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The Value-Pluralism
and Liberalism Problem Revisited[*]

Abstract: This article tackles one of the most burning issues discussed by adherents of the dynamically developing movement in ethics which bears on political and legal philosophy, that is value-pluralism. In particular, the article is devoted to an investigation into the highly controversial issue of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism, based upon the three crucial, divergent approaches represented by Isaiah Berlin and his two main opponents, John Gray and George Crowder. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the two concepts in question are neither mutually exclusive nor logically connected, but actually overlapping, which signifies the existence of a loose, *de facto* connection between them. Such a final thesis proves to be consistent with the position of Isaiah Berlin, and contrary to the final statements endorsed by his critics, John Gray and George Crowder.

Keywords: liberalism, values, pluralism

Rough Outline of the Problem

The core of Isaiah Berlin's distinctive idea of value-pluralism boils down to the thesis that fundamental human values are objective and knowable, but they are irreducibly plural. Thus, they can neither be ranked in a comprehensive hierarchy nor reduced to a common measure. Plurality and incommensurability of some of the values lead to unavoidable conflicts among them. These inevitable collisions

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sometimes do not allow for any rational resolution. As a consequence, the idea of perfection itself appears as logically incoherent.

Berlin's novel attempt at grounding his unambiguously liberal standpoint in a value-pluralist ethical perspective gave rise to the highly controversial problem of the mutual relation between the two ideas. The question whether pluralism supports liberalism or whether the two ideas are actually incompatible was raised for the first time in the 1980s (Kocis 1983: 374–375; Sandel 1984: 8). The dispute about this dilemma developed rapidly in the 1990s. In 1993 there was a substantial contribution, made by John Kekes, according to which there is no bond between liberalism and pluralism (Kekes 1993). In 1995 John Gray developed his critique in his influential monograph, *Isaiah Berlin*, where he put forward the strong thesis that pluralism in fact subverts liberalism. This work prompted a flood of publications on value-pluralism over the past two decades.

Gray's investigations gave rise to the emergence of two opposite schools within the pluralist movement—liberal and anti-liberal. The first includes such thinkers as Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, Joseph Raz, Michael Walzer, William Galston, and later George Crowder. The second is represented by, among others, Robert Kocis, John Kekes and John Gray.

The issue in question is so extensive that it requires confinement here to a restricted number of themes. I shall give a very brief account of the two most substantial opposite standpoints, taken by John Gray and George Crowder. I shall, of course, include as well the position of the thinker whose work gave rise to the controversy, Isaiah Berlin. While discussing the three contributions I shall adopt a historical perspective, that is start with Gray's critique, then present Berlin's response and, in the third place, shortly outline the main tenets of George Crowder's liberal pluralism. At the very end I shall present my own stance, which goes counter both to Gray's and Crowder's views, and corresponds with Berlin's standpoint.

Three Rival Standpoints on the Issue in Question: Gray, Berlin, Crowder

Gray investigates the relationship between pluralism and liberalism, undertaking an analysis of three strands of reasoning whereby value-pluralism might support liberal values and practices. I shall comment on one of them only; i.e., the one which inspired Isaiah Berlin himself and made him enter into the discussion. This was the argument that, "if the radical pluralist thesis of the rational incompatibility of goods and evils is true, the state can never have sufficient rational justification for imposing any particular ranking of values on people." (Gray 1995: 144) According to Gray this argument fails, for

[...] 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, or even that it is a better ranking than others that are presently found in the world. It need only claim that it is a ranking embedded in, and necessary for the survival of, a particular way of life that is itself worthwhile. (Gray 1995: 153)

Gray's investigations lead him to the conclusion that all three arguments analysed by him fail. This implies that value-pluralism does not in fact support liberalism. In Gray's view, they are indeed rival doctrines. A political ideal that actually harmonizes with the pluralist perspective in ethics is support for a *modus vivendi*—the conception advocated by Gray, aptly characterized as "a form of loose, 'political pragmatism,'"[1] aimed at reconciling conflicting values.

I was privileged to meet Isaiah Berlin in 1995, shortly after the publication of Gray's monograph, and then to discuss Gray's analyses in an exchange of four important letters with Berlin in 1997. Yet, before I give an account of Berlin's conclusions reached during our conversations and correspondence, I shall briefly refer to his earlier statements about the issue, published before Gray's monograph.

Berlin rarely devoted himself to the cardinal problem of the relation between pluralism and liberalism in his written work. His position seems to suggest that the special status of freedom follows from the fact that it is involved in each act of choice, and it is choosing that makes human beings human. At the end of *Two Concepts of Liberty* Berlin recognizes the bond between pluralism and liberalism as a logical connection: "Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek [...] the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery [...]" (Berlin 2002: 216). Thus, pluralism implies liberalism. Yet, in a conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo, Berlin says: "Pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts. There are liberal theories which are not pluralistic. I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected" (Berlin, Jahanbegloo 1992: 44). Unfortunately, the two claims are openly contradictory.

During my several conversations with Berlin in 1995, I gave an account of Gray's recent critique and flooded my interlocutor with my doubts and questions. Inspired by Gray's analyses, Berlin undertook an investigation into the problems posed by his opponent. Unfortunately, he did not systematize his conclusions in any publication. The direct impulse, which made Berlin ruminate on the nature of the bond between pluralism and liberalism, was Gray's example of illiberal cultures that do not claim universal authority for the ways of life protected by them and do not question the truth of value-pluralism. Thus, in Gray's view, the pluralist perspective in ethics is compatible with an authoritarian regime, which means that there is no logical connection between pluralism and liberalism. Berlin countered this argument in a conversation with me in the following way: despite the fact that it is indeed possible to reconcile pluralism with particularistic monism, representatives of such cultures are inclined to adopt a liberal attitude with respect to the rest of the world; otherwise, they would not be pluralists. In this sense, "pluralism must imply liberalism."[2] This standpoint, so firmly outlined by Berlin in our conversation, in due course happened to undergo an evolution. The incentive was my having referred to the obviously contrary claim, quoted above, that Berlin had made in the conversation with Jahanbegloo. I also gave the example of

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[1] I owe the phrase to George Crowder (Crowder 2000: 119).

[2] In conversation with me, Oxford, 17 May 1995 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 217).

Machiavelli, who, on Berlin's interpretation, was a forerunner of pluralism, yet was not simultaneously a liberal. Consequently, Berlin modified his earlier stance: the connection between pluralism and liberalism is not *logical* in character, but *psychological*.[3] This recognition was later elaborated in correspondence, where Berlin overtly gave up his former thesis of a necessary connection between pluralism and liberalism: "I think that Gray is perfectly right in saying that there is no logical nexus between pluralism and liberalism, though there are all kinds of other—in a way equally important—connections."[4] Although I have already given a detailed account of Berlin's line of reasoning elsewhere (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 290–292) it is worth reproducing it here in a more concise form.

The distinctive feature of a pluralist is the ability to understand different human aims and values, as well as other cultures. A typical reaction to the experience of strangeness is either indifference or hostility; understanding tends to moderate these reactions:

> If you are going abroad, you may find yourself in a strange foreign culture, but you don't necessarily reject or attack it—it is not yours, but you can put up with it, you can even understand how one might live that sort of life even though you yourself are not prepared to.[5]

Therefore, the external sign of practising empathic understanding is toleration: "That state of mind [empathic understanding] surely leads to that toleration which is at the heart of liberalism: toleration with limits, not indefinite toleration, toleration provided your culture is not in mortal danger—but still, toleration."[6] In Berlin's conviction the idea of toleration is also deeply embedded in liberalism:

> [...] toleration is a human right, a universal right as it were, or quasi-universal in my locution; if this is so, and only a liberal society can fully practise it, then that is a connection between them—it is not a logical connection, but a *de facto* one and none the worse for that.[7]

Thus, toleration plays the role of a bridge, connecting pluralism and liberalism. In a letter to me, Berlin once again refers to his earlier recognition of the nature of the link between the two standpoints: "Is there a psychological connection between pluralism and liberalism? Yes."[8] He then reinforces this statement with a broader reflection, concerning the psychological dimension of human ends and values:

> It is a fact, discoverable by anthropological observation, that men seek different values—negative liberty, positive liberty, equality, justice, mercy, rational organisation, family life. Some of these clash, as we know, but the question is, why seek them at all, what makes them values? The answer to this is that everything is ultimately psychological—that that is how men are made, some differing from others, and so people choose values because they are so made; and if they clash, then they can compromise between them [...].[9]

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[3] In conversation with me, Oxford, 24 May 1995 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 226).
[4] Letter of 19 April 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 91).
[5] Letter of 18 February 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 87).
[6] Letter of 18 February 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 87–88).
[7] Letter of 19 April 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 93)
[8] Letter of 18 February 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 87)
[9] Letter of 28 June 1997 (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 99–100)

Summing up, according to Berlin there exists a connection between pluralism and liberalism, though it is not a logical one. If this bond were to be characterized in anthropological categories, it would have to be described as a psychological dependence. The link which connects both concepts is the idea of toleration.

Let me now discuss a standpoint which is opposite to that of John Gray, and which simultaneously amounts to the most powerful case for liberal pluralism. I have in mind the pluralist liberal theory put forward by George Crowder. His point of departure was at first a severe criticism of liberal pluralism (Crowder 1994); he then changed his view to become its keen adherent (Crowder 2002). Like Gray, Crowder first analyses the main lines of reasoning from pluralism to liberalism inherent in Berlin's writings and also finds them unsuccessful. He singles out two strains of reasoning: the argument *from choice* and the *anti-utopian* perspective. He recognizes the first one as logically flawed, i.e., guilty of the naturalistic fallacy and the second one as suffering from incompleteness. His conclusion is that "Berlin does not wholly succeed in explaining why pluralists should be liberals" (Crowder 2004: 126). However, he does not question Berlin's view that there exists a bond between the two ideas in question. His thesis is much stronger, as he maintains that pluralism implies liberalism; moreover, liberalism of a special kind, that is universalist and perfectionist. Thus, Crowder is going beyond Berlin's view. Let me attempt the impossible task of giving a very brief account of his original contribution.

According to George Crowder's vision, the pluralist position in ethics involves four distinctive constituents characterizing the real features of value: universality of certain generic values, plurality, incommensurability and conflict. These formal attributes of value-pluralism imply five normative principles, that are best respected within a liberal form of politics. Thus, they provide a universal argument for liberalism grounded in pluralism. The five principles recognized by him are as follows: the principle of respect for generic universal values, the principle of recognition of value incommensurability, the principle of commitment to diversity, the principle of acknowledgement of reasonable disagreement among conceptions of the good and the principle of practising the pluralist virtues: generosity, realism, attentiveness and flexibility, required by practical reasoning under pluralism; powerfully reinforced by close, or even overlapping liberal virtues: broadmindedness, moderation, respect for persons and autonomy.

I engaged in controversy with Crowder's theory in an article included in *Unfinished Dialogue*, the book co-authored by Isaiah Berlin and myself. I made the claim that Crowder draws a conclusion as to the *value* of diversity from the empirical *fact* of plurality of values and accused him in turn of having committed a naturalistic fallacy. Henry Hardy, the editor of Berlin's writings, who helped me prepare the manuscript of *Unfinished Dialogue*, sent my article to George Crowder before the book was actually published. This was how our argument started, first with the participation of Hardy, who acted as an intermediary, and then in print. Crowder refuted my argument in an email message to Hardy, which I included as an Appendix to *Unfinished Dialogue*:

Beata's criticism of my "diversity" argument—namely, that the argument violates Hume's law—seems to me to miss a crucial point. The starting point for the argument is not the fact that plural things happen to have been valued universally [...]. My starting point is an understanding of universal ends as contributing objectively to human well-being (as in Aristotle, the natural law tradition, or Nussbaum). [...] This argument doesn't violate Hume's law, because it doesn't move from fact to value, but from value to value. The starting point is not a claim of fact about what people happen to value, but a value judgement to the effect that certain generic goods contribute to human well-being. (Berlin, Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 297–298)

I openly admitted that this argument subverts my critique. Crowder engaged in the discussion twice again in his contribution to a reader on Berlin *The One and the Many* and in his article published in *Political Theory* (Crowder 2007a: 211–212, 2007b: 131). I shall refer to his later statements at the end of the paper.

Critical Discussion of the Competing Solutions

Let me now express my own view on the issue in question. I agree both with John Gray and with George Crowder as far as their criticism of Berlin's ways of reasoning from pluralism to liberalism is concerned. In particular, I concur that Berlin did not succeed in proving a logical connection between the two ideas. Moreover, I acknowledge the objection raised both by Gray and Crowder that Berlin's version of pluralism violates Hume's law. (Gray 1995: 160–161; Crowder 2007a: 211). Nevertheless, I dissent from their views about the relation between pluralism and liberalism. In this very respect, I agree with Berlin's conclusion, reached in his letters to me.

As for John Gray's analyses, he has in my view successfully pointed out that pluralism does not entail liberalism, i.e. that it is possible to adopt a value-pluralist perspective in ethics, without adhering simultaneously to liberalism. Yet, Gray went too far in his conclusions. The lack of a logical connection between the two ideas does not imply that they are mutually exclusive. Because they may overlap. If Gray were right then it would be incoherent to adhere to liberalism conceived of as a local way of life, taking simultaneously a pluralist standpoint in ethics. Yet this is exactly Joseph Raz's position: a pluralist and a liberal, though at the same time a particularist, stance. Whatever objections one might raise against the limiting reservations inherent in Raz's liberal pluralism, what one definitely cannot do is identify a logical error in his doctrine. It is my guess that Gray's fierce attack on the Enlightenment's universalist legacy and liberalism's hubris led him to his exaggerated conclusion. As he once himself admitted in an interview given to Ben Rogers: "You see... I'm a partisan" (Rogers 1995: 33). His other claim, coming from an interview given to me provides an excellent illustration of this particular trait of his:

[...] I think one serious problem of value pluralism [...] comes about if you agree on a list of 7 or 9 or 14 or however many intrinsic goods and bads, and someone comes along and says, "I accept the list, but I only attach any weight to one or two of them." In other words, he's a fanatic. Take Nazism. Mercy might appear somewhere on the list, but a Nazi might say, "What I really care about are the top two." That's a problem. You could be a pluralist but a fanatic. You could accept that there are other items in

the ethical universe and that they're important in some sort of way, but you could say, "Well, I'm going to give them very little importance compared with the two that I do." So if you really are a non-hierarchical pluralist, how do you argue against that? (Gray, Polanowska-Sygulska 2009: 83)

One feels tempted to comment upon this statement: according to Gray fanaticism does not stand in logical contradiction with pluralism, but liberal values do! Summing up, I perceive Gray's recognition of pluralism and liberalism as rival doctrines as considerably exaggerated. Having successfully proved that the two ideas are not logically connected he then went much too far in claiming that they are mutually exclusive. If liberalism is only understood exactly as he perceives it, as a local way of life, it does not contradict the truth of value-pluralism; certainly, no more than fanaticism does. Not to mention, that in Berlin's ultimately psychological version of his argument there is far more "elective affinity," to borrow from Goethe, between liberalism and pluralism than between fanaticism and either of them.

However, I am not convinced either by the conclusion reached by Gray's most radical opponent, George Crowder. Let me first comment upon my misinterpretation of Crowder's liberal pluralism, made in *Unfinished Dialogue*. It is indeed not difficult for a reader of Crowder's treatise to be misled about the alleged breach of Hume's law when he encounters the following passage: "To acknowledge the truth of value-pluralism [...] is to acknowledge the duty to promote these goods" (Crowder 2002: 137). What struck me later, while studying together the relevant passages from Crowder's *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* and his email message in which he pointed out my misapprehension, was the impression that they had been written from, so to say, disparate philosophical perspectives. On a more meticulous reading of his treatise, one detects a seminal declaration in an endnote, revealing that the author's position is different from Berlin's, being more akin to that of Martha Nussbaum's:

> Nussbaum's formulation of the objectivity required for value pluralism is probably too strong, since a life that lacked certain of the capabilities she lists may still, surely, count as recognizably "human," and even a good life to some degree. All that is necessary from a pluralist point of view is that there are certain goods that *contribute* to human well-being universally and independently of particular beliefs, that is, that such goods make human lives go better than they would otherwise. On the other hand, Berlin's version of value objectivity is probably too weak for pluralist purposes. Berlin sees universal values as those goods that all human beings in fact value [...]. (Crowder 2002: 73–74)

Such an extremely vague outline of the conception of value, and indeed, of man, conceived of as a basis for an elaborate normative system including a catalogue of principles and virtues, does not, however, seem to fulfil its crucial task. Moreover, the particular way in which this conception has been expressed, i.e., only casually mentioned in an endnote, makes it tremendously difficult for the student of Crowder's normative theory to pick up the essential clues. To be fair one does encounter in Crowder's later work a more comprehensive account of Nussbaum's "thick and vague" conception of the good. Yet, some nagging doubts still linger. First, it is still not quite clear what Crowder's own position is; the only indication is that it should be located somewhere between that of Nussbaum and Berlin. Second, while he recognizes Nussbaum's conception as too strong for pluralism's purposes,

yet it does not seem strong enough to serve as a basis for a developed normative system. It is indeed true that her "thick and vague" theory of human capabilities does display an obvious normative dimension, yet she insists that it is open-ended and that it rather amounts to channelling our moral thinking than to constructing a systematic philosophical theory (Nussbaum 1990: 219). Third, while Nussbaum indeed draws heavily on the Aristotelian tradition, she declares that while her doctrine is far from metaphysical biology it is actually grounded in a community of myths and stories, coming from different epochs and regions (Nussbaum 1990: 217). Thus, she overtly emphasizes the historical dimension of her conception of the good. Incidentally, other contemporary thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre or Joseph Raz, who are likewise greatly influenced by the Aristotelian tradition, also stand in either a historicist or particularist perspective. George Crowder's approach proves to be strikingly divergent in this respect, for his elaborate ethical system is true to type ahistorical and universalist. Moreover, while claiming to have put forward a model pluralist theory, he simultaneously heavily stresses the rational dimension of human nature. Now, this is an overtly definite and clearly biased—individualist and thus undoubtedly Western—vision of man. For all the aforementioned reasons I do not find George Crowder's ambitious intellectual construction convincing. His theory feels as if it were aiming at merging fire with water—the old metaphysical tradition with the modern empiricist perspective, drawing extensively on their respective merits, yet trying to evade the costs involved.

Towards the Conclusion

Let me now return to the issue in question. As both hitherto discussed identifications of the relation between value-pluralism and liberalism have been found questionable it is worth returning to Berlin's thesis of a weak, psychological connection between them. What is significant, two other liberal pluralists, William Galston and Michael Walzer have also arrived, quite independently of Berlin, at a similar conclusion. According to them the two attitudes—pluralist and liberal— go together with the same kind of disposition. This is how both thinkers elaborate on their observation:

> Many people (ordinary citizens as well as academics) are both value pluralist and political liberals and see these positions as mutually supportive. If they are mistaken about this, they must in some measure revise important theoretical and practical commitments [...]. (Galston 1999: 769)

> 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, i.e., a pluralism that encompasses a variety of genuine but incommensurable values. 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 for just that purpose. And receptivity, generosity, and skepticism are, if not liberal values, then qualities of mind that make it possible to accept liberal values (or, better, that make it likely that liberal values will be accepted). (Walzer 1995: 31)

If this is so, it is perhaps worth referring to the history of ideas to find out whether it supports any of the three different conclusions, arrived at by Gray,

Berlin and Crowder. The answer provided by the history of ideas may not be conclusive as the exemplary, actual positions held by particular thinkers may be inconsistent. Yet, if this were so, this very inconsistency should be detectable. Indeed, it should actually be pointed out by the adherent of a standpoint to which there are counter-examples in the history of ideas.

Let us consider Figure 1, representing the views of John Gray, Isaiah Berlin and George Crowder on the issue in question.
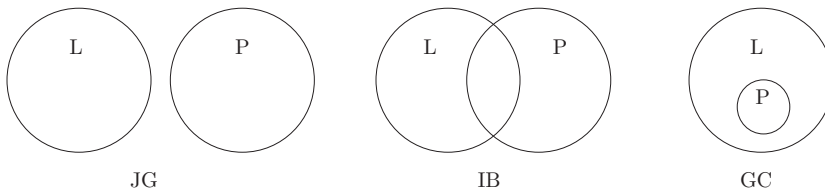

Figure 1.
Source: own work.

John Gray's account of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism can be illustrated by the left-hand side diagram. However, such a representation makes it impossible to mark the position of Joseph Raz, for example, who is both a pluralist and a liberal and whose theoretical construction does not seem to be vulnerable to the objection of inconsistency. George Crowder's standpoint can be illustrated by the right-hand side diagram. According to it pluralism logically implies liberalism of a certain kind, which means that an adherent of ethical pluralism is simultaneously committed to a universalist, perfectionist liberal position. If so, where could we mark the standpoint of an undoubted pluralist Carl Schmitt, who was simultaneously an overt anti-liberal? Isaiah Berlin's vision of a weak, psychological bond between pluralism and liberalism is represented by the middle diagram. It accounts for the positions of both Raz (to be situated in the overlapping part) and Schmitt (to be marked within the pluralist range, yet outside the overlapping part).

Let me now come back to George Crowder's later contribution to the discussion on the pluralism–liberalism nexus. As has been mentioned above, he refers in *The One and the Many* to *Unfinished Dialogue,* casting doubt on Berlin's thesis of a psychological connection between pluralism and liberalism. He expresses his disappointment with Berlin's weak conclusion in the following way: "Even if we accept that most pluralists tend to be liberals and vice versa, what is the force of this observation?" (Crowder 2007b: 212). This utterance brings to mind one of Berlin's favourite citations, that is a thought-provoking remark, coming from C.I. Lewis: "there is no *a priori* reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered, will necessarily prove interesting." It would certainly be stimulating and useful (especially from the point of view of liberals) if the bond between pluralism and liberalism proved to be a logical one. Yet the truth seems to be less interesting.

Summing up, Berlin's cautious recognition of a loose, psychological connection between pluralism and liberalism seems to provide the least questionable answer to this highly controversial problem.

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