With the beginning of Michaelmas term in 1928, the nineteen-year-old Isaiah Berlin left home and moved to Oxford, his alma mater and the most passionate, long-standing love of his life. He began to study Greats, the shorthand name given at Oxford to the detailed study of Roman and Greek history and philosophy, read in Latin or Greek. Before inspiring him intellectually, Oxford captivated Berlin’s social sensibility. “The great majority at Oxford are pleasant, often clever, careless, comfortable persons, some gentlemen, some not, who are very delightful so long as you do not ask too much of them,” he wrote sometime later to his aunt Ida Samunov in Palestine. It was not an easy task to enter the prestigious university: Balliol College rejected Berlin twice, and the fact that he did not graduate from Eton did not help either. Even at Corpus Christi College, which eventually accepted him, he felt inferior. “Corpus tended not to take Paulines,” he explained to Steven Lukes year later, “because they were all regarded as dilettantes. Rotten before they were ripe. Too knowing. We were overworked at St. Paul’s—it was a cramming establishment. Then the Paulines came to Oxford exhausted and tended to fall by the wayside.”

Berlin seldom referred to the years he spent in Oxford as an undergraduate student. It is almost impossible to accurately reconstruct the exact training he went through, not only due to a lack of archival sources, but also because of the very nature of philosophical training at Oxford in those days. Under the tutorial system, with no textbooks, Oxford’s students followed a very abstract curricula based on a series of canonical writings. In Berlin’s case we should be extra cautious: in his few retrospective accounts of these years, he presented himself as a strict empirically minded analytical philosopher, busy shedding any remains of “English Hegelianism,” and as someone still disinterested in ethical and political thought. In one case he described himself as being “brought up originally as an English Hegelian,” yet he insisted, “I rebelled against that, because I couldn’t understand Hegelian language, and when I read the English Hegelians, I found myself floating about in a land of mist which I really did not and still do not
I was made to read Hegelian philosophers. Couldn’t understand a word. I read Bradley, I read Bosanquet. Not a word. But then I read G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*. I was illuminated. Of course I reject it now, but the lucidity, the strictness, the honesty, that was wonderful (…) Then I became a kind of Realist. I began reading Bertrand Russell and Moore, and I began reading, oh, Oxford philosophers, Joseph and Cook-Wilson, they seemed rigorous and clear and rational.4

This narrative helped Berlin present himself and his own generation of philosophers as heroic rebels who were repulsed by the shallow waters of Hegelian-inspired philosophy—as a modernist philosophical group that restored the true merits of “British” philosophy, namely, skepticism, uncompromising antimeta-physical empiricism, and a greater proximity to “common-sense” realities. But the recent and extensive secondary literature on British Idealist thought, its “Realist” opponents, and the early beginnings of what would later come to be considered the emblematic British analytical philosophy allows us to entertain grave doubts about Berlin’s self-description, and, even more crucially, to contextualize his early philosophical endeavors better than before.5 Such contextualization requires a more careful examination of the way in which Berlin operated within the given discursive and philosophical traditions available to him as a young student and scholar. Oxford at the time was not exactly a high temple of Hegelian philosophy, and neither was Berlin a member of a group that practically invented Realism *ex novo*. Furthermore, as much as he was critical of the generally speculative orientation of Idealist philosophy, Berlin was not so alienated from the ideas he later dismissed as traditionalist and shallow. Berlin’s enthusiastic postwar return to the philosophy of Robin George Collingwood, which allowed him to develop his unique mixture of history and philosophy, should be taken seriously and understood in this context. It would be erroneous to see it as a new interest that developed out of thin air. It would be equally wrong to accept Berlin’s Promethean self-description as a rebel philosopher, entirely breaking away from all non-Realist traditions. Rather, it would be more accurate to describe him as engaging in a continuous critical dialogue with the Idealist tradition. For *within* a given tradition, as J. G. A. Pocock argues, there is always a dialogue between nontraditionalist and traditionalist voices. A tradition, thus, “may be a turbid stream to swim in, full of backwaters, cross-currents and snags”; nevertheless it is a place that allows conflicting powers to meet. We can, in other words, contextualize a given philosophical activity within an “intra-traditional” framework without eradicating dialogue and opposition. What we need, in Pocock’s term, is a richer description of the tradition, which includes the logic and argumentative strategies of the canonic writers next to the less famous voices who operated within the same framework.6

The purpose of this chapter is to map this dialogue between the Idealist and Realist philosophical traditions in interwar Oxford. It is crucial to examine the Idealist philosophy more seriously because the resemblance between certain aspects of interwar Idealist philosophy and some ideas and philosophical vocabulary one finds in Berlin’s later philosophy is not coincidental. Put