

VALUE PLURALISM AND NORMATIVE REASONING

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1. Introduction^{*}

In this paper, I will argue in favour of the view that an acceptance of value pluralism does not have cultural relativism or “incomparability by reason” between values (Gray 1995b:142) – a combination of which I here will call ‘practical relativism’ (cf. section 3 below) – as a consequence. Instead, I believe it adds richness, realism and ‘maturity’ to the endeavour that is normative reasoning (cf. Berlin 1990; 1996; 2002; Seung and Bonevac 1992). The paper could be viewed as a ‘technical’ addendum to my study of Isaiah Berlin, as it addresses a few theoretical questions left out at that occasion (cf. Thorsen 2004, especially section 2.2.1).

1.1 Problem and plan

What are the consequences for normative reasoning if value pluralism is held to be true? Until now, the debates surrounding value pluralism have been largely concentrated around whether it is combinable with liberalism in political matters (cf. e.g. Berlin and Williams 1994; Crowder 1994; 1999; 2002; Gray 1995b; 1998; 2000; Galston 2002). In this study, I will attempt to cast the net a bit wider and ask more generally to what degree normative reasoning at large will be changed by an acceptance of value pluralism. I will however draw on the debate whether value pluralism is combinable with liberalism as it is a useful illustration of normative reasoning under value pluralism, as well as the disagreements that have arisen among the theorists presented in this paper.

I will begin my study with a presentation of the theorists I will review and refer to in my discussion. In section 2, I will describe the classical versions of value pluralism, represented by the works of Sterling Lamprecht and Isaiah Berlin. Lamprecht was the first to describe value pluralism, or ‘ethical pluralism’, as such, borrowing the term ‘pluralism’ from the tradition of early twentieth century

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American pragmatism (cf. Lamprecht 1920; 1920a; 1921; cf. also Brogan 1931). It was however Berlin who in the course of several seminal articles and books developed pluralism and removed it from obscurity (cf. especially Berlin 1956; 1990; 2000a; 2002). There is no concrete evidence to suggest that Berlin was directly influenced by Lamprecht (Hardy 2004), but it seems to me that they are as closely related in the ethical views they adopt as they could possibly become, making it desirable to view them in conjunction with each other.

In section 3, I will sketch value pluralism in the form it is given by John Gray, with special consideration to two of the modifications he superimposes on Berlinian value pluralism (Gray 1995b; 1998; 2000). Gray's project is to drive a wedge between the two main components of Berlin's ethical and political theorising, namely his value pluralism and his cautious and tentative liberalism. He succeeds in this, I contend, only because of the alterations he makes to the theory of value pluralism and only in light of an unhelpfully restrictive perspective on what kind of phenomenon 'liberalism' is (cf. Thorsen 2004). In this study it is mainly his perspective on value incommensurability as rational incomparability, along with its upshot of cultural relativism that receives my critique. I will argue that Gray's modifications of value pluralism are unwarranted, not only because they go against the spirit and letter of classical value pluralism, but also because Gray's theory is moving fast towards inconsistency. The first assertion value pluralism makes (see section 1.2 below) is that there are objective values in the world – making it inimical to ethical relativism – an assertion which I view to be on a collision course with Gray's cultural relativism. It is of course not the case that moral and cultural relativism are inexorably linked together, but Gray's endeavour to base such all-out cultural relativism in value pluralism is ultimately itself confused and in addition a source of much confusion about Berlinian value pluralism. Instead, I believe that value pluralists who wish to take part in normative debates and reasoning should take their cues from Lamprecht, Berlin and Crowder, rather than the 'practical relativism' of Gray.

In section 4, it is George Crowder's move away from attitudes comparable to those of Gray that comes under light (Crowder 1994; 1999; 2002; 2003). Crowder is

one who has changed his mind, it seems, about value pluralism. In his first article on the subject (Crowder 1994), he takes up the position on value incommensurability held by Gray, suggesting that there at least is a kind of missing link between Berlin's value pluralism and his endorsement of liberalism. In subsequent papers and books, however, he develops a more relaxed understanding of incommensurability, culminating in the opposite view that there indeed are compelling arguments to be made in favour of liberal arrangements and policies under value pluralism, and that some common arguments in favour of liberalism could be adapted to function under a value pluralist framework (cf. especially Crowder 2002).

Section 5, entitled 'Pluralism, monism and relativism', will constitute the discussion portion of the paper, in which I will present my views on value pluralism, and contrast it with its alternatives, namely monism and relativism. In it, I will argue that pluralism, even if it has some problems of its own, is preferable to these two alternatives. Section 6 will contain a short conclusion.

1.2 What is value pluralism?

What is value pluralism? Crowder (2002:2) defines it as a theory about moral values that is "*associated in particular with the late Isaiah Berlin, that fundamental human values are irreducibly plural and 'incommensurable', and that they may, and often do, come into conflict with one another, leaving us with hard choices.*" Compact as this sentence is, it states that value pluralism makes four distinct claims about morality (cf. Crowder 2002:44-73).

First, value pluralism acknowledges that there are fundamental human values, values whose pursuit is what constitutes the 'essence of humanity'. These values are furthermore deemed to be objective in the sense that they represent something of value regardless of what status they are accorded by individuals, their theories or particular cultures or societies: "*[T]he multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity, rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies*" (Berlin 2000a:12). Value pluralism is for this reason a kind of moral objectivism about values and hence not akin to relativism, which denies the existence of such objective value altogether (cf. e.g. Harman and Thompson 1996).

The second claim that value pluralism makes is that these objective values are irreducibly plural, in the sense that they cannot be collapsed into one another until one is left with one ultimate or paramount value. This is a rejection of the Platonic assertion that there is a unified phenomenon that is the Form or the Idea of The Good, or as this has been named in medieval philosophy, the *summum bonum*, or ‘the highest good’ (cf. Lamprecht 1920a:562). The claim that there is only one ultimate value or a consideration that overrides all other goals is, following Berlin (cf. e.g. 2002; Crowder 2002), here described as value monism. Monism and relativism are for this reason well described as being, each in its own way, antithetical to pluralism, in that they both deny one of the most central claims of value pluralism.

Third, value pluralism will claim that these plural and objective values are incommensurable with each other, as they cannot be ranked according to one common measure or principle. The nature of incommensurability is furthermore the great dividing issue among theorists of value pluralism. Berlin and Lamprecht uses this concept taken from geometry not without a certain degree of recklessness, leaving much room for diverging interpretations of value pluralism and its consequences (a brief summary of some of the possible interpretations could be found in Seung and Bonevac 1992 and in Crowder 2002:49-54). Gray (e.g. 1995b:142) and Kekes (1993:21) suggests that incommensurability ought to be understood as *incomparability* between values, claiming that value pluralists – or anyone else, if value pluralism is true – never have any *reasons* to choose one value over another when and if they conflict. Needless to say, this perspective will limit the scope and relevance of normative reasoning under value pluralism altogether. Crowder (2002:49-54), in part following Berlin and Williams (1994), suggests instead that value incommensurability ought not to be viewed in this manner, and advises a more relaxed understanding in which it is merely thought of as meaning that values are ‘unrankable in the abstract’. In this paper, I will contend that one under pluralism needs Crowder’s elaboration of value incommensurability rather than Gray’s competing definition in order to make normative reasoning about particular problems intelligible at all.

Fourth, it is said that values conflict with each other. By this it is meant that the values we ought to utilise as guides for our conduct, values that have already been deemed as objective, irreducibly many and ‘incommensurable’ are also in a state of “perpetual rivalry” (Berlin 2002:216), making “social and political collisions” “unavoidable” (Berlin 1990:19). This perspective on morality has vast consequences for normative reasoning. When the four propositions about morality are held together, normative deliberation becomes both more difficult and more pressing than under relativism or monism. If one assumes monism to be true, for instance, every genuine normative question will have one and only one answer that is judged to be the truth – one need only put a given normative question into the algorithm proposed by the theory one adheres to, in order to get an answer which is satisfactory according to that theory. Under relativism also – at least *consistent* relativism – normative reasoning becomes a less important undertaking, as one from the outset claims that supposedly normative problems might be solved by an appeal to subjective aesthetical judgments or alternatively to the authority of conventions and traditions – if they need to be ‘solved’ at all – rather than normative reasoning proper. Under value pluralism, on the other hand, normative questions are often deemed to be difficult and genuine problems consisting of hard choices, making normative reasoning more complicated, but also more crucial, than under value monism and relativism.

For the remainder of this paper, I will limit the discussions on value pluralism to the lineage I trace back to Berlin and Lamprecht, and with more recent representatives in Crowder and to some extent Gray, rather than the alternative lineage from Oakeshott (cf. e.g. 1962; 1975) to Kekes (1993; 1997; 1998). Another theorist I will not be able to report on is Joseph Raz, whose statement – or rather restatement – of value pluralism on the grounds of a concern for personal autonomy would have received much more attention than mere mentioning in any complete review of value pluralism and normative reasoning (cf. Raz 1986; 2001; 2003). There are definitely also numerous other contributors whose works should have been

brought to attention in a more thorough analysis of the problem at hand, but which I could not find room for in this present study.

2. Classical value pluralism

After his initial formulation of value pluralism, in his two articles *Equality* and *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Berlin 1956; 2002:166-217), Berlin put down a significant proportion of his research efforts in intellectual history into tracing the origins of that theory. What he found was an astonishing array of notables from the history of political and ethical theorising, including Machiavelli, Montesquieu and John Stuart Mill, whom under Berlin's reading become value pluralists *in spe*, theorists moving towards, but not entirely reaching, an outright value pluralist conclusion (Berlin 1979:25-79, 130-161; 2002:218-251). He also finds ancestry to his own theory in the thinkers he collectively denotes as the 'Counter-Enlightenment', the critics of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment, in which Vico, Hamann and Herder are among the most important contributors (Berlin 1979:1-24; 2000).

There is however also a third group of precursors to Berlin's value pluralism, and one that Berlin does not seem to acknowledge in his works, and that is the early twentieth century American philosophers Sterling Lamprecht (1920; 1920a; 1921) and A. P. Brogan (1931). These are also, I believe, Berlin's most important predecessors, in that they first describe the vocabulary which Berlin uses in his own works in ethical theory. It is of course possible, and even likely, that all three developed their theories independently of each other as neither Brogan nor Berlin seem to recognise Lamprecht's earlier articles, but it remains that they share extraordinary similarities in vocabulary and substance. Berlin himself seems to say so when he in a letter to his friend Jean Floud stated that pluralism was "[t]he only truth which I have ever found out for myself"[†], but one cannot preclude in a definite way the possibility that Berlin read Brogan or Lamprecht at an early stage and then later forgot about them (Hardy 2004). At any rate, I find it natural to include Lamprecht

[†] Letter from Isaiah Berlin to Jean Floud dated 5.7.68, quoted in Ignatieff (1998:246).

along with Berlin in the following outline of ‘classical’ value pluralism. Brogan’s shorter explication of pluralism is of course interesting in its own light, but I choose not to discuss his works in any detailed manner at this present occasion as he, as far as I can tell, does not develop his views in any greater detail elsewhere.

2.1 Lamprecht

Whatever may be Berlin’s ultimate influences, and regardless of whether he ever read Lamprecht’s three articles or not, there is more than considerable overlap between the ethical theories of the two authors. Due to this fact, I find it fruitful to view them as being complementary theorists, in which Berlin’s broader historical and conceptual analyses adds texture to the sketchy theory of value pluralism supplied by Lamprecht.

Lamprecht himself seems to develop his ‘ethical pluralism’ primarily as the forces of ‘epistemic’ pluralism brewing particularly in American, ‘pragmatic’ philosophy at that time are combined with a growing disenchantment with various attempts to reduce all human morality into one and only one supreme ‘value’, maxim or *summum bonum* (Lamprecht 1920; 1920a; 1921). What he rebels against is not “pragmatism in any of its positive doctrines”, but rather what he describes as “an unfortunate one-sidedness” in its various affiliated ethical theories, particularly its tendency to value ‘control’ or ‘intelligent action’ above all else (Lamprecht 1920:513; cf. also Dewey 1918; Ryan 1995). Instead, he concludes, “[l]ife gains its meaning and its value only because through its course men can achieve a multitude of goods which not only lead on to further consequences, but are in themselves a joy and a delight” (ibid.).

This emerging uneasiness with value monism, and in particular its tendency to push the complexities of human existence and our moral sense into a rigid, theoretical scheme, is developed by Lamprecht into an alternative theory of morality in two subsequent articles (Lamprecht 1920a; 1921). Lamprecht’s pluralism has thus two origins. One is the pragmatic view of “the pluralistic universe” in which “the impossibility of finding any one metaphysical formula which will fit all reality” is acknowledged (Lamprecht 1920a:561; cf. James 1977[1909]). The other is what he thinks of as a pre-theoretical and ‘common-sense’ view of morality (Lamprecht

1920a:562): *“To the naïve mind, not yet befuddled by the intricacies of academic controversies over ethical theory, the moral life would surely not seem one simple path outside of which all else was bad, nor would the distinction between good and bad, or between right and wrong, seem sharp and exact. The moral life seems to be confronted with alternative possibilities of development towards different and sometimes inconsistent goods; it is full of dilemmas, ambiguities, loose ends, irresolvable choices.”*

The conclusions Lamprecht draws from his ‘ethical pluralism’ are several, but they all point towards a more cautious and tentative way of dealing with existence, the world and in particular other people. His scepticism towards moral theory – and its reported ability to make agonising choices between rival goods wither away – is obvious in these articles: *“The goods of life are utterly incommensurable. Health, beauty, courtesy, knowledge, friendship, all these can not be measured by a common scale and tabulated in a common calculus. They burst all artificial standards brought to bear upon them, and sweep across all barriers of philosophical system-making”* (Lamprecht 1920a:564). It is perhaps worth noticing that the main difference between the pluralist and the relativist is that the former does not translate his scepticism towards grand theories of morality into scepticism towards morality proper. To Lamprecht, the embracement of value pluralism leads almost directly to an endorsement of individual liberty for everyone: *“When we make our supreme choice [between conflicting values], we must, in so far as possible, without endangering all such choices, be willing to let others make theirs”* (Lamprecht 1920a:566). His second article culminates on a note characterised by both fallibilism and cautious optimism towards the future if we in moral questions let ourselves become inspired by a “scientific approach” rather than the “absolutism” of unexamined traditions and conventional moral theorising: *“It would enable us to retain our standards without becoming bigoted, to learn to compromise when compromise alone is the highest morality”* (Lamprecht 1920a:572).

Lamprecht’s third article concerns itself with pluralism’s political implications, in which he tries to develop a theory of politics that forms a middle ground between hard-core *Realpolitik* and the ‘idealism’ of natural law theories: *“Neither the*

supposition of eternal principles nor the realistic protest is sound. Both are overstatements of one or another aspect of the facts” (Lamprecht 1921:231). Again, it is the spirit of compromise that permeates Lamprecht’s point of view: *“Thus there will be constant need for reconciliation, for compromise, for working agreements. There will be no means of settling the issues which are bound to arise between advocates of different and opposed programmes of action except either brute force or mutual adjustment”* (ibid.). *“On the one hand, no single principle of eternal justice is possible; on the other hand, mere force can not create right. Rather it is true that compromise is the sole alternative to violence as a means of achieving human excellence”* (Lamprecht 1921:243).

Lamprecht does not, however, explicitly align his pluralism with any detailed set of political beliefs, even if he lets his favourable attitudes towards the then newly formed League of Nations shine through in his article. The ‘political implications’ he sees as coming from his pluralism is not implications on the level of individual problems in policy-making, but rather a vague preference for compromise and concord over struggle and discord. To Lamprecht, moderation (*σοφροσύνη*) and prudence (*φρόνησις*) are among the most important guiding lights in political affairs and action, rather than insisting on the unshakable truth of one’s own prejudices. While this decidedly does not make him into a liberal in anything but the most anaemic sense of that word, he certainly espouses attitudes that are generally emphasised more strongly among liberals than among people with other ideological affinities. He adopts a cautious and compromising attitude towards political questions, which, it could be said, makes him into a precursor to Berlin’s defence of liberalism on a pluralistic footing.

2.2 Berlin

Lamprecht may have been the first to explicate value pluralism in any detailed sort of way, but his articles soon receded into oblivion. Instead, it was Isaiah Berlin who almost forty years later developed overlapping ideas about morality and politics. Unlike Lamprecht, who quickly went on to other, unrelated subjects, value pluralism became one of the recurring themes in Berlin’s works, in which the intellectual ‘pre-

history' and the political and intellectual consequences of pluralism are laid out in ever increasing detail.

Berlin starts out on a provisional note in his article *Equality*, developing what may be viewed as a critique of the impulse to merge equality and other values such as liberty and democracy into one paramount political value called equality, as Richard Wollheim attempts in the companion essay on the same subject (cf. Berlin 1956, especially pp. 319-326; Wollheim 1956, especially p. 300, cf. also Watkins 1956). Gradually, this quite limited dismissal of the offer to take part in the quest to develop an account of liberal values in which all of them are fitted together in a rigid hierarchy of considerations grows into a general and explicit pluralism of values. In his *Two Concepts of Liberty*, originally given two years after *Equality* as his inaugural address as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, his value pluralism has reached a state of clarity and generality (Berlin 2002:166-217). By now, the pluralism he espouses forms the centre of his ethical and political theorising and indeed, one might argue, much of his overall *Weltanschauung*.

Starting in his own version of value pluralism, he sets out to defend liberalism – the liberalism of Constant, Mill and Tocqueville – against ideologically motivated authoritarianism and the corresponding grand theories of history and society. Value pluralism then becomes the theoretical footing on which Berlin attempts to place his endorsement of liberalism and individual, 'negative' liberty, when he is faced with a choice, so obviously a choice of immediate importance at the time he held his address, between it and various kinds of authoritarian and totalitarian alternatives (Berlin 2002:208-217).

It is however only later that Berlin places this pluralism of values in the specific context of debates in metaethics and general ethical theorising, and thus highlighting the contrasts between value pluralism on one hand and monism and relativism on the other. It is especially his later articles *The Pursuit of the Ideal* (Berlin 1990:1-19) and the posthumously published *My Intellectual Path* (Berlin 2000a:1-23) which elevates pluralism to the level of it becoming an alternative as fully developed as competing metaethical theories of either monistic or relativistic

shading. Consistent relativism, the belief that no actions whatsoever are right or wrong judged purely on their own merits and demerits and that they should only be judged relatively to the values and moral codes of their actors, finds no support in Berlin's works: "*I am not a relativist; I do not say 'I like my coffee with milk and you like it without, I am in favour of kindness, and you prefer concentration camps' – each of us with his own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated. This I believe to be false. But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ*" (Berlin 2000a:11-12).

Time and again he insists that there in fact are objective values, and that the pursuit of these disparate values, necessarily a pursuit that will never reach the endpoint of perfection, is among the things that make us human – or rather humane – in more than a merely physiological sense of the word. Ultimately, as in *The Pursuit of the Ideal* and in the concluding part of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin connects the acceptance of pluralism with the possibility for peace and civilised conduct. Monism, the idea that there is only one value that is objective and ultimate, and that all other legitimate goals or considerations could potentially be subsumed under it, receives also only negligible sympathy from Berlin, claiming it to be "demonstrably false" (Berlin 2002:214) and even responsible for considerable avoidable human suffering: "[T]he search for perfection does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed, no better even if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart" (Berlin 1990:18).

The moral theories expounded by Berlin and Lamprecht are marked to an extensive degree by being developed in opposition to other and in part more established perspectives on morality. Neither of them developed the theory of value pluralism from the beginning in the form of a grand theory. Their preferred medium was, it seems shorter essays and not monumental works that attempt to devise a definitive account of morality. This choice of genre leaves to a certain extent the road open for divergent interpretations of their theories.

3. Revision: Gray

Up until the early 1990's, there was, as far as I have been able to tell, little controversy over value pluralism and its ability to supply its proponents with liberal

political conclusions akin to those of Lamprecht and Berlin (cf. e.g. Shklar 1989). The few criticisms that surfaced were mainly general criticisms of value pluralism, expressing doubts as to whether values actually do conflict (cf. e.g. MacCallum 1967; 1967a; Norman 1987). This line of critique has been followed up in our day most prominently by Ronald Dworkin, who insists, it seems, on the absence of perplexing dilemmas within liberalism and on the lack of conflict between liberal values (cf. Dworkin 2001; 2001a).

That all changed, at least seemingly, when some new and more critical works were published, in which Berlin's combination of value pluralism and liberalism was put under scrutiny in a more direct way. The most enduring of these sceptical commentators, John Gray, has made it into something of a life project to disconnect value pluralism, to which he frequently and enthusiastically aligns himself, with anything that reeks of "modernity", "Enlightenment" and "liberalism" (cf. Gray 1991; 1995; 1995a; 1995b; 1998; 2000).

The reason why Gray feels compelled to reject Berlin's political conclusions could be found, I contend, in the way he interprets and modifies the positive doctrines of classical value pluralism, making, in effect, a whole new theory of morality. The differences between classical value pluralism and the one formulated by Gray centres on two main alterations. One is the notion of incommensurability, which under Gray's interpretation becomes an idea of *incomparability* (Gray 1991, emphasis added, cf. also Parfit 1991; Crowder 2002:49-54): "*Berlin's master idea is that ultimate values are objective and knowable, but they are many, they often come into conflict with one another and are uncombinable in a single human being or a single society, and that in many such conflicts there is no overarching standard whereby the competing claims of such ultimate values are rationally arbitrable.*"

While the beginning of this quote is acceptable as a description of Berlin's perspective, the last clause is clearly controversial, reflecting a will to mutate Berlinian value pluralism in order to match it with his own aggressive disbelief in liberalism and "the Enlightenment" (Gray 1995; 1998; cf. also Berlin and Williams 1994). Without any further qualifications, Gray equates the vague and potentially problematic notion of "incommensurability" Berlin employs with the far more

specific concept of “incomparability by reason” (Gray 1995b:142; cf. also Seung and Bonevac 1992; Berlin and Williams 1994). It is of course appropriate to change the theories of others if one sincerely believes that the modifications are genuine improvements. It is however slightly more dubious to attempt to present these changes as part and parcel of the original theory if that is not necessarily the case, as Gray (1995b:47) seems to be doing: “*It is worth noting that versions of value-pluralism can be stated, at once less radical and less interesting than Berlin’s, which accept that the goods of human life are many, that they are uncombinable and sometimes constitutively so, but which deny their rational incomparability*”. But this restrictive view of ‘incommensurability’ is in fact highly contentious, and one which I find difficult to trace back to Berlin.

With his move, Gray does not, I believe, make the notion of incommensurability any clearer, but adds instead a belief that incommensurability is somehow connected to reason or rationality being suspended when choices has to be made between conflicting values. It seems to me that the authors of classical value pluralism did not believe this, as they believed that reason played a part when they were faced with non-trivial moral problems, i.e. problems in which more than one value commands our attention. This is perhaps most evident when they insist on the importance of compromise, understanding and the cessation of violence between opposing peoples or groups of people. There is unmistakably a time for compromise and a time for spreading the ideas one believes to be correct, and that reason and rationality plays a part in choosing one over the other in a particular situation seems obvious from their thinking (cf. Lamprecht 1921; Berlin 2002:212-217).

Second, he adds to Berlin’s pluralism the view that not only pairs of objective values, but also whole cultures are incommensurable, and presumably also not subject to rational judgements (cf. Wolf 1992). Berlin himself attributes the view that cultures are incommensurable to Herder, one of the Counter-Enlightenment precursors to value pluralism mentioned earlier, but does not in any way explicitly declare himself to be in agreement with this perspective on cultures (Berlin 1979:12). This Gray (1995b:136; cf. also quote on p. 122), transforms into Berlin being a proponent of Herderian cultural relativism: “*The question arises whether his*

doctrines of objective pluralism and of agonistic liberalism, as I have termed them, permit him to retain key Enlightenment commitments to human emancipation, to liberty and to cross-cultural communication and evaluation while accepting the Romantic and Counter-Enlightenment claims as to the incommensurability of cultures and the role of the will in individual and collective self-creation.” It seems to me as if Gray here confuses *empathy* towards other writers, a necessary virtue in all fruitful research in intellectual history and an asset with which Berlin was richly endowed, with *sympathy* or agreement towards their arguments and conclusions, a sympathy it is doubtful that Berlin ever entertained.

The two revisions Gray makes to classical value pluralism have vast consequences for normative reasoning. With these revisions comes an increased frequency of indeterminacy in normative deliberation, which potentially affects most normative questions. If one takes Gray’s additions at face value, it seems to me that he moves away from the tenets of classical value pluralism and towards what one might call ‘practical relativism’ – a perspective on morality in which one stays clear of explicit or theoretical relativism, but where the scope of rational, normative reasoning is deemed to be severely limited. Indubitably, Gray nominally accepts value pluralism, which must include a rejection of outright moral relativism, if one assumes that the cornerstone of ethical relativism is that there are no objective values at all (cf. Mackie 1977). But the added reinterpretation of value incommensurability as rational incomparability, as well as the belief that cultures are incommensurable with each other leaves little room for rationality in reasoning about normative questions above the level of the trivial, if one cannot decide rationally questions in which the demands of conflicting values, or cultures, clash. And since it is difficult to imagine all such normative questions being left unanswered so that we must choose in one way or another, then any non-trivial decision must be irrational or arbitrary, since rationality in such matters is already precluded. Then we are left with nothing but our emotions, reflexes and conventions in all of life’s difficult moments, making Gray’s outlook, I contend, more closely related with relativism than with *classical* value pluralism, and if not in content, then at least in attitude.

4. Rebuttal: Crowder

Of the many reactions to Gray's exposition of Berlin's theories, none is more comprehensive than the one supplied by George Crowder, developing a direct critique of Gray's modifications to pluralism (cf. e.g. Crowder 1998; 1999; 2002a), culminating in a book in which liberalism is broadly defended and combined with an acceptance of value pluralism (Crowder 2002, cf. also 2003).

As mentioned above, one cannot help but to notice a certain dynamic in the views held by Crowder as he in an earlier piece criticised the attempts of Berlin and others to combine pluralism and liberalism (Crowder 1994). That, however, soon withered away as he embraced and elaborated further a notion of incommensurability suggested to him by Berlin and Williams (1994). This new-found wisdom on Berlinian value pluralism was quickly employed in a critique of those other critical reviewers of Berlin cropping up at that time (cf. especially Kekes 1993; Gray 1995b; Crowder 1998; 2002).

Crowder begins his critique of Gray's position by attacking the two additions Gray makes to classical value pluralism mentioned in the preceding section of this paper (Crowder 1998), and then moves on to building a 'positive case for liberalism' from pluralist premises, claiming that value pluralism actually supports and justifies broadly liberal policies and arrangements, perhaps even to a greater degree than monism and relativism are able to do (Crowder 1999; 2002; 2002a).

It is pivotal for Crowder's later analysis that he rejects the notion of incommensurability as "incomparability by reason" (Gray 1995b:142) or alternatively that "[c]hoices among incommensurable values are 'underdetermined by reason' or contain an element of rational 'indeterminacy' " (Crowder 1994:295, acknowledging in a footnote his debt to Gray (1991) (and Raz (1986)) for this view of incommensurability). This understanding of incommensurability presented to us by Gray and the earlier Crowder is in turn rejected by Berlin and Williams (1994:307): *"In his talk of 'underdetermination by reason', Crowder seems unsure which of two quite different views about potentially conflicting values he is ascribing to the pluralist: that it is not a requirement of reason that there should be one value*

which in all cases prevails over the other; or that in each particular case, reason has nothing to say (i.e. there is nothing reasonable to be said) about which should prevail over the other. Pluralists – we pluralists, at any rate – see the first of these views as obviously true, and the second as obviously false.”

So, then, the notion of incommensurability present in classical value pluralism is not to be understood as inimical or antithetical to the rationality of normative reasoning and deliberation, making it possible to choose rationally between alternatives (actions, guiding principles for conduct etc.) in isolated cases within a given context even if these alternatives represent or embody different values deemed to be ‘incommensurable’ with each other. Choices between values do not need to be wholly irrational, because we in ‘each particular case’ have much more to guide us than the abstract deliberation between values, namely a ‘context’ of conventions, expectations, related problems and probable outcomes which might facilitate a rational decision, even if the choice we make is not immediately transferable to similar choices in other contexts. My choice between donating a sum of money to charity and spending the same sum on myself could, for instance, be resolved by examining what situation I find myself in. If I really need the money to satisfy some basic need of my own, it would not be as bad to keep it to myself, than if I instead use it to obtain some ridiculous luxury item. If the choice between abstract values (for instance compassion and personal want-satisfaction) is ‘underdetermined by reason’, it does not follow that choices between alternative courses of action in specific settings are always irrational.

After this, Crowder parts ways with Gray, and tries to develop an understanding of value incommensurability which is more in tune with Berlin’s own description and which does not have what I have called ‘practical relativism’ as its consequence: *“Reasoned ranking of plural values is impossible in the abstract, but apparently unproblematic in particular cases. What makes the difference is evidently the presence in particular cases of a concrete context for choice”* (Crowder 1996:650; cf. also 1998). This less severe notion of incommensurability is developed further, in part as a direct critique of Gray, into the notion that incommensurable values are merely “unrankable in the abstract” (Crowder 2002, especially pp. 52-54).

On Crowder's view, this is also enough to provide some forms of justification for fairly distinct and potentially controversial choices, such as the choice of liberal arrangements and policies over possible alternatives (Crowder 1998:291): "*Consistently with value pluralism, it may be possible to produce a contextual justification of liberalism.*" This view is in turn, it seems, almost paradoxically, developed further into the conclusion that the overall 'context' we find ourselves in today provides a case for the global or 'universal' acceptance of liberalism (cf. Crowder 2002). This is perhaps made clearer by the fact that even the most relentless of tyrants have to pay their nominal respect to specifically liberal concepts such as 'democracy' and 'freedom', which they often claim to defend or to have developed further, because such concepts, and the ideas behind them, hold sway over political debates all over the world. Today, it might in fact in some cases, as in the efforts to diffuse democracy and human rights, make sense to treat the whole world as the appropriate 'context'.

Given that value pluralism does not, at least under the auspices of Crowder, bar its adherents from choosing rationally even if 'contextually' in matters of such gravity as the choice of a constitutional order, it is difficult to see any problems in which our capability for normative reasoning has to be suspended entirely if one accepts value pluralism. Consequently, Crowder's understanding takes us back to the classical value pluralism of Lamprecht and Berlin, who evidently did not think that their own versions of pluralism led to 'practical relativism' or any other form of perpetual indecision in non-trivial normative questions.

Crowder also attacks Gray for his transferral of incommensurability from the level of values to the level of cultures or 'forms of life' (Crowder 1998:294-296; cf. also Wolf 1992). The position which holds that cultures are incommensurable, presumably in the stronger, Grayesque sense, is repudiated by Crowder as being "in effect, a strongly relativist conclusion" (Crowder 1998:295). He goes on (*ibid.*, emphasis deleted): "*I conclude that value pluralism, although holding that basic human goods are incommensurable, implies that human cultures are commensurable in two respects: first, where their ends happen to overlap; secondly, as expressions of a deeper, or more general, set of ends common to humanity. Among cultures there is*

both a family resemblance and a deeper although more abstract common core. The implication of these dimensions of cultural commensurability is that they open up a space for inter-cultural comparison and evaluation.”

It seems to me that Crowder here moves towards classical value pluralism in a way Gray does not appear willing to. It also, in my book at least, counts to Crowder’s favour that he shows a willingness to avoid the conclusions of cultural or ‘practical’ relativism, which to me is simply bewildering, and perhaps even more so than outright, ‘theoretical’ relativism, which at least is an ‘honest’ position – something concrete to argue for or against. With Crowder’s efforts, classical value pluralism is reborn in a theoretically more rigorous style of writing, more familiar from the standpoint of contemporary ethical and political theorising than Berlin’s historical panoramas or the mere sketches provided by Lamprecht. If there are any shortcomings in Crowder’s exposition, it must be that he does not try to develop an overall account of what normative reasoning under value pluralism would be like, and instead only answers the quite limited problem of justifying liberalism within such a theoretical framework. While the following section could not possibly fill this gap entirely, it will at least provide some preliminary remarks on the subject in question.

5. Pluralism, monism and relativism

I started out this paper by saying that I think an acceptance of value pluralism adds richness and realism to normative reasoning. Why? How so? It is evident that more than a few knowledgeable theorists have not acknowledged pluralism and instead embraced some variety of monism or relativism. Value pluralism is therefore not obviously true or uncontroversial in any meaningful sense. It is, however, an outlook on morality and the conditions of normative reasoning I think is defensible and in the end more attractive because it accommodates our inborn moral sense or conscience, as well as our ability to reflect on the probable consequences of our actions better than either monism or relativism does. While the theory of value pluralism has up until now suffered from a certain lack of clarity and concision – paving the way for

misapprehensions and disagreements, for instance the one between Crowder and Gray – I do not think that these deficiencies are irremediable.

I contend that monism – the belief that there is only one ultimate value, making *all* moral conflicts and dilemmas evanescent or avoidable in one way or another – is primarily the property of persons “befuddled by the intricacies of academic controversies over ethical theory” (Lamprecht 1920a:562). Monism is probably not something anyone not acquainted with the great traditions in ethical theory, only depending on their common sense or ‘moral intuitions’, would easily subscribe to. Conflicts between values, goals or ends, and consequently of hard choices in normative problems, seem to me to be a simple fact of life – a fact the monist must try to explain away. It also seems to me that monism is part of a general quest, deeply rooted in much of Western philosophy, to superimpose on the world some degree of certainty, unity, simplicity or coherence which may or may not be there to begin with.

It is, I believe, an empirical question whether our moral sense or ‘intuitions’, our vague and fallible sense of what is right or wrong, in the end fits the blueprints drawn up by one of the various monistic theories, with Benthamite utilitarianism being only the most clear-cut and prototypical kind of monism. Perhaps it really is the case that this precarious moral sense we obviously are endowed with could be made to correspond with this or that monistic theory. That, however, is not something we – I, at least – can judge to be true from the outset, without argument. It seems to me to be difficult to say with a light heart that moral conflict and perplexing dilemmas are merely appearances because reason, or rather our limited capacity for rationality, dictates the truth of monism. In a sense, pluralism is both less demanding and less elegant. It is obviously less elegant than monism, in that it allows for imprecision and indeterminacy to continue from the realm of common experience and on to the level of theoretical enquiry. It is also, however, less demanding intellectually because it makes sense even if we abandon the notion that everything in the world *has to* make perfect sense to us within the framework of one great theory. If the world and morality is in fact more complicated than we might wish for it to be, pluralism

provides us with a way of retaining morality, and not receding into relativism, if the preferred or inherited monism breaks down under the weight of its own contradictions.

As far as relativism goes, pluralism accommodates our moral sensibilities in a far better way. Consistent relativism rests on the belief that moral sentiments are mirages of the mind, effects of our upbringing, or alternatively a mere fanciful expression of brute emotions. Our sense of right and wrong are not, according to this view, something 'given' that commands our respect and observance, but rather the reflexes of accidental conventions (cf. Mackie 1977; Harman and Thompson 1996). The logical upshot of this perspective on morality must in my view be that 'anything goes'. There is no rational decision to be made, as Berlin pointed out in the quote given above (p. 13), between kindness and concentration camps, if nothing fits the description of being right or wrong in and of itself. I find this position simply baffling, unable as I am to take it completely seriously. While the sceptical protest against some forms of ethical theorising the mentioned relativists articulate seems warranted, the disaffection they exhibit towards morality itself, towards morality proper, is premature to say the least. It is also indicative of the dubious nature of relativism, I think, that the mentioned, self-declared relativists or 'sceptics' (Mackie and Harman) allow for meaningful normative reasoning and the use of distinctively normative concepts, even if severely limited and stunted. It is almost as if they shy away from their own theory, when they see its practical consequences unfolded.

Value pluralism, especially the classical variety, is in one way the middle road between monism and relativism. It offers a theoretical accommodation of our sense of right and wrong in a way its alternatives does not. Under monism vague, fallible and in part culturally conditioned and therefore 'relative' moral 'intuitions' need to be seriously modified and artificially sharpened in order to fit theories that undoubtedly are elegant and economical, but which may or may not constitute any ultimate and unshakable truths. Under relativism, the overall standing and reliability of this innate moral faculty, whatever its ultimate nature may be, is doubted all together. Only pluralism, the middle ground, seem to accommodate what I believe to be a

thoroughly human response to the totality of normative questions, namely that some are easy enough to answer and that others are less so, and perhaps even impossible to answer in a way that is fully satisfactory, that is without some sense of tragedy and loss.

Compromise and the capacity for careful analysis, virtues held dearly by the theorists of classical value pluralism, does not dictate acceptance of everything others say and do, but rather mutual adjustment and understanding. When two or more incompatible cultures or value-systems are faced with each other, forced to live together on a finite territory, compromise is best thought of not in terms of uncritical accommodation, but rather as mutual acquiescence in search of practicable solutions to immediate problems. This perspective on normative reasoning as concrete problem-solving is not, I contend, taken seriously by relativists, who is committed to the view that nothing is right or wrong regardless of how it is perceived, or by most monists, of whom many seem more interested in devising elegant, grand theories than workable answers to the problems at hand.

In essence, value pluralism changes the focus of normative reasoning from the formulation of ultimate theories – algorithms that purportedly always give us a final, correct answer to every conceivable normative question – to the disentangling of concrete moral dilemmas in the world we live in and on. When absolute certainty or ‘determinacy’ ceases to be the pivotal goal of ethical theorising and normative reasoning, what one is left with is necessarily not confusion and nihilism, but rather a more proper and complete ‘sense of reality’ (Berlin 1996, especially pp. 1-40). Alternatively, the renunciation of the quest to find simple answers to hard questions is a sign of *maturity*, as we move from behaviour governed by rules and regulations and on to conduct inspired by the exercise of prudence and practical wisdom in the affairs we take part in (cf. Seung and Bonevac 1992).

There are of course problems with pluralism – as it is with any non-trivial theory – and there is a considerable amount of clarification and illumination left undone by the authors of classical value pluralism. One of the problems remaining is that the theory itself has not yet been formulated in a language that conforms to the

highest standards of rigour and concision from theoretical philosophy, making it only partially comparable with some of the other traditions in ethical theorising. But then again it is not certain that this austere form of philosophising is something that could easily be conformed to the pluralistic attitude and frame of mind.

There are also several problems ‘internal’ to pluralism, for instance what its most basic beliefs are: Kekes (1993), for instance, develops an entirely different understanding than the one supplied by Crowder (2002), and which is quoted above in section 1.2, and yet it certainly makes some sense to describe both as value pluralists. There is also the quite general problem of defining what and how many objective values there are and how they are to be separated from mere ‘subjective fancies’ (cf. Berlin 2000a:12). It is plain, I think, that the ‘specific’ plausibility of a detailed, pluralistic ethic will vary according to how many or what values are recognised as being objective. A detailed theory of pluralism which appreciates as objective, say, racist ‘values’ or ‘fancies’ such as the right for one ‘race’ to exploit and live off ‘inferior’ peoples will for instance become wholly implausible, in my book at least, than other possible explications of value pluralism.

The controversy over the word ‘incommensurability’ already mentioned is also among the things that are in need of further elaboration, perhaps with special consideration of the situations in which ‘hard’ and irreparable choices between incommensurable values seem unavoidable. There seems to be a fundamental ambiguity about the concept of incommensurability. In what ways and to what degree does the claim that values are incommensurable allow for rational deliberation about normative problems, either contextually, with reference to a concrete decision between actions embodying different objective values, or ‘non-contextually’ as a “radical choice” (Gray 1995b, e.g. p. 71) between ‘abstract’ values inside the heads of philosophers? I, for one, think that choice between values are best or most productively thought of, following my interpretation of Lamprecht, Berlin and Crowder, as a choice that takes place in a quite specific context, and that a critical examination of this context could supply most of our decisions with some degree of rationality. There are however also times, perhaps among life’s most gruelling

moments, in which ultimate and life-defining decisions between incompatible ideals and goals are inescapable, and in which calm reflection might take us only part of the way towards a satisfactory solution. All this does not, however, in my view preclude that there is a potential for rational deliberation, even in the most difficult of dilemmas. It remains, however, that further arguments need to be made in order to rid the notion of incommensurability of its ambiguities – and to evaluate the conditions and possible limitations normative reasoning is faced with under the pluralistic perspective of morality.

But all in all, I fail to see that these problems reduce the ‘general’ initial plausibility of value pluralism, at least in its classical form and when it is compared with monism or relativism. To end this section, I choose to quote A. P. Brogan (1931:295), a theorist I left out in the discussions above, but who nevertheless captures some central features of the pluralistic disillusionment with competing theories: *“In conclusion, please note that both the objective monist and the subjective pluralist [i.e. relativist] offer you suspiciously easy and dogmatic doctrines. What you are asked to believe is just one sentence, though to be sure it is usually a different sentence for each philosopher. They say that the highest good is so and so, that goodness is pleasure or what not, that value is whatever you think or feel it is. As soon as this one sentence has been settled, all fundamental problems about value are supposed to be solved. Even if there were no fallacies back of the proofs for all of this, would it not seem too easy to be a plausible account of our complex world? At any rate it is to be confessed that an objective pluralism will be more difficult. It will call in all of the possible methods of analysis, including psychology and the modern logic of relations. It will study human valuations patiently and empirically, using not only the traditional statistical methods but also newer and more fruitful methods. It will perhaps seem more slow, but it will ultimately seem more sure, than the traditional methods.”*

6. Conclusion

In the preceding, I have attempted to describe value pluralism as this has been elaborated by primarily Sterling Lamprecht and Isaiah Berlin, and put it into the

context of normative reasoning in general. I have argued in favour of a specific understanding of value pluralism that owes much to George Crowder's rejection of John Gray's revision of classical value pluralism. Pluralism thus elaborated constitutes in my view a morality that accommodates the intricacies and perplexities of pre-theoretical morality in a way more elegant moral theories does not, without succumbing to the opposite oversimplification, i.e. moral or 'practical' relativism.

Value pluralism is still somewhat of a novelty in ethical theorising, at least when it is compared with other traditions in that field. In spite of this, and in spite of the fact that there is some vagueness still left to be removed, it is, I contend, a plausible account of morality not easily overlooked as it seems better suited to accommodate our innate, but hazy and fallible, sense of right and wrong than monism and relativism are able to do. It is also a theory that moves conundrums in normative reasoning away from the search for final and unshakable truths, simple mechanisms to answer hard questions, to the solving of more immediate problems at hand. It is, in essence, a theory that tries to negotiate a middle ground between rival oversimplifications, between the precipitancy of monism, a precipitancy which stands in stark contrast to the centrality and stubborn difficulty of many moral problems, and the baffling conclusion of relativism.

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