The Review of Politics 75 (2013), 69–96.
© University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S0034670512001325

A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill

Alex Zakaras

Abstract: The essay explores the relationship between value pluralism, as Isaiah Berlin understood it, and liberalism. It consists of two main parts. In the first part, I argue that value pluralism does not entail liberalism, and I criticize two philosophers—William Galston and George Crowder—who believe that it does. In the second, I reconstruct and defend Isaiah Berlin's own understanding of this relationship, drawing on an essay that is often neglected by Berlin's interpreters: "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life." Berlin thought that the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism was largely psychological. He believed that those who embraced value pluralism would be more likely to affirm liberal institutions, because they would be more likely to exhibit certain virtues—notably empathy, imagination, and openness to other ways of life—that typically motivate tolerance.

In his 1995 book *Isaiah Berlin*, John Gray argued that Berlin had outlined a "distinctive, and highly original" conception of liberalism—a conception that repudiated one of the central assumptions of the liberal tradition.[1] Berlin stood apart from other liberals, in Gray's view, because he tried to rest liberalism on a new philosophical foundation: value pluralism. As Gray read it, there were two broad steps to Berlin's justification of liberalism: (1) *if* value pluralism is true, then none but liberal political institutions can be justified; (2) value pluralism is true.[2] Gray maintained, however, that this distinctive justification of liberalism, though it was "formidable and plausible," was a failure. The problem, in his view, lay in the first step: Berlin failed to show that value pluralism could endow liberal institutions with "universal

Alex Zakaras is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Vermont, Old Mill Room 522, Burlington, VT 05405 (Alex.Zakaras@uvm.edu).

This article is based on an essay presented at the International Symposium on Isaiah Berlin and Contemporary China, organized by Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning, and held in March 2011 at Tsinghua University, Beijing. I am grateful to Professors Liu Dong and Liu Wei, as well as to Joshua Cherniss, Chow Po-Chung, George Crowder, Jonathan Riley, and Patrick Neal for their help and comments.

[1]John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 145.
[2]Ibid., 150–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

authority." Gray held that value pluralism, properly understood, actually deprived liberalism of any such authority.

Since Gray's book was published, a great deal has been written about the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism, much of it focused on Berlin. Several philosophers—most recently, George Crowder and William Galston—have taken up Gray's challenge and tried to defend step (1) of the argument that Gray attributed to Berlin.[3] They tried to show that value pluralism does in fact entail liberalism. I will call this the *entailment claim*. I begin this essay by arguing that this claim is mistaken: value pluralism yields only indeterminate political conclusions; as Gray recognized, and as Berlin himself came to see, it does not entail liberal political institutions.

If Gray was right to reject the entailment claim, however, his reading of Berlin has contributed to several misunderstandings—both about Berlin's philosophy and about the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism—which have survived for the last fifteen years. First, there is very little evidence that Berlin endorsed the entailment claim in the first place. Gray and others rely heavily on the final section of "Two Concepts of Liberty," in which Berlin makes mention of "pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails."[4] Berlin seldom repeated this claim; in fact, he later explicitly denied it—he certainly did not make it a centerpiece of his philosophy. Second and importantly, Berlin never set out to offer a foundational justification of liberalism. In fact, Berlin's philosophical corpus—from start to finish—suggests that he doubted that such justification was even possible.[5] In attributing foundational ambitions to Berlin, Gray, along with Crowder and Galston, among others, has helped turn him into a spokesman for a philosophical project that was not really his.[6] In doing so, they have made his philosophy seem weaker and less coherent than it is; they have also

[3]In a 2004 article, Galston claims that he rejects this entailment claim. As I will argue below, however, there is strong evidence suggesting that he still endorses a qualified version of it.

[4]Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 171. Gray is somewhat equivocal when he attributes this view to Berlin. He notes that the evidence for it is inconsistent at best. But he goes on to say that "the question of interpretation of Berlin, given that the textual evidences are not wholly unequivocal, is second in importance to the questions of substance: Does value-pluralism support liberalism, or can the two come into conflict with one another?" (Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 151).

[5]For an excellent discussion of Berlin's antifoundationalist view of political justification, see Ella Myers, "From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin," *Review of Politics* 72, no. 4 (2010): 599–625.

[6]Robert Talisse, for instance, writes that Berlin's "principal contribution to political theory" is his attempt to derive a justification of liberalism from value pluralism. See Robert Talisse, "Can Value Pluralists be Comprehensive Liberals? Galston's Liberal Pluralism," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2004): 131.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(mostly) neglected some of Berlin's most compelling insights about the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism.

In the second half of this essay, I argue that Berlin understood the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism in largely psychological terms. He believed that those who embraced value pluralism, along with a certain kind of empiricism about human values, would be more likely to affirm liberal institutions because they would be more likely to exhibit certain virtues—notably, empathy, imagination, and openness to other ways of life—that motivate tolerance.[7] I draw support for this reading largely from an essay titled "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," which, though it is rarely considered in this context, remains one of the few essays in which Berlin addresses the justification of liberalism directly and at length. In fact, I argue that Berlin's treatment of Mill supplies a key piece of evidence, both in vindicating the psychological reading of Berlin and in clarifying his view of liberalism's justification, for this is the only piece in which Berlin *actually executes* a value-pluralist defense of liberal institutions.

This is an essay, then, about the relationship between value pluralism, as Isaiah Berlin understood it, and liberalism. I begin by rejecting one view of this relationship; I then outline another, more plausible view and argue that it was in fact Berlin's.

The Idea of Value Pluralism

As George Crowder has argued, the idea of value pluralism combines four different propositions. The first is that human values are objective, not relative or subjective. For Berlin, the objectivity of value was linked to a teleology of the human person: human beings flourished, he thought, when they lived by some combination of these objective values; they failed to flourish to the extent that they ignored them.[8] This was true for all human beings, in all times and places. The second claim is that these objective values are plural: there are many of them, though their number is finite. Berlin never gave an exhaustive list; in fact, he never thought it possible to do so, because new objective values could always, in principle, be discovered. But he included such values as justice, compassion, courage, equality, honor, and negative and positive liberty, among others.

Third, these values conflict with one another in both personal and political life. We cannot, for instance, always be both just and compassionate—these

[7]I have explored the ethical and psychological implications of Berlin's value pluralism elsewhere, drawing on a different body of textual evidence; see Alex Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," *Political Theory* 32, no. 4 (2004): 495–518.

[8]See Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 499–500. Crowder also endorses this reading of Berlin: see for instance George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002), 46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

values sometimes pull in different directions. Likewise, we cannot always pursue policies that advance both equality and (negative) liberty. In many concrete cases, these values will conflict, and we will have to choose between them. Fourth, objective values are *incommensurable*. This is the claim that makes value pluralism distinctive: values cannot be arranged neatly into a hierarchy of importance, so that every conflict between values could be arbitrated through appeal to some higher value. Nor is there even any "common denominator," as Crowder puts it, in terms of which rival values can be measured. Berlin often expressed this fourth claim as a point about the limits of reason itself: "Rationality and calculation," he writes, "can be applied only to means or subordinate ends, but never to ultimate ends."[9] What he means here is not that conflicts between objective values must be settled without appeal to any *reasons* at all, but rather that there will often be no single, rationally correct solution.

Berlin gives countless examples, scattered through his many essays on the subject, of the conflict between incommensurable yet objective values. Sometimes he locates the conflict within a single individual's life, as in the example of the artist who must choose between his vocation and the well-being of his destitute family.[10] Sometimes the conflict shows up in the political dilemmas of a particular community, as in the example of the polity that recognizes that liberty "may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare," or vice versa.[11] But often, the conflict is between entire cultures, which represent "incompatible ideals of life." Consider this example, drawn from his essay on Machiavelli:

> One is the morality of the pagan world: its values are courage, vigour, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice, above all assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction. … Against this moral universe (moral or ethical no less in Croce's terms than in the traditional sense, that is, embodying ultimate human ends however these are conceived) stands in the first and foremost place Christian morality. The ideals of Christianity are charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value.[12]

For Berlin, as for Berlin's Machievelli, pagan and Christian ways of life alike had objective value, and neither was categorically superior to the other. To

[9]Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 324.

[10]Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 12.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," 289.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

those who were in position to choose between them, there was no correct answer, no single, rationally privileged solution.

Berlin was careful to distinguish value pluralism from cultural relativism; he maintained that the values instantiated in pagan and Christian culture were objective values. But relativism was not the main target of his criticism; his target was what he called "monism." Berlin believed that the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato onward, had been seduced by the possibility of discovering a single, rational hierarchy of human values—a moral or political utopia. "One assumption was common to all these views," he writes, describing the whole arc of Western intellectual history from Plato through Christianity to the Enlightenment: they held that "it was, at any rate in principle, possible to draw some outline of the perfect society or the perfect man. … Problems of value were in principle soluble, and soluble with finality."[13] Berlin was an adamant critic of monism throughout his career; he thought that it was an especially pernicious mistake, with important consequences for the modern world.

The ill effects of monism could be felt, he thought, in both personal and political life. In personal life, monism led to moral complacency and self-deception:

> Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.[14]

Such lines do not sit well with the image of Berlin as an enthusiastic multiculturalist. Berlin believed, as I will argue later, that human beings develop their distinctive faculties only in confronting and making difficult choices—choices between competing, incommensurable values. Monists are those who pretend that there are no such choices to make. Berlin thought that, in doing so, they not only misunderstand the human condition, but they also fail to develop the faculties that he—like John Stuart Mill—most admired.

But monism's most disastrous consequences, in Berlin's view, were political. Monism underwrote the forms of political utopianism that he most despised: fascism and totalitarian communism. "The possibility of a final solution—even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler's day—turns out to be an illusion; and a very dangerous one," writes Berlin. "For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no

[13]Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 206–7.

[14]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cost would be too high to obtain it."[15] Monism lent support to political fanatics who terrorized their people in the name of distant utopias. Here lay Berlin's deepest objection to it. It is possible, as Berlin readily acknowledged, to be a monist without being a political fanatic. But he thought not only that many of the twentieth century's worst fanatics—the Stalins and Pol Pots—were monists, but also that their fanaticism drew strength from their monism.[16]

Berlin's criticisms of political utopianism suggest one way of understanding the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism. Value pluralism was a philosophical weapon designed to attack utopianism; in doing so, it would help undermine the greatest twentieth-century enemy of liberalism. If there was no "final solution," no single hierarchy of human values that could be used as a blueprint for the perfectly just or free or virtuous society, if instead there were many valuable but incommensurable alternatives, then the whole philosophical edifice that justified utopianism was false. Berlin often used value pluralism in precisely this negative way: he used it to locate the central ethical mistake that "more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals."[17]

But in order to believe, as Berlin did, that value pluralism could be an ally of political liberalism, he had to believe not only that it refuted utopianism, but also that it did not similarly refute liberalism itself. He had to believe—at least—that value pluralism and liberalism were mutually consistent. And here is where the controversy arises. As many of Berlin's critics have pointed out, the path that leads from value pluralism to liberalism is far from clear. To begin with, many of the seminal liberal thinkers—including John Locke, J. S. Mill, and Immanuel Kant—were themselves monists. So value pluralism stands as a challenge, not only to illiberal utopianism, but also to some of the most influential justifications of liberalism. Furthermore, value pluralism suggests—at first glance, anyway—that liberal values are but some among many legitimate human values, and that they cannot be given categorical priority over their illiberal rivals. The fact that Berlin never gave a systematic, analytical account of the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism only deepens the mystery.

Illiberal Pluralism

There is good evidence to suggest that Berlin himself came to reject the view that value pluralism entails liberalism. In 1997—the year he died—Berlin wrote, for instance, that "pluralism allows for all kinds of illiberalisms:

[15]Ibid., 15.

[16]I will say more about the nature of this relationship (between monism and political repression) later in the paper.

[17]Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 167.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suppressions of negative liberty."[18] Still, a number of philosophers—notably Crowder and Galston—have continued to attribute the entailment claim to Berlin, and though they argue that Berlin's version of it was incomplete, they have tried to show that some version of the entailment claim is nonetheless correct.[19] I begin this section by outlining a coherent, value-pluralist justification of illiberal institutions; I then use this justification to show that both Crowder and Galston are mistaken.

If value pluralism is true, then any regime that tries to justify itself through appeal to the one true human good, or by arguing that it instantiates the one true hierarchy of human values, is illegitimate.[20] Its justification is false. Of course, as I suggested earlier, value pluralism invalidates illiberal and liberal monist regimes alike. It rules out Marxist totalitarianism, but is also rules out Kantian or utilitarian liberalism. It permits only regimes that justify themselves on pluralist grounds. And as Gray emphasized, there is no reason to suppose that all such regimes will be liberal:

> It is true that value-pluralism undermines the universalist claims made by illiberal societies that are Marxist, utilitarian or positivist, Platonist, Christian or Muslim, at their foundations; but human history to date, and the human prospect for the likely future, abound with illiberal cultures that are particularistic, not universalistic, in the values they claim to embody. Authoritarian regimes sustained by Hindu, Shinto or Orthodox Jewish doctrine, or which seek simply to preserve a local way of life, make none of the universal claims that value-pluralism subverts.[21]

The challenge for Galston and Crowder is to show that there is something incoherent in these kinds of justification; that is, in pluralist justifications of illiberal regimes.

To put the question more sharply, imagine two alternative societies. The first is a liberal society that tolerates a great deal of ethical and cultural diversity within its borders.[22] The second is an illiberal society that uses state coercion to encourage and enforce a certain particular way of life. Suppose that the rulers of this second society freely acknowledge that there are—or at

[18]Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 86.

[19]See for instance George Crowder, "Value Pluralism and Liberalism: Berlin and Beyond," in *The One and the Many*, ed. George Crowder and Henry Hardy (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 207–13; George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), chaps. 6–7; and William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51–54.

[20]Unless it can be justified in some other way that is consistent with value pluralism.

[21]Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 151.

[22]Note: I am using the term "pluralism" here as a contrast to monism, to describe a claim about the plurality of objective values. I am not using pluralism to describe a political program of toleration.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

least that there may be—many objectively valuable yet incommensurable ways of life. They acknowledge, in other words, that the way of life they enforce is but one of many objectively valuable possibilities.

To make this second society more concrete, suppose that its rulers justify their coercion as follows: They argue that many citizens of liberal, tolerant societies, if not most, live corrupt or degraded lives—that is, lives that (largely) fail to instantiate any objective values at all. The tolerant liberal state, they point out, is constrained to remain neutral between objectively valuable ways of life and corrupt, degraded ways of life. And because the temptations associated with ethical degradation are strong, corrupt ways of life often triumph over virtuous ones in open competition. They maintain, for instance, that hedonistic materialism is the style of life most likely to take root in diverse liberal societies, and that this way of life has no objective value. While they acknowledge that their own society may rule out many objectively valuable ways of life, they point out that it also forbids many of the most tempting forms of ethical corruption—including hedonistic materialism. The net result, they claim, is that their own citizens are far more likely to lead lives that are guided by values that are in fact objective.[23] They argue, in other words, that anyone interested in *maximizing the ratio of objectively good to bad lives* will choose against liberal society.[24]

Patrick Devlin's famous defense of the criminalization of homosexuality in 1950s Britain can serve as an example of this sort of reasoning. Devlin argued, not that homosexuality was wrong, but rather than it threatened to rend the moral fabric that bound British life together. Such fabric was necessary, he thought, because absent a coherent set of ethical idealş taught and encouraged by law and culture, people would tend to lapse into degradation. We might paraphrase his argument as follows: the way of life Britain enforces may not be the only objectively good one available, but it is nonetheless important that the British government enforce it, for absent such enforcement, people tend to lead degraded, objectively valueless lives.[25] This perspective draws strength from a Burkean pessimism about the choices that individuals

[23]Liberals might respond, of course, that government cannot be trusted to distinguish valuable from corrupt ways of life, and that they are at least as likely to impose corrupt ways of life on their citizens as they are to impose valuable ones. This is a powerful objection, but it has little to do with value pluralism. It is also unlikely to persuade elites who are intent on preserving their society's particular, traditional way of life, which has developed over centuries.

[24]Patrick Neal has given voice to precisely this objection: "After all, … liberal [society] might enable more flowers to bloom, but it might also enable more weeds to grow, some of which might prevent flowers from growing." See Patrick Neal, "The Path Between Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Order: Questioning the Connection," *San Diego Law Review* 46, no. 4 (2009): 880.

[25]In theory, of course, the British government could have chosen to enforce *some other* objectively good way of life. But Devlin points out that the costs associated

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are likely to make absent strong and coherent ethical norms. And as long as the values enforced by the state are in fact objective values, this illiberal approach is wholly consistent with value pluralism. The challenge, in any case, for anyone who believes that value pluralism entails liberalism, is to show that there is something incoherent in this pluralist defense of illiberal repression. Neither Crowder nor Galston succeeds in doing so.

Crowder begins his argument with a point drawn from Bernard Williams: "If there are many competing values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More to this extent, must mean better."[26] Crowder goes on to suggest that this argument proceeds in two steps. First, accepting value pluralism means *endorsing* all objective values "on an equal basis with one another."[27] It is not enough simply to acknowledge the existence of plural, objective values; their very objectivity commands that we *value* them. Second, the best way to value the full range of human goods is to accommodate as many as possible, and the regime that best accomplishes this goal is a liberal one.[28] Crowder suggests, in effect, that governments ought to maximize the number of objective values that can be pursued within their borders.[29]

It is an open question, as Crowder acknowledges, whether a world of liberal states will in fact tend to promote more ethical diversity than a world of illiberal states, or a world that includes both. But the deeper problem is that it is unclear why the proliferation of different objective values, as such, should matter at all. From the illiberal, pluralist point of view that I outlined earlier, such proliferation means very little if, for instance, these values survive only in small enclaves while the majority lapses into ethical degradation. Imagine, for example, a liberal consumer society that accommodates many different, objectively valuable ways of life, but in which most people simply ignore them. Crowder himself acknowledges that the ambition to maximize the number of objective

with moral upheavals are typically quite high, and that one can never be sure what the outcome of such upheavals will be.

[26]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 136; see also Crowder "Value Pluralism and Liberalism," 220–21.

[27]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 137. Patrick Neal has raised important concerns about this argument. To assert that values are equally binding is to commensurate between them; but the possibility of commensuration is precisely what value pluralism denies. See Neal, "Path Between Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Order," 872–74.

[28]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 137–38.

[29]Matthew Moore has criticized this step in Crowder's argument—effectively, in my view; see Matthew Moore, "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 250–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

values in existence seems like a "chiefly aesthetic" concern.[30] If value pluralism is to be an attractive view, there must be other ways of understanding its requirements.

In fact, Crowder himself rejects this strictly aesthetic interpretation. He concedes that maximization alone might not be desirable, because it might yield a society that pursues "*too many* different goods."[31] A society that accommodates too many conflicting goods may actually make it harder, he concedes, for individuals to lead good lives. He quotes John Kekes's worry that lives can be "too scattered. Projects are begun and then discontinued, enthusiasms ebb and flow, the attractions of many possibilities are perceived but too few of them are realized."[32] Crowder argues, therefore, that societies can legitimately restrict the number of values they accommodate in order to promote "balance or coherence" among them.[33] What matters here is not the sheer number of objective values in existence, but rather the extent to which human individuals are able to create good lives, lives that embody objective human values.

Crowder suggests that this principle of coherence could complement the principle of maximization. But as Patrick Neal has argued, it can just as easily be used to undermine maximization altogether.[34] It opens the door, in any case, for societies to argue that their central concern is not to maximize the number of values they accommodate, but to maximize the number of lives that are actually guided by objective, rather than false or corrupt, values. Whether or not repressive regimes can in fact achieve this goal more successfully than liberal regimes will depend on a number of things. It will depend, first, on how well, as an empirical matter, political repression can in fact discourage people from embracing corrupt values. It will also depend on *which* values turn out to be objective.[35] If hedonistic materialism, say, turns out to be an objectively valuable way of life, then liberal societies probably compare favorably to repressive, traditionalist societies. If not, they may not. The point here is that value pluralism alone does not compel societies to accommodate a broad range of values.

Crowder resists this conclusion with another argument drawn from John Kekes. For any individual to flourish, he suggests, that individual's life must instantiate a variety of values. "Good lives should have some scope for the appreciation of beauty, playfulness, and nonutilitarian relationships, as well as for tackling difficult projects that require hard work, discipline, and self-control. Lives involving single-minded concentration on a very

[30]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 151.
[31]Ibid., 141
[32]John Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 97–98.
[33]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 139.
[34]Neal, "Path Between Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Order," 876.
[35]See ibid., 878–82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrow range of values will be impoverished."[36] Crowder is right about this. But stated in these terms, his claim does not yield the conclusions he hopes for, because most illiberal societies are not so narrow as to exclude beauty, playfulness, or self-discipline. All societies allow some variety of values; the question is *how much* variety value pluralism compels them to allow. And again, there seems to me nothing in the idea of value pluralism that requires Crowder's principle of maximization.

Crowder develops several other, secondary strategies for deriving liberalism from value pluralism. I will mention one more here, which involves the idea of "reasonable disagreement." If values are plural and incommensurable, then it will be quite reasonable for citizens to disagree about ethical questions. To his credit, Crowder recognizes that value pluralism in itself does not compel *respect* for all "reasonable" ethical doctrines—this is a Kantian, contractualist idea. Instead, Crowder argues that, as an empirical matter, reasonable disagreements can seldom be settled by force. Here Crowder relies on the Lockean premise that "attempts to compel agreement on matters that attract disagreement among reasonable people will be not only costly, but futile."[37] He also cites Berlin's view that "drastic action" typically exacts a high cost in human suffering.[38] The problems with this line of argument are all too obvious: even if this were true as an empirical matter, it might compel heterogeneous societies to accommodate diversity, but it gives relatively homogenous, traditionalist societies no good reason to liberalize. At best, then, this line of argument gives us what Crowder would call "contextual," not universal, support for liberal institutions.

Galston's strategy is somewhat more modest than Crowder's. In a 2004 article, he explicitly denies that he endorses the entailment claim.[39] Indeed, he suggests that there are two circumstances in which illiberal policies might be consistent with value pluralism. First, when there is perfect consensus around a certain way of life, the state does nothing wrong in enforcing that consensus. Second, when the only alternative to illiberal repression is violent conflict that threatens to undermine "basic decency," then value pluralists can make their peace with such repression. Still, when neither of these circumstances obtains, he suggests that value pluralism *does* entail liberalism —or if not liberalism, a "space for individual and political choice … roughly congruent with the liberty that liberalism seeks to defend."[40] Even this weakened version of the entailment claim, however, ultimately fails.

[36]Kekes, *Against Liberalism*, 97.

[37]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 173.

[38]Crowder, "Value Pluralism and Liberalism," 224.

[39]William Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2004): 144.

[40]William Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 98.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Galston begins by pointing out that value pluralism undermines any "restrictive state policies whose justification rests uneliminably on the assertion that there is … a uniquely valuable ordering [of human values]."[41] This much is true: as Gray acknowledges, value pluralism rules out monist justifications of liberal and illiberal regimes alike. But in order to gain traction against illiberal regimes that do not invoke monist justifications, Galston has to add another important step to the argument. "Because there is no single, uniquely rational ordering or combination of values," he argues, "no one can provide a valid reason, binding on all individuals, for a particular ranking or combination."[42] And absent such reasons, Galston thinks that it would be "unreasonable" for the state to impose any way of life on its citizens.[43] This last step is the crucial one, and Galston never succeeds in justifying it adequately.

"Taken seriously," Galston argues, "value pluralism generates a principle of estoppal that denies the admissibility of the sorts of claims that the bearers of state power have used throughout human history to justify restrictions on individuals' ability to live in accordance with diverse but defensible conceptions of what gives life meaning and worth."[44] This is a claim he repeats in a number of different books and articles, and yet there remains some ambiguity about it. In one article, he summarizes his "principle of estoppal" as follows: "no political or moral argument that denies the truth of value pluralism can stand."[45] If this is all he means, then the principle has no traction against illiberal regimes that acknowledge the truth of value pluralism (such as the hypothetical regime I described above).[46] Let us call this the *weak version* of the principle. There is substantial evidence, however, that Galston in fact endorses a more ambitious version of the principle of estoppal—a version that *does* have traction even against illiberal regimes that affirm value pluralism. He suggests as much when he claims, for instance, that value pluralism "has important implications for politics," namely, that states "may not seek to force their citizens into one-size-fits-all patterns of desirable human lives."[47]

[41]William Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189; see also Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*, 58.

[42]Galston, *Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, 189.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid. Galston briefly restates this claim in "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy," 98.

[45]Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," 145.

[46]As Gray puts it, "a particularistic illiberal regime need not claim, when it imposes a particular ranking of incommensurable values on its subjects, that this ranking is uniquely rational" (*Isaiah Berlin*, 153).

[47]Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," 141.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

How, then, can the principle of estoppal yield these stronger conclusions? The stronger version of the principle says that so long as a certain way of life is "rationally defensible," citizens cannot reasonably be denied the opportunity to pursue it (unless the only alternative is violent chaos). And since value pluralism holds that many different ways of life are rationally defensible, value pluralism effectively constrains government from imposing any particular way of life on its citizens. The problem with this view is that it imports a strong presumption in favor of freedom—a presumption that finds no warrant in the idea of value pluralism itself. In fact, Galston acknowledges this presumption in his 2004 "Reply to Talisse"—he calls it "expressive liberty." Expressive liberty, he says, "is a presumption in favor of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit … in accordance with their own understandings of what gives life meaning and value."[48] With this added premise, Galston's position does indeed gain traction against the illiberal pluralist—in fact, this added premise is doing all the work.[49] But since this premise cannot be *derived* from value pluralism, illiberal pluralists can simply reject it.[50] They can reject it, for instance, for the reasons I outlined earlier: because they believe it leads to more wasted or degraded lives. Adding this extra premise does nothing, then, to reveal any incoherence in the illiberal pluralist justification that I outlined earlier. And if this is true, then Galston is not entitled to say that "while illiberal associations with full exit rights are consistent with value pluralism, illiberal polities that impose a way of life on some subset of their citizens are not."[51]

Robert Talisse has challenged Galston on similar grounds.[52] In response to Talisse, Galston invites readers to imagine a ruler who proposes to impose way of life "T" on citizens, and who justifies this by claiming that "T is preferable to (U, V, W, … n) for all citizens."[53] To this, Galston thinks that citizens can simply respond that "they endorse (U, V, W, … n)" instead. And if value pluralism is true, then the ruler has no way of showing them conclusively that T is superior to these other ways of life. But this response does not get to the real issue: Galston never shows *why* states must justify restrictions of liberty in precisely this manner, by showing conclusively that the way of life they seek to impose is "preferable for all citizens" to any other alternatives. In fact, as I have already shown, there are other, more modest justificatory

[48]Ibid.

[49]See Myers, "From Pluralism to Liberalism," 607–8, where she suggests that expressive liberty is the only premise in Galston's argument that generates liberal conclusions.

[50]Another potential problem arises here: if expressive liberty is meant to establish a categorical protection for certain forms of individual freedom, then it is likely to be inconsistent with value pluralism itself.

[51]Galston, *Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, 191.

[52]Robert Talisse, "Can Value Pluralists be Comprehensive Liberals?," 132–35.

[53]Galston, *Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, 191.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

alternatives: illiberal states can claim, for instance, that their imposition of T gives citizens *the best chance* of living an objectively valuable life, while granting that T is no better than a host of other objective values or ways of life. I can see nothing in Galston's argument, short of his distinctly liberal idea of expressive freedom, that shows why such justifications should be ruled out.[54]

Like Crowder, then, Galston fails to show that value pluralism either *entails* liberalism or even prohibits illiberal repression. Both do shed some light, however, on Berlin's own understanding of the relationship between liberalism and value pluralism. In a passage that Crowder later quotes, Galston writes,

> A narrow society is one in which only a small fraction of inhabitants can live their lives in a manner consistent with their flourishing and satisfaction. The rest will be pinched and stunted to some considerable degree. … To the maximum extent possible in human affairs, liberal societies do avoid this kind of pinching.[55]

This argument does not follow, as a matter of logical entailment, from value pluralism. Rather, it imports two additional assumptions: first, that individuals are not highly malleable, that any attempt to impose a certain way of life on them will "stunt" or "pinch" many of them; second, that what matters most, morally, is the well-being of individuals, and not the flourishing of anything so abstract as values or cultures or ways of life. These are among the familiar liberal insights that Berlin derives from John Stuart Mill.

Berlin, Mill, and the Moral Psychology of Tolerance

Berlin's essay on Mill stands out, partly because Berlin rarely wrote about fellow liberals. The thinkers who typically fascinated him—from Karl Marx to Johann Georg Hamann or Giambattista Vico—were either critics of liberalism or precursors to it. "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" is an exception, all the more unusual because it addresses the philosophical justification of liberalism directly. In fact, Berlin not only explores Mill's justification of liberalism, he also seems to *endorse* it as the best available. "[Mill's] is still the clearest, most candid, persuasive, and moving exposition," writes Berlin, "of the

[54]Here again, though, we encounter some ambiguity in Galston's argument. Galston argues that it is not enough for an illiberal state to simply assert, "we choose to establish A," and give no further justification; see Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," 146. The state, he says, is obligated to make an argument. This claim seems to me wholly unobjectionable; what I object to is the further claim that, unless they can persuade everyone that A is objectively better than all alternatives, they are left without justificatory alternatives.

[55]William Galston, "Expressive Liberty, Moral Pluralism, Political Pluralism: Three Sources of Liberal Theory," *William and Mary Law Review* 40, no. 3 (1999): 892.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

point of view of those who desire an open and tolerant society."[56] It is puzzling that philosophers trying to reconstruct Berlin's own account of liberalism have paid this essay relatively little attention.

There are, admittedly, several reasons to be skeptical, at first glance, about the extent of Berlin's admiration for Mill. Berlin was most passionate in his condemnations of monism; Mill was a self-described monist. In fact, Gray and others often list Mill's liberalism as an example of the sort of monist doctrine that Berlin rejected.[57] Berlin is also thought to have celebrated a minimalist liberalism grounded in a principle of toleration; Mill, by contrast, is often read as a perfectionist who staked liberalism to a particular ideal of human flourishing—an ideal he called "individuality."[58] How, then, could Berlin have endorsed Mill's version of liberalism so enthusiastically?

The answer begins with Berlin's unusual reading of Mill's moral philosophy. Berlin acknowledges that all utilitarians must, by definition, be monists. After all, utilitarians hold that conflicts between values can, in principle, always be resolved through appeal to the standard of utility; they also believe that utility can serve as a "common denominator" that can measure the costs and benefits of trade-offs between values. But Berlin doubts that Mill was in fact a utilitarian. He claims that Mill transformed Bentham's concept of utility into something distinctly pluralistic:

> [happiness] is 'complex and indefinite' in Mill because he packs into it the many diverse (and, perhaps, not always compatible) ends which men in fact pursue for their own sake, and which Bentham had either ignored or falsely classified under the head of pleasure: love, hatred, desire for justice, for action, for freedom, for power, for beauty, for knowledge, for self-sacrifice. In J. S. Mill's writings happiness comes to mean something very like 'realization of one's wishes,' whatever they may be. This stretches its meaning to the point of vacuity.[59]

As Berlin reads him, Mill remained a utilitarian in name, partly to appease his father, but his philosophy moved toward value pluralism. The parenthetical comment is especially telling: the goods that Mill subsumed under the heading "happiness" were not all compatible with one another—certainly not all the time. Choices had to be made, and Berlin thought that, notwithstanding his utilitarian rhetoric, Mill showed no way of arranging these goods—each valuable in itself—into a clear hierarchy.

Mill's alleged pluralism made him a much more attractive thinker to Berlin. Most important, for my purposes, is Berlin's belief that it strengthened Mill's defense of liberalism. This point comes into focus as Berlin begins to

[56]Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Four Essays on Liberty*, 201.
[57]See for instance Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 145.
[58]Berlin understood this well enough: "For Bentham individualism is a psychological datum; for Mill it is an ideal" ("John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 178).
[59]Ibid., 181.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reconstruct Mill's defense of free expression. The opponents Mill took most seriously, writes Berlin, were those who believed that "if the true ends of life can be discovered, those who oppose these truths are spreading pernicious falsehood, and must be repressed."[60] Mill's explicit response, as Berlin reads it, rests heavily on the claim that humans are fallible, and that those who have historically claimed the authority to impose life's true ends on others have often turned out to be mistaken. Christ and Socrates, Mill observes, were killed precisely because they were thought to be spreading pernicious falsehoods. He goes on to point out that European history is littered with examples of brutal repression, designed to protect dogmas that were later shown to be, if not entirely false, then radically incomplete.[61]

It is clear, in these parts of Berlin's essay, how much he identified with Mill.[62] Both men were appalled by the moral and political consequences of repression justified through appeal to the "true ends of life," perpetrated by those who had little doubt that they had discovered them. Both men spent their careers denouncing such repression. At the same time, it is clear that Berlin ultimately doubted the strength of Mill's (explicit) response to it. Mill's doctrine of fallibility, writes Berlin, rests ultimately on his empiricism, on his view that "no truths are—or could be—rationally established, except on evidence of observation."[63] If this is true, in ethics just as surely as in scientific inquiry, then it follows that imposing a certain way of life on people will foreclose the possibility of new experiments in living, which might yet discover new (and superior) alternatives. Berlin believed that this was the heart of Mill's response to repressive monism: in its irrational self-assurance, it destroyed human possibilities that were as yet unimagined.

Berlin thought that this response was not strong enough, for it did not attack monism itself. And, crucially, he thought that Mill implicitly advanced another, more promising, line of argument:

> [Mill's] argument is plausible only on the assumption which, whether he knew it or not, [he] all too obviously made, that human knowledge was in principle never complete, and always fallible; that there was no single, universally visible, truth; that each man, each nation, each civilization might take its own road towards it own goal, not necessarily harmonious with those of others…; that consequently the conviction, common to Aristotelians and a good many Christian scholastic and atheistical

[60]Ibid., 185.

[61]John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 58–62.

[62]"John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" is typical of Berlin's most perceptive and animated works of interpretation in the sense that Berlin's own normative voice is plainly audible, sometimes even at the expense of his Mill's. Berlin often allowed himself to speak through the works of the philosophers he read, and if this tendency sometimes introduced inaccuracies in his readings, it also lent power and vitality to his prose.

[63]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 187.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> materialists alike, that there exists a basic knowable human nature, one and the same, at all times, in all places, in all men—a static, unchanging substance underneath the altering appearances, with permanent needs, dictated by a single, discoverable goal, or pattern of goals, the same for all mankind—is mistaken.[64]

These lines, moving as they do from fallibilism to outright value pluralism, are more revealing of Berlin than of Mill—Mill himself would almost certainly have rejected them. But they help clarify Berlin's own view of the relationship between value pluralism on the one hand and the justification of liberalism on the other: Berlin introduces value pluralism as a way of *improving* and completing Mill's fallibilistic defense of liberal institutions.

To understand why Berlin thought that pluralism improved Mill's argument, it helps to turn briefly to some of his later writings. Berlin believed that there was a clear psychological connection between pluralism and liberalism:

> If I am a pluralist, it means that I understand how people can come to accept these other values, whether because of their historical or geographical circumstances, or for whatever reason: the point is that I don't simply reject them as not mine and therefore nothing to me—as real relativism does—but I seek to understand what kind of world it is for those who don't share my beliefs, and how one can come to pursue values which are not mine.[65]

Those who embrace this attitude, he goes on to say, are less likely to simply ignore or suppress other cultures or ways of life; these tendencies, he says, are "diminished by understanding itself."[66] This passage moves much too quickly over difficult moral terrain, but it helps show the broad structure of Berlin's argument. It proceeds in two steps. First, Berlin thought that those who understood other values and ways of life with empathy and imagination would be more disposed to tolerate them. Second, Berlin saw monism as an impediment to such understanding; he thought that value pluralism, on the other hand, tended to encourage it.

The first step is evident in so many of Berlin's essays, including "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life": Berlin thought that those who understood and appreciated other values and ways of life would be much less disposed to dismiss experimenters as cranks or sinners, or to use coercion to insulate existing values from new influences. He thought they would be more open to the exploration of new ethical possibilities, or of new combinations of old ones. Here he draws support from Mill. In *On Liberty*, Mill is amazed at the parochialism of his fellow Englishmen, who seem to ignore the fact that they are Christians only by accident of birth. "It never troubles him," writes Mill of

[64]Ibid., 188.
[65]Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 84.
[66]Ibid., 87.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his countrymen, "that mere accident has decided which of these numerous [ethical and religious] worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin."[67] Mill thought that such parochialism encouraged intolerance; he wanted them to be more skeptical about their own inherited ways of life and more curious about others.

Mill's essay on Jeremy Bentham, which Berlin clearly admired, is also important here. Berlin cites it only in passing, but it seems to have shaped his view of Mill.[68] Mill criticizes Bentham for his inability (or unwillingness) to look charitably on traditions and ways of life that were alien to him. "The faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind," writes Mill of Bentham, "was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination."[69] For Mill, as for Berlin, Bentham's lack of imagination—and unwillingness to be charitable toward traditions that seemed to him irrational—helped explain his inability to identify with the diverse ends of human life, his willingness to reduce them all to simple, hedonistic measures. Time and again in "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," Berlin compares Mill favorably to Bentham. Mill possessed the ethical and philosophical temperament of the pluralist; Bentham did not.

Berlin believed that the desire to understand and empathize with different ways of life was a psychological prerequisite of genuine toleration.[70] Like Mill, he thought that repressive intolerance came naturally to human beings. "Men *want* to curtail the liberties of other men," he writes, paraphrasing Mill.[71] Only a genuine, sympathetic curiosity about other ways of life could stand as a bulwark against this inveterate human tendency. This was one of the lessons that Berlin drew from Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder—two of the thinkers he most admired and to whom he devoted a great deal of his scholarly attention. Berlin presents the empathy and imagination that these men exemplified as "antidotes to Gibbon's or Hume's or Macaulay's blindness to medieval civilization, to Russell's dismissal of Byzantium, or Voltaire's antipathy to the Bible or Cromwell."[72]

[67]Mill, *On Liberty*, 54.

[68]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 192.

[69]John Stuart Mill, "Bentham," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 91.

[70]By "genuine toleration" I mean toleration that persists even as power relationships change, even as the people in question acquire the power to destroy other ways of life without substantial cost to themselves. For more discussion of Berlin's view of empathy and its relationship to value pluralism, see Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 204–8.

[71]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 185; emphasis mine.

[72]Isaiah Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The next step in Berlin's argument was to suggest that both monism and relativism tended to inhibit such curiosity. Relativism distanced other ways of life, to the point of making them ethically irrelevant: they might have relevance for those who embraced them, but not for anyone else. To outsiders, there were simply objects of idle curiosity.[73] Monism, on the other hand, raised the ethical stakes almost unbearably high: if there was only one true way of life, then most people lived in error or sin. Like everyone else, monists would have a hard time resisting the belief that their own way of life had to be right—or at least, mostly right. And if that was true, then those who rejected their way of life, including the experimenters whom Mill lauded in *On Liberty*, had to be wrong—or at least, mostly wrong. This conviction, in turn, would tend to shut down empathetic inquiry; other, alien ways of life would register as irrational or prejudiced and as threats to the true ends of life.

Berlin thought that this tendency could survive even Mill's fallibilism. Even if it is true, says Berlin, that ethical knowledge is always incomplete, there can be no guarantee that new experiments in living will not bring corruption and degradation rather than ethical improvement. Even if it is possible, in principle, that experiments in living will bring valuable new ethical discoveries, the most prudent path—from the monist point of view—might still be repression, to protect those ethical truths that have been discovered.[74] Mill was vulnerable to the charge—also advanced by Lord Devlin in the late 1950s—that he was simply too optimistic about the sorts of experiments that would likely occur in liberal societies. The new, experimental goods were as yet indistinct, whereas the harms that such experiments might cause were evident. Berlin thought, therefore, that those who conceded monism would too often lose the fight against repressive intolerance.

And so Berlin thought that Mill's fallibilistic defense of liberty "will not tell with those who believe that absolute truth is discoverable once and for all, whether by metaphysical or theological argument."[75] Berlin was thinking not only of Mill's enemies—theocrats and philosophical intuitionists—but also of his own. He thought that repressive monism was "more powerful today perhaps than even in Mill's own century."[76] The combination of monism and fallibilism—the one that Mill claimed to hold—was insufficient. It was unstable and tended to resolve itself into what Mill called the "illusion of infallibility"—the illusion that one's own way of life had to be the right one after all (or, at least, right enough to warrant protection from heresy and error).

[73]Ibid., 85–86.
[74]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 187–88.
[75]Ibid., 188.
[76]Ibid., 187.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And both men saw how easily this illusion would then underwrite political repression. This is one of the major themes of Berlin's corpus: if there is only one rationally defensible hierarchy of human values, and if this hierarchy can be known, then "why should any conduct be tolerated that is not authorized by appropriate experts?"[77] Like Mill, he thought that people who were confident that they knew the "true ends of life" would register dissent simply as heresy or evil that threatened the ethical life, or the very salvation, of the community.[78] When such people came to hold power in their hands, they would use it to enforce their own orthodoxies. The key difference between Berlin and Mill was this: Berlin thought that this psychological tendency inhered in monism itself, while Mill located it simply in dogmatic ethical certainty. But Berlin thought that he was simply following Mill's psychological insights to their own natural conclusions—conclusions of which Mill himself was not fully aware.

It is worth noting, as an aside, that Berlin did not think that liberal monists would escape the tendency to coerce and repress. He famously criticized the Enlightenment for its own form of universalistic moral hubris. In fact, he traced the origins of twentieth-century totalitarianism precisely to Enlightenment rationalism and to the colonial violence it justified.[79] In his view, pluralism would help inspire, not just any liberalism, but a more humane, more restrained liberalism that remained skeptical of the coercive projection of liberal norms across the world.

We come now to the final step in the argument, which is that value pluralism encourages precisely the kind of sympathetic curiosity about other ways of life that motivates genuine tolerance. Here is Berlin's key claim: the value pluralist can easily affirm the value of her own way of life while *also* acknowledging that other, incompatible cultures and ways of life contain objectively valuable human goods. After all, the pluralist must hold that many such goods exist in the human world and that not all of them are mutually consistent. Unlike the monist's, the value pluralist's affirmation of different cultures and ways of life does not threaten to impugn her own life or culture; she is therefore more likely to approach them openly and interpret them generously. Unlike the relativist, she has reason to be curious about them, because she glimpses in them the possibility of objective value, and with it real forms of human flourishing. "I don't simply reject [other values] as not mine and therefore nothing to me," says Berlin, impersonating the pluralist point of view, "as real relativism does."[80] Berlin therefore believed that pluralists would, by and

[77]Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 151.

[78]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 185.

[79]See for instance Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought." It is interesting that Mill's work with the East India Company, and his relatively permissive attitudes toward colonialism, escape criticism in "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life." Of the two, Bentham saw the evils of colonialism more clearly.

[80]Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 84.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

large, find themselves disposed to respond to otherness with empathy and curiosity.

Put this way, however, his argument is not entirely convincing. It is certainly possible to imagine a pluralist who believes, for instance, that there are a limited number of objectively valuable ways of life, that they are all well known, and that all but these ways of life should be repressed. This kind of pluralist seems to have no more reason than the monist does to favor openness and tolerance. Missing from this version of pluralism is one of the key virtues that Mill celebrated—fallibilism, grounded in empiricism—and that Berlin admired.

I have argued elsewhere that empiricism is an important feature of Berlin's value pluralism.[81] He thought that objective values could never be known a priori; they could only be known through patient empirical inquiry into existing (or historical) cultures and ways of life. This is a second lesson that Berlin drew from Herder and Vico. History and anthropology were the disciplines through which we could learn the contours of human nature—that is, the range of the human potential for flourishing, and with it the objective values that conduced to such flourishing. "What we understand," writes Bernard Williams of Berlin's historical approach to ethics, "is a truth about human nature as it has been revealed—revealed the only way in which it could have been revealed, historically."[82] Berlin thought, furthermore, that any pluralist who took this empirical attitude toward human values would have to remain open, in principle, to the possibility that there were other objective values or ways of life to be discovered. The ethical history of the human species was ongoing. He also thought that the virtues needed to conduct historical and anthropological inquiry responsibly were precisely those that conduced to sympathetic curiosity toward others.[83] In humanistic inquiry, understanding simply cannot be achieved without the capacity to "enter into" the lives, motives, and feelings of others.[84]

The pluralism that Berlin celebrated was something more, then, than the four propositions that I outlined earlier; it also included empiricism, properly understood, about values. And it was pluralism in this more inclusive sense that Berlin thought would encourage the epistemic virtues—imagination, empathy, openness—that he associated with tolerance and, by extension,

[81]See Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 502–3.

[82]Bernard Williams, introduction to *Concepts and Categories*, by Isaiah Berlin (New York: Penguin, 1981), xviii. For a more detailed discussion of Berlin's empiricism, see Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, 15–21.

[83]See Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 505–6; see also Ryan Hanley, "Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004): 329–32.

[84]Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 133.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

liberal political commitments. Michael Walzer described this relationship perfectly:

> I don't know anyone who believes in value pluralism who isn't a liberal, in sensibility as well as conviction. … You have to look at the world in a receptive and generous way to see a pluralism of Berlin's sort. … And you also have to look at the world in a skeptical way, since the adherents of each of the different values are likely to rank them very high on a scale designed just for that purpose. And receptivity, generosity, and skepticism are, if not liberal values, the qualities of mind that make it possible to accept liberal values (or better, that make it likely that liberal values will be accepted).[85]

Mill was right, in Berlin's estimation, to list empiricism, as well as the fallibilism it underwrites, as psychological prerequisites of genuine toleration. But Berlin thought that value pluralism was important, too. Value pluralists could believe that their own way of life was objectively valuable without suspecting that other ways of life—even ways of life radically different from their own, guided by sharply different values—were therefore corrupt or sinful. To the value pluralist, the world presents itself is a less Manichean light. Those who embraced both a fallibilistic empiricism and value pluralism would find that liberal tolerance came more naturally to them.

One further piece of Berlin's story is relevant here. Berlin thought that all human beings (and all societies) were confronted with rationally underdetermined ethical choices. Since there was no single, rationally privileged way of life or hierarchy of political values, people had to choose. Only those who acknowledged the truth of value pluralism, moreover, and who were curious enough to understand something of the variety of objective alternatives, were in a position to make such choices deliberately. And these were precisely the people—including Herder, Vico, Maciavelli, and others—whom Berlin most admired. He admired them more than he admired the many cultures or ways of life that they observed.[86] This is an important fact about Berlin: he seldom praised cultural or ethical diversity as such. He thought that people who lived under the illusion that their own parochial way of life was the only valuable one led diminished lives, lives less free than they might have been. The moral psychology of tolerance, for Berlin, opens up into the practice of autonomous choice-making—and this deepened

[85]Michael Walzer, "Are There Limits to Liberalism?," *New York Review of Books*, October 19, 2005, 31. To his credit, Crowder acknowledges this link between Berlin's pluralism and liberalism. His mistake lies in arguing that those who embrace the pluralism claim are compelled by practical necessity to embrace certain epistemic virtues, and then political liberalism. I do not have space to discuss this claim in detail, but I agree with Berlin in finding it mistaken; see Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 186–213.

[86]See Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 506.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the psychological connection, in his mind, between pluralism and liberalism.[87]

In "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," Berlin presents what seems to me a compelling account of the psychological relationship between an empirical, fallibilistic value pluralism and liberal tolerance. It is important, though, to recognize its limits. First, as I have just emphasized, it is an account of the psychology of value pluralism combined with a certain kind of empiricism, not of value pluralism alone. Second, though Berlin might have disagreed, the account applies to some forms of monism as well. It seems to me that one can reject the incommensurability thesis—as Mill did—and still find oneself inclined toward toleration in precisely the way Berlin hoped for. Mill, for one, thought that human goods were objective and diverse, and that they conflicted. And while he believed that the standard of utility could ideally be used to resolve these conflicts, he thought it was very difficult to apply faithfully and precisely; his fallibilism led him to believe, for instance, that governments—even utilitarian governments—would often do more harm than good when they tried to regulate citizens' lives. In other words, value pluralism, understood as encompassing the four claims I summarized earlier, is neither a sufficient nor a necessary element of the moral psychology of tolerance. Though Berlin might have doubted it, certain forms of monism—of which Mill's is but one example—encourage precisely the virtues that he associated with liberal tolerance. Berlin's assessments of monism were always far too dire.

I have argued that Berlin conceived of the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism in largely psychological terms. In a 2007 essay, "Value Pluralism and Liberalism," Crowder considers this possibility, only to dismiss it rather quickly. He names two philosophers—Gray and Kekes—who embrace value pluralism without endorsing liberalism; "On the 'psychological' view of the liberalism-pluralism relation, what can liberals say to Gray and Kekes: that they are psychologically abnormal?"[88] Even if Crowder were invoking the more inclusive sense of value pluralism that I just outlined, it is surely uncharitable to understand Berlin as saying that *everyone* who embraces it will be liberal. Berlin is outlining a broad, psychological affinity, not a causal necessity.[89]

Crowder's deeper complaint is that this affinity, even if it does exist, is not very interesting, for it can always be argued—as Gray and Kekes have—that

[87]Crowder is sensitive to this convergence in Berlin's thought, but he tries—mistakenly, in my view—to turn it into another *justification* of liberalism; see Crowder, "Value Pluralism and Liberalism," 225–27.

[88]Ibid., 212.

[89]The passage in which he comes closest to describing this psychological relationship as necessary or inevitable appears in a late conversation with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska; see Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 214. Here, I think Berlin is simply overstating his case.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

value pluralists who are drawn to liberalism are simply "making a mistake."[90] There is a fundamental disagreement here about what liberalism needs most. Berlin thought that the best we can do for liberalism is to encourage the habits of mind that will, by and large, incline us and others to embrace and defend it. If we can teach and exemplify the psychological prerequisites of liberal toleration, he thought, we can begin to create a better, more humane world. Crowder, like most liberal philosophers, is more preoccupied with outlining an airtight justification of liberalism. In my view, Berlin's project is the more important of the two.

Justifying Liberalism

I suggested, at the start of this essay, that those who mistakenly saddle Berlin with the ambition of offering a foundational justification of liberalism make his philosophy seem weak, if not actually incoherent. That said, Berlin was not entirely silent on the question of liberalism's justification. In fact, the rest of "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" outlines two different justifications of liberalism.

The first is more modest, and it turns on two claims—one empirical and one normative—that I summarized earlier. Berlin is writing here about Mill and about the coercive imposition of a single value or way of life: "the imposition of any such construction upon a living society is bound, in his favorite words of warning, to dwarf, maim, cramp, wither the human faculties."[91] For support, he quotes Mill's view that any such imposition is bound to "to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady's foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity."[92] To force people into a single ethical mold is to maim them, to destroy some important part of their nature or personality, for people are not limitlessly malleable. This is the empirical claim. Its normative complement is that objective goods are not valuable for their own sake, but only because they provide avenues for human flourishing. There are many ways of making sense of the ideal of "human flourishing," but for Berlin, as for Mill, it always had a subjective element: no human being whose life was scarred by deep and persistent suffering could be described as flourishing. Here, then, is the reason Berlin would have rejected the illiberal pluralism that I outlined earlier. If what matters most is human suffering, then the fact that illiberal pluralism might maximize the ratio of objectively good to bad lives is in itself no defense. If in fact—as Berlin and Mill both would have supposed—this maximization is purchased at the price of a great deal of suffering imposed on individuals

[90]Crowder, "Value Pluralism and Liberalism," 212.
[91]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 193.
[92]Ibid., 194.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who are prevented from pursuing the diverse goods that suit them, then illiberal pluralism is unjustifiable.

It is worth noticing the role that value pluralism plays in this first justification. The mere fact that human natures are diverse and not highly malleable, and that they suffer when forced into a particular mold, does not in itself compel liberal tolerance. To see why consider, for instance, the view of homosexuality that might be taken by a religious traditionalist. He might acknowledge that our sexual dispositions are diverse, and that imposing a certain sexual order—monogamous heterosexuality—causes substantial suffering to those whose natures do not fit this mold neatly. But he might say that such suffering, though is was indeed an evil, was justified by the fact that monogamous heterosexuality is among the "true ends of life."[93] Mill's response to such arguments was fallibilism, which he thought would make us more hesitant to coerce others in the name of any particular conception of the human good. And as I argued earlier, Berlin doubted that fallibilism alone would make monists receptive to unfamiliar values and ways of life. He believed that pluralism, combined with a fallibilist empiricism, would prove a much stronger answer. If there were many objectively valuable yet incompatible ways of life, if new ones could always be discovered—and if the traditionalist therefore felt compelled to respond to homosexuality not as something radically alien and corrupt, but as part of a way of life that might (or might not) itself have objective value—then he would be less likely to want to repress it at the cost of substantial human suffering.

The first justification of liberalism, then, rests on the observation that human beings suffer when they are forced to live a way of life that does not suit them. The second is somewhat more controversial: "Mill believes in liberty, that is, the rigid limitation of the right to coerce, because he is sure that men cannot develop and flourish and become fully human unless they are left free from interference by other men within a certain minimum area of their lives, which he regards as—or wishes to make—inviolable."[94] Berlin here draws attention to a central feature of Mill's ethics: there is embedded in Mill's defense of liberty a certain conception of human flourishing—flourishing through the exercise of choice (and choice not just among means to a prescribed end, but choice among *ends*). Berlin thought that though this was Mill's deepest commitment, it was ultimately an article of faith; he also calls it "the ultimate basis of political liberalism."[95] Of course,

[93]This argument need not be cast in explicitly religious terms. Robert George, along with coauthors Sherif Gergis and Ryan Anderson, has argued, for instance, that heterosexual love and marriage, and the "comprehensive union" they embody, is objectively good and corresponds to a distinctive form of human flourishing unavailable to gay couples. See Sherif Gergis, Robert George, and Ryan Anderson, "What Is Marriage?," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 245–87.

[94]Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 190.

[95]Ibid., 191. Note that he does not call it merely the basis of *Mill's* liberalism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as Gray emphasizes, no society deprives individuals of the opportunity to exercise meaningful choices. No society prescribes a single career, for instance, or a single way of spending one's leisure time. Choice is possible within all societies. Here is Berlin's response:

> For [Mill] man differs from animals primarily neither as the possessor of reason, nor as an inventor of tools and methods, but as a being capable of choice, one who is most himself in choosing and not being chosen for; … with the corollary that the more various these fashions, the richer the lives of men become; the larger the field of interplay between individuals, the greater the opportunities of the new and the unexpected; the more numerous the possibilities for altering his own character in some fresh or unexplored direction, the more paths open before each individual, and the wider will be his freedom of action and thought.[96]

At this point in the essay, the principle of maximization that Crowder endorses comes into view. If what matters is the cultivation of individuality, then individuals should have the opportunity to choose from a broad range of options. Illiberal societies deny individuals the range of examples and alternatives that are typically available in liberal societies. They therefore stymie the development of essential human faculties. Berlin is paraphrasing Mill in these passages, but it is clear that he approves of Mill's reasoning.

Again, it makes sense to ask: What work, exactly, is value pluralism doing in this argument? And again, the answer is that it serves as an important complement to fallibilism. It is certainly possible to value choice for its own sake as part of a monist ethical view. It is possible to hold, for instance, that there is one correct ethical way, but individuals must be allowed to come to it themselves, because choice making is valuable in itself. Most forms of Christianity, for instance, do contain this view. Moreover, virtually all monist strains of liberalism actually enshrine liberty as one of the highest public values, if not *the* highest value. Still, Berlin worried that even liberals monists might find themselves tempted to impose a certain understanding of the good life, often under the guise of liberty itself, on others.[97] Mill's fallibilism suggests one way of holding this temptation at bay: you never know; the ways of life that are being targeted for restriction might instantiate freedom in ways we do not fully understand, or they might instantiate other values at least as worthwhile as freedom, but whose importance we underestimate. I have already shown why Berlin doubted this argument's efficacy. He thought that it was ultimately more powerful to be able to say: There are in fact rival, incommensurable goods between which we are all

[96]Ibid., 178.

[97]He mentions Hegel as an example; see Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 133–34. The recent European controversies over the veil provide a vivid contemporary illustration of this tendency.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

destined to choose. We choose between them whether we know it or not. Better to do so deliberately, knowing something about our alternatives.[98] Better, in other words, to fashion lives for ourselves, and to design political institutions that protect and enable our power to do so.

At first blush, these two justifications of liberalism seem incompatible with value pluralism. After all, if Berlin is suggesting that suffering or autonomy is more important than other real values, or that either can be used to adjudicate between other conflicting values, then he seems to be embracing his own version of monism. It is important, in closing, to see why Berlin would have rejected this charge. Consider the following passage from a short reply to Crowder that Berlin and Bernard Williams coauthored in 1994:

> It is true, as Crowder points out, that pluralists sometimes urge the particular importance, on their views, of some value such as variety or autonomy, which on other views may be less important, or perhaps not a value at all. Once again, there is no inconsistency between their doing this, and their accepting that this is one value among others. If they move to asserting the overriding importance of this value, as some liberals do, then they may begin to be in trouble with pluralism.[99]

Berlin can urge the particular importance of human suffering, then, without claiming that it is irrational not to do so. The argument looks something like this: *Yes*, there are many objectively good yet incommensurable human values. When designing basic political institutions, however, in a world such as ours, I hold that certain values—notably the avoidance of suffering and the attainment of a minimal threshold of personal autonomy—should be given priority, at the cost of others. I acknowledge that others may disagree, and they are not irrational for doing so. They are not irrational, not simply because of what John Rawls called the "burdens of judgment," but also because human values really are plural and incommensurable, and so human suffering has no rational priority over other goods. I will nonetheless press my case as persuasively as I know how, using all of the rhetorical tools that I can honestly use.[100]

[98]Berlin develops this argument clearly in the climactic final section of "Two Concepts of Liberty," where he declares that "the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition." "This [fact] gives its value to freedom," he goes on to say, "as Acton conceived of it—as an end in itself" ("Two Concepts of Liberty," 169).

[99]Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply," *Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (1994): 308.

[100]See Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," 515. Ella Myers also speaks to this point: "He is making a judgment," she writes of Berlin's defense of liberal values, "concerning the significance of these goods and attempting to persuade others (namely his readers) of their value: he is taking a stand, which is neither necessitated nor ruled out by pluralism" ("From Pluralism to Liberalism," 623–24).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Berlin thought that very few people denied the moral importance of human suffering—it had a kind of empirical universality. And there points are in his essays where he gestures at a universal moral minimum that includes, as Amy Gutmann puts it, "not only protecting [some measure of] individual liberty, but also avoiding extreme forms of human suffering that are humanly inflicted, cruelty for short."[101] But the moral status of this minimum is usually left ambiguous. And he sometimes explicitly denied that even these basic moral obligations could be universally binding. "To begin with," he writes in a letter to Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, "we recognize 'human rights' and 'crimes against humanity.' As you know, I do not believe in a priori justification for these, or absolute values. Things would be easier if one did, but one must say what one believes—I should like to say in my case, knows—to be true."[102] Berlin thought he could give reasons—powerful ones—why human suffering is morally important, should take moral priority. At the same time, he recognized that prioritizing suffering was not the only rational way of ordering political values. He was not, then, trying to endow liberal institutions, or even basic human rights, with "universal authority," as Gray (and many other interpreters) have claimed he was. His philosophical ambitions were considerably more modest.

[101]Amy Gutmann, "Liberty and Pluralism in Pursuit of the Non-Ideal," *Social Research* 66, no. 4 (1999): 1042.

[102]Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001325 Published online by Cambridge University Press