, we should neither curl up with our comfortable truths nor get bogged down foxily between several claims to truth. We become freer internally when we have the courage to challenge ourselves again and again and organize our experiences in new ways. In the best-case scenario, we will become more confident and can make a more effective contribution in situations where freedom is under threat. We could also say that the way to more external freedom is via greater internal freedom.

1. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* https://www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/crag/files/2016/06/the_hedgehog_and_the_fox-berlin.pdf (accessed January 19, 2022).
2. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, p. 436.
3. According to his biographer, Berlin was alerted to this quotation by a university friend, Lord Oxford. As a student of ancient philosophy, Lord Oxford considered this verse to have “all the elegance and mystery of a Japanese haiku.” Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 173.
4. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, pp. 436–37.
5. Quoted in Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, p. 453.
6. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, p. 463.
7. The earlier and better known distinction between negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to) was discussed by Berlin initially in his inaugural lecture in Oxford in 1958, this influencing subsequent debates to a considerable extent. See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
9. Peter Gomez and Timo Meynhardt, “More Foxes in the Boardroom: Systems Thinking in Action” in *Systemic Management for Intelligent Organizations*, ed. Stefan N. Grösser and René Zeier (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), pp. 83–98.
10. Timo Meynhardt, Carolin Hermann, and Stefan Anderer, “Making Sense of a Most Popular Metaphor in Management: Towards a HedgeFox Scale for Cognitive Styles” in *Administrative Sciences* 7, 2017, pp. 1–23.
11. Ibid.
12. Here’s how to determine your style of thinking in four steps:
 - 1) Self-assessment: answer all the questions. If the statement applies, write down a 6, if it does not apply at all, write down a 1. Use the numbers in between to grade your assessment.
 - 2) Then add up the numerical values of statement 1, statement 4, and statement 6 to calculate the extent of your “hedgehogness.” Then add up the numerical values of statement 2, statement 3, and statement 5 in order to calculate the extent of your “foxiness.”
 - 3) Identifying your thinking style: four variants can occur. Please use the numerical values to determine the one that applies to you:
Hedgehog: the foxiness dimension is between 3 and 12; the hedgehogness dimension is between 15 and 18.

Fox: the foxiness dimension is between 13 and 18; the hedgehogness dimension is between 3 and 14.
HedgeFox: the foxiness dimension is between 13 and 18; the hedgehogness dimension between 15 and 18.

No dominant profile: the foxiness dimension is between 3 and 12; the hedgehogness dimension between 3 and 14.

4) Interpretation: Please decide for yourself, or preferably with someone you trust, how characteristic your profile is for you. It is advisable to visualize your own style through concrete examples. The procedure does not replace comprehensive psychological diagnostics, but it is a reliable way of revealing initial tendencies that can provide important clues for self-reflection.

13. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending and Minding the Misconceived Gap between Science and the Humanities* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

14. Jim C. Collins, *Good to Great. Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (New York: Random House, 2001).

15. Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

16. John Kay, *Obliquity. Why Our Goals are Best Achieved Indirectly* (London: Profile, 2011).

17. Nate Silver, *The Signal and the Noise. Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don't* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

18. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

19. Gregory Mitchell and Philip E. Tetlock, "Cognitive Style and Judging" in *The Psychology of Judicial Decision-Making*, ed. David E. Klein and Gregory Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 279–84.

20. Meynhardt et al., "Making Sense of a Most Popular Metaphor in Management: Towards a HedgeFox Scale for Cognitive Styles."

21. Philip E. Tetlock, in a personal message of February 26, 2016: "I suspect you are on to something very important I missed. My sense is that the best forecasters in the super-forecasting project combine the best of foxiness and hedgehoginess, which connects nicely to the concept in management of cognitive ambidexterity. No hard data to support any of this—just a hunch."