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BERLIN'S VALUE PLURALISM AND LIBERALISM



The relationship between Isaiah Berlin's pluralism and liberalism has been the subject of much critical study. Notably, John Gray, through a non-liberal conception of value-pluralism, has ascribed a form of agonistic liberalism to Berlin. Additionally, George Crowder has not only challenged Gray's argument, but has analysed the same relationship through a value-pluralistic liberalism, with obvious Enlightenment roots in the prominence given to individual autonomy and positive freedom. It is worthwhile exploring not only these attempts to elucidate the possibilities of connecting Berlin's conceptions of value-pluralism and liberalism, but also to consider the conceptual feasibility of discerning and creating relations between pluralism and specific political schemes.

In Gray's arguments for agonistic liberalism[1], it is firstly important to note that Gray assumes a connection between value-pluralism and liberalism, a basis upon which he can outline a particular argument concerning Berlin: namely, that if Berlin's pluralism holds, then the only "agonistic liberalism, a stoic liberalism of loss and tragedy" can be defended[2].

For Gray, the agonistic nature of this liberalism lies in the tension between the incommensurability of contending goods, "the irreducible diversity of rivalrous goods, *including negative and positive liberties*", and the tragedy inherent to making choices between these goods[3]. Within this framework, Berlin's agonistic liberalism emerges as distinctly anti-fundamentalist and its liberalism lies insofar as it aims to protect the freedom to choose:

"[I]n founding the value of freedom in the opportunity it gives us of navigating among incommensurable options and forms of living, Berlin at the same time cuts the ground from under those doctrinal or fundamentalist liberalisms – the liberalism of Nozick or Hayek no less than of Rawls or Ackerman – which suppose that the incommensurability of moral and political life, and of liberty itself, can be smoothed away by the application of some theory, or tamed by some talismanic formula." [4]

For Gray, the agonistic element lies in the contest stemming from the incommensurability of values as well as the incommensurability of competing conceptions of value. Gray's grounds focus upon the internal logic of value pluralism, how it relates between two alternative conceptions of liberty at the intra-value level. The extent of value-pluralism, for Gray, is such that the ensuing liberalism of which it forms a basis favours neither positive nor negative forms of liberty.

By contrast, Crowder's notion of pluralism entails the impossible nature of favouring any value or form of liberty in particular, and he concentrates on the inter-value level. Perhaps it is this difference in formulating the extent of value-pluralism that accounts for the fundamental disagreement between Gray and Crowder.

Crowder's criticism of Gray's formulation of Berlin identifies his subjectivist interpretation, in which Gray "appeals to those passages in which Berlin appears to say that choices among incommensurables must be non-rational"[5]. Further, he argues, that in *Berlin*, Gray adjusts this reading, through three main arguments in Berlin, offering a more contextualist understanding for the connection between pluralism and liberalism in Berlin's thought.

Firstly, Gray notices that, for Berlin, "a constitutive component of human self-creation" is his notion of the value of negative liberty, which is "not merely or even primarily...an aspect of rational autonomy, but...a *condition* whereby human beings constitute themselves in all the diversity of identities in which they are to be found." [6]

Hence, value pluralism sustains liberalism since it is the protection of our choices by negative freedom that facilitates the negotiation of incommensurable values [7]. This complements the underlying implication in Berlin's value pluralism of the inevitability of freedom to choose as something naturally human.

Secondly, since there is a plurality of goods necessarily within pluralism, goods that can be combined in different ways, "no political authority can have good reason to impose any particular combination of them on any of its citizens" [8]; this is a strictly speaking negative support for liberalism, insofar as value pluralism cannot sustain a political scheme – such as conservatism – that subscribes to value monism. Hence, value pluralism is best conceived of as compatible with rather than exclusively supportive of liberalism.

Thirdly, and following on from the second argument, "the authoritarian denial of freedom presupposes the denial of the *truth* of value pluralism" [9], implying that liberal societies display a particular understanding of and sympathy with value pluralism [10]. As Gray puts it, "[A]uthoritarian or illiberal societies or regimes are committed necessarily to denying the genuineness or validity of the value they suppress or disfavour; and that liberal societies are ones in which the truth of value-pluralism is accepted and celebrated." [11]

The implication of non-liberal societies denying the truth of value pluralism is that they necessarily give support to a false conception of human values. Like the second argument, this is a negative argument for liberalism. From within this speculative reconstruction of Berlin's thought emerges a type of liberalism that does not assume the validity of any overarching standard or value, a type of liberalism that differs "radically from those that have dominated political philosophy in the post-war world, and indeed since J. S. Mill, in many important respects" as well as from, as Gray notes, the political liberalism predicated on a particular conception of justice that John Rawls proposes[12]. It is important to note that the agonistic element in this is not so much in the plurality at the intra-value level, but in the plurality of forms of life.

One obvious problem is that, if pluralism entails a plurality of equally valid forms of life, liberalism – itself a form of life – could not enjoy universal or superior validity. Gray looks at this by outlining three counter-arguments against the connections between value pluralism and liberalism outlined above.

Firstly, he argues against the claim that an authoritarian imposition of a particular system upon its citizens necessarily violates the truth of value pluralism. This would be true of those systems, like Marxism, Christianity or Islam, "which ground themselves on the Western universalist premises that the truth of value-pluralism demonises"[13]. It would not, Gray argues, be true, however, of particularist non-liberal cultures based upon, say Hindu or Orthodox Jewish premises. For these "seek simply to preserve a local way of life [and] make none of the universal claims that value-pluralism subverts"[14]. Further, the exercise of freedom of choice would seriously compromise if not demolish forms of life within these societies.

Secondly, it could be argued that world in which liberal and illiberal societies co-existed would represent the truth of value pluralism far more profoundly than a world composed only of liberal societies and in which illiberal societies no longer existed. Or, to put it differently, if the imposition of a particular conception or conceptions of value upon citizens by a government is not legitimate, then a world in which only liberal societies existed would be similarly illegitimate.

Thirdly, one can respond to the liberal defence of the argument if values are incommensurable, then there can never be sufficient reason to impose any one scale of values on persons. As Gray notes, "Yet, it can be...not[ed] that a

particularistic illiberal regime does not mean the raking of incommensurable values to be 'uniquely rational' or a 'better' one. What is more, again, such a regime can be defended on the ground that 'it is a ranking embedded in, and necessary for the survival of, a particular way of life that is itself worthwhile, and that this ranking, and the way of life it supports would be imperilled by the unimpeded exercise of choice.'[15]

It is worth noting two important elements in Gray's overall notion of the agonistic element in liberalism. Firstly, the agonistic element, reasoned from value pluralism to a type of political scheme, lies in the incommensurability of values.

Secondly, the agonistic element lies in the bounds set by pluralism itself. In this second element, the agonistic element relate not to the incommensurability of values – the competition between values – but to the competition of liberalism as a form of life in competition with other forms of life. The contextualist nature of this argument for liberalism lies in the limitation set to universalism; instead, liberalism is to be justified specifically and locally, not as one form of life incommensurably competing with others:

"[I]n our historical circumstances...it may be true that the universal minimum requirements of morality have the best chance of being met under liberal institutions."[16]

This qualification is not only a reaction to criticism of his 'subjectivist' reading of value pluralism, but also forms critique of contemporary liberal theories. The critiques of the 'subjectivist' interpretation are responded to by demonstrating that the making of choices is rational within pluralism, and, further, that the argument in favour of liberalism is itself an instance of reasonable choice, within the context of contemporary socio-economic circumstances in the West. As a corollary, the validity of this is bound up within Western tradition(s). And, furthermore, the global political vision implied is one of the co-continuation of liberal and non-liberal systems around the world.

Gray's approach to Berlin is, in many ways, deconstructionist: he, firstly, thoroughly reconstructs the text before identifying intrinsic contradictions, "lever[ing] open [the text] through the location "blind spots""[17]. Gray exposes the tension stemming from the logic of pluralism – that all values are plural and none holds superior validity over others – embedded within Berlin's liberalism.

This tension is predicated upon the interplay between pluralism's particularist tendencies and the universalist claims of liberalism as espoused by many contemporary liberal thinkers, a tension outlined in his earlier article "between the idea of a common human nature and the idea of human self-creation and self-transformation"[18].

In other words, the creativity of moral agency compromises the expectation of an ultimate convergence of liberal values as a form of life. The agonistic element of liberalism tries to negotiate this tension by foregoing the claims for universality: within this framework, liberalism can only be supported as a particularly, not universally, valid system.

The underlying assumptions in Gray that liberalism is a form of life and, importantly, that pluralism's logic extends from beyond the intra-conceptual level to that relating to different forms of life are rejected by Crowder, who, in contrast, analyses what might be called the internal logic of pluralism at the level of goods.

Crowder, though aware of Gray's anti-liberal understanding of the implications of Berlin's value pluralism, nonetheless sets out to argue that this very value pluralism actually results in – rather than undermines – universalistic liberalism[19]. The central disagreement with Gray's analysis, then, is on whether liberalism entails a particular or universal form of life: that it is a form of life is not the real centre of debate. In addition, it also concerns the reasonability of choice. Gray's implication, as we saw, was that choice can be reasonable albeit within a decidedly Western context.

In Crowder's conceptualisation, by contrast, the reasonability of choice, including the choice for liberalism, must be based upon a common humanity, it must try to find "principles for reasoned choice within the concept of pluralism itself"[20].

The starting point is that there is a "common moral horizon" or core of values[21], without which, as Crowder sees it, Berlin's value pluralism would simply entail cultural relativism[22]. But, he goes on, Berlin's emphasis on pluralism not entailing relativism presupposes such a common moral horizon, and that, even if within pluralism no one particular value can be privileged, there is nonetheless a "minimal universal morality"[23]. One possible problem, however, is that the sharing of certain moral values implicated by the notion of a common moral horizon does not necessitate a universal morality.

The importance of a value is relative to cultural forms of life – even a conception of a universal human right holds different significances for different people in different places at different times[24]. A universal morality risk grossly reducing the range of values that a pluralist like Berlin would want to incorporate. Nonetheless, through a teleological conception of human beings, Crowder aims to expand Berlin's notion of common humanity, depending on Nussbaum's and Sen's notion of the human good life as needing "the possession of real capacities to exercise certain essential "human functions""[25]. Though not outlining these capacities, Crowder does conceive of rationality as conferring humanity in contradistinction with non-human animals. He is aware, on one hand, of Berlin's view that,

"...universal values should be conceived empirically, as what people happen to want rather than as components of a human essence or telos: "there are values that a great many human beings in the vast majority of places and situations, at almost all times, do in fact hold in common." "[26]

On the other hand, he also points out Berlin's quasi-empirical qualification, based upon the fact that, "concepts and categories that dominate life over a large portion (even if not the whole) of recorded history are difficult, and in practice, impossible to think away." [27]

Crowder considers that Berlin's more cogent view is to be found in his quoted conception that "multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies"[28]. Hence, for Crowder, it is the universalism embedded within Berlin's value pluralism that prevents the slide into relativism. The cultural relativism of a Herder or Vico "conflicts with [Berlin's] commitment to human rights and liberalism, and [thus] is incompatible with his notion of moral universals and cross-cultural empathetic understanding"[29]. The implication is that cultures necessarily communicate through "points of commonality at the level of generic human purposes and interests"[30], and, further, that cross-cultural comprehension is not impossible.

The implications of this are: firstly, that, despite the fact that this distinction between relativism and pluralism appears to be "more formal than substantial", it is, according to Crowder, cogent enough to argue, contra Gray, that incommensurability between values can extend into incommensurability between cultures[31].

Further, the agonistic element of liberalism is consequently flawed since it mistakenly assumes that “to value a diversity of forms of life is to value a diversity of political regimes” and, further, “the diversity to which pluralists are committed is principally a diversity of cultures or ways of life”[32].

Secondly, the teleological element highlights Berlin’s idea that reasonable choice is not barred by pluralism. A minimal, common, universal morality, as identified in Berlin by Crowder, supplies the basis upon which rational choices can be made between incommensurable values *and* between incommensurable forms of life. This teleological element is vital in preventing the logic of incommensurability from becoming something insuperable. Instead, the postulation of common humanity is the context within which cultures must be judged. Further, the implication is not simply that rational choice within a pluralistic framework is possible, but that rational choice is necessary and required by the framework.

Ultimately, it is this teleology that gives Crowder the conceptual space in which to argue for liberalism. Since incommensurability does not extend to the intra-cultural level because of a universal human morality, he goes on to argue through both negative and positive supports of liberalism. The negative support lies in that the recognition of the incommensurability of values forces one, in an anti-utopian spirit, “...to rule out views like classical Marxism and anarchism as utopian and to commend more realistic positions which accept and accommodate imperfection and conflict.”[33]

For Crowder, liberalism is a system that recognises “moral and political imperfectability”[34]. As a positive argument, he suggests that liberalism is “the best political vehicle for the diversity of goods” and “the best political container for reasonable disagreement concerning the good life”[35]. At this point, it is worth noting a crucial difference between Gray’s and Crowder’s analyses. Gray argues for liberalism’s defensibility by reference to diversity: what is worth defending in liberalism, is the diversity of forms of life contained therein. Crowder’s analysis, by contrast, Crowder argument discusses diversity in relation to “goods”. Consequently, value-pluralism is changed into a defence of the plurality of abstract values – in the sense of “goods” – rather than the plurality of forms of life or culturally-enmeshed values.

Moreover, this understanding of goods is central in Crowder’s next positive argument, in which disagreements over the ranking or ordering of human goods are reasonable, which is different from Berlin’s notion of value-pluralism.

If values are defined as basic goods, then, as Crowder argues,

“conceptions of the good may be thought of as schemes for ranking basic human goods across a generality of cases (and thus) if at least some basic goods are incommensurable, then many such general rankings will be *prima facie* reasonable, and many will be equally reasonable.”[36]

Crowder argues that this argument effectively relocates “the theme of infeasible conflict that was only implicit in Berlin’s account”[37]. Within this framework, a conservative political approach is not legitimate within a value pluralistic set-up, because the conservative necessarily responds to conflicts between values by appeal to an authoritative tradition or a singular conception of the good, and does not recognise the conflict of values as reasonable disagreements.

This has repercussions for Gray’s view, as above, that while those effectively illiberal societies that claim universal validity for themselves are not compatible with pluralism, particularistic societies that do not claim universal validity can be deemed compatible and allowed to flourish. On Crowder’s reading, however, these particularistic societies are not legitimate since, within their own cultures, they do not recognise the reasonable disagreement that is relative to the values allowed by each culture. And, if the ultimate aim is a *modus vivendi* political approach to protect these particularistic but illiberal societies, as in Gray’s approach, these too should be dismissed.

Further, if the *modus vivendi* approach values peaceful inter-cultural co-existence higher than the freedom of the individual, then it is essentially not a type of liberalism: one example, for Crowder, was the Munich Agreement, which resulted in “a net reduction in the ends open to the Czechs”[38].

Does a postulated right to exit the group offer a way out of illiberal cultures? Such a move would be rejected by Crowder because the very nature of an illiberal culture’s system of values is such that contradicts the truth of pluralism. If morality is universal, then all men, whether singly or collectively, must be subject to the same moral standard. Ultimately, Crowder’s aim is to suggest that Berlin’s pluralism, with its recognition of radical choice between incommensurable values, lays the foundations for a form of liberalism based upon autonomy rather than diversity. At this stage, it is worth considering the distinction posited by William Galston in his *Liberal Pluralism* between two

forms of historical liberalism: the Enlightenment type and the Reformation type[39]. At the core of Enlightenment liberalism, according to this distinction, is the notion of “liberation through reason from externally imposed authority”; that is, reason is the prime source of authority[40]. Reformation liberalism, by contrast, is also committed to the value of diversity, stemming from the need to formulate a way of engaging with “the political consequences of religious differences in the wake of the divisions within Christendom”[41].

The strategy for doing this was fourfold. Firstly, to subdivide the community into smaller, homogeneous political units. Secondly, to coercively restore homogeneity. Thirdly, to restore homogeneity through the rationalisation of traditional religious particularities into a unitary religion predicated on reason (something that constitutes a fundamental difference between the Enlightenment and Reformation forms of liberalism). And, fourthly, to accept diversity and manage it through tolerance (a point that was crucial for the development of liberalism)[42].

Within the terms of Galston’s distinction, Berlin’s liberalism is a Reformation form of liberalism since diversity is an intrinsic value. Incidentally, Galston’s own position is also one of the Reformation form of liberalism: rather than the civic liberty of Enlightenment liberals, he defends what he sees as expressive liberty, the expression of identity with “the organising principle of the group” through negative liberty[43].

Galston’s subscription to an argument from diversity, as above, differs from Gray’s. Although both conceptions share support for the diversity of individual and collective forms of life, Galston also stresses as equally important the choice to opt out of a group. The illiberal cultures that Gray’s *modus vivendi* political approach would allow to flourish would most probably take coercive measures against internal dissidents. In some cultures, members who “do not experience it as worthwhile and can articulate their discontent in terms consistent with value pluralism”. Hence, “while liberal pluralism rejects state promotion of individual autonomy as an intrinsic good, there is a form of liberty that is a higher-order liberal pluralist political good: namely, individuals’ right of exit from groups and associations that make up civil society. Securing this liberty will require affirmative state protections against oppression carried out by groups against their members.”[44]

Crowder, then, is clearly aware of this distinction between types of liberalism when he argues for an Enlightenment form of liberalism supported by Berlin’s

value-pluralism. He points out one crucial difference between these two forms of liberalism in terms of their approach to non-liberal minority groups within a liberal society, “the reformation view being more hands-off and the Enlightenment view more interventionist”[45].

Crowder goes on to argue that Galston effectively “endorses the point...made earlier against Gray: that if value diversity is to be promoted, then it should be promoted not only among political regimes but within them too”[46], thereby overlooking the limited application of the argument from diversity endorsed by Gray. Hence, Galston’s Reformation form of liberalism is rejected because of its “uncritical acceptance of illiberal cultural practices, such as patriarchy and censorship” and this seems to contravene “Berlin’s concern for the negative liberty of the individual”[47].

Crowder rejects what he supposes to be Galston’s and Gray’s argument from diversity because “(p)luralist diversity translates into cultural diversity only to the extent that cultures themselves promote a diversity of goods”[48]. That is, liberalism for Crowder expresses diversity in the form of reasonable disagreements over the ordering of human goods in terms of which cultures must be evaluated.

With this theoretical objective, Crowder limits diversity to the level of goods so that he can analyse value pluralism in terms of Aristotelian practical reason and thereby advance an Enlightenment form of liberalism. There are two underlying assumptions behind his argument for autonomy-centred liberalism. Firstly, we must be autonomous in order to cope with the inescapably difficult choices under pluralism. Secondly, liberal virtues are required to cope well – in the sense of choose for a good reason – with the choices under pluralism[49].

Hence, in relation to his rejection of Galston’s Reformation form of liberalism, he asserts that “an effective right of exit presupposes personal autonomy, because only an autonomous person is in a position to make a decision that is genuinely his or her own about whether to stay or go”[50].

Hence, rational choice within pluralism, including opting out of one’s group, necessitates the exercise of liberal virtues. These liberal virtues are certain “attitudes of mind”: open-mindedness, realism, attentiveness and flexibility[51].

Open-mindedness is connected, in Crowder's conception, to respect for the whole range of legitimate goods and thereby it promotes the diversity of goods and respects other cultures and forms of life. Realism encompasses "a feeling for the real costs of moral and political decisions, conditioned in particular by the implications of incommensurability". Attentiveness denotes an attitude towards particular details within concrete moral situations. And, flexibility relates to the fact that pluralism does not have single moral rules, thereby necessitating that pluralists are "flexible in tailoring their judgement closely to the situation to which they attend"[52].

Of these four virtues, one concedes that the first two, open-mindedness and a realist attitude, have been commended by Mill and Berlin, while attentiveness has possibly been part of "the core liberal concern for the fate of individual human beings as captured, for example, by Kant's doctrine of respect for persons"[53].

It is the fourth virtue, however, upon which Crowder's autonomy-centred, Enlightenment form of liberalism is based. According to him, flexibility relates to autonomy since to "judge flexibly in the light of value pluralism is to judge for one's own reasons in a strong sense, that is, autonomously"[54]. The reason for this is that in a pluralist system, a rational agent must not make appeal to a single moral rule or to the authority of a particular tradition in order to choose between incommensurable goods or to solve a moral conflict. Instead, the rational agent within a pluralist system must "go behind such perspectives to weigh the values they embody for herself"[55].

Crowder seems to relate this notion of autonomy as an expression of a transcendental notion of rationality, a deviation from Berlin's pluralist conception of reasoning. Indeed, Crowder remains a monist, in a sense, insofar as he argues for autonomy as "a legitimate goal of public policy"[56]. And, ultimately, he has transformed Berlin's defence for negative liberty into a form of liberalism based on one version of positive liberty. For all its innovations, then, Crowder's pluralist liberalism is ultimately not defensible along the lines of Berlin.

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