

Hedgehogs, Foxes, and the Roles We Play

Working through Isaiah Berlin’s distinction as a taxonomy of modern work
Brad Berens with Claude (Anthropic) · August 2026

BRAD

I’m writing about Isaiah Berlin’s notion of Hedgehogs and Foxes and applying it to modern life. Here are a series of pairs. Can you think of others? One important thing to note is that this is about particular roles rather than existential identity. A theater actor who goes on to direct a play and then returns to the stage as an actor has been a hedgehog, a fox, and then a hedgehog again.

Hedgehog	Fox
Startup Founders	Venture Capitalists
Researchers	Teachers
Brand Marketers	Ad Agencies
Hollywood Directors	Hollywood Producers
Chef	Restaurant Owner
Writer	Editor
Player	Coach
Painter	Gallery Owner

CLAUDE

More pairs, grouped by the structural logic

Maker v. portfolio-holder — your dominant pattern, in which the fox selects among many hedgehogs.

Hedgehog	Fox
Architect	Real-estate developer
Carpenter	General contractor
Winemaker	Sommelier
Novelist	Literary agent
Screenwriter	Showrunner
Actor	Casting director
Instrumentalist	Conductor

Songwriter	A&R exec
Beat reporter	Managing editor
Software engineer	Product manager
Individual contributor	Engineering manager
Dissertation candidate	Advisor
Litigator on one case	General counsel
Coach	General manager

Specialist v. generalist inside one field — no hierarchy, pure structure, which may be the cleanest illustration of Berlin.

Hedgehog	Fox
Surgeon	Primary care physician
Anesthesiologist	ER doctor
Psychoanalyst	Integrative therapist
Marathoner	Decathlete
Sniper	Quartermaster
High school subject teacher	Elementary school teacher
In-house strategist	Management consultant
Single-issue advocate	Legislator

That last one earns its place. The legislator must trade incommensurable goods against each other with no master metric, which is Berlin's quarrel with monism, not just breadth of subject matter.

Two moves worth stealing for the piece

The ladder. Your relativity point extends further than the actor example. Founder to VC to limited partner to fund-of-funds: each rung is a fox to the one below and a hedgehog to the one above. Same with chef, restaurateur, restaurant group, private equity. The role isn't fixed; it's positional. A coach is a fox to a player and a hedgehog to a GM.

The inversion. Some of your pairs flip under pressure, which strengthens rather than weakens the frame. The thesis-driven VC who bets everything on one conviction about the world is a hedgehog wearing fox clothing. The founder who pivots four times is a fox running a hedgehog's org chart. The index fund is the ultimate fox; the activist investor with one concentrated position is the hedgehog.

One sharpening suggestion

Your pairs currently read as depth v. breadth. Berlin's fox is stranger and more interesting than that: he pursues ends that don't reconcile and refuses to force them into one system. The strongest version of

your argument is that fox roles require judging by criteria that can't be reduced to a single number. A VC weighs team, market, timing, and price with no formula. A chef asks one question: is the dish good. That reframe converts your list from an occupational taxonomy into an argument about how different jobs handle value pluralism.

BRAD

Another one comes to mind: the scientist versus the tinkerer. Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues that most of the great discoveries come from tinkering rather than theory-informed science. I'm not thrilled with the word "scientist" in this pairing, though. Can you think of anything better?

CLAUDE

Theorist v. Tinkerer is the one to take. It's exact, it alliterates, and the two words scan identically. "Scientist" fails because it's honorific rather than descriptive, and because half of science is tinkering. The experimentalist at the bench is Taleb's hero, not his target.

Other candidates, each with a different center of gravity:

- **Systematizer** — the most Berlinian option. The hedgehog's defining move is relating everything to one system, so the word does double duty.
- **Modeler** — the most contemporary. Catches quants, macroeconomists, epidemiologists, and anyone whose output is a representation rather than a thing.
- **Planner** — imports Hayek and James C. Scott. Useful if you want the political charge, noisy if you don't.
- **Designer** — Taleb's own antonym, since his real opposition is designed v. evolved. It collides with the profession, though.
- **Grand theorist** — C. Wright Mills coined it as an insult, which gives you a free ally in the footnote.

Two things this pair does that your others don't.

It inverts your dominant structure. Everywhere else the fox sits above the hedgehog, selecting among many. Here the fox is the maker in the garage and the hedgehog holds the institutional chair. That inversion is worth naming in the piece, because it proves the frame describes cognition rather than org charts.

It's also your purest Berlin. Berlin's fox pursues many ends that are unrelated and sometimes contradictory, seizing on variety without forcing it into one vision. That is a literal description of tinkering. Your other foxes have a portfolio; this one has no vision at all, by design.

Worth anticipating the objection: Taleb overstates. Penicillin and the steam engine support him, but the transistor, the laser, GPS, and mRNA vaccines all ran theory-first. The defensible version is that the two alternate, which serves your role-not-identity thesis. Edison tinkering in 1878 and Edison systematizing the industrial research lab in 1887 are the same man in opposite roles.

BRAD

*Thank you, this is helpful. However, you are wrong about the discovery of GPS. Look at Steven Berlin Johnson's *Where Good Ideas Come From*, which describes a frantic night of tinkering as U.S. scientists tried to trace Sputnik orbiting the Earth.*

CLAUDE

My error, and it's a useful one to correct because the story cuts against the example I chose.

Johnson tells it this way: in October 1957, two young physicists at Johns Hopkins' Applied Physics Lab, William Guier and George Weiffenbach, started listening to Sputnik's beeps out of curiosity during lunch. They noticed the signal's frequency shifted as the satellite passed overhead, realized they were watching a Doppler effect, and improvised their way to a full orbital fix using borrowed lab equipment and time on the building's UNIVAC. No assignment, no grant, no hypothesis going in.

The pivot is the part your piece wants. Their boss, Frank McClure, asked the inverse question a few months later: if you can locate a satellite from a known point on the ground, can you locate an unknown point on the ground from a satellite whose orbit you know? That inversion became Transit, the Navy's satellite navigation system and GPS's direct ancestor. Tinkering produced the raw observation; someone else's question turned it into an architecture.

Which gives you a cleaner case than the one I was reaching for. GPS is not tinkering or theory. It's tinkering that discovered a phenomenon, then theory that made it a system, and the system needed both special and general relativity corrections to work, since the satellite clocks drift about 38 microseconds a day against ground clocks. Skip that math and the fix degrades by roughly ten kilometers per day. Guier and Weiffenbach could never have tinkered their way to that.

So the honest structure of your pair is sequential, not oppositional, and it's the strongest evidence for your role-not-identity thesis. Guier and Weiffenbach were foxes on a Friday night and hedgehogs by the time Transit shipped. McClure was a fox in the exact Berlinian sense: he saw a connection between two problems nobody had placed in the same category.

BRAD

Please create a PDF version of this entire conversation, including my initial question, that I can share with my readers to show them how you helped.

Transcript lightly formatted for print. Two proper names were corrected in the exchange above: Isaiah Berlin and Nassim Nicholas Taleb.
