Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin

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Isaiah Berlin is rightly known as one of the most important representatives of liberal political thought in the twentieth century. Yet at the very centre of his work there is a tension between his liberalism and his value pluralism. On the one hand Berlin appears committed to the universality of basic liberal values, a commitment expressed, for example, in his endorsement of a minimum area of negative liberty for any decent human life, and in his animus towards authoritarian systems of politics, in particular that of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, his most distinctive contribution to political philosophy is his notion of 'value pluralism', the idea that human goods are irreducibly plural, frequently incompatible, and sometimes incommensurable with one another. Where incommensurable goods clash, the choices we must make are problematic because there is no single right way of ranking such values or trading them off against one another. On some interpretations, like that of John Gray, this problem applies not only to choices among goods, like liberty and equality, but to choices among whole cultures, since these must also be incommensurable.[1] According to Gray, liberalism itself, understood as the political expression of a certain culture, can be no more than one legitimate political option among others. Berlin's universalist liberalism appears to be contradicted by his value pluralism.

I shall argue against Gray's interpretation and in favour of the view that liberalism is not only compatible with Berlinian pluralism but positively supported by it. The key mistake made by Gray is, in effect, that of confusing value pluralism with cultural relativism, in particular by equating the incommensurability of goods with the incommensurability of cultures. This confusion is abetted by certain passages in Berlin himself, especially in his discussions of Vico and Herder. Berlin does eventually succeed in distinguishing pluralism from relativism, by pointing to the pluralist acceptance of values that are universal. This is a step in the right direction, but it does not by itself dissolve the tension between liberalism and pluralism. Berlin's concept of universality is so thin that it still admits the legitimacy of non-liberal forms of politics, while a more substantial list of goods would cease to be genuinely universal. To rule out illiberal regimes, and consequently to preserve a case for a universalist liberalism, Berlinians should look beyond the idea of universal goods and try to identify principles implicit in other features of pluralism. Fortunately, a clue to how this might be done is provided by one of Berlin's own attempts to argue from pluralism to liberalism. The 'argument from choice', although unsuccessful as Berlin presents it, can be restated to provide a strong reason why pluralists should be liberals.

I begin by reviewing Berlin's account of pluralism and its relation with liberalism before setting out Gray's effectively relativist reading of Berlin. Next I consider Berlin's own replies to the relativism objection, on which I base my own account of how relativism and pluralism are distinct. Even once pluralism is distinguished from relativism, however, the

question remains of how pluralism can allow Berlin's liberal universalism, and for this purpose I restate and develop Berlin's argument from choice.

Berlin's value pluralism

Berlin's value pluralism must first be understood in contrast with his notion of moral monism.[2] Moral monism is the view that all ethical questions have a single correct answer and that all these answers dovetail within a single, coherent moral system. Such a system will be dominated by one value, or small set of values, which overrides or serves as a common denominator for all others. The clearest example of a monist theory is utilitarianism, which holds that utility, variously understood, is the only thing that is desirable for its own sake, all other goods being either subservient to utility or quantifiable in its terms. But utilitarianism is only one version of monism, others including Kant's categorical imperative and the idea of natural law. Indeed, monism in one form or another is the mainstream approach to ethics in the Western tradition stretching back to the Greeks, being a subset of the broader *philosophia perennis* according to which error is many but truth, in any field, always one.

According to Berlin, monist thinking is the basis for political authoritarianism, and ultimately the totalitarianism of the twentieth century. One link between monism and authoritarianism is by way of utopianism. The attraction of monism is the support it offers to the expectation that all genuine moral values must somehow fit together into a single harmonious system. From such a system, supposedly, we can in principle derive a single correct answer to any moral problem. The seamless moral system, once known, will enable us to iron out all political conflicts and make possible a perfected society in which there will be universal agreement on a single way of life. This is the belief, or the dream, of Plato, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. That list, Berlin suggests, should immediately give us pause, for these are among the principal intellectual sources of modern totalitarianism. The monist outlook is dangerous.[3]

Moral monism is not only dangerous, Berlin believes, it is also false. Such a view does not do justice to the depth and persistence of conflict in human moral experience. Rather, 'the world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others'. [4] The moral world we know is better captured, that is, by the idea of value pluralism, according to which basic human goods do not fit neatly together but are irreducibly multiple, frequently incompatible and incommensurable with one another. This is a world of moral conflict, disagreement and dilemma. In such a world there is no possibility, even in principle, that all goods can be realised simultaneously, or that there is only one rational way of ranking them. If goods are incommensurable, then each is its own measure and, depending on the circumstances, there will be many reasonable

ways of ranking them. Consequently there is no possibility in a pluralist world of a 'final solution' to all moral and political problems, no possibility of moral or political perfection. Along with monist utopianism falls the standard justification of totalitarian dictatorship, the idea that one goal overrides all others and justifies any sacrifice.

But if values are incommensurable then that places a question-mark over the justification of liberalism too. When incommensurables collide choices among them will be problematic. Just how problematic depends on what we understand by 'incommensurable'. Some philosophers interpret this very strongly to the effect that incommensurable values are wholly incomparable with one another and choices among them must be ultimately non-rational, or not guided by any reason that is decisive over others.[5] Berlin sometimes appears to endorse this interpretation, for example in his essay on Machiavelli where he writes that, 'Entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration'.[6] If this is his view then his commitment to liberal solutions in preference to the alternatives looks arbitrary. Indeed, on this strong reading of incommensurability, no political position is rationally justifiable since any such position rests ultimately on a non-rational plumping for one set of values rather than another.

However, the strong interpretation of incommensurability is neither Berlin's only view nor his best. He repudiates it explicitly in a later article, where he insists that reasoned choice among incommensurable goods is possible, if not in the abstract then at least in (some) particular cases.[7] He offers no examples, but it may help to consider the following conflict between impartial fairness and personal loyalty or attachment. The utilitarian William Godwin believed that 'political justice', understood as the impersonal maximising of human happiness, should always come before anything else. In his notorious example, if there is a fire and I have to choose between rescuing my father or Archbishop Fénelon, that benefactor of humanity, Godwin claims that I should choose the Archbishop.[8] Most people would say something has gone wrong in this judgement. There are indeed cases where we should give priority to impartial justice over our personal affiliations, as where a judge is presiding over a trial or an official is awarding a public contract. But humanity-wide impartiality does not always come first, as the Fénelon example shows, or ought to. Whether partiality or impartiality should take priority depends not on any absolute monist ranking or decision procedure but on the particular context in which the conflict is instantiated. Incommensurables such as these cannot be ranked in the abstract, but there may be good reason to rank them in particular cases.

Consequently, Berlin's better view of incommensurability, and therefore of value pluralism, is the more moderate one that allows at least some room for rational choice. Although incommensurability may place problems in the way of reasoned decision making, it

does not rule out reasoned choice within a particular context. Choosing among incommensurables is always hard in two senses: first, such choices always involve regrettable loss, because gains in terms of one value can never wholly compensate for sacrifices in terms of an incommensurable value; secondly, because choices among incommensurables cannot be guided or justified by any simple monist standard like utilitarianism. Moreover, *some* cases may present genuine dilemmas in which there is no decisive reason to favour one option over another. But in other cases choosing among incommensurables, although difficult in the two senses mentioned, need not be irrational or arbitrary. Rather, decisive reasons to choose in one direction rather than another will be generated by context. As Berlin puts it, 'the concrete situation is almost everything'.[9]

What kind of context will guide such choices, and how exactly will it do this? Berlin says little on this subject, but he does sometimes refer to following 'the general pattern of life in which we believe', and to judgements 'dictated by the forms of life of the society to which one belongs'.[10] What these passages suggest is that conflicts among incommensurables in particular cases always arise in a context that includes certain background commitments, whether those of the individuals concerned or those of the society to which they believe. It is by reference to those background commitments, like those of the judge or the official or the loving son, that we may be able to resolve such conflicts rationally. Of course, what our background commitments are will often be uncertain, and one set of commitments will often conflict with others. One may think here of Sartre's example of the man torn between joining the Resistance and staying home to look after his mother.[11] This is just to say that the resolution of moral conflict will frequently be messy, consisting 'in some logically untidy, flexible and even ambiguous compromise'.[12] In the absence of valid monist decision procedures we should not expect things to be otherwise. But to admit that the reasoned justification of these choices may be messy is not to say that it is always impossible.

The idea that reasoned moral decision making is possible without commensuration departs from the standard modern wisdom offered by the utilitarians and Kant, but is not unique or original to Berlin. Although Berlin does not make the connection, the classic statement of this view is Aristotle's account of *phronesis*, or practical reasoning.[13] On this view human morality is too complex to be reduced to the kind of monist rules proposed in the modern age. Rather, the only rigid standard for moral decision making is that one should imitate the *phronemos*, the person of practical wisdom. The *phronemos* decides what ought to be done in a given situation, how exactly the competing considerations should be balanced, through accumulation of experience in dealing with cognate situations. Experience enables the *phronemos* to develop a certain skill in practical reasoning, refined against a background of other virtues or dispositions of character which together contribute to a good life overall. Later I shall argue that reflection on the nature of value pluralism suggests the need for a

specific set of skills or virtues in coping well with choices among incommensurables. These virtues provide further guidance to rational choice under pluralism.

Clearly a pluralist view of moral choice invites many questions about how to resolve particular hard cases, but that is to be expected of any realistic moral theory. Moreover, Berlin need not resolve all such cases, or even many of them, in order to make his political point, which is that pluralism goes together with liberalism. Even if he had to say that on the pluralist view many concrete ethical problems must be seen as irresolvable dilemmas, he might still insist that pluralists at least have reason to accept a liberal political framework within which these issues can be contained. But then the question is, why should the framework be liberal? Liberal democracy gives special weight to goods such as toleration, personal autonomy and human rights. Why should that particular constellation of goods be preferred to an alternative set, such as the equality, solidarity and social justice championed by socialists, or the stability, prudence and tradition stressed by conservatives? Indeed, it is the values of conservatism rather than liberalism that seem to reflected most clearly by Berlin's appeal to 'the general patterns of life in which we believe'. In short, how can Berlin's liberalism be justified in the face of his pluralism?

The possibility of contextual argument under pluralism opens up the possibility of arguments for liberal solutions if the context happens to support this, but not otherwise. So far, liberal universality and pluralism seem to be at odds. Might Berlin overcome this problem by arguing that a universal case for liberal is actually implicit in the idea of value pluralism itself? In some places Berlin denies any necessary connection between pluralism and liberalism.[14] But elsewhere he asserts that pluralism does indeed imply liberalism, as when he refers to 'pluralism, with the measure of negative liberty it entails', and when he writes that 'if pluralism is a valid view ... then toleration and liberal consequences follow'.[15]

Assuming that Berlin does believe, at least in some passages, that pluralism implies liberalism, how does he argue for this? His most explicit response turns on the value of choice. If pluralism is true, then 'the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom ...'.[16] The value-pluralist outlook emphasizes moral plurality and conflict. On this view choice moves to center-stage in moral experience as unavoidable. If we must choose, Berlin argues, we must value freedom of choice, hence by implication a liberal order based on negative liberty, that is, liberty as non-interference with whatever choices we might make.

This argument, at least in the form in which Berlin presents it, is clearly flawed. It is, in effect, an instance of the naturalistic fallacy: from the fact that something is unavoidable it does not follow that it is desirable.[17] Berlin himself observes that many choices among

incommensurables are painful, even tragic. Why then should we value such choices or the freedom with which to make them? A better solution might be to avoid these choices as far as possible, a move endorsed by Berlin in one essay.[18] One way of doing so may be deliberately to reduce our negative liberty. The necessity of moral choice, without more, is compatible with authoritarian as well as with liberal politics. I conclude that Berlin's most explicit attempt to argue from pluralism to liberalism does not succeed. But that is not the worst of it. Berlin's claim that pluralism and liberalism fit together comes under a still more radical assault from John Gray.

Is pluralism relativism?

For Gray, Berlin's basic concept of value pluralism is correct, but it possesses an 'enormous subversive force' that Berlin himself does not fully appreciate.[19] Pluralism not only fails to support liberalism, Gray argues, it positively undermines most forms of liberal political thought. He advances various arguments in support of this view, but his principal pluralist thrust against liberalism rests on the claim that value incommensurability implies the incommensurability of cultures. Just as there can be no universal formula for ranking goods like liberty and equality, there can be no such formula for ranking cultures. Rather, each culture is its own measure, each can be evaluated only on its own terms. On this view a liberal culture is just one locally valid form of life among others, characterised by the priority it gives to liberal goods such as individual liberty, toleration and personal autonomy. That ranking of goods is incommensurable with alternative rankings, neither inferior nor superior. Liberalism is, like other ideological positions, 'agonistic'. It represents no more than one legitimate way of ranking goods, and has no universal application or authority.

A Berlinian liberal could reply that Gray's critique rests on a major mistake: it confuses value pluralism with cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the view that there are no moral principles or values that apply universally, only particular moral judgements made from within the standpoint of the moral code of a specific culture. To judge a culture from the 'outside' is to apply to that culture standards that are alien and inapplicable to it. In short, cultural relativism holds that cultures are indefeasible moral authorities. On this view liberalism can be no more than the political voice of a particular kind of culture, one that happens to place a high value on individual liberty and toleration. This is precisely the position that Gray arrives at from his reading of Berlin's pluralism. Berlin, as I shall show further in a moment, insists that pluralism and relativism are distinct, and Gray claims to follow him in this.[20] But Gray effectively elides the distinction when he identifies value pluralism with the incommensurability of cultures. If cultures are incommensurable, then each is its own measure and open to evaluation only on its own terms. For Gray, just as for the relativist, cultures are morally indefeasible. Pluralism and cultural relativism become indistinguishable.

Despite Berlin's denials that his pluralism is the same as relativism, the two have been equated not only by Gray but by several other critics, both hostile and friendly to Berlin.[21] In part, the fault lies with Berlin himself, because some of his own texts are significantly misleading on this point. This is especially true of his influential interpretation of Vico and Herder.[22] Berlin is interested in these thinkers because he sees them as belonging to a 'Counter-Enlightenment' tradition which provides a salutary antidote to the most powerful strain of monism in modern times, namely the scientism of the French Enlightenment. The dominant view among the Parisian *philosophes* was that the methods of the natural sciences, which had been so successful in explaining the workings of the physical world, would do the same for the social world. Human conduct could be investigated as a natural phenomenon, its patterns observed and measured and reduced to a set of laws which would then be used to guide the reconstruction of society on rational lines. For Berlin, this scientism is the origin of the technocratic utopianism that reaches its intellectual high-tide with Marx, and which eventually results in the horrors of the Soviet gulag.

Against the abstraction and universality of Enlightenment scientism, Counter-Enlightenment thinkers like Vico and Herder emphasise concrete experience and particularity, and this is the source of their pluralism. They share the belief that genuine understanding of human conduct is not possible through external observation and measurement, the methods of the natural sciences, alone. Unlike other phenomena, human activity is purposive and can be grasped only by adopting, if only in imagination, the inside view of human actors themselves. The technique of *Einfühlen*, or imaginatively 'feeling oneself into' the worldview of people in other times and places, becomes the basis of Berlin's own distinctive method in the history of ideas.[23] Central to this approach, in the hands of both Berlin and his Counter-Enlightenment predecessors, is a focus on the particulars of concrete experience rather than abstract laws and patterns. And since concrete experience varies so greatly both historically and culturally, the result is an emphasis on the irreducible plurality of outlooks and value-systems. Vico and Herder, on Berlin's account, are pluralists in the sense that they stress the multiplicity of distinct ways of seeing and valuing the world.

But how is this kind of pluralism different from cultural relativism? At first sight much of Berlin's account suggests strongly that the two are identical.[24] Vico, for example, is presented as primarily a historicist thinker who rejects any notion of a permanent human nature or natural law, and who argues that each stage in the evolution of a culture or civilisation has its own distinctive character and outlook. That outlook includes its own set of values, and these are the only appropriate measures of its achievement. Thus Berlin writes that for Vico human values 'belong to, and are effective and intelligible at, only their specific stage in human history', and that 'each phase is incommensurable with the others, since each

lives by its own light and can be understood only on its own terms'.[25] Comments like these look like strong statements of a relativist acceptance of the moral authority of cultures. The appearance of relativism is even stronger in Berlin's interpretation of Herder, for whom cultures or 'nations' rather than civilisations or historical phases are 'incommensurable'. Each culture possesses its own unique 'centre of gravity', and 'all these forms of life are intelligible each in its own terms (the only terms there are)'.[26] Each way of life realises 'an ideal of indefeasible validity' such that 'we are forbidden to make judgements of comparative values, for that is measuring the incommensurable'.[27] If this view is indeed Herder's, how can he be other than a cultural relativist?

Berlin does acknowledge certain non-relative themes in Vico and Herder, but he promptly dismisses these as the least persuasive parts of their work. This judgement may be true, but it leaves Berlin with the problem of relativism. Sometimes in the essays on these thinkers he seems to concede that what he finds in them is historical or cultural relativism; at other times he insists on the 'pluralism' label, but does little to show how this refers to something different from the relativism he repudiates.[28] On the contrary, the discussion of Herder in particular confuses the issue by very strongly assimilating pluralism to cultural relativism, in practice if not in name. The effect of this is to eviscerate value pluralism as a distinctive position and to let in arguments which reduce Berlin's liberalism to no more than one cultural expression among others. To avoid this result, Berlin needs to develop an account of value pluralism which separates it more sharply from cultural relativism. More specifically, he needs grounds from which to evaluate cultural practices critically rather than accepting cultures as morally authoritative and unassailable.

The common moral horizon

Berlin is sensitive to the objection that his pluralism is really relativism, and replies to it in the later essay, 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought' (1980). There he insists that Vico and Herder are not relativists but pluralists, and in the course of his argument he gives his most substantial account of the general distinction between value pluralism and relativism. Ethical relativism he defines as the view that the moral 'ideas and attitudes of individuals and groups are inescapably determined by varying conditioning factors', including culture and class.[29] According to cultural relativism, therefore, values are wholly conditioned by culture. If this were true, Berlin argues, then people would see things only from the point of view of their own culture. They would be 'insulated', occupying 'windowless boxes' whose dimensions would constitute their entire world.[30] Consequently they would be unable to appreciate or even understand the values of other cultures – at least as values in any way comparable with their own. In a relativist world we may be able to acknowledge the values of other cultures as externally observable behavioural goals on a level with those of other species. But we would be quite unable to understand or empathise with those values as in any

way human goals like our own, because to do would require entering into them as purposes comparable to ours.

Yet of course, Berlin suggests, the world is not like this. Much of the importance of Vico and Herder lies in their insistence – an insistence which separates them from the relativists – that we can understand and appreciate the values of other cultures.[31] We can do this precisely by imaginatively entering into the cultural and moral world-view of those we are seeking to understand. What makes this possible is that, contrary to relativism (at least in its stronger forms), there is sufficient universality of human experience to make other cultures comprehensible to us, and through that comprehension to allow us to appreciate their values as genuine values that we might imaginably live by ourselves. Thus our undoubted capacity to understand and empathise with the values of other cultures and historical periods presupposes certain 'limits of humanity', a common 'human horizon' or shared field of moral experience.[32] Our ability to understand other cultures implies a set of universal values.

It might be objected that to understand the values of other cultures is not necessarily to share them.[33] Just because I understand another culture's valuing of human sacrifice – that is, understand its meaning and purpose - does not mean that I agree with it and thereby share a common commitment to human sacrifice. But the objection trades on an ambiguity in the term 'value' which is to some extent present in Berlin's own usage. If 'value' in this example means the specific practice or norm of human sacrifice, then of course my understanding the practice does not commit me to endorsing it for myself. However, if my understanding is a genuine, internal understanding in Berlin's sense (and if the practice falls within the horizon of recognisably human activities) then I necessarily appreciate the deeper purposes or goals which the practice serves – the 'values' which stand behind the practice or which the practice expresses. It is these deeper values that I can then see myself as sharing even if I strongly reject the particular way they are expressed in the practice confronting me. Even though I am repelled by human sacrifice I can understand that the practice is intended, however wrong-headedly, to express a reverence for regeneration, fertility and ultimately life itself.[34] It is these underlying values that I can identify with and that imply a common moral horizon. All such values 'respond to the real needs and aspirations of normal human beings', and while specific responses vary along with specific circumstances, resulting in the cultural variety we know, the basic pattern of response to fundamental human needs and interests is always the same.[35]

The important point that emerges from Berlin's discussion is therefore that while relativism divides moral experience into discrete, non-communicating compartments or perspectives, value pluralism implies the existence of a significant moral horizon shared by all human beings. It is this that explains, as relativism cannot, why it is possible to enter into the

mind of another culture. The corollary is (although this is not stressed by Berlin) that the common horizon also provides a basis for cross-cultural criticism, where fundamental human goods are denied or inadequately realised by a particular culture or ideology. Thus the human sacrifice practised by the Aztecs might be rejected on the ground that although ostensibly serving the valid goal of regeneration, its claim to do so rests on grossly mistaken beliefs concerning natural causality. The underlying values are identifiably human and genuine, but the institution is misguided even when judged by those same basic terms.

This point confirms that Gray's culture-based reading of Berlinian pluralism is erroneous. The idea that not only goods but also cultures are incommensurable is one that, as we have seen, does appear in Berlin's texts. But this should be seen as a mistake in the light of his key notion of a common moral horizon. If there are universal values, even if these are highly generic, then it cannot be true that cultures are wholly incommensurable. Within the common horizon cultures must overlap, sharing at least some of the human values. Despite what Berlin himself sometimes says, his better view is that it is primarily *goods* (and sub-goods, like negative and positive forms of liberty) that are plural in his sense rather than cultures. No doubt the plurality of goods will also lead to considerable cultural variation, since distinct packages of goods will be pursued in divergent ways by different groups of people. But that cultural variation will be parasitic on the plurality of goods.

The problem of thinness

If the foregoing distinction between pluralism and relativism is correct, then where does that leave the relation between pluralism and liberalism? First, pluralism does not undermine liberalism in the way Gray supposes. According to Gray, pluralism implies that liberalism can only be 'agonistic', or locally legitimate, and that traditional liberal universalism is untenable. But that view depends on Gray's interpretation of Berlinian pluralism as primarily cultural pluralism, which is equivalent to cultural relativism and rests on the assumption that cultures are incommensurable. It is on that assumption that Gray exhibits liberalism as one unrankable cultural outlook among others. But we have now seen that the assumption is false. Cultures are not, indeed cannot be, incommensurable on the pluralist view. Even if liberalism is understood as the political expression of a particular cultural outlook, it does not follow that liberal cultures cannot be critically compared with other cultures. Consequently, pluralism does not imply that liberalism must be on a moral par with other forms of politics.

Indeed, the pluralist acceptance of universals would seem to open up the possibility of liberals' going further and arguing for the positive superiority of liberal principles. If, on the basis of the universal values, pluralism permits a critical comparison of cultures, at least in principle, then it would seem possible, again in principle, to argue that liberal values and institutions answer better to the demands of those values than do the alternatives. Such an

argument has recently been proposed by Jonathan Riley.[36] In Riley's view Berlin's notion of the common moral horizon can be assumed to include rights not to be enslaved and to be free from starvation and arbitrary killing. These point to an embryonic account of human rights, which in turn suggests a 'minimal liberalism'.[37]

The trouble with this as an interpretation of Berlin is that the account Berlin actually gives of the universal goods, in particular his notion of the common moral horizon, is far too thin or generic to support conclusions as substantial as Riley's 'minimal' rights. So far we have seen Berlin argue that there must be universal values, because these are presupposed by our capacity to understand other cultures. As to their content, however, his remarks are sporadic and unsystematic, referring occasionally to values such as liberty, equality, justice and courage.[38] Nowhere does he claim that the specific values mentioned by Riley are universals. Indeed they are very implausible candidates for this status given his remarks about what 'universality' means, as follows.

On the meaning of 'universal', Berlin's texts are again inconsistent, but two main accounts can be extracted from them. The first, as we have seen, is that of the common 'limits of humanity' or 'human horizon' beyond which behaviour is no longer recognisably human and understanding is impossible. Someone who sees no difference between kicking a pebble and killing his family is beyond the human pale, because his values or purposes are literally incomprehensible.[39] But the actions of the Nazis, although morally detestable to most people, are not incomprehensible in this way – Berlin is quite explicit about this.[40] Rather, those actions are performed in the service of values, such as group belonging and self-esteem, that we can recognise as human. Consequently the practices themselves, although we revile them, must be acknowledged as, lamentably, human. On this view, therefore, not even Nazi society is excluded by Berlin's common moral horizon. Nor would the horizon exclude a society (and there have been many such) that rejected Riley's universal right to be free from arbitrary killing, starvation and slavery. The common horizon excludes only what is not recognisably human, and consequently permits almost anything. It certainly permits societies which endorse violent death, hunger and slavery, at any rate for some.

Berlin's second main conception of value universality refers not to a common horizon but to a common 'central core' of values which all human beings share.[41] The notion of the core is distinctly narrower and more demanding than that of the horizon, concerned less with negative limits than with positive requirements, namely those values which all or most people have actually accepted historically. This is bound to be a subset of the merely 'human' values and practices, since not all goals that are recognisably human have been widely pursued. The practices of the Nazis fall within the horizon but are somewhat less likely to satisfy the core. Nevertheless, even the common core is likely to be very thin. On this account what makes

values universal is the fact that they are universally desired. But the historical record provides little evidence of anything actually desired or admired by all human beings except goods or virtues described at the highest level of generality. Among the examples proposed by Berlin, courage is a plausible candidate (although what particular actions count as courageous is likely to vary across cultures), but liberty and equality, not to mention social welfare, are highly dubious. And once again Riley's rights are unlikely to be included. Slavery, for example, has been endorsed as a legitimate institution by many societies.

Whether conceived as horizon or core, Berlin's universal values are likely to be so general or abstract that most human societies would satisfy them, including many highly illiberal societies.[42] Could Berlin respond by making his account of moral universality 'thicker' or more demanding, so that it would be satisfied by fewer non-liberal societies? A model for this move might be provided by the 'human capabilities' approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, according to which a good life for a human being requires the possession of real capacities to exercise certain essential 'human functions', the list of these being fairly detailed and extensive.[43] It could then be argued that such capacities are best realised under a liberal form of politics. The general difficulty with this strategy is the obvious tension between identifying goods at a sufficient level of specificity to single out liberalism as a necessary political context, and on the other hand ensuring that the goods are described in sufficiently general terms to count as genuinely universal, in the sense of essential or desirable for any good life. While such an approach should not be ruled out prematurely, it is probably best to remain sceptical of it.

At this stage it might seem that Gray is right after all. He may have confused pluralism with relativism, but his larger point that pluralism excludes liberal universalism appears to be intact. Berlin does separate pluralism from relativism, the crucial move being the pluralist commitment to universal values. But it now turns out that Berlin's category of universals is so broad, its contents so general, that it excludes virtually nothing. Berlin's distinction between pluralism and relativism now looks more formal than substantial. Certainly his universals are consistent with a huge range of deeply illiberal values and ways of life. To this point, then, a local commitment to liberal values may be consistent with value pluralism, but so is much else. And if that is true, then pluralism would seem to rule out liberal universalism.

What this shows, however, is only that pluralist defenders of liberal universalism cannot rely on respect for universal values alone. They might find other resources in the pluralist outlook to mount their case. The notion of universal values is only one element of the idea of value pluralism. There are several others, including incommensurability, plurality,

and conflict. Might it not be that these, too, generate principles which point towards distinctively liberal choices?

Pluralism and the liberal virtues

I believe that several arguments are possible along these lines.[44] Here I focus on only one of these, since it amounts to a revival of Berlin's 'argument from choice' mentioned earlier. Recall Berlin's failed attempt to pass directly from the necessity of choice under pluralism to the valuing of choice under liberalism. That argument can be restated to avoid the naturalistic fallacy as follows. Pluralism imposes hard choices on us. To cope well with those choices we need to develop certain dispositions of character or virtues. Those virtues overlap the character traits distinctively promoted by liberal forms of politics, in particular personal autonomy. In short, liberalism promotes the virtues required for coping successfully with the exigencies of choosing among conflicting incommensurables. The argument avoids the naturalistic fallacy because it passes not from necessity to value but from necessity to necessity. Because hard choices are unavoidable under pluralism, so too are liberal virtues.

I should admit straight away that this argument depends on a significant assumption. Liberal virtues are necessary to cope well with choices under pluralism if to 'cope well' with such choices means to choose for a good reason. It is only if we are first committed to rational choice under pluralism that we will need the virtues requisite to practical reasoning. But why should we be committed to reason here? Why not say that from a pluralist point of view rational choice is itself merely one value among others, and that one may equally cope with pluralist choice by plumping arbitrarily? A reply is suggested by Nussbaum, who argues that practical reasoning is 'architectonic' among the basic human functions she identifies in the sense that it is necessary to 'organise and arrange all of the others, giving them in the process a characteristically human shape'.[45] Similarly, under pluralism practical reason is needed to organise choices among incommensurable good. In the absence of practical reasoning our choices would be arbitrary, incoherent and perhaps self-defeating. Unless we give some thought to how the ends we endorse fit together we are in danger of creating lives that, as John Kekes puts it, 'are too scattered ... In such lives there are many values, but between their favorable evaluation and realization come the distractions of other values whose realization also recedes for the same reason'.[46] Lives like these are undesirable from a specifically pluralist point of view because they fail to do justice to, or to take seriously, the goods they purport to value. I shall return to this notion of taking goods seriously in a moment.

My argument is that rational choice under pluralism requires the exercise of certain liberal virtues. I shall now consider the steps in this argument in a little more detail. First, pluralism imposes hard choices upon us. We saw earlier that this is true in two senses: such

choices involve absolute loss, and they must be made without reliance on any simple monist rule like utilitarianism. Secondly, to cope well with those hard choices (i.e. to choose for a good reason), we need to develop certain dispositions of character, or virtues. This claim recalls the link made earlier with Aristotelian practical reasoning. Aristotle's person of practical wisdom is able to see what she ought to do in the given situation because she has developed, through experience of cognate situations, a skill in practical judgement. That skill or virtue is supported by other virtues, in particular courage, justice and temperance. Similarly, a person confronted by a hard choice among incommensurables will be assisted in choosing well if he informs his reflections with certain attitudes of mind which may likewise be called virtues.

What, then, are the pluralist virtues? Once more I suggest we can answer this question by reflection on the nature of pluralism itself. In this way I propose four candidates. The first is generosity or open-mindedness, which is closely connected to the idea of taking plural values seriously. The idea of value pluralism involves the notion that there is a wide range of human goods, all of which possess a fundamental moral parity because all are equally intrinsic. At a further level there is a wide (but more limited) range of legitimate ways of life or conceptions of the good, these representing different rankings of constellations of the fundamental goods. To be a pluralist is, in part, precisely to acknowledge that a wide range of goods and lives are genuinely valuable.[47] Consequently, to acknowledge the truth of pluralism commits one to respecting the full range of legitimate goods and good lives, that is, to endorsing those goods and lives prima facie. This does not mean that pluralists must endorse all such goods and lives equally in every particular case, since clearly there is insufficient 'social space' to do this within the life either of an individual or even a society.[48] But pluralists should affirm all such goods and lives as possessing real value, even if they must choose against them in concrete instances. This is what I mean by the pluralist injunction to take goods seriously. If a good is genuine, then we must promote it where we can, and where we cannot we must choose against it with regret. The implication is that we should approach pluralist choices with a certain attitude, namely one of respect for the full range of human goods and lives, including those we cannot accommodate within our own decisions. This amounts to a high degree of generosity or open-mindedness when dealing with the values and cultures of others.[49]

For the same reason pluralists should approach their choices with what Berlin calls 'a sense of reality', a feeling for the real costs of moral and political decisions, conditioned in particular by the implications of incommensurability.[50] This is the second pluralist virtue: call it 'realism'. Thirdly, pluralists' rejection of neat abstract rules and insistence on the particularity of moral solutions should make them attentive to the relevant details of the choice situation, including the claims and circumstances of those people affected by the

choice.[51] Fourthly, in the absence of decisive monist rules pluralists need to be flexible in tailoring their judgement closely to the situation to which they attend.

The final step in my argument is the claim that the pluralist virtues are also characteristically liberal virtues. Generosity towards the range of human goods and lives is a recognizable trait of liberalism at its best.[52] One sees it, for example, it Mill's valuing of individuality and social diversity.[53] Realism in the face of unavoidable costs and conflicts is a theme which separates liberals from their more utopian opponents, including classical Marxists and anarchists. Attentiveness is represented by the core liberal concern for the fate of individual human beings, as captured for example in Kant's doctrine of respect for the person.

Above all, pluralist flexibility overlaps the liberal commitment to personal autonomy. Of the several links between pluralist practical reasoning and liberalism this is the most significant, since personal autonomy is the most distinctive of liberal virtues, at any rate on the Enlightenment view. To judge rationally in the light of value pluralism is to judge for one's own reasons in a strong sense – that is, autonomously. In part this is because conflicts among incommensurable goods cannot be decided for good reason merely by the mechanical application of a standard monist rule. If utilitarianism, for example, itself represents only one possible ranking of incommensurables, then utilitarian calculation can be no more than one consideration among others in pluralist judgement. The rational pluralist judge cannot rely on utilitarianism or any other ready-made monist procedure to resolve deep moral conflicts, but must go behind such perspectives to weigh the values they embody for herself.

Nor, contrary to the conservative view of John Kekes, can pluralists answer such questions merely by appealing to the authority of local tradition.[54] Traditionalism is especially unhelpful in modern societies characterised by widespread disagreement among conceptions of the good. But on the value-pluralist view the problem is not merely an aspect of modernity, it is rooted in the moral experience of humanity. For pluralists, reasonable disagreement concerning the good life is a permanent possibility in all human societies because of the deep structure of human value. Traditional and other conceptions of the good life represent, as I suggested above, generalised rankings of incommensurable values. Although I have argued that pluralists should not accept that all such conceptions are automatically on a moral par, nevertheless the wide range of genuine human goods implies a wide range of legitimate permutations of those goods, that is, of reasonable rankings. Many such rankings will be equally reasonable, and concerning these there is consequently room for people to disagree on reasonable grounds. Pluralists cannot resolve the deepest value conflicts simply by citing a local or personal conception of the good, because under pluralism these are subject to reasonable disagreement.

Reasonable disagreement about the good is experienced not only among cultural groups or belief systems but also within them. Moreover, individuals can experience the centrifugal pull of incommensurable goods not only interpersonally but also within themselves. Berlin's own inner conflicts, surely among the deepest sources of his pluralism, are a case in point.[55] Here too there is a link between pluralism and personal autonomy. For where the nature of the good life is subject to reasonable disagreement, conceptions of the good cannot be permanent bases for decision but must be subject to revision themselves. That kind of decision is possible only through the exercise of personal autonomy.

In short, value pluralism imposes on us choices that are demanding to a degree such that they can be made rationally only by autonomous agents. If pluralism is true, then the best lives, those informed by reasoned choices among the available options, will be characterised by personal autonomy. And if that is true, then pluralism implies a case not only for liberalism but specifically for that kind of liberalism under which the promotion of personal autonomy is a legitimate goal of public policy. This conclusion follows given the plausible claim that the conditions for personal autonomy, both cultural and economic, are unlikely to be sustained, at least for many people, in the absence of some significant degree of deliberate state intervention.[56]

My argument can thus be applied in the now-standard debate as to whether liberalism is best conceived on a 'Reformation' model, based on negative liberty and toleration, or on an 'Enlightenment' model, advancing personal autonomy as the keystone of a superior conception of the human good.[57] At stake is the question of whether the appropriate role of the liberal state is to accommodate different ways of life, perhaps including illiberal ones, or to promote a distinctively liberal conception of human well-being. In these terms William Galston has recently employed arguments based on Berlinian pluralism to construct a case for the Reformation alternative.[58] But if the argument I have outlined is correct, then this aspect of Galston's position has to be questioned. The logic of Berlin's pluralism, if not the position taken by Berlin himself, favours the Enlightenment model, emphasising personal autonomy.

This means that although my argument revives Berlin's argument from choice, it also transforms that argument significantly. Whereas Berlin had linked pluralist choice with liberty in its negative form (freedom of choice), my reformulation endorses personal autonomy, which belongs to the 'positive' category (freedom as authentic self-direction). This supports the view of those commentators who have argued that Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' is insufficiently alive to the central place of positive conceptions of freedom in the liberal outlook.[59] The revival of Berlin's liberal pluralist position builds on his views but also goes beyond them.

Notes

[1] John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana, 1995); *Enlightenment's Wake* (London: Routledge, 1995); *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

[2] Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. H. Hardy and R. Hausheer (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 6-16; *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 11-14; *Liberty*, ed. H. Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 212-217. For a comprehensive bibliography of writing by and about Berlin, see *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, a website maintained by Berlin's editor and literary trustee: http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/

[3] Not all monists are authoritarians, however. Berlin's view is not that monism is linked to tyranny by necessity, but that monism can lead to authoritarianism along a slippery slope of psychological association. His position here parallels his famous account of the way positive conceptions of liberty, although not necessarily anti-individualist, are vulnerable to becoming twisted in that direction 'not always by logically reputable steps': *Liberty*, 179.

[4] *Liberty*, 213-214.

[5] Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); Jonathan Riley, 'Crooked Timber and Liberal Culture', in *Pluralism: the philosophy and politics of diversity, ed.* M. Baghramian and A. Ingram (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); 'Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism', *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001), 283-295; 'Defending Cultural Pluralism', *Political Theory* 30 (2002), 68-96.

[6] Berlin, *Proper Study*, 320.

[7] Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, 'Pluralism and Liberalism: a Reply', *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 306-309.

[8] William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. I. Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 170.

[9] Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. H. Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 15.

[10] *Liberty*, 47; *Crooked Timber*, 18.

[11] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. P. Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 35-36.

[12] Berlin, *Liberty*, 92.

[13] The following account of Aristotelian practical reasoning and its links with value pluralism draws on the work of Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. B. Douglass, G. Mara and H. S. Richardson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory* 20: 202-246; *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Henry S. Richardson *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Nussbaum's pluralist reading of Aristotle is disputed by Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163-167.

[14] Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Phoenix, 1993), 44.

[15] *Liberty*, 216; *Power of Ideas*, 13.

[16] *Liberty*, 214.

[17] George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 81-82.

[18] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 17-18.

[19] Gray, *Berlin*, 1.

[20] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 70-90; Gray, *Liberalisms*, 290-291; *Berlin*, 62-65.

[21] Leo Strauss, 'Relativism', in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. T. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Michael Sandel, Introduction to M. Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); George Kateb, 'Can Cultures be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work', *Social Research* 66 (1999): 1009-1038; Roger Sandall, 'The Book of Isaiah', in *The Culture Cult* (Boulder, Co: Westview, 2001).

[22] Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann and Herder* (Princeton: Priceton University Press, 2000).

[23] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 14, 18-19, 197, 212-213.

[24] Arnaldo Momigliano, 'On the Pioneer Trail', *New York Review of Books*, 11 November, 1976.

[25] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 61; *Crooked Timber*, 75.

[26] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 211, 219, 235.

[27] Ibid., 234, 233.

[28] Ibid., 198 note.

[29] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 77.

[30] Ibid., 85.

[31] Ibid., 82.

[32] Ibid., 80; *Proper Study*, 10.

[33] Kateb, 'Can Cultures be Judged?', 1030; Micahel Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 220.

[34] See Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (Paterson, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1960), 188-189.

[35] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 84.

[36] Riley, 'Crooked Timber and Liberal Culture'; 'Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism'; 'Defending Cultural Pluralism'.

[37] Riley, 'Crooked Timber and Liberal Culture', 140-141.

[38] Berlin, *Liberty*, 172; Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 37.

[39] Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. H. Hardy (London: Hogarth, 1978), 166.

[40] Berlin, *Power of Ideas*, 12-13; Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 38.

[41] Berlin, *Proper Study*, 243; *Three Critics*, 277.

[42] Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 109.

[43] Martha Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. B. Douglass, G. Mara and H. S. Richardson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism'; *Love's Knowledge; Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

[44] See in particular George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, and 'Two Value-pluralist Arguments for Liberalism', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37 (2002), 457-473; William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: the Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[45] Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', 226.

[46] John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 97-98.

[47] By 'valuable' here I mean contributing to human well-being objectively, not just valued de facto by particular persons or societies. The latter is Berlin's usual view of universal value: Berlin, *Liberty*, 45; Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 37. I depart from Berlin on this matter because his account makes all values a function of empirical preference, thereby commensurating them in a way inconsistent with the fundamental message of value pluralism: see Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 73-74 note 1.

[48] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57.

[49] Michael Walzer, 'Are There Limits to Liberalism?', *New York Review of Books*, 19 October, 1995.

[50] Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. H. Hardy (London: Hogarth, 1978), 111, 207.

[51] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 101.

[52] Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, 61-62.

[53] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. G. Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), ch. 3; see also Berlin, 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', in *Liberty*, 218-251.

[54] Kekes, *Morality of Pluralism*; also *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); *A Case for Conservatism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[55] Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: a Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 246-247, 250-251, 287.

[56] See Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 226-236.

[57] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, ch. 2.

[58] Galston, *Liberal Pluralism.*

[59] George Crowder, 'Negative and Positive Liberty', *Political Science* 40 (1988), 57-73; John Christman, 'Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom', *Ethics*101: 343-359; Richard Bellamy, 'T. H. Green, J. S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Liberty and Liberalism', in H. Gross and R. Harrison, eds, *Jurisprudence: Cambridge Essays*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.