Isaiah Berlin
and the
Politics of Pluralism

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But truth is ever incoherent, and when the big hearts strike together the concussion is a little stunning.

Herman Melville, letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne

Two fixed ideas can no more coexist in the moral sphere than can two bodies occupy the same space in the physical world.

Alexander Pushkin, "The Queen of Spades"

If men cannot refer to a common value, recognized by all as existing in each one, then man is incomprehensible to man.

Albert Camus, "The Rebel"

... a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

CONTENTS

Abstract

In this dissertation I examine Isaiah Berlin's view of pluralism. Where some have claimed that Berlin cannot justify his commitment to liberalism given his ideas about moral pluralism – that his views are subjective – I argue that he *can* justify his commitment to liberalism, and avoid the problems of relativism. The departing point of my study is that unlike many, I do not think it is necessary to explicate Berlin's opinions about history, nationalism, or similar ideas – that what he says about pluralism is logically distinct from his other views. My argument has two basic parts. In the first I argue that Berlin's conception of pluralism is best understood as a response to monism, and not necessarily as a position which stands alone. As I argue, Berlin's commitment to liberalism depends less upon direct links between liberalism and pluralism, than a critique of monism which shows how vis-à-vis the corruption of positive liberty, monism leads to authoritarianism. The second part of my argument revolves around the idea that pluralism and relativism are distinct ideas, as seen in their treatment of the idea of incommensurability. Pluralism, I argue, unlike relativism, allows for comparative judgments to be made between values and cultures, because of certain assumptions it holds regarding human nature. Thus the charge that Berlin is a relativist is incorrect, in so far as it fails to consider the theoretical differences between pluralism and relativism.

Resume

Cette etude addresse la point de vue de Isaiah Berlin sur pluralisme. Je prend la position que Berlin peut justifier son engagement au liberalisme, et evite les problemes du relativisme. L'article commence avec la notion qu'il est pas necessaire d'explicate les avis du Berlin au sujet de l'histoire, du nationalisme, ou des idees semblables-l'idee que ce qu'il dit au sujet du pluralism est logiquement distinct de ses autres vues.

Mon argumentation a deux parts de base. Dans le premier part, je propose que la conception de la pluralisme par Berlin est mieux comprise comme une reponse au monisme, et pas necessairement comme une position qui seul se tient. Comme je discute, l'engagement de Berlin au liberalisme depend moins des liens directs entre le liberalisme et le pluralisme, qu'une critique du monisme qui montre comment, vis-a-vis de la corruption de la liberte positive, le monisme dirige a l' authoritarianism. La deuxieme rameau de cette argumentation tourne autour de l'idee que le pluralisme et le relativisme sont des idees distinctes, comme vu dans leur traitement de l'idee de l' "incommensurability". Comme je debats, pluralism a la difference de relativism, tient compte pour qu' entre des jugements comparatifs soient faits les valeurs et les cultures, en raison de certaines pretentions qu'il se tient concernant la nature humaine.

Donc, la charge que Berlin est un relativist n'est pas correcte, pour autant qu'elle ne considere pas les differences theoriques entre le pluralisme et le relativisme.

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my personal greeting is: "Can I ask you for a favor?" It's not. Thanks again ladies – without your help on all the administrative issues, without you watching out for all the things I overlooked, this would never have been completed.

Then there are my friends. John. Spyros and Denise Irene. Larry and Jenny and Kip. Jeff and Chantal. Mike and Pat and Lynda. My friends from the Russian class: Claire and Clara, Chris and Barbara, Natasha and Pavel, Chelsea and Andre. Each of them contributed to this in ways they'll never realize. Without their support and encouragement, I don't think I could have finished it. The one thing that became clear to me as time went along is that completing a dissertation often has less to do with intelligence and aptitude, than it does determination and will. My friends helped me remain stubborn. Thanks guys.

And finally there are the most important people to thank: my parents. Funny thing, this academic life – we're supposed to be detached and impartial, maintain our distance and remain aloof. We're supposed to drape ourselves in robes of disinterest, and set about our task in an objective manner. To that end, we aren't supposed to allow anything subjective to creep into our thoughts and influence our work, nor are we to admit that our reasons for doing this are for anything less than serious scholarship; that we care about anything other than the study itself. We aren't, in other words, to admit that anything other than the research itself inspires and stirs us, refreshes and sustains us. Our work becomes our goal, our writing our end – and that is why we labor.

Of course this isn't true.

This isn't true because it's impossible to maintain a mask of reservation in the pursuit of truth. This isn't true because you don't dedicate years of your life trying to

solve one problem or answer one question without being wholly committed. And this isn't true because it's impossible to act as if we suddenly divest ourselves of the most important attachments that ground our lives in every other way, in this one particular instance.

I love my parents – and this is no trivial thing. I can think of one morning in particular – during a summer visit home – when I'd gotten no rest, had stayed up all night pacing the living room floor. My father came out, roughly around 6 am, and stumbled across me muttering to myself. He asked me what was the matter, and we began talking. I'd had enough. Frustrated beyond belief, I no longer wanted to do this anymore. I began complaining. I didn't need the degree to earn other people's respect. I didn't need the approval of the Academy to validate my intelligence. I didn't need the prestige of being a professor. I didn't need the frustration of wondering what came next. I didn't need the debt. My mother slowly came out, and listened to my protests along with my father. Bleary eyed they sat and said nothing, slowly sipping their coffee. When I'd worn myself out and had nothing left to say, they sat and continued to sip their coffee. Finally my father said, "You're right son; you don't need any of those things. You also don't need the baggage of being a quitter."

This is for them.

Introduction

Let me begin with a personal confession: I chose to study Isaiah Berlin because he is a good writer. Unlike many instances of academic research, Berlin's essays are superbly crafted pieces of scholarship that are truly enjoyable to read. One does not feel, when one reads Berlin, as if one is reading a pedantic essay about a stuffy subject. One feels, instead, the enthusiasm he must have felt about the subjects he enjoyed. Writing is an art, no doubt, and Berlin is unquestionably an artist – a rare combination of intellectual and poet, philosopher and bard, whose work is wonderfully wrought. As his literary executor and closest collaborator – Henry Hardy – has written: "he was constitutionally incapable of writing with the opacity of a specialist."[1]

The pleasure I took in reading Berlin led me to pay close attention to his writing style. As an acquaintance of mine once said: "Berlin has these wonderfully long sentences." Indeed. It is said that Berlin was an excellent conversationalist, someone whose words flowed easily over his lips, as clause after clause came spilling out, often leaving the listener struggling to keep up. So, too, his written work appears effortless – the ease with which his essays may be read gives rise to the appearance of an ease of composition. But this is only an appearance. For Berlin is said to have complained about the difficulties he felt he faced when writing, something which is taken to explain his lack of a 'magnum opus'. If this is the case – if that is, Berlin truly considered writing to be a strenuous chore – then it seems safe to assume that his writings display an intentionality of composition that suggests certain concerns. Certainly in terms of

[1] Henry Hardy, "Editor's Preface," in The Power of Ideas, by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ix-x.

subject one finds recurring ideas or individuals that captivated Berlin. Vico and Machiavelli, Herder and Hamann, Tolstoy and Maistre are common figures in his essays, as are discussions of liberalism and socialism, history and determinism, romanticism and pluralism. It is this last idea that concerns me here; for it is Berlin's thoughts about pluralism that have proven to be incendiary.

Berlin's views regarding pluralism are inflammatory because they are unconventional. He puts his finger upon the one assumption that grounds Western philosophy as an historical movement, and this is that all of our beliefs – all of our values and ideals, hopes and aspirations – are reconcilable. If there is one pillar upon which moral philosophy has rested since the time of ancient Athens, it is simply this: morality is seamless. According to the oldest conceptions of moral philosophy in the West, our moral commitments are all cut from the same cloth, and our moral obligations may all be met. In other words, all of our moral values fit together snuggly, without any problem, without any discrepancy. To put it crudely: there is the assumption that we may have our moral cake and eat it too. It is this most deeply held belief that Berlin disputes.

Berlin does not believe that morality is as simple as many have made it out to be. Against the Greeks, the Scholastics, the British and Scottish Empiricists, the French *philosophes* and the English Utilitarians, as well as the German historicists of the 19th Century and the Logical Positivists of the 20th – against, that is, virtually the whole Western tradition of moral philosophy – Berlin takes his stand. He argues, in a very precise and articulate manner, that our moral beliefs differ and diverge, often to such an extent that they are anything but reconcilable. He argues that morality is not of a whole,

and that our values depart from one another more often than imagined. He argues, that is, on behalf of pluralism.

Through a host of essays and papers, monographs and studies, Berlin brings to life not just forgotten figures, but *ideas*. His is not merely the restoration of slighted scholars or the celebration of second-rank sages. It is, instead, the magnification of a particular mode of thought that challenges and contests the whole Western philosophical tradition. It is an endeavor that has earned high praise and commendation from many, and complaint and condemnation from others.[2] Deeply held beliefs are not taken lightly; and strong challenges to those beliefs do not go unmet.

Of the responses to Berlin's work, the most serious rejoinder is that he is a relativist. That is, it is said that Berlin cannot justify his moral beliefs. Of those who disapprove of Berlin's thoughts on moral pluralism the claim is advanced that he is little more than a relativist; that, in effect, moral pluralism is nothing more than a diluted type of moral relativism, a form of subjectivism which is unaware of its untoward consequences. Such seems to be Michael Sandel's suggestion when he criticizes Berlin's commitment to liberalism, implying that one cannot advance the idea of pluralism and sustain a justified defense of any particular position. As he puts it:

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[2] For example, Claude Galipeau highlights the fact that Berlin has made worthwhile "contributions to philosophy", particularly "to moral and political philosophy" – an appraisal that is shared by William Galston, John Gray, Roger Hausheer, Sidney Morgenbesser and Jonathan Lieberson, and Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram. See, for example, Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram, "Introduction," in Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity, ed. Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2-3; Claude J. Galipeau, Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 3;William Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory," American Political Science Review 93 (December 1999), 769; John Gray, Isaiah Berlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1; Roger Hausheer, "Introduction," in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), xvi; and Sidney Morgenbesser and Jonathan Lieberson, "Isaiah Berlin," in Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration, ed. Edna and Avishi Margalit (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), 7.

> If one's convictions are only relatively valid, why stand for them unflinchingly? In a tragically-configured moral universe, such as Berlin assumes, is the ideal of freedom any less subject than competing values to the ultimate incommensurability of values? If so, in what can its privileged status consist? And if freedom has no privileged status, if it's just one value among many, then what can be said for liberalism?[3]

It is an accusation seemingly shared by Leo Strauss, Robert Kocis, and Leon Wieseltier, each of who indicate that Berlin's liberalism comes dangerously close to floundering on the shoals of relativism.[4] It is assumed, apparently, that if morality is not of a complete piece, then it is nothing. Our moral beliefs stand united, it seems, or they do not stand at all. Berlin, of course, does not believe this, and marshals his considerable talents to make his case.

Now this is where a potential difficulty arises. Because of the diversity of Berlin's writings – and because of the assumption that our beliefs must be somehow seamlessly related – Berlin's defenders have tried to piece together his position. That is, they have surveyed the vast terrain of essays and exposes, articles and papers that Berlin produced, and tried to coordinate them one to another, and fit them together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Surely, it is argued, that in this huge assortment of writings – of historical studies, literary reviews, personal impressions, philosophical treatises, musical expositions, and political ruminations – there is one theme, one thread, which ties

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[3] Michael Sandel, "Introduction," in Liberalism and Its Critics, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 8.

[4] See: Robert Kocis, "Reason, Development, and the Conflicts of Human Ends: Sir Isaiah Berlin's Vision of Politics," American Political Science Review 74 (March 1980), 51; Leo Strauss, "Relativism," chap. in The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13-18; and Leon Wieseltier, "Two Concepts of Secularism," in Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration, ed. Edna and Avishai Margalit (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), 83. Both Gregor McLennan and John Kekes note the alleged tie between relativism and pluralism more generally. See: John Kekes, The Morality of Pluralism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8; and Gregor McLennan, Pluralism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 76.

everything together. Surely, it is held, that in this great diversity of literature, there is a common strand that draws it tight. Surely this multitude of ideas is somehow all related. Surely there is a plan.

Perhaps the best example of this "holistic" treatment of Berlin's thought is found in the studies of Claude Galipeau and John Gray, both of whom regard Berlin's statements about history as the key to his writings, the means to making sense of the medley of themes, ideas and topics found within his work. According to Galipeau and Gray – each of who have provided the only full length published studies on Berlin to date – Berlin is the heir to two traditions, the Romantic and the Rational. A child of the Enlightenment as well as Romanticism, Berlin incorporates the concerns and assumptions of each movement, and attempts to adopt what is best in both. As Gray puts it: "The intellectual project which Berlin's agonistic liberalism embodies is that of fusing rationalism with Romanticism, and thereby reconciling the Enlightenment with its critics in the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment."[5] Berlin's affirmation of pluralism is thus to be understood as a product of his interest in writers and thinkers such as Herder and Hamann, while his commitment to liberalism is the result of his concern with the work of Kant, Constant and Montesquieu. The former, it is said, allows Berlin to acknowledge the diversity that characterizes this world, while the latter allows him to deal with it, or address it. And the role of history, it is claimed, is to reconcile the two, to pull together these two quite different, quite unrelated and distinct, ideas. For history is alleged to indicate the conditions that lead individuals to opt for a liberal ideology, to choose, that is, liberalism over socialism or fascism. "It is experience," Galipeau says,

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[5] John Gray, Isaiah Berlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 156.

"that matters to him, not theories."[6] Similarly, Gray claims that "[i]t is the historicist element in Berlin's thought which gives the clue ... to the reconciliation of rationalism with Romantic voluntarism it seeks to achieve, and to the status of liberalism within it."[7] So according to Galipeau and Gray, while his critics are correct to point out that Berlin does not claim there are universal values, he nevertheless allows individuals the ability to affirm one set of values over another, given considerations of historical context. In this manner history is said to join – indeed, synthesize – the disparate elements of Berlin's writings. For grasping the context allows one to discern the reasons why a society is liberal, and not something else. And in this Berlin is said to distinguish himself from other contemporary liberals – such as John Rawls and Joseph Raz – for he gives history its due where they allegedly do not.[8]

Now there is a fairly obvious problem with the holistic approach. Berlin the pluralist – whose writings, both in content and in style, reflect the diversity of his interests – is treated as a monist. Rather than take to heart Berlin's resistance to architectonic visions of reality, scholars such as Galipeau and Gray have decided to treat him as what he is not: a system-builder. Rather than pay attention to the diversity of his literary output, which ranges from the essay to the elegy, the lecture to the book review, and is as diverse and sophisticated as the many topics upon which he touches, Berlin's apologists have tried to force him into a mould. They have, in effect, attempted to make

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[6] Galipeau, 176.
[7] Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 157.
[8] Gray compares Berlin's work with that of Joseph Raz on pp. 28-37 of his study, and with that of Richard Rorty on pp. 161-163. His point is that Berlin's historicist bent gives Berlin an advantage, to the extent that it avoids the problems that arise around teleological conceptions of humanity. Galipeau compares Berlin with other conceptions of liberalism – such as the natural law and utilitarian traditions – in several places, most notably chapters 5 of his book. As Gray, Galipeau seeks to show that Berlin's vision of history grants his liberalism a "realistic" slant that other forms of liberalism allegedly lack.

his thought comprehensible, by making it manageable; and they have attempted to make it manageable, by integrating it. Berlin's views of history are made to coincide with his views on Romanticism, which are made to coincide with views on liberalism, which are made to coincide with his views on nationalism, which are made to coincide with his views on Zionism – and so on and so forth. So when one of the criticisms which then gets leveled at him – that Berlin affirms incompatible positions – it is assumed that he has been undone. For it is a commonplace that one cannot mutually support positions that pull in different directions, positions that are antagonistic, if not outright contradictory. That Galipeau and Gray themselves eventually invoke this criticism makes the allegation all the worse, as even Berlin's defenders, it seems, cannot help but censure him. As Galipeau characterizes it: "[A]n appeal to historical and cultural facts is inescapable. [But] [t]his does not aid us in deciding between liberties and other values."[9] Similarly, Gray says "there is an unresolved tension in ... Berlin's work, generated by the strongly historicist conception of human nature ..."[10] This tension leads Berlin to "underdetermine any particular form of life, including that of liberal cultures" such that in the end he "cannot give a foundation to liberal practice."[11] Berlin thus seems to be in quite the bind: accused of relativism, with a defense that is said to fail since its various strands are cut from completely different cloth. That is, without foundations, he is said to contradict himself. A subjectivist whose thought runs against

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[9] Galipeau, 178.
[10] Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 163.
[11] Ibid., 164. Compare: "Yet the contested relations between pluralism and liberalism which are the crux of Berlin's work suggest that the synthesis attempted by Berlin is not wholly successful and that his thought remains haunted by an uncertainty." (156)

itself – this is, and remains, the nature of the charges against Berlin.[12]

And yet upon further reflection there remains a way out of this dilemma, one that is actually rather simple. When I first noticed the logic of this interpretation – that it transforms Berlin the pluralist into Berlin the monist – it struck me as fallacious. For this approach considers Berlin as what he is not, and then condemns him for failing to be consistent at it. Berlin is *not* a system builder. Indeed, there is probably no other thinker of the 20th century as adverse to architectonic philosophical visions as he. So to treat him as one, both in the elucidation of his thought, as well as its appraisal, is simply an error. For it imposes a meaning upon his work that is questionable, a meaning which is, to say the least, imputed, at most, artificial. That Gray himself admits that his interpretation presents a "view" which "is not Berlin's," while Galipeau offers his interpretation despite Berlin's "reticence" and a general "desire to go no further" only gives one further reason to pause.[13] For while the interest in exploring and elucidating Berlin's thought is well warranted, one cannot but ask why scholars would treat Berlin's writings in a manner so strongly at odds with what he wished. So, in the face of such admissions – admissions where Berlin is defended, then disavowed – I could not help but wonder whether the holistic approach offers the best interpretation. With this in mind, I decided to search for another.

The central assumption of this study is that it is unnecessary to relate all the various facets of Berlin's thought together to understand what he says about pluralism. Berlin himself was resistant to any such engagement, and wisely so I think. For Berlin's

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[12] Galipeau expresses this well. He says: "... the charge of relativism, if correct, would render [Berlin's] defence of political liberalism empty; it would amount to little more than a personal attachment, rather than something in keeping with basic human needs." (Galipeau, 44.)
[13] Galipeau, 11 and Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 161.

scholarly interests were broad and wide-ranging, eclectic and manifold, touching upon subjects as diverse as literature and music, philosophy and politics, history and personal impressions. Once one realizes that the various strands of his writings are *not* woven together one also realizes that what he says about pluralism stands on its own. Berlin had eclectic interests, and, as he himself was quick to point out, while these interests may overlap in certain ways, they certainly are not logically linked. So the purpose of this study is to focus upon the logical links that *are* within his writings, as opposed to forging ones that are not. To this end the scope of the study is narrow compared to that of other studies of Berlin, studies that purportedly have the same object, which is to examine what he says and defend him from his critics. I do not think, however, that the relatively narrow parameters of this work undermine its endeavor; rather, I think they capture the spirit and imitate the example of Berlin himself. This is not to engage in gratuitous self-congratulations; it is merely to suggest that I believe the depth of this study is in no way negated by its lack of breadth. The approach I have deployed is sound – whether I have employed it successfully or not is another matter.

To that end, there are three specific issues that I have highlighted here. Each revolves around the attempt to show that Berlin is not a relativist by trying to clarify how he justifies his commitment to liberalism. The assumption is that his defense of liberalism, given his pluralist beliefs, is rational and reasoned – is anything, that is, but subjective. Regarding the first, I have attempted to indicate how pluralism is compatible with liberalism. That is, I have attempted to address the insinuation that there is a tension between pluralism and liberalism, such that Berlin's liberal commitment is inconsistent with his appreciation of pluralism. The thrust of my argument is that

Berlin's commitment to liberalism is a 'negative' one, or, in other words, a commitment which does not seek to bridge the logical divide between pluralism and liberalism, so much as show that alternatives to pluralism and liberalism lead to despotism. That is, Berlin's argument relies upon a comparison of pluralism and monism, and attempts to show that monism entails authoritarianism. Less an attempt to argue that pluralism logically leads to liberalism, or to prove that there are irrefutable ties between the two, Berlin's effort aims at indicating how conceptions of morality and politics other than those of pluralism and liberalism having leanings towards tyranny. Liberalism, then, for Berlin, carries the day in the face of other options, options that tend to oppression.

That I have chosen to highlight the ties between pluralism and monism deserves some explanation, as do my assumptions concerning the significance of Berlin's writing style. For it is not only that Berlin's defense of liberalism is a negative one that led me to consider pluralism and monism together, but also the result of noticing a particular literary tactic he uses. This tactic is to 'preface' his discussion with brief introductory remarks that provide the context for his exposition. Clearly this is not an uncommon way to write about scholarly subjects, but there is a certain way – a repeated way – in which Berlin frames his discussion, or in other words, provides his introductory remarks. Simply enough, during the course of his prefatory discussions Berlin sketches out the fundamental tenets and propositions of a particular position. He then takes this position – which is usually referred to as 'Rationalism', 'Utopianism', 'Idealism', or 'Monism' – and contrasts it with the thinker or ideas he wishes to elaborate so as to draw out, elucidate and clarify the points he wishes to make. The effect is that Berlin not only provides a presentation of a given thinkers, such as Hamann, or of a movement, such as

Romanticism – he offers an account of its 'antipode' as well. That is, Berlin does not only discuss the 'Counter-Enlightenment', he also discusses the Enlightenment; he not only portrays Romanticism, he also depicts Classicism; he not only studies Vico, he also speaks about Voltaire, Diderot and Descartes; and, finally, he not only investigates pluralism, he explores monism as well. This – the way in which Berlin writes about two ideas or positions as if they are flip sides of the same coin – is why I believe it is useful to regard both pluralism and monism together. A few examples of the literary strategy I have mentioned should suffice to show why this is so.

In the recently released *Roots of Romanticism* (an edited transcription of a series of radio lectures by Berlin on the romantic movement) Berlin begins with a summary account of the different definitions of romanticism. Once he shows the wide disagreement that exists concerning this term, Berlin decides to clarify what romanticism means, not by defining, but by analyzing the various factors that challenged and eventually overthrew the predominant mode of thought that preceded romanticism. That is, Berlin does not delineate what romanticism specifically is; instead he determines the contours and shape of romanticism by showing what it was a reaction to. In fact, the segue from his opening chapter (which contains the review of the various definitions of romanticism) to the next makes this point quite explicitly. As he puts it there:

> ... I shall do my best to explain what in my view the romantic movement fundamentally came to. The only sane and sensible way of approaching it ... is by slow and patient historical method; by looking at the beginning of the eighteenth century and considering what the situation was then, and then considering what the factors were which undermined it, one by one, and what the particular combination or confluence of factors was which, by the later part of the century, caused what appears to me to be the greatest transformation of Western consciousness,

certainly in our time.[14]

Berlin then proceeds in the next section of the text, entitled 'The First Attack on the Enlightenment', to list what the "situation" of the eighteenth century was. Having done this, he then turns his attention to various thinkers and scholars whose writings provided the theoretical framework for those writers and artists whose work is typically taken to be 'romantic'. Here, then, is one instance of Berlin examining an idea by contrasting it with another, dissimilar, idea.

Another instance of such a maneuver by Berlin is found in his *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism.* This study, which takes Johann Georg Hamann (a Protestant theologian from Konigsberg who has, until recently, been a rather neglected historical figure) as its subject, finds Berlin once again prefacing his study with a discussion of ideas and principles that are the opposite of those he is interested in. Considering Hamann to be one of the precursors of the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress') movement that dominated much of German literature during the nineteenth century, Berlin begins his explication of Hamann's thought with an investigation of the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment. As in *The Roots of Romanticism,* Berlin considers it important to determine what Hamann was reacting to, to gain a full appreciation of the ideas of the 'magus':

> Hamann's life, his style, his faith and his thought were one. His positive doctrines always developed as part of a furious onslaught on some falsehood to be rooted out: no man believed in or practiced intellectual toleration less. So, for example, his doctrine of knowledge is rooted in denunciation of Descartes' mathematical approach to natural science, and of the coherent structure of theoretical

[14] Isaiah Berlin, The Roots of Romanticism, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20.

> knowledge of man and nature embodied in the Encylopedie, a work conceived and hatched in the hateful city of Paris ...[15]

Once he considers what "falsehoods" were to be opposed, Berlin then delves into Hamann's beliefs and prescriptions, spending a whole chapter excavating the assumptions of the French Enlightenment. Again, Berlin frames his discussion with a consideration of a position or mode of thought which is the antipode of that which is the subject of his study.

One final example of this literary strategy should be sufficient to show that there are plausible reasons for holding that monism and pluralism should be considered simultaneously. This example may be found in the rather autobiographical essay, "The Pursuit of the Ideal." Here, in this essay, Berlin lays out the path of his own intellectual development as regards his interest in the history of thought. He begins with an account of certain assumptions that he claims serve as the foundation of Western thought and culture – the so-called 'Platonic ideal'. Berlin's argument is that a variety of religious and philosophical approaches share this ideal, even if, on the surface, some of them appear to be at odds. He maintains that when one scratches beneath the skin of these different modes of thought – when, that is, one considers a little more carefully the works of Plato, the Stoics, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – one realizes that they are all related by a set of core propositions. It is these core propositions that Berlin analyzes and then critiques, laying out his own views about the significance of Machiavelli, Vico and Herder as he does so. According to Berlin, each of these individuals were pluralists from whom he learned that values may "easily clash" and that "[t]hese collisions of

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[15] Isaiah Berlin, The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 25.

values are the essence of what they are and what we are."[16] Their work thus provided Berlin with the critical tools he needed to articulate his own ideas about moral pluralism, which he then proceeds to explore. While Berlin's discussion of pluralism is important, I will leave it for later. For now it is enough to note that pluralism is not a position that was immediately gained by Berlin: he arrived at it only after much study and contemplation. Similarly, pluralism is not an idea he quickly gives to the reader. As Berlin was only introduced to the idea of pluralism after much thought, so he introduces the reader to his conclusions: we, as he, are to experience the significance of pluralism by way of comparison with its opposite. As before, Berlin sets out the subject of his study, in a dualistic fashion. As before, the reader encounters not one position, but two. Hence the basis of my assumption that Berlin's defense of liberalism requires a consideration of both pluralism *and* monism.

That pluralism and monism are logically correlative concepts mean that it is important to clarify how they are related; how, that is, they share similar concerns. To this end I shall begin by laying out the 'field of relations' that unites them. By this I mean those problems and questions with which both positions are taken. For these problems and questions may be said to serve as a common axis around which monism and pluralism revolve, to be distinguished by the way in which each position respond to, utilizes, or incorporates these primary issues. As one would guess, monism and pluralism do not address these core problems in the same way. Instead, these principles entice or prompt different responses. As I shall argue, it is the differences regarding their respective responses that clarify and determine what monism and pluralism actually

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[16] Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 12-13.

are, at least for Berlin. Clearly Berlin maintains that there are differences between monism and pluralism, differences that would seem to be fairly straightforward and obvious. At one level, these differences *are* obvious: monism maintains that behind the veil of appearances reality is composed of one 'true' substance, while pluralism holds that the hallmark of reality is instead multiplicity and variety.[17] At another level, however, the differences between monism and pluralism are more complex and quite subtle. If, however, there are certain issues or problems that unite monism and pluralism in an oppositional relationship, then more needs to be said about what these issues are. Berlin draws a strong distinction between monism and pluralism; hence the necessity of seeing what this distinction is. I believe that the best way to accomplish this is by investigating how these two positions inhabit the field of relations, or 'stake out their territory'. So the first thing I wish to accomplish is an exercise in clarification: what is the field of relations which monism and pluralism share? In other words, what problems do monism and pluralism seek to redress?

Along these lines it is necessary to discuss why Berlin favors pluralism over monism. While Berlin is correctly known both as a pluralist and a liberal, I wish to show that the reasons why he is a pluralist are different than commonly thought. Many scholars consider Berlin's affirmation of pluralism to be a practical response to the vicissitudes of empirical reality – that is, the best response to the suffering and tragedy of existence – or an ontological statement about the way things are – that is, a claim that the

[17] As Gregor McLennan notes: "In its most basic meaning, pluralism signals a theorized preference for multiplicity over unicity, and for diversity over uniformity." McLennan also notes the more general dialectical relationship between monism and pluralism which I contend holds for Berlin specifically. As McLennan puts it: "The conceptual logic of pluralism ... pits it against 'monism', whatever field of human investigation we wish to consider." (McLennan, 25.)

substance of reality is in fact fragmented and diverse.[18] While these interpretations are not incorrect, neither are they completely accurate. As I shall try to show, Berlin's affirmation of pluralism is not one that is merely the result of pragmatic calculation or metaphysical speculation; it is also the logical result of a particular argument he makes. Let me explain.

Given Berlin's concern both for liberty and the conditions of a free society, as well as the pluralistic condition within which humanity finds itself, he is taken with the task of justifying his commitment to liberalism. As Sandel and Berlin's other critics make clear, Berlin needs to show why liberty – especially negative liberty, which is the hallmark of liberalism – is exempt, so to speak, from the collision of values which defines moral pluralism. As I shall argue, Berlin's response is not to show that liberalism is directly yoked to pluralism, as some have supposed, so that it is a brief step from one to the other, nor does he assume that liberty is exempt from the collision of values that characterizes moral pluralism.[19] Rather, Berlin attempts to show that the alternatives to pluralism and liberalism lead to despotism. As I shall argue, Berlin does

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[18] Regarding the tragic aspect of Berlin's thought, Charles Larmore states that because Berlin's pluralism raises questions about the "homogeneity" of moral values he recognizes that "loss ... and so regret ... can accompany our moral choices." Similarly, Gray says, "By contrast with the dominant liberalisms of our time ... Berlin's is a stoical and tragic liberalism of unavoidable conflict and irreparable loss among inherently rivalrous values." See: Charles Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 38-39; and Gray, 113. Regarding the ontological basis of Berlin's beliefs, Galipeau states that Berlin claims that "[p]luralism is a fact of our moral condition," and that his intention is "to point out how freedom from interference, negative liberty, respects a fundamental characteristic of the human condition, which is the pluralism of moral values." Similarly, Gray characterizes Berlin as a "moral realist" or "objective pluralist," by which he means that Berlin's claims about pluralism are empirical or verifiable statements about the nature of existence. See: Galipeau, 111; and Gray, 46-49.

[19] Regarding the move from pluralism to liberalism see Galston, whose argument seems to turn upon such a link, especially when he claims to provide an "elaborated version" of Berlin's argument which supplies the allegedly missing links between the unavoidability of choice-making which characterizes pluralism and the valuing of choice which is the hallmark of liberalism. Regarding the idea that liberty is insulated from the collision of values which typifies moral pluralism see Galipeau, who claims that Berlin *does* prioritize liberty, despite Berlin's insistence otherwise. See: Galipeau, 111; and Galston, 774.

not argue on behalf of liberalism directly, so much as show that other responses to pluralism are more likely to lead to oppression. Much as he criticizes the idea of determinism without attempting to refute it, so Berlin indicates that responses to pluralism other than the one liberalism provides should give us pause.[20] In other words, insofar as he points out the problems of monism, Berlin provides a 'negative' defense of both pluralism and liberalism. Hence his discussion of the links between monism and the idea of positive liberty, an idea Berlin believes lends itself readily to tyranny. As I shall endeavor to show, Berlin's affirmation of pluralism is primarily the result of his critical appraisal of monism, an appraisal that indicts monism for the charge of authoritarianism.

The second thing I wish to do is clarify the theoretical distinctions between pluralism and relativism. Given the charge that pluralism is nothing more than shallow subjectivism or a form of moral perspectivism, it is necessary to distinguish these ideas further. Many of the key concepts that arise during discussions about pluralism are those of incommensurability, incomparability, and radical choice – ideas that are used to characterize both pluralism and its consequences. While I will postpone a discussion of these concepts for now, suffice it to say that some pluralists, such as Joseph Raz, consider the idea of radical choice to be an intrinsic part of the idea of pluralism, the necessary outcome of a condition of incommensurability and incomparability.[21] Values

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[20] As Berlin said about his critique of determinism: "My thesis is not ... that determinism is false; only that the arguments in favour of it are not conclusive ..." (Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," in Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), x.)

[21] See: Joseph Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency," in Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 110-128. A different account, however, of decision-making and pluralism is provided by Thomas Nagel in his essay, "The Fragmentation of Value." See: Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," chap. in Mortal Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 134-135.

are of equal standing – so the argument goes – hence if they clash one must choose between them 'blindly', or without the benefit of a common measure. Obviously such a portrait of pluralism seems similar to that painted by Sandel, in that decisions ultimately end up being unjustified. Pluralism, then, seems closely related to relativism. That some, such as Gray, attribute such a conception of pluralism to Berlin makes matters worse, for it then appears that Berlin is indeed guilty of Sandel's complaint.[22] As I hope to show, this is not the case, as Berlin's understanding of pluralism differs from that of others. He does not, in my opinion, make certain claims that other pluralists frequently make. Instead, Berlin's depiction of pluralism is more modest; that is, Berlin does not think that pluralism carries with it all the connotations which some – such as Gray and Raz – suggest. As I shall try to show, Berlin's view of pluralism relies more upon the idea of comparability, than that of choice-making. In any event, the second thing I wish to accomplish is to show how Berlin avoids the charge of relativism by clarifying how he distinguishes pluralism from relativism. Elucidating the differences between these two concepts should show that Berlin's commitment to liberalism is, in the end, justifiable.

The third and final thing I wish to do is briefly touch upon the so-called 'tragic' dimension of Berlin's beliefs. As more than a few commentators have noted: Berlin's thoughts about pluralism entail a less than optimistic picture of the world. Indeed, Berlin

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[22] Gray introduces the idea of radical choice for Berlin by saying, "Such choice is, for Berlin, choice among goods that are not only distinct and rivalrous but sometimes incommensurable: it is radical choice, ungoverned by reason." Later Gray develops this idea further when he states: "In political life, as in moral life, we are in the business of making trade-offs between conflicting goods and evils, where the weights of these values are given to use by no supreme principle. They are goods without a common currency for their measurement, between which we must nevertheless choose. Such groundless and criterionless choice is the stuff of moral and political life, in so far as it is pervaded by incommensurabilities. Its third implication is that, in such radical dilemmas of choice, reason leaves us in the lurch ... In this respect the very expression 'radical choice' may be oxymoronic, for in the undecidable dilemmas marked by Berlinian pluralism, our option can only be to act, not to engage in further reflective deliberation ...There is in Berlin's idea of radical choice ... a decisionist, voluntarist, or existentialist element that distinguishes it from all, or virtually all, forms of liberal rationalism." (Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 23, 71.)

himself points out that pluralism assumes a less than sanguine view of human relations, and he states that one particular result of pluralism is the complete repudiation of the idea of the perfect life.[23] Such an observation has led at least two commentators – John Gray and Jonathan Riley – to conclude that Berlin's is an "agnostic liberalism," a liberalism "of conflict and unavoidable loss among rivalrous goods and evils ..."[24] I believe this characterization of Berlin's position is fairly accurate, as it indicates something rather distinctive about his interpretation of pluralism. And this is that Berlin's vision of pluralism is not an 'affirmative' one, or one wherein diversity is both acknowledged and 'celebrated'. Where many, today, regard pluralism as something quite benign, Berlin holds otherwise. Where others apparently assume that diversity can only lend itself to 'celebration', Berlin argues that those of deeply divided beliefs will often find themselves seriously opposed to one another. The difference, it seems to me, between Berlin's position and the more optimistic interpretation of pluralism revolves around an understanding of the nature of value conflict. Berlin has no patience for those who would deny what our experience of morality makes so readily clear – that discord and disharmony are hallmarks of human existence – and he refuses to take the edge off the idea of value conflict. And it is here, I think, that one of the most distinctive traits of Berlin's position lies. For he does not believe that the proper political response to pluralism is 'affirmation', or the promotion of all so-called visions of the good life.

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[23] "Liberty and equality, spontaneity and security, happiness and knowledge, mercy and justice – all these are ultimate human values, sought for themselves alone; yet when they are incompatible, they cannot all be attained choices must be made, sometimes tragic losses accepted in the pursuit of some preferred ultimate end. But if ... this is not merely empirically but conceptually true ... then the very idea of the perfect world ... is in fact conceptually incoherent. And if this is so ... then the very notion of the ideal world, for which no sacrifice can be too great, vanishes from view." ("My Intellectual Path," 23)

[24] Gray, 7. Riley makes use of this term throughout his discussion in "Interpreting Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism." See: Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," American Political Science Review 95 (June 2001), 283f.

Instead he argues for toleration. And it is what Berlin specifically says about the conditions of toleration that I wish to treat last, as I believe it will illuminate why his views are rightly regarded as 'tragic'.

Let me say one final word before I begin. As should be clear from what I've said so far, I intend to focus upon a very narrow aspect of Berlin's thought: his view about the relationship between monism and pluralism. Moreover, I intend to treat his view in a very particular way, that is, I intend to focus *solely* upon his ideas about pluralism. I do not intend – and do not think it necessary – to highlight Berlin's discussions about other issues, such as his views about history and the role of the historian; his ideas about the subject of philosophy; his opinions about nationalism and a 'sense of belonging'; or his views on Russian literature. These ideas, while important, are not *necessarily* related to the question at hand. As I have indicated, there are those who find it useful to discuss multiple aspects of Berlin's writings when discussing one particular idea; that is their discussions treat of several dimensions of his thought simultaneously, as if the various facets of his thought reinforced or supported or complimented one another. The idea seems to be that although Berlin himself disavows any schematic or architectonic ties between his various interests, these ties nonetheless exist. More importantly, perhaps, these ties need to be highlighted and moved to the foreground, so as to provide a fuller picture or more complete portrait of Berlin's work. Such is the case, as I have pointed out, with Galipeau and Gray, both of who find it useful to illuminate Berlin's views on pluralism by casting light upon his views of history as well. And, as I have also said, I find this attempt to tie together all the strands of Berlin's thought a bit unnecessary, for one significant reason: it flies in the face of Berlin's own attitude towards his own work.

Again, Berlin resisted any attempt to 'systematize' his ideas.[25] Having a predisposition against 'holistic' thinking, Berlin engaged in a variety of short studies on topics that interested him – and left it at that. As Galipeau himself notes: for whatever reasons, Berlin did not wish to go further.[26] Now, while there is undoubtedly overlap and similarities of theme in much of what he wrote, it seems to me forced and artificial to discern in Berlin's work a 'philosophy' or 'continuity of thought' that may not actually be there. It is enough, I think, to treat his ideas as he treated them himself: discretely and distinctly. So, following Berlin's lead, I shall focus primarily upon the question of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism.[27] That said, allow me now to begin.

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[25] Compare with Patrick Gardiner, "Introduction," in The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto &Windus, 1996), xiii-xiv; and Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin," 693f.

[26] Galipeau, 11.

[27] Ronald Dworkin has recently stated something that exhibits a similar sentiment. He says: "I want to comment, finally, on the role... [others] have assigned to history. We must take care to distinguish three issues. What have people argued about in the past? How can people be brought to argue and divide less now? When they do argue and divide, is one side right and, if so, which side? Berlin speaks to all three of these questions, but one of his greatest contributions was to distinguish them, and his remarks about value pluralism were addressed to the third. In what way does history help us to get clearer about that question? ..." Dworkin then adds: "So we need something more than history here. We need to confront the essentially moral question of how to construe the ideal of liberty ..." The point Dworkin is after, it seems to me, is that one does not need to relate all the various facets of Berlin's thought together to understand what he says about pluralism. Obviously I agree. See the "Discussion" found in the second section of The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin, ed. Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert Silvers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 123, 124.

Chapter 1

Pluralism and Monism

i

A glance at the genealogy of the term 'pluralism' reveals that it has not always been cast in opposition to monism. According to Rupert Breitling the first use of the term (or its equivalent) was in 1720, by the German philosopher Christian Wolff. Then, during the course of categorizing different philosophical approaches, Wolff uses the term '*pluralisten*' in juxtaposition to 'egoism', his intention being to frame various theories of idealism. It is a use of the term which is later picked up by Immanuel Kant, who uses the term in a similar manner, that is, as the antipode of egoism. It was not until 1909 that the term 'pluralism' was pitted against monism, when William James' *A Pluralistic Universe* appeared.[28] Since then the two concepts have been fairly inseparable, with our understanding of one necessitating or entailing an investigation of the other.

The early use of both the terms '*pluralisten*' and pluralism was specific and precise. Both Kant and James treat pluralism as an ontological statement about the nature of existence: diversity defines nature, not unity.[29] Since then, however, the use of the term 'pluralism' has virtually exploded. As Amelie Rorty says:

> [Pluralism] can refer to significant, persistent systematic differences in a relatively well-defined field ... it can refer to a persistent division of interests; it can refer to the varieties of groups that compose the populations of a

[28] Rupert Breitling, "The Concept of Pluralism," in Three Faces of Pluralism: Political, Ethnic and Religious, ed. Stanislaw Ehrlich and Graham Wootton (London: Gower Publishing Company Limited), 1-2.

[29] Wolff's use of the concept was apparently less philosophical. According to Breitling he uses the term '*pluralisten*' in an assault upon his academic peers, with whose work he was apparently less than taken. (Breitling, 1.)

systems of explanation.[30]

She notes no less than seven types of pluralism, with further subdivisions occurring within the various categories. Similarly, Breitling distinguishes four types of pluralism, as does William E. Connolly, while McLennan discerns – a bit more modestly perhaps – only three.[31] Pluralism, it seems, is no longer a simple idea whose scope is rather narrow.

For present purposes I would like to restrict my discussion of pluralism to one particular version, this being 'moral' pluralism. As I understand it, moral pluralism is a theory about the ends of life, or what is generally regarded as the 'good life'. Moral pluralism holds – contra monism – that the ends of Man are many, and that a variety of good lives are available to the individual. Moreover, moral pluralism maintains that there are a variety of values *within* a given conception of morality, values which often clash and conflict even as the various visions of the good life clash and conflict.[32] Monism, on the other hand, assumes that while there may, in fact, be multiple ends for men to pursue, one of these ends is better than the others. Consequently, there is only one truly good life. Monism also maintains that this vision of the good life provides an

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[30] Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "Varieties of Pluralism in a Polyphonic Society," Review of Metaphysics 44 (September 1990), 4.

[31] Breitling distinguishes 'methodological' pluralism from 'religious', 'political' and 'philosophical'; while McLennan distinguishes 'methodological', 'political' and 'sociocultural' pluralism. Connolly doesn't provide the strict categorization that Beitling and McLennan do; still he says: "Pluralism is variously defined as an ideal of the good life; as a characterization of politics in western, capitalist democracies; as a theory of ethics relevant to the politics of liberal societies; and as a doctrine of cultural diversity that endorses neither a relativist nor a monist assessment of alternative cultures." See: Breitling, 16; William E. Connolly, "Pluralism," in The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought, ed. David Miller, 376; and McLennan, 6-7.

[32] Compare: "Pluralism is a theory about the nature of values whose realization would make lives good. The primary concern of pluralism is with the relation in which these values stand to each other; the identity of the values is of interest to pluralists, *qua* pluralists, only in so far as it is relevant to understanding their relations." (Kekes, 9); and "Moral pluralism is the view that there are various forms and styles of life which exemplify different virtues and which are incompatible." (Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 395.)

ordering of the various values which confront humanity, thereby providing structure and order to what otherwise appears unstructured and disorderly. 'One' versus 'the Many' – so the fundamental difference between monism and pluralism may be characterized.

Obviously this way of defining the differences between monism and pluralism is unsatisfactory. For surely the differences between them are not as loose and sketchy – as 'thin' – as these definitions suggest. Indeed, it is not. For as others have noted, what distinguishes monism and pluralism is their respective responses to particular issues. According to some scholars the main issues with which monism and pluralism are taken are the issues of incommensurability and incompatibility. As Kekes puts it: "Pluralists think that incompatible and incommensurable values are responsible for many conflicts, while monists deny it."[33] It is a characterization of pluralism which is shared by others – such as Chang and Raz – each of whom foreground and fasten upon the problems posed by incommensurability and incompatibility.[34]

But while considerations of commensurability and compatibility are indispensable for understanding monism and pluralism, to confine one's discussion to these ideas alone strikes me as a bit abbreviated – especially where Berlin is concerned. For, in my opinion, there are other issues which further characterize monism and pluralism, or clarify their core assumptions. These issues, which I have termed the 'field of relations', form a set of problems or questions which both monism and pluralism attempt to answer. More, these problems provide the boundaries which unite monism and pluralism in a dialectical fashion, so that an understanding of one entails an

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[33] Kekes, 74.

[34] See: Ruth Chang, "Introduction," in Incommensurablity, Incomparability, and Practical Reason, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1-34; and Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom, 321f.

investigation of the other. That Berlin thought similarly, I think, is ascertained from his presentation of both ideas. As I've noted in the introduction: where one encounters monism, pluralism is not far behind – and vice versa. As I shall try to indicate now, Berlin's understanding of monism and pluralism is quite rich, a fact one realizes when it is seen that, for Berlin, monism and pluralism address more than questions concerning commensurability and compatibility. What, then, are the problems which form the field of relations?

There are four basic problems which the field of relations contains. First, there is the 'problem of parsimony', which addresses issues concerning the 'tractability' and 'exclusivity' of questions. Then there is the 'problem of method', which engages certain methodological issues of a general nature. Next there is the 'problem of universality', which deals with the ontological status of claims about 'Truth'. Finally there is the 'harmony problem', which deals with questions of commensurability, reductionism and compatibility. Let me explore each in turn.

The Problem of Parsimony

The idea behind the problem of parsimony is that the questions or dilemmas puzzling humanity may be answered or resolved. In other words, problems have solutions and questions have answers – although of what sort remains to be seen. The first part of the problem of parsimony addresses the idea that questions have definite, precise, answers; that is, questions are 'tractable'. There is no issue here of what sort of answer is given – say, of whether there are multiple answers to a questions, or only one answer – there is only the claim that problems and questions may be resolved. It is only when issues of 'exclusivity' arise that the problem of parsimony dons a more

complicated guise. For when the additional claim is made that questions are not only tractable, but that there is only one correct answer to the question, there is then an assertion which goes beyond the issue of tractability. At this point, the problem of parsimony assumes a particular sophistication which it otherwise lacks, since clearly there is a great difference between stating 'This question may be answered', and asserting 'This question has *an* answer'. The latter claim clearly forecloses the idea that there might be multiple answers to a question, while the former does not. This, then, is the major issue concerning the problem of parsimony: do questions have answers? Or do they have *an* answer?

The Problem of Method

Where the problem of parsimony addresses the issue of whether or not questions have unique answers, the problem of method addresses the issue of *how* questions are answered. In other words, where the problem of parsimony holds that there is an end destination (or destinations, as the case may be), the problem of method concerns whether there is a way of reaching it; that is, the problem of method maintains that there is a means to discovering answers. As the problem of parsimony, the problem of method manifests itself in two different ways. The problem of method's first form deals with the question of dependability, or whether the means being used to answer a question will actually provide results. From this standpoint, the principle doesn't assume that there will always be an answer – the method may, in fact, be used incorrectly, or in a faulty fashion. While the method will provide a reliable or trustworthy means of addressing a question, it will not be unfailing. Hence, the method may only be a *dependable* means of discovering an answer, not an infallible one. Contrarily, the stronger formulation of the

principle of method makes a bolder claim: that the method will *always* provide the right answer. Unlike the weaker statement of the problem, the stronger statement assumes that the use of the method will invariably provide the correct answer, or always lead one to the truth. For the stronger statement, there is no question that the method's use will go awry or that the method itself is flawed – application generates solution. Thus the problem of method is concerned with the 'dependable' or 'infallible' use of theoretical procedure.

The Problem of Universality

As noted, the problem of universality addresses certain ontological questions, primarily those concerning the status of the answers generated by the use of a given theory. Moreover, as with the problems of parsimony and method, there are two distinct ways in which this problem manifests itself. The first deals with cultural horizons, and addresses what may be termed the 'scope' of truth. Does truth hold for everyone, everywhere, regardless of cultural or societal differences? Or does truth vary between cultures and societies? Clearly, the type of claims being made here different: the first assumes a more absolute or transcendent view of truth, which holds that the truth is the same for all peoples; while the latter takes a less encompassing view of truth, and assumes that truth is particularistic. Similarly, the second aspect of the problem of universality addresses issues of 'temporality': is truth eternal? Put differently, the issue of temporality deals with the question of whether truth is good for all times or all historical periods. Is what was true for ancient Athens also true for medieval Holland? And do those truths apply to us today? Or do different historical eras generate sets of truth according to their own needs and wants and problems? As with the issue of

cultural horizons, the issue of temporality contains both an absolutist take on truth and a particularistic one. And between them, the issues of cultural horizons and temporality define the problem of universality.

The Harmony Problem

The final problem found within the field of relations addresses the ties between problems in regards to their solutions. This problem engages the issue of whether or not the various and assorted answers to the questions facing humanity will, in the end, be reconcilable or compatible. This problem, unlike the others, involves three different issues: *commensurability*, *reductionism*, and *compatibility*. In terms of commensurability, the harmony problem addresses issues of rational standards and comparison: is there a common standard by which different answers or problems may be judged or measured? Can two categorically distinct issues be measured by means of some set criteria? Or are they incommensurable? This, in turn, evokes issues regarding reductionism, or whether categorically different phenomena can be 'reduced' to a common standard or placed within a common framework. Is one particular mode of thought able to provide purchase upon a particular question or problem from which it is distinct? Or, contrarily, are the differences between certain ideas or questions 'irreducible'? Finally there is the issue of compatibility, which addresses the issue of whether two goods may be enjoyed simultaneously. For example, given liberty and equality, or justice and mercy, is there any means which would allow one to enjoy both goods together, at the same time? Or is the essence of each such that the use of one excludes the use of the other? The idea here is that although different goods or problems may be judged by the same standard, it may remain the case that they are different

enough to prevent the achievement of both together. In any event, the harmony problem treats of the issues of comparison and commensurability; reductionism; and compatibility.

These problems, then, are those which form the parameters of the field of relations, and serve to unite and distinguish monism and pluralism. Now that I have laid them out, I would like to turn to their application, first from the standpoint of monism, then from that of pluralism. As I will show, there are dramatic differences between the two positions, although there are certain similarities as well. I will refrain from considering why Berlin values pluralism over monism until the next chapter.

ii

Berlin's comments about monism are scattered. "There is little need to stress the fact," he says in one instance, "that monism, and faith in a single criterion, has always provided a deep source of satisfaction both to the intellect and the emotions."[35] Similarly, in another place, Berlin states: "Single minded monists, ruthless fanatics, men possessed by an all-embracing coherent vision, do not know the doubts and agonies of those who cannot wholly blind themselves to reality."[36] While such statements are instructive to a degree – they provide the sense that monism entails the use of a single standard – they do not grant the clarity for which one might wish. For Berlin portrays monism in different ways – sometimes as 'utopianism'; other times as the 'Platonic ideal'; and others as 'rationalism'. Often, during the course of painting these portraits, Berlin lists certain assumptions of monism he considers fundamental. Other times,

[35] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 170.
[36] Berlin, "Introduction," Four Essays on Liberty, lv.

however, additional assumptions are given, assumptions that highlight different aspects of monism. Consequently, the portrait of monism which arises may be partial; may capture this aspect of monism, but overlook another; or may exhibit the issue incompletely. To clarify the idea of monism, then, requires reviewing, briefly, Berlin's depiction of it in its various forms. Once this is done, it will be possible to determine how monism responds to the problems and issues found in the field of relations.

The first instance of monism at which I want to look is found in Berlin's essay, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," an essay which perhaps best exemplifies Berlin's characterization of monism. Here, in this essay, Berlin writes about the role of utopian thought in Western history, specifically looking at the assumptions that characterize 'utopianism'. According to him, utopian philosophies 'sit' upon a "three-legged stool" which contains certain propositions that unite them under a common rubric. The first 'leg' of this stool is: "[T]o all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer, all the other answers being incorrect. If there is no correct answer to it, then the question cannot be a genuine one."[37] "No one question," Berlin continues, "provided it is clearly stated, can have two answers which are different yet both correct. The grounds of the correct answer must be true; all other possible answers must embody, or rest on, falsehood, which has many faces."[38] Along similar lines, the second assumption holds "that a method exists for the discovery of these correct answers," while the third claims "that all the correct answers must, at the very least be compatible with one another."[39] Berlin develops this final assumption further by stating:

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[37] Isaiah Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Idea, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 24.
[38] Ibid., 24.
[39] Ibid., 24.

> At best, these truths will logically entail one another in a single, systematic, interconnected whole; at the very lest, they will be consistent with one another; that is, they will form a harmonious whole ...[40]

With this general foundation of utopianism set out, Berlin then proceeds to investigate its wane.

A similar characterization of monism is found in Berlin's discussion of the French Enlightenment in his essay, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism." There, as he prepares to show how Hume's thought influenced German thinkers such as Hamann and Jacobi, Berlin reviews the prevalent theoretical outlook of the time. Impressed with the success of mathematics, Berlin claims that the French *philosophes* attempted to apply the same type of thinking to moral, political, and social problems. Guided by the idea of natural science, the *philosophes* were certain that there were 'laws' which determined the actions of individuals and societies.[41] If these laws could be recognized, then the ills of the world could be rectified. Indeed, as Berlin explains it:

> According to this doctrine, all genuine questions were in principle answerable: truth was one, error multiple; the true answers must of necessity be universal and immutable, that is, true everywhere, at all times, for all men, and discoverable by the appropriate use of reason, by relevant experience, observation and the methods of experiment, logic, calculation. A logically connected structure of rules, laws, generalizations, susceptible of demonstration or ... of a high degree of confirmation ... could ... be constructed, and could replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and, above all, what Helvetius called 'interested error' ...[42]

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[40] Ibid., 25.

[41] Berlin also makes this point in "The Philosophers of the Enlightenment." See: Isaiah Berlin, "The Philosophers of the Enlightenment," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 39f, 50-51.

[42] Isaiah Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 163. A similar presentation of

Of course, Berlin's depiction of the French Enlightenment goes further than his discussion of utopianism – there is the added claim that true answers hold "at all times, for all men", and are "universal and immutable." But the affinities between the two positions should be clear – both believe that 'genuine' questions are answerable; assert that the correct method will provide these answers; and hold that these answers will be logically connected to one another.

A final example of monism manifesting itself under another name is found in *The Roots of Romanticism.* Here Berlin speaks about the 'rationalist tradition' of European philosophy, and once again says that there are three assumptions which characterize this tradition. The first is that "all genuine questions can be answered ..."[43] The second is that

> all these answers are knowable, that they can be discovered by means which can be learnt and taught to other persons; that there are techniques by which it is possible to learn and to teach ways of discovering what the world consists of, what part we occupy in it, what our relation is to people, what our relation is to things, what true values are, and the answer to every other serious and answerable question.[44]

Finally, the third assumption is that "all answers must be compatible with one another, because, if they are not compatible, then chaos will result."[45] Again, the resemblance

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the French Enlightenment is given in *The Magus of the North.* There Berlin says, "The three strongest pillars upon which [the French Enlightenment] rested were faith in reason, that is, a logically connected structure of laws and generalizations susceptible of demonstration or verification; in the identity of human nature through time and the possibility of universal human goals; and finally in the possibility of attaining to the second by means of the first, of ensuring physical and spiritual harmony and progress by the power of logically or empirically guided critical intellect, which was in principle capable of analysing everything into its ultimate constituents, of discovering their interrelations and the single system of laws which they obeyed, and thereby of answering all questions capable of being formulated by clear minds on discovering the truth." See: The Magus of the North, 28-29.

[43] Berlin, The Roots of Romanticism, 21.

[44] Ibid., 22.

[45] Ibid., 22.

between Berlin's account of monism here with those previously given should be clear.[46]

Now that I have clarified the core tenets of monism it is time to indicate how they relate to the field of relations which I have said ties monism to pluralism. Regarding the problem of parsimony, monism holds that questions are both tractable and exclusive. In other words, questions have one and only one answer. As Berlin puts it in "The Pursuit of the Ideal": "[A]ll genuine questions must have one true answer and one only."[47] Similarly, in "My Intellectual Path" Berlin states that thinkers of the Enlightenment were guided by the thesis "that to all true questions there must be one true answer and one only, the others being false, for otherwise the questions cannot be genuine."[48] This assertion is repeated in "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," where he says that the first proposition of utopianism is: "to all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer, all the other answers be incorrect."[49] A similar formulation is found in the essay "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," where Berlin claims that a 'tradition' dating to the days of Plato assumes "that every genuine question has one true answer and one only: all the others being false."[50] A variation of this statement is found in "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," where he states: "truth

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[46] While I believe it would be redundant to press the point here, similar accounts of monism also arise in: "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt Against the Myth of an Ideal World"; "European Unity and its Vicissitudes"; "The Pursuit of the Ideal"; "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities"; "My Intellectual Path"; and, in a bit different fashion, "From Hope and Fear Set Free." For a comparison see: "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt Against the Myth of an Ideal World," in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 209; "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 183-184; "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 5-6; "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 80-81; "My Intellectual Path," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto &Windus, 2000) 5-6; and "From Hope and Fear Set Free," in Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 174.

[47] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 5.

[48] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 5.

[49] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," 24.

[50] Berlin, "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," 80.

was one, error multiple."[51] In "European Unity and its Vicissitudes" Berlin puts the principle – at least in terms of tractability – quite simply: "All questions have their answers."[52] As these statements indicate, then, monism engages both parts of the problem of parsimony; that is, monism assumes that questions are tractable, and that the answers will be exclusive.

Regarding the problem of method, it seems that monism holds that the correct use of method *may* allow for the discovery of truth, but not necessarily. In other words, monism affirms the problem of method's dependability thesis, but not the idea of infallibility. The clearest statement Berlin makes regarding this issue is found in "The Pursuit of the Ideal," where he states: "there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths ..."[53] A similar statement of this principle is found in "My Intellectual Path," where Berlin says, "There must exist a path which leads thinkers to the correct answers to these questions ..."[54] In "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" the principle receives its simplest formulation when Berlin states that "a method exists for the discovery of these correct answers."[55] Regardless of the way it is put, when dealing with the problem of method, monism's claims are modest: there is a way to determine truth, although this path may not secure the truth. As Berlin says in "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will": "Man has permanent interests, the character of which the right method can establish."[56] *Establish*, that is, but not necessarily guarantee. Hence, as Berlin understands it, monism affirms the problem of method's dependability

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[51] Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," 163.
[52] Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 184.
[53] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 7.
[54] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 5.
[55] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," 24.
[56] Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 212.

aspect, but not that of infallibility.

Then there is the problem of universality. As with the problem of parsimony, monism answers both aspects of the problem of universality positively. That is, monism affirms both that the truth is universal and eternal. As Berlin indicates: "These solutions, whether or not they are discovered, are true universally, eternally and immutably: true for all times, places and men ..."[57] The idea that truth – in connection with monism – is eternal is repeated in "The Pursuit of the Ideal," where Berlin speaks about "timeless truths;" while the idea that truth is universally shared is given in "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West." Here Berlin speaks about the "assumption ... that men have a certain fixed, unfaltering nature, [and] certain universal, common immutable goals."[58] Obviously the idea of a common human nature carries with it both cultural and temporal implications, for as Berlin explains it: "Once these goals are realised human nature is wholly fulfilled. The very idea of universal fulfillment presupposes that human beings as such seek the same essential goals, identical for all, at all times, everywhere."[59] Perhaps the simplest statement of monism's response to this problem is found when Berlin says, "All the Utopias known to us are based upon the discoverability and harmony of objectively true ends, true for all men, at all times and places."[60] Thus monism, again, as Berlin understands it, answers both parts of the principle of universality positively.

Finally there is the harmony problem. Here monism responds to all the central questions of this problem positively; that is, goods are commensurable, reducible to a

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[57] Berlin, "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," 81.
[58] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," 20.
[59] Ibid., 20.
[60] Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 211.

common standard, and compatible as well. As Berlin puts it in "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism": "A logically constructed structure of rules, laws, generalisations, susceptible of demonstration or, at least in practice, of a high degree of confirmation ... could, at lest in principle, be constructed ..."[61] In "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities" the formulation is a bit different, although the idea remains the same: "The implication of this position is that the world is a single system which can be described and explained by the use of rational methods ..."[62] Regarding the issue of compatibility, in "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" Berlin says, "[A]ll the correct answers must be compatible with one another ..." and can never "conflict with one another," while in "European Unity and its Vicissitudes" he says, "No truth can contradict any other truth ..."[63] This sentiment is repeated – perhaps in its clearest form – in "The Pursuit of the Ideal," where Berlin states that "the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another ..."[64] The idea, then, for monism's response to the harmony problem should be clear: the truths which monism uncovers must be of a logical whole – reducible, commensurable, and compatible.

To sum up, monism engages the field of relations as follows: questions are tractable and their answers are exclusive. The means of determining these answers may or may not be used correctly, since the means are dependable guides but not necessarily certain. The answers, once they have been acquired, hold for all people, everywhere, at all times. Furthermore, these answers are logically and systematically related; that is,

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[61] Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," 163.
[62] Berlin, "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," 81.
[63] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Idea in the West," 24-25; "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 184.
[64] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 6.

reducible to a common standard which renders them commensurable and compatible. In effect, monism holds that there are universal and final solutions to humanity's problems.

iii

Unlike monism, Berlin's statements about pluralism are not as scattered or indirect. Indeed, while he frequently refers to monism under other names, Berlin's discussions of pluralism are usually more specific, frequently focusing upon either moral or cultural pluralism – sometimes both together. Such is the case, for instance, in "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," where Berlin explicates the "doctrine of pluralism" by stating:

> There are many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective, ends.[65]

This is, I think, a rather succinct summary of the idea of pluralism, the sense of which is used by Berlin on more than one occasion. For Berlin repeatedly foregrounds the idea that pluralism entails a variety of values or societies or viewpoints. For example, in "The Pursuit of the Ideal" he characterizes pluralism as "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek."[66] A similar depiction of pluralism is provided in "My Intellectual Path," where Berlin states, "I do believe there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ," and in "Two Concepts of

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[65] Isaiah Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 79-80.

[66] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.

Liberty," where he says, "Pluralism ... recognize[s] the fact that human goals are many ..."[67] Yet Berlin's conception of pluralism is a bit more complicated than these quotes indicate, for diversity is but one of its aspects. As the idea of monism, pluralism addresses multiple issues and problems, which means pluralism requires further explication. Consequently, as I did with monism, I would like to excavate the idea of pluralism and clarify its fundamental assumptions. Since, however, Berlin's references to pluralism are more direct, I will go ahead and explicate these assumptions as regards the field of relations.

Where monism answers both parts of the problem of parsimony affirmatively, pluralism does not. Indeed, while monism maintains that questions are both tractable and their answers exclusive, pluralism's position is more modest. For according to pluralism, in some instances questions are tractable, but in other instances they are not. Moreover, any answer which is found is not necessarily exclusive. In other words, it is always conceivable that there may be several answers for any given question, each of which is as valid as the other. A clear instance, according to Berlin, of the variety of answers which may be given for a particular question is found in the realm of politics, where "it is possible no final answers may be given ..."[68] Indeed, given the particularly 'stingy' nature of political questions or dilemmas, one should expect a number of conflicting and competing answers. Hence Berlin's praise of Machiavelli, whom Berlin considers to a thinker of no small profundity as he was one of the first modern thinkers to notice and reflect upon the pluralistic nature of politics. Indeed, for Berlin, Machiavelli is disturbing because he holds that a politics grounded upon a Roman ethos

[67] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12; and "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171.
[68] Jahanbegloo, 44.

will much different than one guided by Christian beliefs. Why? Because the Roman way of life engages politics in a much different manner than that of Christianity: the former values honor, courage, and high-mindedness; while the latter exalts humility, meekness, gentleness and selflessness. According to Berlin's interpretation of Machiavelli, the grievous wound Machiavelli laid upon the west is the realization that questions of social justice could be answered in two ways, ways which are equally valid, yet exceptionally different. In other words, Machiavelli is a pluralist because he asserts that certain problems – political problems – may be solved in two very distinct ways. Thus, from Berlin's perspective, Machiavelli holds that while problems may be tractable, their answers are not exclusive. In this Machiavelli is a typical representative of pluralism, as regards the problem of parsimony.

Regarding the problem of method, pluralism, as monism, holds that the correct use of a method may provide a dependable means to the truth, but no an infallible one. But where Berlin's statements regarding monism and the problem of method are fairly straightforward, his views about pluralism and this principle are more circumspect. Indeed, it is necessary to uncover and excavate Berlin's opinion on this particular issue to discover what he thinks. One essay in particular – "The Purpose of Philosophy" – is useful to this end, since in this essay Berlin speaks about the different types of questions one may ask, as well as the different ways one may answer a question. Thus, during the course of exploring the question, "What is the subject-matter of philosophy?", Berlin says that there are three types of questions: empirical, formal, and philosophical. The difference between these questions lies in the way they are answered, for as Berlin says, although we may not know the answer to certain questions, "we [do] know along what

lines to proceed; we know what kinds of method will, and what kinds of method will not, be relevant to the answer."[69] Hence empirical questions are questions whose answers depend upon information obtained from observation; formal questions are those whose answers depend upon "pure calculation": while philosophical questions are those whose boundaries are opaque and blurred, and thus those questions whose answers smear the boundary between the empirical and formal categories.[70]

Now, it is not immediately apparent how Berlin's distinction between empirical, formal, and philosophical questions relates to the principle of method. I would like to suggest, however, that Berlin is drawing attention to the fact that questions are not merely multiple or many, but that the ways in which we may answer them are various as well. Simple enough – this idea is one which clearly strikes at the heart of the monistic contention that questions are tractable and their answers exclusive. But Berlin's distinction is more suggestive than this; that is, it implies that there are questions – philosophical questions – which are 'cross categorical'. In other words, certain types of questions provoke competing answers from different fields, answers which are equally valid. There are, from the perspective of pluralism, no infallible ways of ascertaining the 'truth', given certain types of problems. There are, instead, multiple ways of looking at particularly perplexing problems, each of which provides justifiable responses, or dependable ways of resolving the issue. Thus anthropologists, sociologists, economists, historians, playwrights, novelists, theologians and philosophers all have given different, yet comprehensible and plausible answers to the question: 'What is justice?' And since

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[69] Berlin, "The Purpose of Philosophy," 25.

[70] Ibid., 25, 27. As Berlin tells Jahanbegloo: "Philosophical questions are not like empirical problems, which can be answered by observation or experiment or entailments from them. Nor are they like mathematical problems which can be settled by deductive methods, like problems in chess or any other rule-governed game or procedure." See: Jahanbegloo, 27.

each of these fields provide plausible answers to this question, it cannot be assumed – honestly assumed – that any one of them 'trumps' the others, for there may be circumstances which arise that render one particular answer less viable or useful or believable or 'infallible'. Thus, for Berlin, pluralism is like monism to the extent that both claim there are dependable means to the 'truth', and that these means are not infallible.

As perhaps would be expected, when it comes to the problem of universality pluralism holds that 'truth' is culturally and historically specific. Unlike monism, which holds that truth is universal and eternal, pluralism maintains that truth is particular, shaped and bounded by the concerns of distinct cultures and eras. Regarding the 'cultural' component of the problem of universality, as Berlin says when speaking of Vico and Herder: "I am interested in Vico's and Herder's beliefs in the plurality of cultures, each with its own center of gravity – in a variety of cultures with different, novel, unpredicted outlooks and conflicting attitudes ..."[71] Such beliefs entail the view that "[t]he values of one civilsation will be different from, and perhaps incompatible with, the values of another."[72] In other words, "Communities may resemble each other in many respects, but the Greeks differ from Lutheran Germans, the Chinese differ from both; what they strive after and what they fear or worship are scarcely ever similar."[73] The idea should be clear – pluralism assumes that what is true of one culture may not be true for another. And as for the question of 'temporality', pluralism holds the same – that different ages have different truths or, as Berlin phrases it, "centres of gravity." As

[71] Jahanbegloo, 34-35. Compare: "Vico thought of a succession of civilizations, Herder went further and compared national cultures in many lands and periods, and held that every society had what he called its own centre of gravity, which differed from that of others." (Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10.)
[72] Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 224.
[73] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10.

he puts it in "Does Political Theory Still Exist?":

> [T]he very efforts to solve the problems of one age or culture alter both the men who strive to do so and those for whose benefit the solutions are applied, and thereby create new men and new problems, the character of which cannot today be anticipated, let alone solved, by men bounded by their own historical horizons.[74]

Consequently, "[it] follows that the political philosophy ... of an Aristotelian or a Thomist will ipso facto be radically different from that of, let us say, some who learned from Hobbes or Spinoza or any modern positivist ..."[75] This, then, is pluralism's take on the principle of universality: different epochs and cultures have different truths.

But are these truths incompatible? This is the question that arises once pluralism moves from the problem of universality to the harmony problem. As stated previously, the harmony problem contains three parts that address the issues of commensurability, reductionism and compatibility. Regarding the issue of commensurability, pluralism holds that different goods or truths or values are incommensurable or not subject to a single standard. As Berlin says in "Two Concepts of Liberty:"

> Pluralism ... does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent our moral decisions as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle, perform.[76]

This idea is repeated in the essay "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought,"

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[74] Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 153. A similar thought is expressed in "The Pursuit of the Ideal," where Berlin says: "We cannot legislate for the unknown consequences of consequences." ("The Pursuit of the Ideal," 14)

[75] Ibid., 155.

[76] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171.

where Berlin ties the issues of commensurability and compatibility together. As he puts it: "I repeat, pluralism [is] the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends ..."[77] That pluralism holds that values or truths are also incompatible is repeated by Berlin a few times. For instance, prior to speaking about pluralism and the issue of incommensurability in "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin says that different types of values, such as equality and liberty, may not be incompatible or 'maximized' or enjoyed simultaneously.[78] This thought is repeated in "My Intellectual Path," where he says, "I do not know who else may have thought this, but it occurred to me that some values are compatible with each other and some are not."[79] Again: "Certain human values cannot be combined, because they are incompatible with one another ..."[80] The point should be clear: pluralism denies, in some instances, the commensurability and compatibility of values.

The same holds for pluralism's take on reductionism, the final aspect of the harmony problem. As with the ideas of commensurability and compatibility, pluralism rejects the view that different truths or values are equivicable or explicable by a common standard. Each value or truth or ideal "is what it is," Berlin tells us, so that "(t)o say that in some ultimate, all-reconciling, yet realizable synthesis, duty *is* interest, or individual freedom *is* pure democracy or an authoritarian state, is to throw a metaphysical blanket over self-deceit or deliberate hypocricsy."[81] Indeed, "(m)ost men," he says, "wander

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[77] Berlin, "Alleged Relativism of Eighteenth-Century Thought," 87.
[78] "It is a commonplace that neither political equality nor efficient organization nor social justice is compatible with more than a modicum of individual liberty, and certainly not with unrestricted laissez-faire; that justice and generosity, public and private loyalties, the demands of genius and the claims of society, can conflict violently with each other. And it is no great way from that to the generalization that not all good things are compatible, still less all the ideals of mankind." ("Two Concepts of Liberty," 167)
[79] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 22.
[80] Jahanbegloo, 142.
[81] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171.

hither and thither, guided and, at times, hypnotized by more than one model (of thought), which they seldom trouble to make consistent, or even fragments of models which themselves form a part of some none too coherent or firm pattern or patterns."[82] Hence, as with the ideas of commensurability and compatibility, pluralism disaffirms the idea of reductionism.

In the end, then, pluralism refers to the field of relations in the following manner: questions may be tractable, but there are often multiple valid answers. Moreover, the methods one uses to solve a problem are dependable, but not infallible, guides to the solution, since there could be a variety of resolutions. Regarding the 'universal' nature of these truths – pluralism holds that they are bounded, in the main, by cultural and historical considerations. Finally, not only are truths multiple, they are also, for the most part, incommensurable, irreducible, and incompatible. In effect, pluralism holds that there are no final answers to the questions or problems facing humanity.

iv

At this point the main differences between monism and pluralism should be fairly obvious. As I have tried to show, the two ideas are defined by Berlin by the way in which they offer different answers to a given set of questions. These questions, which I have termed the 'field of relations', provide the boundaries and parameters of monism and pluralism, giving shape to two concepts which are perhaps more complicated than commonly thought. As I have indicated, pluralism is more than just an idea which addresses the issue of diversity, or is confined to the treatment of problems of

[82] Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?", 160.

commensurability and comparability. Pluralism is also an idea which treats of other problems, problems which are similarly treated by pluralism's antipode, monism. And, as I have also indicated, monism involves more than the idea of a single standard; it involves particular principles which highlight specific issues. The problems of parsimony, method, universality and harmony all raise particular, fundamental questions about the world in which we live, as well as the way we respond to it. As I have argued thus far, to appreciate Berlin's conception of pluralism fully one must grasp what these questions and issues are; that is, one must grasp the fundamental issues underlying monism, and how pluralism, too, is taken with them. Now that I have outlined these two ideas, I would like to turn to the question of how Berlin sees the relations between pluralism and liberalism.

Chapter 2

Pluralism and Liberalism

i

It seems safe to suggest that Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" is one of the more widely known pieces of 20th century political theory. Initially the Inaugural lecture of the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory, "Two Concepts" was subsequently published as an essay in 1958, and then included in the edited volume, *Four Essays on Liberty* in 1969. The appearance of "Two Concepts" in printed form has been the occasion for much discussion about the merits of the piece, as scholars have either applauded or challenged Berlin's thesis. As Ronald Dworkin portrays "Two Concepts of Liberty": "It provoked immediate, continuing, heated and mainly illuminating controversy."[83] Indeed, Berlin's distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty has proven to be more than a little controversial, and one could undoubtedly study this particular essay simply to consider the storm of opinion surrounding it. For present purposes, however, I wish to highlight something else.

As I noted in the introduction, Berlin disavows any logical link between pluralism and liberalism, an admission that has led to the charge of relativism. Such a charge, I think, is misplaced, for I believe Berlin's commitment to liberalism is indirect. In other words, I think Berlin's commitment to liberalism rests less on a link between pluralism and liberalism than on a connection between monism and authoritarianism. Rather than provide a 'positive' justification for liberalism that reveals the necessary ties

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[83] Ronald Dworkin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration, ed. by Edna and Avishai Margalit (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), 100.

between it and pluralism, Berlin instead provides a 'negative' one. In my opinion, Berlin provides an argument that indicates and emphasizes the shortcomings and failures of alternatives to liberalism, instead of the supposed relations between liberalism and pluralism. Given the condition of moral pluralism, Berlin doesn't seek to show the superiority of liberalism, so much as he attempts to discredit its competitors. And here lies the significance of "Two Concepts", the heart of his endeavor.[84]

As I shall argue in this chapter, "Two Concepts of Liberty" is best understood when one realizes that the thrust of the essay is less about competing types of liberty, than the confrontation between monism and pluralism. In fact, as I will try to show, the distinction Berlin draws between negative and positive liberty is only meaningful to the extent that he relates these ideas to his thoughts about pluralism. Indeed, so far as I know only two individuals – William Parent and C. B. MacPherson – have noticed that the main force of "Two Concepts" revolves around Berlin's discussion of monism and pluralism that arises at the essay's end. For this reason I believe many commentators have misappraised the essay, mistakenly attributing ideas or positions to Berlin which he neither holds nor entertains. Thus I shall begin my investigation with a brief review of the secondary literature, and clarify what criticisms have been made about "Two Concepts." Then I shall explicate the essay itself, and indicate why I believe the piece is actually about the conflict between monism and pluralism. In so doing, I shall elaborate how Berlin's defense of liberalism is a 'negative' one, and clarify how his position is

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[84] My interpretation is in direct contrast to that of Jonathan Riley who, in "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," claims that "Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty is too well known to require much discussion." I fail to see how this is so, and think it is simply impossible to understand Berlin's discussion of either liberalism or pluralism without a careful consideration of this specific essay. See: Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," American Political Science Review 95 (June 2001), 290.

different from the way it is often portrayed. I shall postpone until the next chapter, however, the issue of whether he is a relativist.

ii

The critical responses to "Two Concepts" can be gathered into two categories. On the one hand, there are those who treat the essay *historically*, or seek to situate Berlin's argument in the current of the history of political thought. On the other hand, there are those who engage the essay more *theoretically*, or attempt to determine the philosophical assumptions that guide Berlin or the logical turns his argument takes. Obviously the two treatments of the essay need not preclude one another, for a critic can address the historical significance of "Two Concepts" before, or as, he comes to terms with the logical development of Berlin's argument. In fact, one often finds a given scholar engaging both themes together, which is to say, a given scholar will lay hands on both the historical significance of Berlin's essay as well as its discursive features. Still, criticisms of "Two Concepts" are distinguishable along the lines laid out above, and to bring some clarity to the issue I will consider each type of criticism in turn. As it is the shorter of the two categories, I'll begin with the historical complaint.

Perhaps Marshall Cohen best captures the sentiment of the historical critique when he states: "(D)espite a willful attempt to make his essay very much to the political point, I cannot help feeling that it leaves the reader with a sense of being seriously irrelevant."[85] Strong words, to be sure, but Cohen believes that "Two Concepts" is "less an event in philosophy than in the Cold War, less an occasion for jubilance than for

[85] Marshall Cohen, "Berlin and the Liberal Tradition," Philosophical Quarterly 10 (1960), 216.

lamentation."[86] Cohen is not alone in his opinion, for others also think of "Two Concepts" as of historical interest. C. B. MacPherson, for instance, concludes that Berlin's discrimination between positive and negative liberty is the result of the capitalist context within which he writes. In MacPherson's opinion, "the concept of positive liberty arose and could only arise after the ideal of individual liberty had taken pretty firm hold. And that is to say that the concept of positive liberty is a product of bourgeois society."[87] Similarly, Quentin Skinner regards the distinction between positive and negative liberty as a move made by contemporary philosophers working with specifically 'modern' assumptions. In response, he turns to the historical record to indicate a richer account of liberty, an account that will "investigate the full range of arguments about social freedom" and thereby "cast some doubt" upon contemporary theorizing which has become "confused."[88]

Then there is A. S. Kaufman, who suggests that Berlin's discussion of negative liberty is passé, the perpetuation of an outmoded discussion from the previous century. In his opinion, Berlin's thoughts about coercion and the limits of power are derivative of the sorts of arguments that concerned 19th century liberals. Such issues, according to Kaufman, have been superseded in the 20th century by more pressing problems, problems which he feels Berlin slights or ignores. In Kaufman's opinion, "forms of non-human and inadvertent interference" are now more prevalent than the types of oppression that are the focus of "Two Concepts". Consequently, the scope of Berlin's

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[86] Ibid., 216.
[87] C. B. MacPherson, "Berlin's Division of Liberty," chap in Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 115.
[88] Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives," chap. in Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193-203, 217-219.

analysis is allegedly narrower than it should be.[89] Kaufman, then, as the others, takes Berlin to task for the limited historical horizons of his work; only where others regard Berlin's discussion as timely, he seems to suggest that it is actually archaic, the last echo of outdated debates.

Finally, there is Leo Strauss, who seems to regard Berlin's essay as an exemplary instance of modern 'anti-rationalism'. For Strauss "Two Concepts" appears

> to be a characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism – of a crisis due to the fact that liberalism has abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic.[90]

As far as he is concerned, Berlin's ideas are paradigmatic instances of a 'positivistic relativism' that seeks to overcome the lessons of history by attempting to become ahistorical. Much the way physics, chemistry and biology divorced themselves from the humanities during the 18th century, so contemporary political science has attempted to sever its ties to history in its search for universal truth.[91] As he puts it: "Relativistic social science may ... be said to be one branch of the rational study of nonrational behavior."[92] The outcome of this process, Strauss indicates, is that theorists such as Berlin have fomented a situation where the pursuit of universal truths has, ironically, given way to unbounded skepticism and cynicism.

So Berlin's thought, according to some, is historically bound, the product of a particular period in time, reflective of that period's presumptions, shortcomings, and quirks, if one may say such a thing. For some, such as Cohen, there is little that is uniquely novel about Berlin's work, except as it reveals a certain tendency of a particular

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[89] A. S. Kaufman, "Professor Berlin on 'Negative Freedom'," Mind 71 (1962), 241-243.
[90] Strauss, "Relativism," 17.
[91] Ibid., 18f.
[92] Ibid., 18.

time. For others, such as Strauss, Berlin's work is an exemplary instance of modernity gone awry. And for others, such as Skinner, Berlin's ideas are indicative of a theoretical 'hegemony' that signifies the loss of alternative accounts of politics. Timely and exclusionary – such are the charges of the historical critique. What, then, are the responses?

Regarding Cohen's complaint, it seems clear that there is something 'untimely' about "Two Concepts". Berlin's argument has survived the end of the Cold War – outlasted the conditions which prompted it – and sparked serious consideration of the distinction he draws between negative and positive liberty. It seems one can make short work of the historical critique simply by pointing out the ahistorical proclivities exhibited by "Two Concepts". If anything, Berlin's views have proven to be more important as time has passed, not less. It seems, then, that Berlin's thoughts are resilient, not timely.

But is this all that needs to be said? While appealing, such a response is too easy to make, and more than a little simplistic. Although forty years or so have passed since Berlin initially gave his lecture, this hardly guarantees the abiding worth of his words. It may very well be the case that Cohen and Kaufman are right, and that Berlin's work represents a particular historical moment, a 'modern' moment, whose philosophical limitations will eventually prove to be its undoing. Who can say? Here, it seems, lies the force of the historical critique: it is nearly unassailable. Such charges can barely be met, much less refuted – at least by anyone writing today. There is simply nothing one can say – as of now – to defend Berlin. For his works *do* express particular views of the day, and carry the hallmark of contemporary concerns. On the face of it, this version of

the historical critique appears irrefutable.

Yet I think there is a response to this critique that undercuts it, even if the basic claim that Berlin's work is contingent remains unmet. And this is that "Two Concepts" is important for us, now, at this particular historical juncture. Bourgeois heirs to the 19th century that we are, we cannot help but be engaged by works exhibiting such tendencies. They speak to us, as it were. Indeed, it would be more surprising if our attention was captured by a piece which exhibited *none* of the traits for which "Two Concepts" is criticized. Sharing the same historical horizons with Berlin as we do, it is hard to imagine him making an argument that was not 'bourgeois', 'modern', 'positivistic', or whatever. And if he did, he probably would be unintelligible to us. The problems of Berlin's discussion, as described by this particular form of the historical critique, are actually what make his arguments accessible; for those 'flaws' delineate the common threads that guide our interest in the piece. So far from being shortcomings, the issues raised by Cohen and Kaufman are the very factors that make "Two Concepts" pertinent – at least for us. As for future generations – I'm sure they'll decide for themselves whether Berlin's thoughts warrant their attention. To paraphrase one famous figure: let the unborn give birth to the unborn.

As far as Strauss and Skinner go – their main concern seems to stem from a sense of loss. Strauss, for instance, continually draws attention to what he feels is the crisis of the day, this being the fact that 'modernity' has not just superseded 'antiquity', but has led to the exclusion of particular modes of moral discourse which nevertheless remain important. For Strauss, the temper of the modern mind is such that certain ways of thinking about virtue, justice, and society have been discredited without being given a

fair hearing. According to Strauss, the overwhelming influence of modern science – with its strict distinction between facts and values – has profoundly changed the way men think and speak about politics. No longer are individuals conceived as basically spiritual beings; rather, men are regarded as every other animal, as driven by their appetites, impulses, desires, and instincts. Strauss regards such a view of man as an impoverishment, and wants to restore the classical conception of the individual – or some individuals – as being invested with a faculty of reason that both distinguishes men from, if not sets them above, other species. Strauss's project, then, is to dust off and emphasize the Greek inheritance of the West.

Similarly, Skinner is also concerned with the recovery of particular ideas or thinkers. But where Strauss focuses upon ancient Athens and classical thought, Skinner is taken with the early modern period, especially the time of the English Civil War. In Skinner's opinion (which is similar to that of John Pocock and Philip Pettit) the period encompassing the English Civil War saw the articulation of a particular political philosophy that drew upon the writings and works of Roman thinkers. Men such as Algernon Sydney, James Harrington, and John Hall all turned to the writings of the Romans – as well as their Renaissance 'heirs' such as Machiavelli – in an attempt to fashion a theoretical response to the turmoil of their time. Their goal, according to Skinner, was to provide a vision of representative government that would protect the interests of society from the arbitrary whims or unpredictable abuse of its rulers.[93] This 'neo-roman' or 'republican' position, as Skinner terms it, contributed to the restoration

[93] Interestingly enough, Berlin discerns a similar position regarding the idea of liberty in the writings of the Greeks (rather than the Romans), specifically the work of Herodotus. Herodotus, Berlin says, wrote about "isonomia", which means "equality before the law" and "freedom from oppression, [and] from arbitrary rule." See: Jahanbegloo, 149.

of order in England, and helped provide the foundation for modern notions about federalism. Unfortunately, the advent and success of liberalism led to the diminution of neo-roman thought, and the latter's significance came to be largely forgotten. Skinner's task, then, like that of Strauss, is to call attention to a portion of our intellectual and moral heritage that is felt to be significant despite its neglect.[94]

As I have noted, the criticism of Berlin by both Strauss and Skinner is that his work exemplifies the triumph of 'modernity', either in its 'positivistic' or 'liberal' form. Again, for Strauss Berlin's thought is an instance of the sort of political philosophy which, because it is so concerned with what is empirically observable, ends up degrading humanity by denying humanity's 'higher' capacities. As I hope to show later, this simply is not the case: Berlin is well aware of, and allows for, humanity's higher faculties. In fact, his argument against relativism is firmly grounded upon such a notion. Consequently, if Strauss's primary concern is that Berlin's ideas entail a vision of the moral individual which pales in comparison to that of ancient Greece, I think he is mistaken. But again, more on that later.

As far as Skinner is concerned, Berlin is the inheritor of those intellectual traditions that eventually overshadowed and displaced what he terms 'neo-roman' thought. I think, in all honesty, that this is a fair assessment of Berlin's work. He himself regards his political orientation as liberal, and to the extent that Skinner reads Berlin's work in this light there seems little to say. As for Skinner's contention that there is a tradition of political thought that has been largely slighted by mainstream

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[94] Skinner deals with these issues in several places. The two writings I particularly have in mind are the aforementioned "The Idea of Negative Liberty" and the more recent *Liberty Before Liberalism*. In the latter Skinner expresses his debt to both Pocock and Pettit, although for further comparison see Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, and Pettit's *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*.

theorists, again I think he is correct – as his own work testifies. Indeed, in my opinion, an interesting point of comparison exists between Berlin and Skinner, in that both are engaged in uncovering and restoring particular political theorists who have largely been forgotten. For in so far as both are intellectual historians Skinner and Berlin have made great scholarly contributions. Skinner, for his part, has indeed identified an important tradition of Modern political thought, a tradition that has, until recently, dwelt in relative obscurity. Similarly, Berlin's concern for the 'Counter-Enlightenment' has brought attention to particular thinkers who were also languishing in an 'historical purgatory' of sorts. Unfortunately, as interesting as a comparison of the accomplishments of Skinner and Berlin as historians of thought might be, such a pursuit would be more than a little off topic. So let me simply restate that I believe Skinner is correct to claim that Berlin overlooks one particular tradition of political thought. This, however, has little bearing, I think, on Berlin's own arguments about the relationships between pluralism and monism; monism and authoritarianism; and pluralism and liberalism.

Where the historical critique basically claims that Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" is contingent, or historically bound, the theoretical critique holds that the central thesis of the piece is wrong. For the theoretical critique the issue is not one of relevance, or whether or not Berlin has made a lasting contribution to political philosophy. The pertinence of "Two Concepts" is not in question. Instead the complaint is that Berlin's distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty is muddled, that his depiction of two distinct types of freedom is incorrect either because such a distinction does not truly hold, or because his presentation of their differences is a poor one. Rather than reflecting the concerns of the day, "Two Concepts of Liberty" is taken to be an imprecise

statement about the fundamental importance of liberty. Lack of clarity, not historical horizons, is the concern of the theoretical critique.

One of the earliest – if not the most famous – example of the theoretical critique is Gerald MacCallum's "Negative and Positive Liberty." In response to Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" MacCallum states:

> The argument is not that one of these is the only, the "truest," or the "most worthwhile" freedom, but rather that the distinction between them has never been made sufficiently clear, [and] is based in part upon a serious confusion ...[95]

The confusion, according to MacCallum, is that freedom is "always one and the same triadic relation, [and that] various contending parties disagree with each other in what they understand to be the ranges of the term variables."[96] In MacCallum's opinion, freedom is "always *both* freedom from something and freedom to do or become something ..."[97] As he explains it, freedom is "always *of* something ... *from* something, *to* do, not do, become, or not become something ..."[98] It is therefore best understood not as an idea with a multiplicity of incompatible or competitive forms. Rather, freedom should always be seen as an idea that involves the formula: "x is ... free from y to do ... z."[99] That is, freedom is an idea that involves an individual, his goals, and the obstacles to those goals. So Berlin's mistake, from what MacCallum says, is that he provides a partial or incomplete depiction of liberty, one that distorts or clouds what it means to be free. Highlighting only individuals and the obstacles they face, Berlin slights the third fundamental feature of liberty, and gives the impression that there are various types of

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[95] Gerald MacCallum, "Negative and Positive Freedom," Philosophical Review 76 (1967), 312.
[96] Ibid., 312.
[97] Ibid., 319.
[98] Ibid., 314.
[99] Ibid., 314.

freedom. In this, MacCallum thinks he is wrong.

Berlin's response to MacCallum is equally famous and also worth noting. Where MacCallum argues that freedom involves a triadic relationship between individuals, an obstacle (or obstacles), and the individual's goals, Berlin reaffirms his belief that freedom should be understood differently. According to Berlin, the unfree individual need not desire anything in particular, for freedom itself is enough. As he puts it:

> A man struggling against his chains or a people against enslavement need not consciously aim at any definite further state. A man need not know how he will use his freedom; he just wants to remove the yoke.[100]

From Berlin's perspective, the third part of MacCallum's triad – that freedom presumes a definite end – is an unwarranted assumption. Freedom itself can be the goal; that is, individuals may seek their liberty but lack any idea of what they will do with it. For Berlin, MacCallum unnecessarily extends the idea of freedom to incorporate issues that, strictly speaking, have nothing to do with liberty itself. Again, freedom alone may be the goal – anything beyond this is a different pursuit.

Charles Taylor makes an argument similar to MacCallum. But rather than argue that liberty is best thought of as invoking a theoretical 'triad', Taylor seizes upon the idea of positive liberty, and seeks to show that it is in some ways either prior to, or more fundamental than, its negative counterpart. Distinguishing liberty as an "opportunity" concept from liberty understood as an "exercise" concept – a distinction that matches the difference between negative and positive liberty – Taylor argues that there are a host of issues involved when one speaks about freedom.[101] According to him individuals have

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[100] Berlin, "Introduction," xliii.

[101] Taylor says: "Doctrines of positive freedom are concerned with a view of freedom which involves essentially the exercising of control over one's life. On this view, one is free only to the extent that one has

higher capacities, capacities which require intentional cultivation or what Taylor terms 'self-realization'. These capacities are put into play or "make sense only against a background of desires and feelings which are not brute, but what I ... call import-attributing ..."[102] Unfortunately, negative liberty, or liberty understood as an 'opportunity-concept', is only concerned with the lack of external obstacles before an individual. It quite literally interprets freedom as being a situation where nothing stands in the individual's way.[103] And, in Taylor's opinion, such a literal or "crude" interpretation of liberty is problematic.

According to Taylor, one way in which liberty understood as an opportunity-concept is troublesome is that it is unable to distinguish instances of freedom that are significant and meaningful from those that are less than important. Indeed, in some instances, the literal interpretation of freedom as the lack of external restrictions upon a person's behavior leads to absurd judgments. For example, a comparison of Albania and England by means of the opportunity-conception of liberty leads to the rather surprising conclusion that Albania is a freer society. This is because although England has greater religious freedom, Albania has few restrictions upon its citizens regarding their ability to drive. There are, Taylor assumes, fewer stoplights in Albania than England; hence one can infer that Albanians have a greater liberty to drive as they will. Comparatively

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effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life. The concept of freedom here is an exercise-concept." He continues: "By contrast, negative theories can rely simply on an opportunity-concept, where being free is a matter of what we can do, of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options. This certainly is the case of the crude, original Hobbesian concept. Freedom consists just in there being no obstacle. It is a sufficient condition of one's being free that nothing stand in the way." See: Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" chap. in Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 213. Berlin tells Jahanbegloo he agrees, "[i]n a way," with Taylor's description of negative liberty as an 'opportunity concept'. See: Jahanbegloo, 150.

[102] Ibid., 225.

[103] Ibid., 213.

speaking, then, proponents of the opportunity-concept of liberty must hold that Albanians are 'freer' than the English, given the comparable instances of freedom that may be said to arise between the two nations. However, we know, Taylor argues, that Albania is certainly a less liberal society than England. We know, in other words, that religious freedom is much more important than the freedom to drive as one will, no matter how many (or how few) stoplights there are. Consequently, we cannot but admit that something is wrong with a conception of liberty that leads to such implausible, if not ridiculous, results.

So why is liberty as an opportunity-concept so off base? What leads it to make not just questionable, but clearly incorrect, appraisals? What, in other words, is wrong with negative liberty?

The problem, according to Taylor, is that liberty conceived as an opportunity-concept does not take into account those desires, intuitions, ideas, beliefs, or goals that are the preserve of positive liberty. We do, Taylor insists, attribute greater significance to certain feelings or desires or goals. Through the application of our 'import-attributing' background schema we realize that some forms of freedom are more important than others. This is why the exercise-conception of liberty is superior to its opportunity counterpart – why positive liberty is more valuable than negative – since the former addresses forms of constraint the latter does not. As Taylor explains it:

> our significant purposes can be frustrated by our own desires, and where these are sufficiently based on misappreciation, we ... experience them as fetters. A man's freedom can therefore be hemmed in by internal, motivational obstacles, as well as external ones. A man who is driven by spite to jeopardize his most important relationships ... is not really made more free if one lifts the external obstacles to his venting his spite or acting on his

> fear. Or at best he is liberated into a very impoverished freedom.[104]

In so far as individuals have purposes or goals, then, it is important that they not only be free from external obstacles, but that they be able "to overcome or at least neutralize [their] motivational fetters ..." Thus, for Taylor, freedom consists not only in the individual's being able to do what they will physically, but in his ability to "be actually exercising self-understanding ..."[105]

Although Taylor makes some interesting observations about the significance of positive liberty for what he terms self-realization, I am unsure his argument achieves what he wants it to. Far from showing that negative liberty – or the opportunity-concept of liberty – leads to absurd conclusions, Taylor's argument indicates the importance of carefully evaluating instances of freedom as they arise. For example, so far as a strict interpretation of negative liberty is concerned, one would have to admit that drivers in Albania are indeed freer than their English counterparts. However, this conclusion does not preclude the making of other comparisons. It seems to me that if one wanted to judge adequately the comparative liberty of England against Albania (or any other sets of nations for that matter), one would have to regard *all* the instances of freedom one could determine. Hence, one would need to review the relative freedom of speech in each nation; the comparative security individuals have from arbitrary search and seizure; the different opportunities for political participation; the ease with which one might emigrate; and so on and so forth. Only then – only when a thorough comparison between the different manifestations of freedom has been made – could one plausibly

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[104] Ibid., 227.
[105] Ibid., 228-229.

determine which nation is freer. Taylor's argument, so far as I can tell, does not really confound a strict interpretation of the opportunity-concept of liberty; rather, it invites more comparisons.

As far as Berlin is concerned, however, Taylor's insinuation that he relies too much upon negative liberty as a bulwark against despotism is a bit off. Berlin is well aware of the difficulties of negative liberty, specifically that it is an idea with certain limitations. As he himself argues: "(p)erhaps the chief value for liberals of political – 'positive' – rights, of participating in government, is as a means for protecting what they hold to be an ultimate value, namely individual – 'negative' – liberty."[106] The problem, for Berlin, is the questionable way in which some individuals pursue positive liberty. More often than not, according to Berlin, proponents of positive liberty equivocate freedom with another value: liberty, for instance, is identified with autonomy. Then – "by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible" – autonomy is identified with authority.[107] The end result is a situation such as that found in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where, in the "celebrated fable of the Grand Inquisitor," it is shown "that paternalism can provide the conditions of freedom, yet withhold freedom itself."[108] Observing that "(w)e live in a world charactised by regimes ... which have done, or are seeking to do, precisely this ..." Berlin cannot help but believe that "(n)othing is gained by identifying freedom proper, in either of its senses, with [other] values, or with the conditions of freedom, or by confounding types of

[106] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 165.
[107] Ibid., 152.
[108] Berlin, "Introduction," lv.

freedom with one another."[109] And this, I think, is the mistake Taylor makes.

That Taylor confuses freedom with something else is seen when one realizes – as Galipeau rightly observes – that "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" is primarily about autonomy.[110] As I have noted, Taylor is concerned with the idea of self-realization, which he indicates is the process by which autonomy is attained. This process, according to him, invokes considerations that are intimately caught up with the idea of positive liberty and the import-attributing function it entails. The problem with negative liberty is that it seeks to divorce itself from the import-attributing dimension of our lives, and, in so doing, wrongly portrays what it means to be human. Again, according to Taylor we are free only when we have overcome our internal 'motivational fetters', and exercise our self-understanding. We are free, in other words, when we have realized the autonomous self.

Yet is this the case? Is freedom, in either its positive or negative guises, truly an integral part of the pursuit of autonomy? As certain monastic practices suggest: perhaps not. Take, for example, certain traditions found within Eastern Orthodoxy. In these traditions novices submit to an elder, or *streltsy*, voluntarily renouncing their individual will. In such cases, discipline and obedience are the correlates to the cultivation of character, not liberty, whether it is as an opportunity concept or an exercise concept. Because of this – because, that is, some instances of self-mastery seem to require an

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[109] Berlin, lv, lvi. Berlin treats one such confusion – that between knowledge and liberty – in "From Hope and Fear Set Free." There he says: "The extent of freedom depends on opportunities of action, not knowledge of them, although such knowledge may well be an indispensable condition for the use of freedom, and although impediments in the path to it are themselves a deprivation of freedom – of freedom to know. Ignorance blocks paths, and knowledge opens them. But this truism does not entail that freedom implies awareness of freedom, still less that they are identical." ("From Hope and Fear Set Free," 192) He treats another such confusion – that between liberty and the idea of status – in "The Search for Status." See: Isaiah Berlin, "The Search for Status," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 196-199.

[110] Galipeau, 95f.

intentional fettering of the will – one could make the argument that freedom is actually the antipode of the self-realization, that liberty and 'self-understanding' are not reconcilable. In any event, it appears that the process of self-realization is less compatible with the idea of liberty than Taylor realizes.

Cohen is another scholar who claims that Berlin misunderstands the nature of positive liberty, and therefore misportrays its benefits. During the course of his assault upon the historical aspects of "Two Concepts" Cohen claims that Berlin's comments about positive liberty are "misdirected", and that the course of his critique "misfires."[111] Like Taylor, Cohen regards positive liberty favorably, as a laudable value in so far as it contributes to the cultivation of the individual's higher capacities. According to Cohen, there simply is "no logical susceptibility in the doctrine of self-mastery or positive freedom."[112] Indeed, Cohen goes so far as to say that negative liberty is a greater source of injustice and immorality than Berlin would have us believe. Hence, Berlin's discussion is "deplorable," attributing problems to the idea of positive freedom that are actually the result of its negative cousin.

Clearly Cohen dislikes Berlin's argument in "Two Concepts of Liberty." Criticizing the work along both historical and theoretical lines, Cohn's condemnation of the piece is thorough. But is it decisive? Or even accurate? I have already suggested regarding the historical charge that Cohen's complaint of "irrelevance" is, itself, superfluous, an irrefutable allegation that therefore may be disregarded. As for the claim that there is "no logical susceptibility in the doctrine of self-mastery or positive freedom" – Berlin makes a similar statement himself. In fact, Berlin makes it quite clear that the

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[111] Cohen, 223.
[112] Ibid., 224.

process by which positive liberty is perverted – transformed from the pursuit of freedom into a politics of tyranny – is one *without* a logical progression. He says:

> In this way the rationalist argument, with its assumption of the single true solution, has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible ...[113]

In so far as Cohen criticizes Berlin for trying to show that positive liberty necessarily yields to the rule of a despot, he is simply wrong. As the preceding quote indicates, Berlin does not think that this is the case; in fact, he holds that the opposite is the case, that the corruption of positive liberty is an illogical process. More than off target, Cohen's criticism regarding the content of Berlin's essay is simply wrong.

William Parent is another scholar who takes issue with Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, especially as regards the latter. Like Taylor and Cohen, Parent highlights the ties between positive liberty and self-mastery. Unlike Taylor and Cohen, however, Parent realizes that Berlin's main concern is the tension between monism and pluralism, not negative and positive liberty. This realization leads Parent to ask:

> Instead of attempting to show that the philosophical explication of rational self-mastery leads to tyranny and is inconsistent with a pluralism of values, he might simply have asked: Does rational self-mastery, under any interpretation, reflect what we ordinarily mean by liberty?[114]

Parent thus engages the idea of positive liberty itself, in so far as it is typically understood as a source of the moral self. Such concerns need not capture our attention here – Berlin is only one of several writers Parent investigates. What is, instead,

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[113] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 152.
[114] William Parent, "Some Recent Work on the Concept of Liberty," American Philosophical Quarterly 11 (1974), 152.

important is that Parent realizes that Berlin's actual concern in "Two Concepts" is for the confrontation between monism and pluralism. Less a criticism than an observation, Parent lays bare the true foundation of Berlin's argument. In this, Parent is nearly unique, being matched in this regard only by MacPherson.

MacPherson's critique, like those of Skinner or Cohen, is not confined to particular observations about the essay's historical merits. Indeed, as Parent, MacPherson realizes that Berlin's argument stands upon the discussion of monism and pluralism which ends the essay, and that it is *this* discussion with which he is concerned. In this MacPherson differs quite a bit from other commentators, such as Taylor, who attempt to defend the idea of positive liberty from some perceived diminution vis-à-vis negative liberty. Instead, MacPherson goes to the heart of the matter, so to speak, and attempts to disentangle positive liberty from the idea of monism. And he does so by distinguishing three different forms of positive liberty in Berlin's discussion.

MacPherson acknowledges that Berlin's analysis of the corruption of positive liberty is "brilliant."[115] What he does not think, however, is that Berlin's is an adequate account or accurate presentation of the whole of positive freedom. For MacPherson, the boundaries of positive liberty are broader than Berlin allows, which means that positive liberty is a much richer concept than "Two Concepts of Liberty" would have us believe. A source of human well-being, positive liberty is an ideal which prompts – a la Taylor – the cultivation of character. It is, MacPherson says, "what I have called a man's power in the developmental sense."[116] This power can be distinguished in terms of individual self-direction; rational self-mastery; and participation in political institutions – the three

[115] MacPherson, 106.
[116] Ibid., 105.

variations of positive liberty MacPherson terms "p1", "p2" and "p3". The problem, according to MacPherson, concerns Berlin's discussion of "p2", or positive liberty as rational self-mastery.

MacPherson maintains that Berlin links the idea of positive liberty as self-mastery with that of monism, a move that is – for MacPherson – disputable. According to Macpherson, monism, which holds that there is a 'single true solution' to all questions, is not logically tied to the idea of self-mastery. Because of this – because there are no theoretical ties between monism and positive liberty – positive liberty does not necessarily lend itself to corruption, and therefore does not necessarily lead to despotism. Such a conclusion, however, can only be reached once the various strands of positive liberty are untied and sorted, the 'bad' variant has been specified and, moreover, shown to be logically impervious to the charge of degeneration. Monism, not positive liberty, is what we should be wary of.

So far as he says positive liberty is a valuable ideal, nothing in MacPherson's discussion should concern Berlin. In fact, I suspect Berlin could agree with the three-fold distinction MacPherson draws, without necessarily being exposed to MacPherson's critique. For, again, Berlin never says that positive liberty necessarily leads to despotism, or is even logically linked to monism. Rather, he states quite the opposite, claiming, as noted above, that the steps from positive liberty to monism are "not logically valid."[117] MacPherson's critique is thus a little inaccurate, resting upon a presentation of Berlin's position which simply does not hold. By portraying Berlin's argument as he does, MacPherson actually mischaracterizes Berlin's position. He

[117] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 152.

thereby undermines his initial insight into the text; for while MacPherson is right to suggest that the problem of monism is the real focus of "Two Concepts", he is wrong to attribute the position to Berlin that positive liberty, understood as rational self-mastery, logically leads to tyranny. With that in mind, now is a good time to turn to "Two Concepts of Liberty" itself, and see what Berlin does say.

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"Two Concepts of Liberty" is primarily about authority and the limits of coercion. Following the lead of John Locke, Benjamin Constant, and John Stuart Mill – each of whom was worried about the undue influences of political authority – Berlin is firmly set in the liberal tradition which takes power as the currency of politics, and is less concerned with defining a 'common good' or *summum bonum*, than with establishing the legitimate limits of sovereignty. Indeed, the point of Berlin's distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' liberty is to clarify two distinct limits to government authority, two barriers to government interference in the lives of individuals, and show how effective these limits are. That Berlin emphasizes or dwells upon the alleged failures of one type of liberty – positive – is *not* because he sees it as a particularly degenerate form of freedom. Rather, it is because he regards positive liberty as having certain propensities towards authoritarianism, propensities exaggerated by assumptions the concept seems to share with the idea of monism. Hence, the 'culprit' or 'villain' of "Two Concepts" is not positive liberty as many have assumed, but, instead, the idea of monism. The unmasking of monism, then, as a menace to men's security and well-being is the real point of the piece.

Berlin begins with a brief discussion of negative liberty. In its simplest form, negative liberty is simply non-interference, "the opposite of coercion."[118] "Political liberty in this sense," Berlin explains,

> is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or ... enslaved.[119]

The idea here is one of staving others off, so to speak, of keeping them at bay or holding them at arm's length. It is an idea which holds that there is an inviolable private preserve, a space within which an individual should be left wholly alone, otherwise "the individual will find himself in an area too narrow," too cramped and pinched for him to be able "to pursue, and even to conceive, the various ends which men hold good or right or sacred."[120] Thus negative liberty is concerned with erecting barriers or setting boundaries around individuals, 'frontiers' which will guarantee that individuals have the opportunity to define their lives themselves, if they so choose.[121] As Berlin sums it up: "Liberty in this sense is principally concerned with the area of control, not with its source."[122]

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[118] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 128.
[119] Ibid., 122.
[120] Ibid., 124.
[121] "But whatever the principle in terms of which the area of non-interference is to be drawn, whether it is that of natural law or natural rights, or of utility or the pronouncements of a categorical imperative, or the sanctity of the social contract, or any other concept by which men have sought to clarify and justify their convictions, liberty in this sense means liberty *from*; absence of interference beyond the shifting, but always recognizable, frontier." (126-127) Compare: "In the modern world ... we proceed on the assumption that there is a frontier between public and private life; and that, however small the private sphere may be, within it I can do as I please – live as I like, believe what I want, say what I please – provided this does not interfere with the similar rights of others, or undermine the order which makes this kind of arrangement possible." (Isaiah Berlin, "Liberty," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 111-112)
[122] Ibid., 129. Compare: "Common opinion may oversimplify the issue; but it seems to me to be right about its essence: freedom is to do with the absence of obstacles." ("From Hope and Fear Set Free," 190) And: "The essence of the notion of liberty is the *holding off* of something or someone – of others, who

Positive liberty, on the other hand, *is* concerned with the "source" of control. Where negative liberty is taken with the question, 'How far do others interfere with me?', positive liberty asks, 'Who governs me?' or 'By whom am I ruled?'[123] It is a "desire to be governed by myself" which underlies the idea of positive liberty, not a wish for a "free area of action."[124] Not "freedom from, but freedom to" best describes the idea of positive liberty.[125]

Yet, if liberty is primarily about the limits of restraint, it remains unclear how positive liberty treats the issue of coercion. How, in other words, does the "desire to be governed by myself" protect individuals from abuse? I believe the answer to this question lies in the fact that positive liberty is about autonomy. In Berlin's words, individuals

> wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.[126]

Men, in short, wish to be their own masters, to have control over their own lives. In so far as this is the case – in so far as men wish to determine their own affairs themselves – the individual makes an exclusive claim; that is, positive liberty excludes all forms of authority that do not stem from the individual himself. Anything that abridges or intrudes upon the individual's right to govern himself is to be regarded as wrong, as an

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trespass on my field or assert their authority over me, or of obsessions, fears, neuroses irrational forces – intruders and despots of one kind or another." ("The Search for Status," 196) And again: "The degree of negative liberty simply means how many doors are open to me, whether I want to go through them or not." (Jahanbegloo, 150)

[123] Ibid., 130.
[124] Ibid., 131.
[125] Ibid., 131.
[126] Ibid., 131.

attempt to subjugate the individual, as coercion. Thus positive liberty is not dissimilar to its negative cousin, in that positive liberty curtails the unwarranted interference of others. But where negative liberty does so by erecting barriers, positive liberty does so by an active assertion of autonomy – by individuals taking charge of their own lives – by the "full use of human powers to whatever ends men choose ..."[127] As the individual assumes authority over his own affairs he excludes such an exercise by others. Hence positive liberty curbs coercion by curbing unjustified influences.[128]

Negative and positive liberty, then, both attempt to defend the individual from abuse or harm. As indicated, negative liberty tries to limit interference to an individual's personal concerns, while positive liberty attempts to make him master of his own domain. This shared concern for the well-being of the individual is quite significant, for it highlights something that is often overlooked about Berlin's discussion in "Two Concepts of Liberty", which is that he apparently does not believe that either negative or positive liberty alone can guarantee an individual's well-being. Granted, Berlin does not develop this point very far, but it seems that he thinks liberalism requires both negative *and* positive liberty. In other words, *together* negative and positive liberty provide the measure of freedom necessary for men to live peacefully and securely with one another. As Berlin notes, traditionally liberals have valued both positive and negative liberty, as one provides the opportunity for political participation while the other sets limits to legitimate interference in the individual's life. A truly liberal state, Berlin says, is one which is concerned with an "equality of liberty;" the fair treatment of its citizens; and the

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[127] "From Hope and Fear Set Free," 191.

[128] In other places Berlin makes clear that these impediments may be external, such as when one individual decides for, or in the interest, of another; or they may be internal, such as when an individual is given to passions or feelings which are felt to be uncontrollable or oppressive. See: "From Hope and Fear Set Free," 175; "My Intellectual Path," 16-17; and "The Search for Status," 196.

fulfillment of obligations and duties – in short, in "justice, in its simplest and most universal sense ..."[129] While they may collide and conflict and compete, it is the balance struck between negative and positive liberty, Berlin suggests, which provides the conditions just mentioned; which, that is, characterize a well-ordered liberal polity. As he states unequivocally to Jahanbegloo during the course of their discussions, the "uncontrolled exercise of either liberty destroys the other." Thus, "[n]egative liberty must be curtailed if positive liberty is to be sufficiently realized; there must be a balance between the two ..."[130] For "if there are no restraints, there can be no peace, [and] men will destroy each other." Freedom, it seems, carries with it "reciprocal obligations," obligations which distinguish it from the idea of anarchy.[131] Berlin, like many liberals before him, apparently maintains that procedural protections and civic participation *together* mark the constituent features of liberalism.

So what happens? What, that is, goes wrong? Where, according to Berlin, does the pursuit of freedom, well-being and security go awry? What leads from the institution of a liberal order to the realization of tyranny? What transforms the search for justice, respect for others, and the attainment of autonomy into the establishment of injustice, oppression, and degradation?

The answer lies in the pollution of positive liberty. As I've noted, positive liberty is concerned primarily with the issue of self-direction. "I wish," Berlin explains, "above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility

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[129] "Two Concepts of Liberty," 125.
[130] Jahanbegloo, 41, 42.
[131] Ibid., 149-150.

for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes."[132] I wish, in short, to be responsible for, and to, myself. Berlin suggests that originally the idea of positive liberty developed as the result of attempts at self-mastery, that individuals felt personally enslaved or oppressed to the extent that they were 'prey' to outside influences.[133] Individuals began to ask themselves:

> Is there not within me a higher, more rational, freer self, able to understand and dominate passions, ignorance and other defects, which I can attain to only by a process of education or understanding ...?[134]

And the answer was: yes, there is. At this point a duality was posited between 'higher' and 'lower' selves, where the higher self was identified with reason or an individual's rational faculties, while the lower self was equated with the passions or whatever irrational forces storm within men. Conflict and competition between the two soon followed.

The confrontation between these two forces – between reason and the emotions; between the rational and the irrational; between the mind and the heart – gives rise to the issue of coercion. The individual cannot be left at the mercy of what is untempered and untamed – to what Schopenhauer described as "a striving without aim or end."[135] Indeed, having identified his 'real' self with his rational faculties the individual has to free himself from such forces, to establish control over that which opposes his reflective,

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[132] Ibid., 131. Compare: "True liberty consists ... in self-direction: a man is free to the degree that the true explanation of his activity lies in the intentions and motives of which he is conscious, and not in some hidden psychological condition that would have produced the same effect ... whatever explanation or justification the agent attempted to produce." ("From Hope and Fear Set Free," 175)

[133] " 'I am a slave to no man'; but may I not ... be a slave to nature? Or to my own 'unbridled' passions? Are these not so many species of the identical genus 'slave' – some political or legal, others moral or spiritual?" (132)

[134] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 17.

[135] Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation: Vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 321.

'true', self. Subjugation becomes the means for self-control, since subjugation allows for the hierarchical ordering of the soul whereby reason assumes its rightful place of prominence. The passions, contrarily, are to be thrust into a yoke. So harnessed, the emotions and irrational forces that usually move men uncontrollably may be tamed and tempered, and put into their proper place. Coercion, then, becomes a tool of reason, a prod used to prompt the passions to behave.

But what is the truly free individual to do when confronted with others who are not similarly free? What is the autonomous man to do when he comes face to face with others who lack restraint, who lack discipline, who have not mastered themselves? How is the harmonious individual to deal with the clamoring multitude? He is, quite simply, to do to them what he did to himself – that is, to treat the disharmonious masses as he treated his own disharmonious soul. He is, in effect, to impose order upon them, to force them to be free. [136]

Yet how can such hard actions be justified? Berlin indicates that answer is rather simple, even if questionable. He writes: "Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong. To force empirical selves into the right pattern is no tyranny, but liberation."[137] Freedom, then, provides, the grounds for coercion since "(l)iberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, become virtually identical with it."[138] Indeed, "(i)n the ideal case, liberty coincides with law: autonomy with

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[136] "In due course, the thinkers who bent their energies to the solution of the problem on these lines came to be faced with the question of how in practice men were to be made rational in this way. Clearly they must be educated. For the uneducated are irrational, heteronomous, and need to be coerced, if only to make life more tolerable for the rational if they are to live in the same society and not be compelled to withdraw to a desert or some Olympian height." (149)

[137] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 148.

[138] Ibid., 148.

authority."[139] As Berlin puts it in the short essay, "Liberty:"

> We are told that to obey these institutions is but to obey ourselves, and therefore no slavery, for these institutions embody ourselves at our best and wisest, and self-restraint is not restraint, self-control is not slavery.[140]

The justification of authoritarianism is found, it seems, not in the unjust acts of the autonomous, but in the irrationality of the non-autonomous. If, Berlin asks, I interfere with someone, "but only in order to enable them to do what they would do if they knew enough, or were always at their best, instead of yielding to irrational motives, or behaving childishly, or allowing their animal side of their nature the upper hand ... (is) this then interference at all?"[141] A vicious version of 'blame the victim', those who are oppressed are culpable of bringing tyranny upon themselves. For "(i)f you cannot understand your own interests, I cannot be expected to consult you, or abide by your wishes ..."[142] Despotism is driven, then, by the ignorance and frailties of those who lack self-restraint or a capacity for self-mastery. Not the autonomous, but the heteronomous are responsible for paternalism.

Now, it remains to be seen how the perversion of positive liberty is tied to, or

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[139] Ibid., 149.
[140] Berlin, "Liberty," 112.
[141] Ibid., 112.
[142] "Two Concepts of Liberty," 149. Compare: "If the individual is ignorant, immature, uneducated, mentally crippled, denied adequate opportunities for health and development he will not know how to choose. Such a person will never truly know what it is he really wants. If there are people who understand what human nature is and what it craves, and if they do for others, perhaps by some measure of control, what these others would be doing for themselves if they were wiser, better informed, maturer, more developed, are they curtailing freedom? They are interfering with people as they are, but only in order to enable them to do what they would do if they knew enough, or were always the best, instead of yielding to irrational motives, or behaving childishly, or allowing the animal side of their nature the upper hand." ("Liberty," 112) And again: "There is a well-known metaphysical view, according to which I can be truly free and self-controlled only if I am truly rational ... and since I am not perhaps sufficiently rational, I must obey those who are indeed rational, and who therefore must know what is best not only for themselves but also for me, and who can guide me along lines which will ultimately awaken my true rational self and put it in charge, where it truly belongs ... In short, they are acting on my behalf, in the interests of my higher self, in controlling my lower self; so that true liberty for the lower self consists in total obedience to them, the wise, those who know the truth, the elite of sages ...." ("My Intellectual Path, 17)

exhibits tendencies of, monism. So let me briefly recount the constituent features of monism as laid out in chapter one. First, monism holds that questions are tractable and that their answers are exclusive. One, and only one, answer exists for every question. The means of determining these answers may or may not be used correctly, since the means are dependable guides, but not necessarily certain. Moreover, the answers are both culturally and historically universal, holding for all people, everywhere, at all times. Finally, these answers are logically and systematically related; that is, reducible to a common standard which renders them commensurable and compatible. Thus monism's responses to the problems of parsimony, method, universality, and harmony.

The congruence between positive liberty and monism is found with the problems of universality, harmony, and parsimony. Berlin states that there are four assumptions that identify the slide from freedom to despotism:

> (F)irst ... all men have one true purpose, and one only, that of rational self-direction; second, that the ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a universal, harmonious pattern, which some men may be able to discern more clearly than others; third, that all conflict, and consequently all tragedy, is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational or the insufficiently rational – the immature and undeveloped elements in life – whether individual or communal, and that such clashes are, in principle, avoidable, and for wholly rational beings impossible; finally, that when all men have been made rational, they will obey the rational laws of their own natures, which are one and the same in them all, so be at once wholly law abiding and wholly free.[143]

Clearly the references to men having "one and the same" nature and "one true purpose" exhibit the universal concerns of monism. As I showed earlier, one of the cornerstones of monism is the idea or belief that the differences between individuals are more

[143] Ibid., 154.

apparent than real. And as the preceding quote indicates, this is clearly one of the assumptions underlying the transformation of positive liberty. As for the harmony problem, the idea that the "ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a single universal, harmonious pattern" indicates monism's assumption that all answers to moral dilemmas must be commensurable and comparable. That is, the answers to the questions individuals ask must form part of a seamless whole. Finally, the idea that "clashes" are "avoidable" points to monism's response to the problem of parsimony. For as Berlin puts it: if one were sufficiently "rational" one would avoid the contest of values that characterizes the spiritually "immature." In other words, dilemmas are resolvable; problems, remedial.

Thus Berlin points to the potential overlap between positive liberty and monism, thus he indicates that his critique is not directed at positive liberty per se, but at the assumptions underlying it which allow it to be appropriated by monism. Yet showing this – showing, that is, monism's actual appropriation and perversion of positive liberty – requires turning to his discussion about the conflict between monism and pluralism.

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Berlin concludes "Two Concepts of Liberty" with a discussion of 'The One and the Many'. The reference is clear: Berlin now turns to the contest between monism and pluralism. As I have stated, this conflict – the conflict between monism and pluralism – is a major concern for Berlin in "Two Concepts", a concern that comes to the fore primarily at the end of the essay. Having laid out the concerns of, and differences between, negative and positive liberty; having indicated what he takes a liberal order to

be; having intimated the lines along which positive liberty may be perverted; having introduced monism by way of his discussion of positive liberty, Berlin concludes his essay with a consideration of the confrontation between two contending views of the world, between, that is, the 'One' and the 'Many', between monism and pluralism.

"One belief," Berlin says, "more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the alters of great historical ideals ..."

> This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution.[144]

He continues: "This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another."[145]

It is not difficult to discern the spectre of monism lurking within these words, for the idea that all values are reconcilable, compatible and logically linked is a part of monism's definition. The principles of parsimony and harmony are clearly at work here, insofar as the assertion is made that the answers to humanity's dilemmas basically fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, or parts of the pattern of a quilt. Again, the transformation of positive liberty from a valuable and worthwhile ideal to a justification for despotism involves the belief that the ends of all people may exist without discord and disharmony; that, in fact, everyone shares the same goal. And here arises the assumption that clinches the degradation of positive liberty, for it is the assumption of universality that ties monism to positive liberty. Let me explain.

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[144] Ibid., 167.
[145] Ibid., 167.

Positive liberty, it must be recalled, is concerned with the self-mastery or the pursuit of self-realization. According to positive liberty, "[f]reedom is self-government ... and anything that increases the control of the self over forces external to it contributes to liberty."[146] It is thus merely a personal matter, the cultivation of the individual's rational faculties by self-restraint, diligence, and moderation. Yet monism assumes that all men have the same end, that there is "only one correct answer to any problem of conduct."[147] This assumption – the assumption of universality – takes the idea of self-mastery 'a step further', so to speak, by maintaining that what fulfills one individual will do so for everyone else as well. In other words, the answer the monist finds to the problems which plague him are not held to apply to himself alone. Rather, the monist claims that the answer applies to *everyone*. One should not assume that what is good for you is also good for everyone else, Berlin suggests; but this is exactly the assumption monism makes. And when this assumption is made, the foundation for tragedy, suffering and sorrow is laid. For the assumption of universality is what pushes individuals out of their isolation and into confrontation, thus becoming the excuse monists use "to knock down walls between men, to bring everything out into the open, [to attempt to] make men live together without partitions, so that what one wants, all want."[148] It leads to the

> ruthless elimination of all goals, interpretations, forms of behaviour save for one absolutely specific, concrete, immediate end, binding on everyone, which calls for ends and means so narrow and clearly definable that it is easy to impose sanctions for failing to pursue them.[149]

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[146] Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free," 179.
[147] Ibid., 179.
[148] Berlin, "Liberty," 113.
[149] Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?", 152

The assumption of universality, then, is what allows monism to poison positive liberty, since positive liberty alone does not yield oppression.

Let me state this a bit differently: the fully rational, fully autonomous individual cannot allow for difference, lest the universe be not a harmonious whole, but some sort of polyphonous disharmony. Confronted with recalcitrant individuals who apparently do not have control over themselves; who appear irrational, unstable, or overly given to their passions; who do not know their place in the world; the rational individual must reshape their character, or 'free' them, so that "(e)ach ... will be a liberated, self-directed actor in the cosmic drama."[150] Questions are disallowed – "for who can tell where this might lead?" – hence there is the suppression of "any tendencies likely to lead to criticism, dissatisfaction, disorderly forms of life."[151] Unable to suffer fools lightly, so to speak, the monist must show others what their true nature is, and indicate to them where their real interests lay. It is not enough for the monist to discover the answers to life's problems for himself, nor is it enough for him to discern whether or not these answers are reconcilable or compatible. It is not enough, in other words, for the monist to overcome the problems of parsimony and harmony. He must also clarify the whole of humanity's higher capacities as well. That is, the monist must illuminate the one

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[150] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 147.

[151] Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," in Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 26. Berlin explains this further in "Philosophy and Government Repression," where he says: "The business of [State] control is to preserve the status quo – to guarantee some established situation, to protect what is regarded as the best, most harmonious correlation of interests, combination of factors, that can in the circumstances be achieved. The purpose of it is stability, peace, contentment." On the other hand, "the principle function of philosophy at its best is to break through, liberate, upset ... In this sense philosophers are necessarily subversive." " Certainly no society," Berlin concludes, "will be wholly secure, wholly safe on rocklike foundations, while philosophers are allowed to roam large." Thus the reason despots inevitably hound and harass intellectuals, artists and authors. See: Isaiah Berlin, "Philosophy and Government Repression," in The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 66f.

destination towards which every individual is traveling.[152] The problem of universality is thus the obstacle over which the monist must triumph.

As noted previously, the monist's means to meeting the problem of universality is to assume that everyone shares the same goals, has the same ends and hopes and fears, is driven by the same desires and aspirations. "The human being is one," the monist insists, "and in the ideal society, when everyone's faculties are developed, nobody will ever want to do anything that others may resent or wish to stop."[153] Once again, the assumption that all individuals are fundamentally the same is what leads the monist to misappropriate the idea of positive liberty. For positive liberty's calls for self-rule yield all too easily – even if not logically – to the monist's belief in the universal nature of humanity. The "great perversion of positive liberty," Berlin says, is that the tyranny it inspires "seeks [to liberate] the imprisoned, 'real' self within men," a self which everyone potentially shares.[154] Fettered by their passions, ignorance, superstitions and laziness, individuals must be forced to be free. No one, the monist suggests, would ever act against his or her own best interest. Therefore, when someone does act against his or her own best interest, restraint is appropriate. It is appropriate, from the standpoint of the monist, for individuals to be coerced to freedom since the authoritative institutions "embody ourselves at our best and wisest ..."[155] Freedom – 'true' freedom – thus "consists in total obedience to them, the wise, those who know the truth, the elite of

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[152] "To find roads is the business of experts," Berlin says. "It is therefore reasonable for ... society to put itself into the hands of specialists of tested experience, knowledge, gifts and probity, whose business it is ... to conduct the human caravan to the oasis the reality and desirability of which are recognised by all." ("Does Political Theory Still Exist?", 152)
[153] Berlin, "Liberty," 113.
[154] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 18.
[155] Berlin, "Liberty," 112.

sages," who act "on my behalf, in the interests of my higher self ..."[156] Let there be no doubt, Berlin says,

> [t]here is no despot in the world who cannot use this method of argument for the vilest oppression, in the name of an ideal self which he is seeking to bring to fruition by his own, perhaps somewhat brutal and ... morally odious means ...[157]

That is, there is no price that is too high for the perfectly free society, a society wherein individuals "can attain to the level of those who give the orders."[158] Thus Berlin would have us understand that the assumption of universality is the force behind paternalism and authoritarianism, not positive liberty. Thus he would have us consider monism as the potential source of tyranny.

And what of pluralism? Here the matter becomes a bit murky, for Berlin, as I've noted, disavows any logical links between liberalism and pluralism: they are, for him, two distinct ideas. Again, as Berlin says to Jahanbegloo during the course of one of their conversations: "liberalism and pluralism ... are not logically connected."[159] Despite such claims, however, towards the end of "Two Concepts" Berlin makes the following remark, a remark that is a bit puzzling. He says:

> Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty it entails, seems to me a truer and more human ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind.[160]

The favorable juxtaposition with monism is clear: pluralism provides a more accurate account of the human condition, and hence is less threatening and more sensitive to

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[156] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 17.
[157] Ibid., 17.
[158] Ibid., 18.
[159] Jahanbegloo, 44,
[160] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 171.

men's needs. What is less clear, however, is how pluralism "entails" negative liberty. What does this mean? How should we understand this statement, especially given that Berlin has insisted elsewhere that the two ideas are unrelated? Certainly clarifying this will shed some light on why Berlin is at once both a pluralist and a liberal.

I believe the key to this statement is that both pluralism and negative liberty involve some view of the idea of choice. Please recall that negative liberty is concerned with barriers or, to paraphrase Berlin, with 'holding doors open'.[161] The assumption seems to be that the more rooms a man may enter, the freer he may be said to be. Staving off the unjustified interference of others provides men with the opportunity to pursue their own goals. Hence, negative liberty involves choice in so far as it gives men the latitude to choose.

Similarly, pluralism involves choices by also providing men with the opportunity to choose. Because values are incommensurable; because questions have multiple responses, each of which is potentially valid; and because these responses are, to a certain degree, historically and culturally bound, pluralism recognizes that "human goods are many ..."[162] Where monism holds that everyone aims at the same end – an assumption which, in effect, strips the idea of choice of any substantive meaning, or regards decision-making as a process of technical expertise – pluralism posits that individuals *do not* aim at the same goals. Consequently, pluralism realizes that "(t)he

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[161] "When we speak of the extent of freedom enjoyed by a man or a society, we have in mind, it seems to me the width or extent of the paths before them, the number of open doors, as it were, and the extent to which they are open." ("From Hope and Fear Set Free," 191) Compare: "The extent of a man's negative liberty is ... a function of what doors, and how many, are open to him; upon what prospects they open; and how open they are." ("Introduction," xlviii)

[162] Ibid., 171.

necessity of choosing ... is an inescapable characteristic of the human condition."[163] And it is this recognition of choice as such a fundamental "characteristic of the human condition" which allies it with liberalism. For the link between pluralism and liberalism is not logical or discursive: it is one of similarity. Pluralism "entails" liberalism *not* because of any specific theoretical tie, but because of a 'family resemblance', or, rather, an overlapping concern for the idea of choice-making. Berlin can affirm pluralism and liberalism simultaneously because they mirror one another. Given monism's potentially disastrous consequences, Berlin's commitment is understandable.

Now, the position I have attributed to Berlin – that choice is the tie between pluralism and liberalism – is not without its critics, and rightly so. For the idea the liberal belief that choice is valuable is quite different than the pluralist assumption that choice is a necessity. Indeed, this seems to be the argument of both Gray and Crowder, both of whom claim that such an argument is flawed, and does not succeed in what it sets out to do. In other words, according to Gray and Crowder, choice does not provide the means to move from pluralism to liberalism.

For Gray the issue is rather simple: "the supreme value of choice-making cannot ... be derived from the pluralist thesis of value-incommensurability ..."[164] Pluralism, Gray holds, does not highlight the significance of choice, therefore it is quite unlike liberalism, for which the "freedom of choice has universal and pre-eminent value ..."[165] Similarly, Crowder claims that nothing in pluralism leads one to choose liberalism per se, for "there is nothing in pluralism itself to tell us which values in particular ought to

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[163] Ibid., 169.
[164] Gray, 161.
[165] Ibid., 161.

be chosen."[166] The problem, from Crowder's perspective, is that the necessity of choosing that characterizes pluralism does not necessarily yield an appreciation of choice as an end in itself. Choice, in other words, as it relates to pluralism is categorically distinct from choice as it relates to liberalism: the fact of having to choose does not mean one will value choice. Consequently, one can choose to pursue illiberal paths as readily as liberal ones. For both Gray and Crowder, then, the idea of choice does not provide a reliable way to get from the position of pluralism to that of liberalism.

Now Berlin is not unaware of this problem. In fact, one can discern at least two different responses to these criticisms in his work, attempts by Berlin to address the dichotomy between choice as a value and choice as a necessity. The first of these attempts, I think, does not succeed. The other, however, I believe fares somewhat better, although it may not be as decisive response as one would hope. So let me review them in turn.

Berlin's first attempt to meet the criticism that there is a difference regarding the idea of choice for both pluralism and liberalism may be found in "Two Concepts" itself. There, towards the essay's end, Berlin states:

> The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some which much inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose ...[167]

The assumption, here, is obvious enough: Berlin does not believe that there is such a great divide between choice as a value and choice as a necessity. Indeed, according to

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[166] Crowder, 295.
[167] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 168.

this statement, the value of choice arises from the necessity of choosing; that is, we hold choice dear because we are constantly making choices. From this perspective, pluralism *does* carry an appreciation of the importance of choice making in its wake, and this, according to what Berlin says here, is enough to ally it with liberalism. It may not be a logical move, strictly speaking, but it is, again, enough of a reason to warrant or justify a commitment to liberalism. It would seem, then, that Berlin, at this point, is not willing to concede the idea that there are *no* ties between pluralism and liberalism whatsoever. For him there are.

Clearly this is a problematic assertion. Rather than meet the criticism 'head-on', as it were, Berlin, instead, simply restates his position. The value of choice comes from having to choose – and that is that. Of course, "that isn't that", for such an assertion begs the question. Men may very well value choice; but to insist that they value choice because they in fact make choices avoids explaining why. For it is equally easy to assume that people detest or dread making choices – as they often do – and that individuals do not value the idea of choice as a result. Again, 'The Grand Inquisitor' is helpful here, for the point of Dostoyevsky's parable is that people may become so uncomfortable with making choices that they give up their ability to do so to someone else. It would seem, then, that if Berlin wants to claim that the value of choice somehow follows from the act of choosing he must indicate the reasons why a little better. Thus he makes yet a second attempt.

The thrust of Berlin's second response is that it is not a sufficient refutation of the ties between liberalism and pluralism to point out that individuals may renounce their right to decide for themselves. It is not enough, in other words, to indicate that people

may avoid choosing liberalism, or select some other political ideology. As his own discussion about the corruption of positive liberty shows, Berlin was well aware that individuals have the option to pick non-liberal – or illiberal – responses to pluralism. Yet, as he takes pains to point out, the results of such choices are often horrible and inhumane.

What is important for Berlin, instead, is that reasons can be found which allow one to choose liberalism. That is, it is enough to delineate reasons on behalf of liberalism, even while one is aware of the reasons that support other positions. This seems to be the point Berlin and Bernard Williams make in their joint response to Crowder, wherein they say:

> All that is strictly necessary ... to produce an effective argument is that [choice] should be appropriately related to liberalism, and that pluralism can urge the claims of [choice-making] more effectively than that enemies of liberalism can urge [their claims against liberalism] ...[168]

The issue, according to what Berlin and Williams say here, is not whether one can imagine reasons for *avoiding* liberalism. Rather, one needs to determine whether there is evidence *for* liberalism. As the idea of choice makes clear, Berlin (and Williams as well) believes there are.

Now I would like to state that even this second response does not seem to achieve what Berlin hopes. While there are undoubtedly reasons both for and against liberalism, the question remains as to whether liberalism is the *best* response to pluralism. That is, there is still a problem as to whether one should pay heed to the reasons on behalf of liberalism, or whether one should give precedence to the reasons against liberalism.

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[168] Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: a Reply," Political Studies 41 (1994), 308.

Although they might not like admitting this, the preceding quote by Berlin and Williams indicates that there is still the difficulty of determining whether liberals can "urge" their claims better than their rivals. The contest between liberalism and, say, socialism, or fascism, is not resolved by simply stating that there are reasons for each position and we must discern which are the more effective or most persuasive. Such a statement merely pushes the issue of deciding for or against liberalism even further into the background. For the problem remains as it was before: how does one decide which position is best? How, in other words, does one 'urge' the claims of liberalism more effectively than those of its competitors? Rather than convincingly respond to Crowder and Gray's criticisms, it seems Berlin and Williams have sidestepped them. Is there *no* response then?

According to some the response depends upon the circumstances. That is, it is the historical context that justifies the 'jump' from pluralism to liberalism. As Galipeau explains things, Berlin "appeals to history" to buttress his defense of liberalism. "By analysing the history of the idea of liberty," Galipeau says, "and pointing to its uses in political history, he strengthens the case against the positive conception of liberty."[169] The study of history thus explains his commitment to liberalism, as Berlin "concluded from history that the concept of negative liberty has been historically less perverted than the concept of positive liberty."[170] Galipeau's belief – that history provides the basis of Berlin's commitment to liberalism – is an appealing one, given that it appears to deflect the relativist critique of Berlin. Gray, for instance, makes an argument similar to Galipeau's, claiming that Berlin believes "the context of cultural tradition in which

[169] Galipeau, 147.
[170] Ibid., 147.

conflicts occur will itself suggest reasons for resolving such conflicts in some ways rather than others."[171] Hausheer is another who argues that Berlin overcomes the charge of relativism through a reliance on historical context. As he puts it, Berlin overcomes the danger of subjectivism with an assertion that our most "direct incorrigible knowledge ... [is of] human beings in specific historical circumstances ..."[172] Obviously the idea that history provides the bridge joining pluralism to liberalism is a defense of Berlin which is attractive to some.

Unfortunately, this is not the response Berlin himself makes. Although there is no doubt that Berlin regards history highly, and often seeks to exonerate the study of history vis-à-vis that of the natural sciences, he does not base his defense of liberalism upon history as Galipeau and others claim.[173] As the preceding statements by he and Williams indicate, Berlin does not argue that the ties between liberalism and pluralism are to be found within the realm of history or be determined by historical studies. Neither does he argue that historical context reveals the compatibility between pluralism and liberalism. As I have shown, Berlin indicates, instead, that the worth of liberalism lies elsewhere, that it derives from the value individuals place upon the act of choosing, or results from the fact that monism is the foundation of despotism. Rather than rely upon a view of history, Berlin apparently makes another argument. That is, Berlin responds to the charges pressed against him by Gray and Crowder a bit differently than Galipeau and others have supposed. So what *is* his response?

Berlin's rejoinder to Gray and Crowder, I think, lies with what I have called his

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[171] Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 155.
[172] Hausheer, li.
[173] Berlin sharply distinguishes history form science in "The Concept of Scientific History"; "Historical Inevitability"; "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities"; and "The Sense of Reality".

'negative defense of liberalism'. As I have said, this defense consists in trying to show that monism leads to tyranny – and in this it differs quite a bit from the attempts to tie liberalism and pluralism together. For while one can, by means of the idea of choice, indicate a certain resemblance between liberalism and pluralism, this resemblance, in the end, does not gain what it essays. That is, that liberalism and pluralism share a certain resemblance regarding the idea of choice does nothing but show why it is tempting to think, fallaciously, that the two are somehow joined. This is why it is necessary for Berlin to provide another defense of his liberal commitments, which I think he does through his critique of monism.

Berlin's argument against monism, as I have laid it out, is that if one assumes a monist view of reality one may be led more easily to a politics of tyranny. Central to this argument is the idea that monism holds that individuals share the same ends. Now, if all individuals hold the same ends, then clearly once a problem is settled, it is settled for the whole of humanity. Similarly, along those lines, once one determines the best way to govern, one determines the best means of governing everyone. Because individuals are ultimately the same, what holds good for one, will hold good for all. And this will be as true of humanity politically as it is ethically, biologically or otherwise.

The upshot of this, according to Berlin, is that choice – in either its pluralist or liberal guise – is lost. As Berlin puts it: if monism is correct, then "the necessity and agony of choice disappear, and with it the central importance of the freedom to choose."[174] For once one knows the right path to walk, once one determines one's place in the harmony of ends, then there is nothing left to struggle with, worry about, or

[174]Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 168.

decide. In other words, where "ends are agreed, the only questions left are those of means, and these are not political but technical, that is to say, capable of being settled by experts or machines like arguments between engineers or doctors."[175] The beginnings of authoritarianism are simple enough indeed.

Let me restate this once more. Monism, as Berlin characterizes it, cannot countenance choice. Now, if monism cannot allow for choice, then Berlin's defense is clear: pluralism and liberalism are the only decent – the only "humane" – options we have. The argument, it seems to me, that Berlin provides is not one that asserts the idea that pluralism and liberalism are somehow compatible. Rather, his argument is one that seeks to show that if you assume monism, then you must renounce pluralism, and quite possibly liberalism as well. His is a 'negative defense', then, insofar as it strongly relies not upon the tactic of buttressing pluralism and liberalism, but upon undermining monism.

Now Gray has an interesting observation related to what I have just said. In the course of his discussion of Berlin, Gray points out that the possibility exists that societies may settle for non-liberal forms of government that do not make universalistic claims. As he puts it, there are "illiberal regimes [which] are not committed to asserting the unique or universal authority of the ways of life which they protect, nor are they committed to denying the value of other ways of life ..."[176] In other words, there may be cultures that are non-liberal, but also not monistic.

Clearly this poses a problem for Berlin, for a group that pursues non-liberal practices but avoids the temptations of monism is not a group that falls within the

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[175] Ibid., 118.
[176] Gray, 152.

parameters of his discussion. Such a society is effectively 'pluralistic', but not liberal. It would seem Gray has specified something which Berlin has not considered, something which potentially challenges his argument. And this is the idea of a pluralistic, non-liberal society. According to Jonathan Riley, however, Berlin has nothing to worry about.

Riley's response to Gray is basically this: Berlin's conception of pluralism assumes a framework of liberal values. That is, liberalism is 'interwoven' or written into the nature of pluralism. Focusing upon Berlin's comments about a 'common human horizon', Riley interprets him as saying that certain values are shared by the whole of humanity. More, Berlin believes that these shared values are liberal values, given his statements that it is impossible to imagine human existence without a minimum of respect certain individual rights. The result of such comments, Riley claims, is that incommensurability is not a problem for comparing or deciding between liberal and illiberal regimes. Such a comparison does not exist, simply because illiberal regimes are not really an option. Since all societies necessarily fall within the so-called 'common horizon', all societies are in some sense liberal. As a result, the problem of incommensurability arises only for liberal societies, in that the alternatives we face are alternatives among different forms of liberal regimes. Gray, then, is wrong, simply because, for Berlin, there are no non-liberal alternatives.[177]

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[177] Jonathan Riley, "Crooked Timber and Liberal Culture," in Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity, ed. Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (New York: Routledge, 2000), 120-155. To be fair, Riley's argument is a bit more complex than my portrait of it. For instance, he provides some insightful comments about the role of rationality in Berlin's thought, claiming that Berlin juxtaposes a more modest form of rationality in opposition to the 'utopian' rationality of the Enlightenment. About this I think Riley is right. Unfortunately, Riley then suggests what I've sketched out in the text above, which is that Berlin holds that all societies are, to some degree, liberal. As I try to make clear above, I think this is simply incorrect.

Now Riley undoubtedly provides an interesting reading of Berlin. The idea that incommensurability exists as a problem only for liberal regimes – and therefore is not really a problem at all – is definitely an imaginative interpretation of Berlin, and one that is not completely implausible. Berlin, for instance, *does* claim individuals share a common moral horizon. Moreover, he also states that all societies have to exhibit certain values if they are to survive. What he does *not* do, however, is assert that these values are necessarily liberal. That is, Berlin does not claim that *all* societies, in someway, exhibit liberal values. If he did assert this, then Berlin would have to claim something to the effect that socialism, for instance, is a form or variation of liberalism. And this, no doubt, would be an odd thing for him to proclaim. It seems that if Riley is right, some pretty surprising conclusions follow.

Clearly I do not believe Riley's appraisal of Berlin is correct. The problem with Riley's interpretation, it seems to me, is that he tries to answer the problem Gray raises with a questionable suggestion: that incommensurability only obtains between liberal societies. But Berlin does not indicate this. Indeed, as I have shown, Berlin is quite clearly concerned with the challenge illiberal regimes pose to liberal ones. To the extent that this is so, to the extent, that is, that Berlin is concerned with why one should be a liberal, as opposed to a socialist, he does not seek to shirk or dilute the problem of how one decides between different political alternatives. Quite the opposite, in fact, for Berlin puts the point that there are competing political visions as strongly as possible.

Where Riley goes astray, I think, is that he attempts to defend Berlin from the charge of relativism by dissolving the issue, instead of meeting it. That is, Riley attempts to avoid the hard question of how Berlin can be both a pluralist and a liberal, by

suggesting that Berlin believes that if one is not a monist then one can never be anything *other than* a pluralist and a liberal. Unfortunately, to regard Berlin in this light Riley has to assume that Berlin means the common human horizon is a common *liberal* horizon – which I do not think is the case. Berlin does speak about a common human horizon, to be sure. But this common human horizon is one with a "finite" number of values, values that may be ranked by various societies or individuals in different and competitive ways. So far from suggesting that incommensurability is a problem only for liberal regimes, Berlin is quite clear that the problem of commensurability arises between liberalism and its non-liberal rivals.

So, in my opinion Gray's challenge stands. It seems to me that Berlin still has to confront the idea of non-liberal, and non-monistic, regimes. However, where Gray believes he is speaking about pluralism, I think he is speaking about something else. It seems to me that the problem of comparison Gray raises is not a question about pluralism per se. It is, instead, a question about relativism. For how one decides whether to be a part of this society instead of that – how one decides whether to live in a liberal or non-liberal polity – is the problem of how one decides between apparently incomparable alternatives. This, quite simply, is the challenge posed by relativism. In effect, for Berlin to respond to Gray's observations he must first take into account the issue of how pluralism differs from relativism, which is to say, Berlin needs to discriminate pluralism from relativism. So, with that in mind, I would like to now turn to a comparison of pluralism and relativism.

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Berlin's, then, is a 'negative' defense of pluralism and liberalism. As I have argued, "Two Concepts of Liberty" evinces Berlin's belief that a just liberal order rests upon the balance struck between negative and positive liberty. More, that this order is threatened by the potential corruption of positive liberty. Positive liberty, Berlin argues, is a search for self-mastery or the grounds for autonomy. In so far as positive liberty allows for the cultivation of character or self-fulfillment along personal lines it is a valuable ideal. But when positive liberty asserts that what fulfills one individual will do the same for all individuals, it goes too far. At this point – the point of assuming that all individuals share the same ends – positive liberty joins with monism, and begins marching down the path to paternalism and authoritarianism. Monism, not positive liberty, is the danger, for monism provides the push towards tyranny.

Contrarily, liberalism and pluralism, while not logically linked, exhibit a shared concern for the idea of choice. Liberalism, which attempts to protect individuals from unjustifiable coercion, provides men with opportunities for action. Similarly, pluralism that assumes a variety of values, holds that choice is inescapable. "That we cannot have everything," Berlin reminds us, "is a necessary, not a contingent, truth."[178] The rough overlap between these two positions – between what amounts to a similarity between political and moral freedom – is what allows Berlin – in places – to affirm both pluralism and liberalism, even while claiming that the two are not logically related. Again, a particular resemblance is what unites pluralism and liberalism for Berlin, not a discursive justification.

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[178] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 170.

Yet this particular resemblance does not completely overcome all objections. Indeed, it appears that Berlin cannot completely justify his commitment to liberalism. As Gray points out, there remains the issue of non-liberal, but non-monistic, societies. Why, from this perspective, should one always choose liberalism? How can one, in such cases, justify such choice? What, in other words, does one do when confronted with apparently incommensurable and incomparable alternatives. This brings to the fore the question of relativism, and leads to the question of whether Berlin is a relativist. So, with that in mind, I would now like to turn to the consideration of how Berlin distinguishes relativism from pluralism.

Chapter 3

Pluralism and Relativism

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Although Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty has proven to be provocative, it is what he says in the last paragraph of "Two Concepts of Liberty" which has earned him condemnation as a relativist. There, during the course of a passing reference to Joseph Schumpeter, Berlin makes a statement that has generated its share of controversy, prompting the irritation of some, the appreciation of others. He says:

> 'To realise the relative validity of one's convictions,' said an admirable writer of our time, 'and yet to stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.' To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practise is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.[179]

For those who have found their ire invoked, the preceding statement smacks of faint-heartedness or a lack of moral fortitude or fibre. For those who applaud Berlin's comment, praise is given for the signs of humility and marks of modesty the statement is taken to exhibit. Either way, Berlin's words are evocative.

As noted in the introduction, it is Sandel who provides the clearest summary of the case against Berlin. While he does not accuse Berlin of being an outright relativist, Sandel does put the issue starkly, leaving no doubts as to what the problem is. As he puts it:

> If one's convictions are only relatively valid, why stand for them unflinchingly? In a tragically-configured moral

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[179] Ibid., 172.

> universe, as Berlin assumes, is the ideal of freedom any *less* subject than competing ideals to the ultimate incommensurablity of values? If so, in what can its privileged status consist? And if freedom has no morally privileged status, if it is just one value among many, then what can be said for liberalism?[180]

Others have asked similar questions, wondering, as Sandel, whether Berlin does not edge precipitously close to the cliff of relativism. Michael Ignatieff, for example, ends his biography of Berlin with a question akin to Sandel's, asking: "why should a free society be valued above all?"[181] In the same vein, Ronald McKinney inquires whether Berlin's "fallibilist stand [is] in fact self-referentially inconsistent?" – a complaint commonly lodged against relativists.[182] Similarly Roger Hausheer asks: "In the absence of a set of overarching, universal, objective standards, is mere anarchy of values the result? Is the door opened to the raising up of any and every conceivable form of human action or behavior to the status of a moral end?"[183] And Yael Tamir worries about how we are "to make normative decisions if our starting point is that only history can provide us with an answer?"[184] As Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram put it: "Berlin's vision of an objective plurality of values is not shared by everyone."[185]

Tamir's suggestion – that given a condition of pluralism decisions are ultimately contingent – indicates the basis of the idea that pluralism is little more than a 'soft' form of relativism. The concern, it seems, is that if our decisions cannot be 'grounded' upon a solid foundation our moral commitments will be arbitrary, if not fleeting. To quote

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[180] Sandel, 8.
[181] Michaal Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin: A Life, (New York: The Viking Press, 1998), 286.
[182] Ronald H. McKinney, "Towards a postmodern ethics: Sir Isaiah Berlin and John Caputo," The Journal of Value Inquiry 26 (1992), 405.
[183] Hausheer, xlix.
[184] Yael Tamir, "Whose History? Whose Ideas?" in Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration, ed. Edna and Avishi Margalit (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), 158.
[185] Baghramian and Ingram, "Introduction," 3.

Baghramian and Ingram once more:

> The fear is that if we allow the possibility of many incompatible and true pictures of the world, and many incompatible goods and virtues, then we are undermining the whole notion of the true and the good.[186]

In short, pluralism is thought to tear at the texture of man's moral universe because it allegedly disavows the idea of a universal or common morality. Such is Strauss's objection, and the point about which he most strongly disagrees with Berlin.

During the course of his critique of "Two Concepts," Strauss fastens upon and foregrounds statements by Berlin which are, at the very least, paradoxical. Noticing that Berlin indicates that liberalism cannot make architectonic claims, yet cannot survive without them, Strauss concludes that "we are forced to say that Berlin contradicts himself."[187] The problem, according to Strauss, is that Berlin demands a sacrosanct private sphere which has the weight of an absolute position, but is unwilling to provide this sphere the absolutist justification it requires. Such hesitation, says Strauss, is the result of Berlin's 'empiricism', an empiricism born of Berlin's concern for history. Berlin, Strauss claims, cannot allow for the possibility of a "peak experience, of an absolute moment in history, in which the fundamental condition of man is realized for the first time and in principle fully."[188] Regarding only the historical record or the "experience of men," Berlin interprets history as being an open-ended affair, or one without a terminus, "unfinished or unfinishable." While this may be adequate for describing past events, such a view provides little help for the moral dilemmas men face. For, as everyone else, Berlin cannot avoid the necessity "to which every thinking being

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[186] Ibid., 3.
[187] Strauss, 16.
[188] Ibid., 17.

is subject: to take a final stand, an absolute stand in accordance with what he regards as the nature of man or as the nature of the human condition or as the decisive truth ..."[189] Berlin's problem, then, is that he "wishes to find an impossible middle ground between relativism and absolutism," a ground the existence of which Strauss doubts.[190] Consequently, Strauss concludes that Berlin is simply a relativist who apparently does not know, or is unwilling to admit, what he is.

The claim that pluralism is an "impossible middle ground" brings to the fore an interesting implication of the relativist critique, which is the assumption that there are only two responses to the world's diversity. On the one hand, one can regard the diversity one encounters as a sort of skein which overlays the 'true' nature of reality. From this vantage, variety is a sort of mirage which keeps individuals from seeing things 'as they really are'. Once one pierces this veil, one will realize what the essence of being consists of. On the other hand, one can regard the diversity of the world as being the *only* reality. That is, one can hold that nothing lies 'beyond' the realm of appearances, that appearances are actually *all* that exist. The idea that there is something more than what we encounter in our day-to-day existences is a hoax, a dream consisting of castles built in the sky. In short, an implication of the relativist critique – an implication Strauss renders explicit – is that if pluralism is an impossible middle ground, then one must either be a monist or a relativist: there is no third path to take.[191] It is simply vain, from this position, to assume that pluralism is a viable alternative. Pluralism, it seems, is a

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[189] Ibid., 17.
[190] Ibid., 17.
[191] Compare: "There are (at least) two problems, but those two problems are absolutely fundamental: is there one kind of man, or are there many? Is there but one world, or are there many?" (Ernest Gellner, "Relativism and Universals," in Rationality and Relativism, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 181)

non-starter.[192]

But why, exactly, is this? Why do Berlin's critics hold that pluralism is an untenable position? What, specifically, leads them to the conclusion that pluralism is merely a variation of relativism, and therefore to be rejected? What are the grounds for the relativist critique?

First, there is the self-referential problem both Strauss and McKinney mention. Pluralists, like relativists, are apparently guilty of contradicting themselves. For how can one disavow architectonic structures yet still make architectonic claims? Either one must admit that such structures exist – as monists do – or one must admit that they do not – as relativist do. To *not* make such a choice – to persist in claiming the benefits of metaphysical foundations while denying their existence – is little more than a philosophical version of 'having your cake and eating it too'. It is to garner the security and surety of what Strauss terms 'absolutism' while denying that one is an absolutist. It is to assert and deny simultaneously the same claim.

Clearly such a maneuver is inconsistent, being based, as it is, upon a formal contradiction. One *cannot* both assert a proposition and its opposite simultaneously, which is to say, one cannot both claim 'A' and 'not-A' at the same time. Yet this is exactly what Berlin is accused of doing: he is accused of breaking the so-called 'law of non-contradiction'. If this is so, – if, that is, Berlin does in fact contradict himself in this fashion – then he faces a serious dilemma. For the problem of contradiction relativism

[192] Interestingly enough, at least one critic of universalism, Richard Rorty, holds the same position as its defenders, which is to say, Rorty also regards the issue 'dualistically' or in terms of a 'binary opposition' between universalism, or monism, and relativism. Thus Rorty's depiction of the history of thought as a confrontation between 'objectivists' and 'pragmatists', 'universalists' and 'relativists', 'rationalists' and 'irrationalists.' His point seems to be that opponents of monism are relativists by default, even as Strauss makes the same assumption. In my opinion, such an assumption is wrong.

faces (which is, undoubtedly a serious issue for that position) applies to pluralism as well. The first charge leveled against pluralism, then, is one of contradiction.

Then there is the issue of 'radical choice'. This, I think, is the real bone of contention for those who dislike pluralism. Radical choice, as the relativist critique presents it, is the idea that decision-making is ultimately subjective, that, when confronted with alternative values or goals or ends, one decides without the benefit of reason or chooses 'blindly'. It is a subjective vision of decision-making that regards decisions as the result of preferences or tastes or desires, but not explicable reasons.[193] The assumption here, apparently, is that because "action must be unitary" so men's reasons or rationalizations for acting must also be unitary.[194] Pluralism is a 'soft' form of relativism because pluralism, like relativism, relies upon the idea of 'radical choice'. Again, pluralism allegedly does not allow for individuals to justify why they do or decide as they do – decisions are simply made. It is this then – this irrational vision of decision-making – which critics of pluralism point to when they wish to argue that pluralism is ultimately a disguised form of relativism. For, according to them, the decisions that result from radical choice are arbitrary or unjustifiable or 'ungoverned by reason'. Pluralism is consequently an unsustainable position because it relies upon an

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[193] Again, Nagel is useful here. As he puts it: "The strongest cases of conflict are genuine dilemmas, where there is decisive support for two or more incompatible courses of action or inaction. In that case a decision will still be necessary, but it will seem necessarily arbitrary. When two choices are very evenly balanced, it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem. But when each seems right for reasons that appear decisive and sufficient, arbitrariness means the lack of reasons where reasons are needed, since either choice will mean acting against some reasons without being able to claim that they are *outweighed*." ("The Fragmentation of Value," 128-129)

[194] Thomas Nagel puts this well. He says: "The unavailability of a single, reductive method or a clear set of priorities for settling them does not remove the necessity for making decisions in such cases. When faced with conflicting and incommensurable claims we still have to do something – even if it is only to do nothing. And the fact that action must be unitary seems to imply that unless justification is also unitary, nothing can be either right or wrong and all decisions under conflict are arbitrary." ("The Fragmentation of Value," 134)

idea that has relativistic overtones.

Now, I have my doubts about the relativist critique, even without taking into consideration how it applies to Berlin's work. It seems to me that the insinuation that one is either a monist or a relativist – which, again, is the implication of the relativist criticism – is false, primarily because it elides the differences between pluralism and relativism. It seems to me problematic to stress that the theoretical distinction between pluralism and relativism does not hold because pluralism does not allow for architectonic claims. Pluralists such as Berlin have argued that pluralism *does* allow for such claims, which suggests that pluralism, in some way, is quite different than relativism. The challenge, then, is not to overstate the similarities between pluralism and relativism or insist that pluralists are being hypocritical, or guilty of defying the law of non-contradiction, but to clarify how pluralism and relativism differ. This, in turn, requires a careful examination of the two concepts, one that lays out the central tenets or assumptions of each position. Unfortunately, such an investigation has not been forthcoming from those who argue that pluralism is merely a variant of relativism. Instead, as I have indicated above, what such criticisms have accomplished is to allege that pluralism depends upon an idea – radical choice – that makes it an indefensible position. Obviously I believe this is an incorrect appraisal of the situation.

As I shall argue, pluralism differs from relativism regarding the question of comparability. Comparability, it seems to me, is the crux of the idea of 'radical choice', for radical choice, as I have pointed out, is the idea that decisions are made without the guidance of reason, or are, to a certain degree, subjective. "Given two or more alternatives," the proponent of radical choice tells us, "one must choose without the

direction of reason, or blindly." People simply choose as they choose, as it were. Undoubtedly such a conception of pluralism – if this is what pluralism actually holds – *is* little more than a veiled form of relativism (as I will shortly try to show), for a choice blindly made would have to depend upon nothing more than preferences. A radically made choice, that is, would have to be subjectively based.

Yet this is not the argument Berlin makes. Interestingly enough, the idea of radical choice is not one he ever mentions. Indeed, choices – as he seems to understand the process of decision-making – are made upon certain grounds or are justifiable. According to Berlin, one *can* explain why one chooses, say, Taoism over Christianity, or Islam over Buddhism, even as one can explain why one is a liberal and not a socialist. Choice is neither radical nor blind in his opinion. The question which arises – and this brings me to the heart of the relativist critique – is how, according to Berlin, one can do this; how, that is, one can decide between two apparently incommensurable alternatives. According to some defenders of Berlin, history, again, proves to be the key to his thought.

According to this defense Berlin's historical reflections lead to the realization that values are anything but relativistic or subjective.[195] Values are objective, it is claimed, because they exist as the outcome of identifiable choices made by particular groups or individuals in given circumstances. Values, in other words, are something we can know – something objective – because we can historically excavate them. Berlin is not a relativist, this defense runs, because his use of history leads one to see that values are concrete, not subjective. As Galipeau puts it: "The very experience of conflict exposes

[195] See: Galipeau, 14-30, 58; Gray, 77f.; and Hausheer, lif.

how objective values can be."[196] Far from being a weakness, Berlin's historicism is taken to be one of his greatest strengths. History saves Berlin from relativism, it is held, since the study of history shows that our moral values are anything but reflections of preference or taste.

Now, I do not wish to question whether or not Berlin's views of history lead him to conclude that values are objective, as I believe this particular point is well made. Berlin claims time and again to be 'empirically-minded', or to believe only those things that may be observed and tested. As he tells Jahanbegloo during the course of their interviews: "rational methods, verification, the basis of our knowledge and science, as well as the attempt to check intuitive certainties, are of cardinal importance."[197] Berlin also claims that the ideas with which philosophy deals "come from life."[198] Such statements seem to indicate that he is, indeed, an empiricist – which I take to be the fundamental point of those who point to Berlin's use of history as a hedge against relativism. But while Berlin may in fact be an empiricist as Galipeau and others claim, this does not save him from being a moral relativist. As I shall indicate in the next section, relativism begins with the fundamentally sound observation that variety is a hallmark of human existence, that diversity is a 'fact'. Relativists then go on to use this observation to argue that no one particular moral system is any better than another. So claiming that Berlin skirts the dangers of relativism by grounding his views upon a form of empiricism that is historically derived does not seem to me to rescue Berlin from the criticisms Sandel and Strauss and others have made. Regardless of how objective our

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[196] Galipeau, 70. Gray puts things a bit differently. He says: "What limits radical voluntarism in Berlin's thought, accordingly, is much more the historicity of the choosing subject than the common horizon of human values." See: Gray, Isaiah Berlin, 160.
[197] Jahanbegloo, 39.
[198] Jahanbegloo, 39.

values are, the question remains as to how we decide between them. In my opinion, the resolution to this problem centers less upon Berlin's views of history, and more upon what he says about the idea of comparability.

For Berlin questions of comparability are not to be confused with questions concerning commensurability; which is to say, *incomparability* is not the same thing as *incommensurability*. Suffice it to say that this distinction – an extremely important one for Berlin – has been pretty much overlooked by those who consider him a relativist. Concerned as they are with showing how pluralism shades off into relativism, Berlin's critics tend to avoid a thorough examination of how relativism and pluralism differ. In this I believe they make an error, for as I have stated, the two ideas cannot be assumed to be the same. That one of Berlin's defenders – Jonathan Riley – also conflates these two ideas strikes me as problematic, as it attributes to Berlin a position that he specifically repudiates. As Riley notes in his recent essay, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," Berlin's critics often overlook or smudge the distinction between the ideas of incommensurability and incomparability. Yet, as Riley points out, Berlin himself often "suggests that incommensurable values can be rationally compared ..."[199] Unfortunately Riley does not pursue this particular defense of Berlin himself, stating that he would rather meet Berlin's critics on "their own terms." This strikes me as a grave disservice to the debates surrounding Berlin, as it not merely acknowledges a fallacious criticism of Berlin, but actually *attributes* it to him. Berlin is better served, I believe, by a precise statement of what his position actually is, rather than a reading of his position that attempts to overcome a wrongly made critique by integrating it into the substance of his

[199] Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," 283-284.

thought. So let me therefore now turn to the idea of relativism, that I might clarify the foundations of this position. Once I have done this, I will investigate more fully Berlin's views about pluralism, and try to show how pluralism and relativism differ, as well as how I think he successfully avoids the charge of being a relativist.

ii

If philosophy has a bugbear then surely relativism is it. Ever since Protagoras allegedly suggested that knowledge is dependent upon the individual the idea that there is no objective truth has raised people's hackles. Whether it be in the realm of epistemology; whether it be within the domain of ethics; whether it be in the field of anthropology; or whether it be in the sphere of aesthetics, the thought that there are no absolute standards – no truth which exists independent of humanity – has been the cause of much concern and vigorous debate. For those who 'like' the idea, relativism is a liberating position, something which grants individuals the opportunity to craft their own identities, forge their own communities, pursue their own visions of the good. For those who reject relativism, there is the sense that it undercuts our sense of responsibility and commitment, that it narrows our moral horizons, that it promotes the vice of selfishness. Regardless of the stance one takes – regardless of whether you accept it or reject it – relativism is a doctrine whose persistence and influence is matched only by the controversy surrounding it. Needless to say, any philosophical position that generates such diametrically opposed – such mutually exclusive – responses is something that requires careful consideration. For without such consideration, without, that is, an investigation of what it 'is', relativism is little more than a term of praise or blame,

admiration or opprobrium.

There are two different forms of relativism I want to speak about. One – the first – may be termed the 'simple' form of relativism. Conversely, the second (not surprisingly) may be called the 'sophisticated', or 'complex', version. The importance of this distinction is twofold: it allows me to clarify why many scholars loathe, and therefore reject, relativism; as well as distinguish relativism from pluralism. In my opinion, most of those who criticize relativism do so with the 'simple' concept in mind, while most of those who defend relativism are thinking of the 'sophisticated' version. To the extent that critics of relativism condemn the simple variant, I think they are correct. But, to the extent that they seek to characterize pluralism in a similar light, I think these critics are wrong. Similarly, to the extent that defenders of relativism are working with a more complicated version of this idea than the critics realize (or are willing to admit), I think they – the defenders – are also correct. However, to the extent that defenders of relativism apparently believe that their position is 'airtight' or completely defensible, I think they are a little off – as a comparison of the sophisticated form of relativism and the idea of pluralism should make clear. Of course these statements require clarification, so let me define the difference between 'simple' and 'sophisticated' relativism.

'Simple' relativism is the idea that there is no such thing as 'truth', period. A vulgar view, simple relativism begins with the observation that there are a variety of beliefs and opinions, and ends with the conclusion that each of these beliefs and opinions are equally valid, which is to say, that no one belief or opinion is any more correct, any 'righter', than another. As Ernest Gellner puts it: "Relativism asserts that there is no

unique truth, no unique objective reality."[200] You have your view, I have mine, and both are correct – mine for me, yours for you. Neither of us can assert greater validity for our own claims, which are regarded primarily as expressions of subjective preferences. Simple relativism, in its purest form, holds that truth is indeed 'relative', to individuals or the communities they inhabit: truth, as such, simply does not exist. It is not hard to demolish this position.

The first problem simple relativism runs into is the aforementioned issue of self-contradiction. "If there is not truth," one may ask a relativist, "then what does that say about your own statement?" Clearly it is fallacious – as well as absurd – to make a statement that purports to be true while denying that there is such a thing as 'truth'. For if *this* statement is true – as absolutely true as it sounds – then surely one runs the risk of hypocrisy. As Richard Bernstein puts it:

> ... [I]mplicitly or explicitly, the relativist claims that his or her position is true, yet the relativist also insists that since truth is relative, what is taken as true may also be false. Consequently, relativism itself may be true *and* false. One cannot consistently state the case for relativism without undermining it.[201]

Similarly, Nicholas Rescher states: "Relativism ... makes it impossible to put forward *any* ... claim or contention – that of relativism itself included. Seen as a serious doctrinal position, relativism is simply self-undermining."[202] And finally Gellner reports, "Notoriously, there is not room for the assertion of relativism itself, in a world in

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[200] Gellner, 183.

[201] Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 9.

[202] Rescher continues: "It lies in its very nature that it is self-frustrating in that to whatever extent it is correct it cannot be seriously maintained to be so ... For reasons of simple self-consistency, indifferentist relativism can advance no claims on its own behalf." See: Nicholas Rescher, Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 104.

which relativism is true."[203] Simple relativism, it seems, cannot get around the fact that it asserts what it denies, which is to say, that it breaks the law of non-contradiction. It is fundamentally an inconsistent – and therefore unsound – position.

The second problem simple relativism meets with is that it regards all statements as expressions of something subjective, either as reflections of taste or preference, or of communal standards which are not assented to rationally, but, instead, inherited. Either way – whether your statements be the expression of a personal preference, or whether they mirror the received values or mores of your group – the idea, here, is that truth is not the result of reasoned consideration or investigation, but of something fundamentally irrational. As Rescher puts it: "The core of an authentic relativism lies in its insisting that there are no *rationally cogent* way of choosing."[204] A habit, an inheritance, a custom or a tradition, 'Truth', if it exists, is without rational ground or reasonable basis. Relativism, in short, is subjective.

Williams, if I may be so bold, has a great response to the subjective side of simple relativism: he insinuates that it is absurd. It is absurd to maintain the idea, he suggests, that statements about truth are categorically the same as statements about, say, the type of ice cream a person likes. When we make claims about something being true or false, or right or wrong, we are not merely stating our approval or disapproval; we are, in effect, issuing an invitation to discuss and debate, argue and confer, disagree or agree about whatever it is, *reasonably*. Statements regarding truth may actually be what simple relativism claims – matters or preference or taste – but this is not the way we experience them. No, we experience them as something to get upset about, something to

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[203] Gellner, 183.
[204] Rescher, 109.

argue over, something we must come to grips with, if not fight for. *This* – this feeling that our disagreements about truth matter – separates them from more mundane matters, such as whether we think McDonald's french fries are better than Burger King's, or whether denim jeans are preferable to cotton khakis. Such claims *are* matters of taste, and therefore not open to discussion. Truth claims, however, are different. To the extent that they provoke discussion and debate, statements about truth are not merely matters of taste, they are matters which require justification, elucidation, 'Reason'. As Williams puts it: 'when in Rome do as the Romans do' is at best a matter of etiquette; it certainly is not a guide for discerning what is right.[205] To the extent, then, that truth claims invite rationalizations, it is clear that they are quite different than statements which actually are subjective.

And yet simple relativism begins with an indisputable observation: that individuals and societies differ and disagree about what they consider 'right'. "The central relativist idea," William Newton-Smith says, "is that what is true for one tribe, social group or age might not be right for another tribe, social group or age."[206] The Germans and the Russians, the Norse and the Indians, the Victorians and the Mayans *do* have divergent visions of what is 'good' and 'bad', of what is 'moral' and 'immoral', of what is 'true' and 'false'. Simple relativism takes seriously the fact that the world is marked by diversity – which is perhaps its greatest shortcoming. For simple relativism notes variety and variation and concludes that this is all there is. The simple relativist

> tells us [that the variation in belief and in reasoning from age to age and from social group to social groups] arises

[205] Bernard Williams, Morality: An Introduction to Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
[206] William Newton-Smith, "Relativism and the Possibility of Interpretation," in Rationality and Relativism, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 107.

> from the fact that the differing ages or groups live in different worlds. Different things are true for them.[207]

Yet, however sound its initial observation, no matter how direct, and therefore truthful, our experience of diversity may be, simple relativism draws a questionable conclusion: that there is no such thing as truth, period. All positions are equally right, or all positions are equally wrong – no one of them, however, is any 'better' or more 'privileged' than another. This is simple relativism's last word. As I have indicated, however, such a conclusion is problematic: it leads to self-contradiction and conflicts with our experience of ourselves as 'claim-makers'. Simple relativism cannot be honestly maintained, then.

But is this all that can be said? Must the relativist necessarily be driven to inconsistency? Must, that is, relativism always end in contradiction and self-refutation?

Not if one takes the more sophisticated form. This version of relativism – like its 'simple' cousin – begins with the observation that different people – different societies – believe different things. However, sophisticated relativism avoids the rather slipshod mistake the simple version makes, which is to say, it provides a more elaborate account of why 'truth' doesn't mean 'Absolute Truth', but something else. Rather than state – incorrectly – that "There is no such thing as truth", instead sophisticated relativism says that "What is true, is always true for *someone.*" There is 'truth' it seems – only it is not to be understood in an absolute or universal sense. Rather, 'truth' is to be understood as 'truth for this particular person', or 'that given group'. Truth is indeed relative, to a given society, culture or individual. Let me explain.

Barry Barnes and David Bloor provide a rather succinct account of sophisticated relativism in their "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge." There

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[207] Ibid., 106.

they note that most relativist doctrines begin with the aforementioned observation about the diversity of beliefs, as well as the idea that truth is contextual. Furthermore Barnes and Bloor note that most of these doctrines incorporate what they call the 'equivalence' postulate, or the idea that "general conceptions of the natural order, whether the Aristotelian world view, the cosmology of a primitive people, or the cosmology of an Einstein, are all alike in being false, or are all equally true."[208] It is the equivalence postulate which 'does in' most versions of relativism, according to Barnes and Bloor, as it is the assertion of the equivalence postulate which leads to self-contradiction. As they put it:

> If one belief denies what the other asserts, how can they both be true? Similarly, to say that all beliefs are equally false poses the problem of the status of the relativist's own claims. He would seem to be pulling the rug out from under his own feet.[209]

The problem, then, is how to avoid the potentially devastating effects of this self-contradicting assumption.

Barnes and Bloor get around the complications of the equivalence postulate by basically suspending it. For them the question is not whether a set of beliefs is true or not, or right or wrong. Rather, the important thing to consider is what 'structures' or 'modes of thought' lead to the beliefs held. "[One] must," in their words, "search for the causes of ... credibility."[210] What contextual constraints cause *this* belief to be held, and not *that*? What convention authorizes one goal over another? What custom validates these values instead of those? What 'patterns of vested interest' contribute to the

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[208] Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in Rationality and Relativism, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT press, 1982), 22.
[209] Ibid., 22-23.
[210] Ibid., 23.

perceived truth of a set of beliefs? In short, what processes clarify the ideals, values, goals or ends of individuals and the groups to which they belong? Rather than determine the validity of a belief or sets of beliefs, Barnes and Bloor are interested in determining the communal considerations which cause beliefs to be held; that is, they are interested less in the epistemological aspects of knowledge, than in the sociological.[211]

Now, there is a quite dramatic turn, here, which clarifies the fundamental differences between simple and sophisticated relativism. Barnes and Bloor do not deny the idea that there is such a thing as truth, as found with simple relativism. What they do, instead, is *insist* upon it. They take as given the view that there is 'truth', that there is 'goodness', that there is something called 'right'. What they refuse to accept, however, is that these things can ever be spoken of in a meaningful way outside of specific communities or cultures. That is, Barnes and Bloor refuse to concede that truth "can be formulated in absolute or context-independent terms."[212] The upshot of this – of the idea that truth is 'context-dependent' – is that truth is not subjective, is not merely a matter of preference or taste. Truth, according to them, is as 'objective' or empirically observable as any fact can be. Sophisticated relativism avoids the criticism of subjectivity by assuming – quite strongly – a form of empirical verification. We see diversity of belief. We specify the reasons for those beliefs. We explain where divergence between systems of beliefs lies. If simple relativism makes an unwarranted jump from "There is a variety

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[211] Rorty seems to pursue a similar task in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. There he says: "On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the 'intrinsic nature of reality'." Rather, philosophers should recognize "the *contingency* of the language we use ... [as well as] the contingency of conscience, and [therefore acknowledge] how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are." (Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8-9.)

[212] Ibid., 27.

of opinion" to "There is no truth", sophisticated relativism goes from "There is a variety of opinion" to "Here's why." Avoiding subjectivism, sophisticated relativism skirts self-contradiction.

Yet there remains the problem of how to judge competitive cultures. "It's well and good," one might say, "to show why Southerners thought Africans were their inferiors, or to clarify why Nazi's believed Jews were subhuman; but that doesn't help us decide whether those beliefs are correct or are ones we should pursue. There is still the problem of evaluation – of judging – societies or ends or values or goals which not only differ dramatically from ours, but are dramatically *opposed* to ours. Specifying the locus of divergence is fine, but there is still the problem of deciding who is right when there is a clash of ideals or values." In short, sophisticated relativism pushes the problem of choice back a step.

At this point the sophisticated relativist faces a choice: either abandon the idea that truth is contextual, or maintain their conviction. If they do the former, then the relativist accepts the idea that there are absolute standards of some sort. That is, they give up on the idea of relativism. If they take the latter course, the relativist must explain how decisions are made in the face of incompatible views or beliefs. Since relativists – as most people – are loathe to admit they might be wrong, they go for the second option, and generally make the following claim.

"Given confrontation between two mutually exclusive and incompatible ways of life, societies, cultures – whatever – one is faced with the possibility, if not the probability, of conflict. For non-Nazis or New England Americans there is no point for discussion about fascism or slavery – they are simply evils. As an evil, there can be no

repair or reconciliation between their beliefs and their opponents – there can only be battle. And indeed this is what we see. Two societies which are mutually incompatible – whose values are exclusive and irreconcilable – do not debate or discuss their differences: they come to blows. A Briton judges by the light of parliamentary liberal democracy, a Pennsylvanian or a Bostonian by the Constitution, and there is no room for mediation between they and their adversaries. Our decisions always refer to our own standards, and where these standards conflict, well, that's where war begins." Thus a sophisticated relativist might respond to the issue of choice given incompatible values or beliefs.[213] A couple of things, obviously, need to be spelled out a little further.

First is the belief that breaks between groups or individuals can be so deep as to be unbridgeable. Sophisticated relativism holds that gulfs exist between certain societies, certain clusters of beliefs or hierarchies of values, such that two communities not only diverge from one another but are completely alienated or estranged from one another. Common dialogue between different modes of thought or belief systems is not possible – there is no, as Barnes and Bloor put it, "bridgehead" by means of which one group accesses the thoughts or values or intentions of another. In other words, there is no common standard, no shared measure, by which one group discovers or learns or becomes familiar with the attitudes or mores of another. To accept the claims of sophisticated relativism is to accept "the claim that there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are presently using

[213] Rescher makes the same point with a little more technical sophistication: "Confronted with a pluralistic proliferation of alternatives you have your acceptance-determination methodology, and I have mine. Yours leads you to endorse *P*; mine leads me to endorse not-*P*. Your is just as valid for you (in your methodology validity principles) as mine is for me. The situational differences of our contexts simply lead to different rational resolutions. And that's just the end of the matter." (116-117)

…"[214] It is to accept the idea of incommensurability, understood as deep, decisive difference.

But that is not all. Incommensurability, for the sophisticated relativist, does not merely signify a lack of common ground between different groups: it *precludes* such common ground. Incommensurability is not just an indicator of differences of values or standards or beliefs; it indicates an inability to surmount such differences. Incommensurability, as sophisticated relativism portrays it, entails incomparability, or the lack of an adequate means for comparing, and therefore deciding between, competing views. Socialized all they way down, so to speak, a person can only understand others as he understands himself; which is to say, choices are only made relative to the beliefs an individual already holds. Conflict and confrontation arise not by grasping what the other side does and evaluating it, but from ignorance, or an inability to understand others. Particular perspectives – whether communal or individual – are simply insurmountable. Again, individuals decide not by way of an Archimedean point or Olympian vantage that allows for objective consideration or comparison. They decide, instead, in light of their own particular traditions, values or customs. Dialogue, such as it is, between people or societies is always conditional, contextual, relative to the standards of the group. We are, so to speak, trapped in windowless boxes, unless we are able, somehow, to extend the walls of these boxes so that they incorporate others. As Rorty puts it, we need "to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can."[215]

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[214] Rorty, 48.

[215] Ibid., 196. Whether he realizes it or not, Rorty's 'sense of solidarity' is quite an ominous thing, I think, given the above quote. For what the expansion of our "sense of 'us' " would require, it seems to me, is a form of intellectual and cultural hegemony which smacks of a form of moral imperialism. For if various cultures utilize different 'languages', languages which are ultimately incommensurable, incomparable and incompatible (as Rorty seems to suggest), then how could the extension of *our* language be anything but

Incommensurability, then, may be said to breed incomparability, insofar as individuals are constrained by their own particular web of social beliefs.

Needless to say this is a rather distressing, if not ugly, picture of social relations. Critics of relativism are right to insist that if relativism is true then it undermines much of our basis for moderating conflict. For if relativism is right, then there is no moderation to be had. The clash of civilizations – of societies, peoples, cultures and communities – is almost an inevitable consequence of relativism, if relativism's account of incommensurability and incomparability is correct. For this reason I think Williams is a bit off with his suggestion that one of the central problems of relativism – or as he terms it: 'subjectivism' – is that it "underdetermines" moral conflict, or dilutes the extent to which societies or cultures might be confrontational. The truth of the matter strikes me as rather the opposite: relativism heightens the probability of conflict between differing groups or individuals, as it precludes any basis of mutual intelligibility or common comprehension. Given its take on the idea of incommensurability, which is interpreted as an idea which excludes any sort of shared ground between various people whatsoever, sophisticated relativism puts individuals in a position of eventual confrontation. For where things eventually shade into situation of 'I believe this but you believe that, and who's to say which of us is right?' then what is left but war? By treating incommensurability as always entailing incomparability, sophisticated relativism destroys any foundation for moderation or reconciliation. For in the absence of shared standards, in the absence of the ability to bridge the chasm that distinguishes one group from another, individuals are faced not with another human being, not with another

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tyrannical? Rorty appears to consider his vision of linguistic 'redescription' for the sake of 'solidarity' as an innocuous, liberal pursuit. It strikes me, however, as anything but.

individual who has goals and fears and hopes akin to their own, but a foe. We have our beliefs, they have theirs, and we can only assume that we are the ones who are right. By laying so much stress upon the idea of incommensurability, and, moreover, by insisting that incommensurability precludes comparability (for in the absence of common standards what is the basis for comparison?) sophisticated relativism sows the seeds of discord. It does anything, as a consequence, but underdetermine conflict.

Let me sum things up. Simple relativism's mistake, again, is that it derives the conclusion 'there is no such thing as truth' from the observation that different groups or people believe different things. Such a conclusion is problematic, since it is logically inconsistent, as well as unable to account for the fact that individuals *do* justify their beliefs. The rationalizations people provide their views of right and wrong, truth and falsity, good and bad, are enough to challenge seriously the subjective contentions of simple relativism (which holds that people believe what they believe as a matter of taste or preference) and provide reasons for thinking that some beliefs are 'true' in an absolute since. Sophisticated relativism, however, is neither self-refuting or logically inconsistent, nor as extremely subjective as its simple counterpart. Instead, sophisticated relativism asserts that there is truth (or truths), and that truth can be reasonably justified *within a given context*. While both of these assertions go some way in helping it avoid the shortcoming and failures of its simple counterpart, sophisticated relativism nevertheless is faced with its own set of problems.

First, there is the idea that incommensurability is so great as to preclude discourse, and hence comparison, between various groups. Individuals are wrapped, so to speak, within a web of social conventions and beliefs that they simply cannot shed.

While a person may specify why he believes what he believes vis-à-vis certain social standards or customs, comparison between one set of beliefs and another is off the table. For how can one compare what one cannot transcend? The upshot of *this*, in turn, is that confrontation between groups is more likely, and conflict more probable. For any means of moderating tensions by grasping what others are about – what they want or intend or believe – is precluded. 'I cannot know what another person believes or thinks or feels,' a sophisticated relativist has to argue, 'as our moral and intellectual and communal frameworks are so very different.' That, I think, is enough to make one want to look for another option to relativism; for where one holds that groups or peoples are so deeply different – where one gives up the idea of a common 'bridgehead' – one gives up the hope of human communication and discourse. Value conflict, contrary to Williams, is not underdetermined by sophisticated relativism, but exaggerated. Fortunately, I believe Berlin provides a more viable, as well as humane, alternative. So let me now turn to what he says.

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"I repeat," Berlin insists, "[that] pluralism – the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends – is *not* relativism; nor *a fortiori*, subjectivism, nor the allegedly unbridgeable differences of emotional attitude on which some modern positivists, emotivists, existentialists, nationalists and, indeed, relativistic sociologists and anthropologists found their accounts."[216] In one fell swoop Berlin makes clear – as sharply as he can – that he does not regard relativism and pluralism as being cut from the

[216] Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought," 87.

same cloth. Indeed, part of the point of the essay in which the preceding statement is found – "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought – is to refute the suggestion that certain thinkers were relativists by showing, instead, that they were pluralists. To this end, Berlin spends quite a bit of time outlining the idea of relativism, so as to disentangle it from the concept of pluralism. It is an engagement that occupies Berlin in more than a few places, apparently because he realizes that relativism and pluralism are often mistakenly confused, one for the other, much to the detriment of the latter. It is profitable, then, to begin a further investigation of Berlin's thoughts about pluralism with a consideration of his comments concerning relativism.

To continue, a bit, with the discussion of "Alleged Relativism of Eighteenth-Century European Thought": Berlin notes two types of relativism, only one of which concerns him here. The first sort of relativism he specifies deals with "judgments of facts," and seems to involve certain epistemological issues. Berlin describes it as being a doctrine which "denies the very possibility of objective knowledge of facts, since all belief is conditioned by the place in the social system, and therefore by the interests, conscious or not, of the theorist, or of the group or class to which he belongs."[217] Given the particular concerns of "Alleged Relativism" – which are of a moral, rather than epistemological, sort – Berlin does not given much attention to this type of relativism; indeed, he dispatches it with the observation that such relativism is "ultimately self-refuting."[218] The idea that relativism, in one of its guises, is internally inconsistent or self-contradictory is repeated in other places, such as during the course of one of Berlin's conversations with Ramin Jahanbegloo. "Relativism can't be stated," Berlin says there,

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[217] Ibid., 74.
[218] Ibid

"because the proposition which expounds relativism cannot itself be relative."[219] The reason why, he explains elsewhere, is that relativism is a term which only makes sense in contrast to, or by comparison with, the idea of an absolute. As he puts it in "Historical Inevitability":

> Some of our judgments are, no doubt, relative and subjective, but others are not; for if none were so, if objectivity were in principle inconceivable, the terms subjective and objective, no longer contrasted, would mean nothing; for all correlatives stand and fall together.[220]

As a consequence, relativism, of this sort, asserts what it denies, which means it ends in contradiction. In any event, the type of relativism Berlin has in mind here seems akin to what I have termed 'simple relativism' which, indeed, as many besides Berlin have held, *is* self-refuting. There is, in truth, little reason for Berlin to concern himself overly with this version of relativism, given that it actually *does* end by undermining itself. As he sums things up in his introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, "Scepticism, driven to extremes, defeats itself by becoming self-refuting."[221] So much, then, for epistemological relativism.

The second type of relativism – and the one with which Berlin addresses more seriously – addresses what he calls "judgments of values," by which he seems to mean "entire outlooks."[222] Rather than address claims about how we know things, this form of relativism addresses the social structures, both conscious and unconscious, which determine the beliefs individuals hold. This form of relativism overlaps, somewhat, with

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[219] Jahanbegloo, 107.
[220] Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in Four Essays on Liberty, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 104. The preceding quote is the summation of an argument which spans several pages of this particular essay. For that reason I find Williams claim that Berlin provides "no general theoretical critique of relativism" a little hard to agree with. See: Williams, "Introduction," xv.
[221] Berlin, "Introduction," liii.
[222] Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought," 74.

the epistemological variant, in that it also holds that there is "no objective correlate which determines [a judgment's] truth or falsehood."[223] But rather than hold that there is no such thing as 'Truth' – rather than, that is, engage the issue of whether individuals can ever claim to know anything with certainty – this second sort of relativism maintains that the judgments people make – their decisions for acting this way instead of that – are ultimately subjective. " 'I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.' That is relativism," Berlin says in "The Pursuit of the Ideal."[224] Similarly, he tells Jahanbegloo, "Relativism says: 'The Nazis believe in concentration camps and we don't' and there is no more to say."[225] The question, then, is how this happens; how, that is, moral relativism comes to the conclusion that all our reasons, all our justifications, for acting are on par, or equal. It is a question, to use Barnes and Bloor's terminology, about relativism's adaptation of the 'equivalence principle'.

Moral relativism stems from the thought that all cultures, all societies and peoples, are sharply divided. Moral relativism, Berlin says, insists that different groups exist in their own "windowless boxes." As he explains in "Alleged Relativism":

> ... some varieties [of relativism] maintain that men's outlooks are so conditioned by natural or cultural factors as to render them incapable of seeing the values of other societies or epochs as no less worthy of pursuit than their own, if not by themselves then by others.[226]

"The most extreme versions," he continues, "... which stress the vast differences of cultures, hold that one culture can scarcely begin to understand what other civilizations

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[223] Ibid., 80.
[224] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.
[225] Jahanbegloo, 107.
[226] Berlin, "Alleged Relativism of Eighteenth-Century European Thought," 81.

lived by – can only describe their behaviour but not its purpose or meaning."[227] The source of relativism's subjectivity, then, is the incapability of individuals to surmount the partiality of their own existences. That is, relativism's use of the equivalence principle stems from a pernicious form of socialization. As Berlin puts it, relativism assumes a "conception of men as wholly bound by tradition or culture or class or generation to particular attitudes or scales of value which cause other outlooks or ideals to seem strange and, at times, even unintelligible ..."[228] And this, he concludes, is what eventually leads relativists to the conclusion that there are no objective standards by which individuals are joined. Lacking common standards means lacking a common humanity. And without a common humanity, individuals are without any objective basis for justifying the beliefs they hold. As Berlin says: they like concentration camps, we don't.

Let me repeat this: according to Berlin moral relativism is basically the assumption that individuals are deeply embedded in a social context, a context which does not allow for the comprehension or understanding of other societies or groups. Relativism isolates societies, according to Berlin, because it undermines or disavows the possibility of – or foundations for – rational exchange between people. The problem of relativism, in other words, is the problem of incommensurability. For the cultural or social divisions which form the substance of relativism rest upon an assertion that there are no objective measures by which societies may engage one another. The fact that different groups have nothing in common with one another means that overarching standards – objective standards which would allow for bridges to be built between

[227] Ibid., 81.
[228] Ibid., 82.

groups – do not exist. This, in turn, entails the idea of incomparability, since the absence of common standards, according to relativism, means that there is no way one group or culture or society can reasonable say their way of life is better, or more just, or more moral, than other. As Berlin puts it: "[I]f the existence of such [deeply divided] outlooks is recognized, this inevitably leads to skepticism about objective standards, since it becomes meaningless to ask which of them is correct."[229] In the end, relativism regards the individual's moral life as being ultimately subjective since the inability to comprehend those who are different – those who affirm a set of values or live by the light of beliefs other than one's own – means that the choices individuals make (insofar as they *can* make choices) are reflexive or instinctive or emotive, but not the result of careful comparison or thoughtful appraisal or reasonable reflection. Relativism, then, cannot avoid the rather depressing conclusion that others "are not fully human for us; we cannot imaginatively enter their worlds; we do not know what they are up to; they are not brothers to us ..."[230]

Of course such a conception of life is unacceptable to Berlin. "One can," he affirms, "reject a culture because one finds it morally or aesthetically repellent, but, on this view, only if one can understand how and why it could, nevertheless, be acceptable to be a recognizably human society."[231] So the key, for him, to avoiding the problems of relativism is to determine how it is that individuals may come to understand or comprehend – if not even appreciate – one another. He does, I think, by arguing two things.

First, Berlin believes in a common human horizon. That is, Berlin believes that

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[229] Ibid., 82
[230] Ibid., 87
[231] Ibid., 202.

there are limits or boundaries to what individuals (or groups) may experience, or the values they may hold. In "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes" he describes this horizon in familiar terms, as a form of human nature. Two distinguishable traits characterize our understanding of human nature, he says there, the first of which addresses our biological existence. As Berlin puts it: "men must possess a certain physical, physiological, and nervous structure, certain organs, certain physical senses and psychological properties, capacities for thinking, willing, [and] feeling ..."[232] Berlin also claims that individuals share a common moral framework. In his opinion "there are also certain moral properties which enter equally deeply into what we conceive of as human nature." He continues:

> We lean on the fact that the laws and principles to which we appeal, when we make moral and political decisions of a fundamental kind, have, unlike legal enactments, been accepted by the majority of men, during, at any rate, most of recorded history; we regard them as incapable of being abrogated; we know of no court, no authority, which could, by means of some recognised process, allow men to bear false witness, or torture freely, or slaughter fellow men for pleasure; we cannot conceive of getting these universal principles or rules repealed or altered; in other words, we treat them not as something that we ... freely chose to adopt, but rather as presuppositions of being human at all, of living in a common world with others, of recognising them, and being ourselves recognised as persons.[233]

As he tells Jahanbegloo: "There are universal values ... values that a great many human beings in the vast majority of places and situations, at almost all times, do in fact hold in common, whether consciously or explicitly or as expressed in their behaviour, gestures, actions."[234] Berlin's point seems to be that there is a range of values around which

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[232] Berlin, "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes," 204.
[233] Ibid., 204.
[234] Jahanbegloo, 37.

societies revolves, without which, that is, human life as we know it is inconceivable. And indeed this *is* his point; for as he puts it elsewhere: "there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek ... [but there] is not an infinity of them: the number of human values, of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite ..."[235] "Incompatible these ends may be," Berlin says elsewhere, "but their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men ... must possess some generic character to be called human at all."[236] It is a point Berlin cannot stress forcefully enough, for if there is no common frame of human values, men will no longer be recognizably human.[237] As he says: "if we meet someone who cannot see why ... he should not destroy the world in order to relieve a pain in his little finger, or someone who genuinely sees no harm in condemning innocent men, or betraying friends, or torturing children ... we call them moral idiots." Indeed, we "sometimes confine them to lunatic asylums."[238]

Let me restate this once more: Berlin believes in a common human nature. This common human nature is something that is, according to what he says, partially constituted by a horizon of values without which life as we know it would be inconceivable. These values, Berlin says, are a form of "natural law" in "empiricist dress;" "basic principles" of behavior that "we cannot help but accept."[239] They are the "common moral ... foundations" of human existence, and although they may differ

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[235] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12.
[236] "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 80.
[237] " ... for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human ..." ("My Intellectual Path," 12)
[238] Berlin, "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes," 203-204. Compare: "Such men are not fully human for us; we cannot imaginatively enter their worlds; we do not know what they are up to; they are not brothers to us ... we can at most only dimly guess at what the point of their acts, if they are acts, may be." ("Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 87)
[239] Ibid., 204.

between societies or historical eras, regions or traditions, they are values and ends that remain "open to human pursuit, as the comparative study of history and literature and philosophy and *Volkerpsychologie* and religion reveals."[240] Moral values, in other words, constitute the common ground by which humanity is united, and are "that which enables us to identify other men and other civilizations as human and civilized at all."[241] As he says in "Historical Inevitability": "The modes of thought of cultures remote from our own are comprehensible to us only to the degree to which we share some, at any rate, of their basic categories ..." and that while our "situations may differ from theirs", these differences are not so wide "as to make all comparisons unfair."[242] At the risk of simplifying his thought, it seems to me that Berlin's belief in a common human horizon is, in its essence, a conviction that individuals are moral beings. And it is this – the fact that our existences are moral – which allows him to argue that we share a common humanity. In short, Berlin believes that moral values are every bit as fundamental as the need to eat, breathe and sleep – are as objective as any other aspect of our physical existence – and that together these moral and physical attributes constitute a common human horizon. As he tells Jahanbegloo: "There are certain things which human beings require as such, not because they are Frenchmen or Germans or medieval scholars or grocers but because they lead human lives as men and women."[243]

The second part of Berlin's argument revolves around his claim that there is a human capacity – a faculty, if you will – which allows people or groups to grasp what others are about. "It is always open to us," he says, "... to place ourselves in the

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[240] "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 85.
[241] "Historical Inevitability," 103.
[242] Ibid., 96, 99. Compare: "Of course there is a common human nature, otherwise men in one age could not understand the literature or the art of another, or, above all, its laws ..." ("My Intellectual Path," 8)
[243] Jahanbegloo, 39.

circumstances of an individual or society; if only we take the trouble to 'reconstruct' the conditions, the intellectual and social and religious 'climate' of another time or place ... [so as to attain] a glimpse of ... motives and attitudes ... unlike our own ..."[244] Indeed, although there "are many kinds of happiness" which are often "incommensurable": "all respond to the real needs and aspirations of normal human beings; each fits its circumstances, its country, its people ..." As a consequence, "members of one culture can understand and enter the minds of, and sympathise with, those of another."[245] So far from dividing humanity, the diversity that characterizes it is one that exemplifies its unity; for the appreciation or comprehension of those who are different than us revolves around our ability to regard the world from their perspective, to apply, that is, our 'sense of reality'.

Berlin suggests that this faculty is a universal one, shared by the whole of humanity, and is therefore open not just to specialists or scholars, but to anyone with enough imaginative insight to be able to consider the situation of others. As he puts it in "The Sense of Reality":

> What I am attempting to describe is, in short, that sensitive self-adjustment to what cannot be measured or weighed or fully described at all – that capacity called imaginative insight, at its highest point genius – which historians and dramatists and ordinary persons endowed with understanding of life ... alike display.[246]

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[244] "Historical Inevitability," 101. Steven Lukes also attempts to overcome the problem of incommensurability posed by relativism by arguing that there are common values shared by the majority of humanity. See: Steven Lukes, "Relativism in its Place," in Rationality and Relativism, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982), 261f.

[245] "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 84.

[246] Isaiah Berlin, "The Sense of Reality," in The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 25. Compare: "...[S]uccessful statesmen behave like artists who understand their medium. They undertake courses of action or avoid others on grounds which they find it difficult if not impossible to explain in clear theoretical terms. And not only they, but the historians and psychologists and political analysts who seek to explain their behaviour, are forced to resort to such terms as 'imagination', 'political genius', 'sense of history', 'unerring judgment', which rightly

Obviously such an endeavor is an imaginative one that requires a great deal of empathy on our part to the situation of those different than us. Indeed, it is an endeavor that Berlin considers to be more aesthetic than scientific, and he often juxtaposes the understanding which one achieves through the 'sense of reality' with the type of understanding one attains through science. As he characterizes it in one place, the former is akin to the type of knowledge an intimate has of a friend's character, while the latter would be more like the type of insight a psychologist would provide.[247] Similarly, Berlin sometimes characterizes the results produced by the 'sense of reality' as more like the achievements of a gardener than a botanist: the former has an understanding of plants which the latter lacks.[248]

This distinction between the comprehension science provides and the imaginative insight the sense of reality provides is one Berlin returns to again and again. Although he says he is unsure why some individuals exhibit a greater sensitivity to the details of life than others, he makes it clear that the difference is one of detail. That is, the use of the sense of reality is one which takes into account those features of human existence which are fleeting, which are contingent, which are excluded by the rigorous application

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have no place in a scientific treatise." (Isaiah Berlin, "Realism in Politics," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 139)

[247] "The sense in which the most learned and accurate psychologist, working purely on the basis of accumulated scientific data, and of hypotheses bolstered up by these can describe and predict the behaviour of the human being in a concrete situation, from hour to hour and day to day, is very different from that in which someone who knows a man well, as friends and associates do, can do so ... A medical chart or diagram is not the equivalent of a portrait such as a gifted novelist or human being endowed with adequate insight ... could form; not equivalent ... because [the former] confines itself to the publicly recordable facts and generalisations attested by them, [which means that] it must necessarily leave out of account that vast number of small, constantly altering, evanescent colours, scents, sounds, and the psychical equivalents of these, the half noticed, half inferred, half gaze-at, half unconsciously absorbed minutiae of behaviour and thought and feeling which are at once too numerous, too complex, too fine and too indiscriminable from each other to be identified, named, ordered, recorded, [and] set forth in scientific language." ("The Sense of Reality," 23)

[248] Berlin makes such a comparison in "The Sense of Reality" (33) and "Realism in Politics" (140).

of the rules and procedures typically applied by the sciences. As he puts in "Realism in Politics":

> In theory there is perhaps no reason why some omniscient ... being should not patiently accumulate all the relevant facts, and then, by reputable scientific methods – the normal combination of observation, experiment, analogy, deduction, induction and the rest – frame a hypothesis which will enable him to work out correctly all possible alternatives and their consequences. In theory this may be so. In practice the facts are too many, too complex, too brief, too minute, the theoretical weapons at our disposal too abstract, the models too remote from any but the stock, the unusually simple, situations.[249]

The point, I think, is clear: the texture of life is too rich, the variety of human experience too great, for the mere application of method to achieve adequate results. Indeed, according to Berlin, one of the chief sources of misery in human life has been the unfortunate application of methods that are appropriate in one realm of existence to another. At times this has been the unconscionable application of scientific methods to society; at others the immoral use of aesthetic models.[250] Either way, a grave crime is committed, insofar as significant aspects of life are either excluded or ignored, or misinterpreted.

While he seems unsure about why certain individuals exhibit the sensitivity the sense of reality requires, Berlin lets there be no doubt as to what is involved in such pursuit. He says that one of the failures of a strictly scientific approach to human relations is that they only grasp the 'outward' manifestations of behavior, that science

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[249] Isaiah Berlin, "Realism in Politics," 140.

[250] This is Berlin's biggest criticism of the Romantic movement: that it took the idea of the 'artist as creator' to extremes, inappropriately applying a model of artistic achievement to politics. See: "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will;" "The Essence of European Romanticism"; "Kant as an Unfamilar Source of Nationalism;" "The Purpose of Philosophy;" The Roots of Romanticism; and "The Sense of Reality."

can only explain those activities that take place in 'public.' What is lost, he claims, are the motivations and goals which guide and inspire people; those ends and values for which individuals make sacrifices and suffer, for which they struggle, for which they risk security and safety.[251] The sense of reality is taken to rectify this problem to the extent that it provides knowledge of these things; that is, the sense of reality's strength is that it allows us to grasp intentions and motivations. This is why the sense of reality is a faculty exhibited by statesmen as well as historians, authors and artists as well as philosophers. Any attempt to come to grips with human endeavor is ultimately an attempt to understand not just what happened, but why. "Above all," Berlin says," this is an acute sense of what springs from what; what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces."[252] Along with the assumption Berlin makes about a common human

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[251] Berlin indicates this particular shortcoming of science in "Chaim Weizmann's Leadership;" "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities;" "Does Political Theory Still Exist?;" "Historical Inevitability;" "Political Judgment;" "The Purpose of Philosophy;" "Realism in Politics;" and "The Sense of Reality."

[252] The full quote is: "The gift we mean entails, above all, a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent perpetually overlapping data ... To integrate in this sense is to see data ... as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically ... To seize a situation in this sense one needs to *see*, to be given a kind of direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data, and not merely to recognise their general characteristics, to classify them or reason about them, or analyse them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them ... Above all this is an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces." ("Political Judgment," in The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 46) Compare: "Judgment, skill, sense of timing, grasp of the relations of means to results depend upon empirical factors, such as experience, observation, above all on that 'sense of reality' which largely consists in semi-conscious integration of a large number of apparently trivial or unnoticeable elements in the situation that between them form some kind of pattern which of itself 'suggests' ... the appropriate action. Such action is, no doubt, a form improvisation, but flowers only upon the soil of rich experience and exceptional responsiveness to what is relevant in the situation – a gift without which neither artists nor scientists are able to achieve original results." ("Realism in Politics," 139-140) Also: "So passionate a faith in the future, so untroubled a confidence in one's power to mould it, when it is allied to a capacity for realistic appraisal of its true

horizon, then, the sense of reality is what enables Berlin to claim that we can understand, and judge, others. That is, the sense of reality and his belief in a common human nature are what allow Berlin to overcome the problem of incomparability. An example should clarify how this is so.

As I have shown, Berlin thinks there is a common moral horizon that unites all individuals. There are bounds, he suggests, to what humans can both experience and do. "[T]he number of human values," he says, "of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite – let us say 74, or perhaps 122, or 26, but finite, whatever it may be."[253] This statement in itself is enough to distinguish Berlin's views from those of relativism, for as I have indicated previously, relativism claims that individuals or groups differ radically. There is, according to relativism, no common ground – no 'bridgehead' – between societies or cultures. Fascist Italy and liberal New Zealand are incomparable, according to relativism, because they are both incommensurable. But Berlin holds other than this; he insists that we *can* understand others; that we can appraise the values, mores, and customs of those who are different than us. "[I]f I have enough cultural empathy," he tells Jahanbegloo, "if I understand ... what the centre of gravity of a culture is, then I understand why people in those circumstances pursue the goals they do. More than that, I can understand how I myself in those circumstances could have pursued it or rejected it ..."[254] Nowhere is this idea more forcefully put by Berlin than when he takes up the issue of Nazism. "I find

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contours, implies an exceptionally sensitive awareness, conscious or half-conscious, of the tendencies of one's milieu, of the desires, hopes, fears, loves, hatreds, of the human beings who compose it, of what are impersonally described as social and individual 'trends'." ("Winston Churchill," in Personal Impressions, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 11.)

[253] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12.

[254] Jahanbegloo, 107.

Nazi values detestable," he says:

> but I can understand how, given enough misinformation, enough false belief about reality, one could come to believe that they are the only salvation. Of course they have to be fought ... but I do not regard the Nazis, as some people do, as literally pathological or insane, only as wickedly wrong, totally misguided about the facts ... and so forth. I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining me, believe this and commit the most unspeakable crimes.[255]

Repugnant Nazi beliefs may be; unintelligible they are not. As Berlin explains it in "Historical Inevitability:" "It is always open to us ... by a feat of imaginative sympathy to place ourselves in the circumstances of an individual and society; if only we take the trouble to 'reconstruct' the conditions, the intellectual and social and religious 'climate' of another time or place ..."[256] By such means, "we shall thereby obtain insight into, or at least a glimpse of, motives and attitudes in terms of which the act we are judging may seem no longer gratuitous, stupid, wicked, nor above all, unintelligible."[257] This, I think, is the clue to determining how Berlin believes we may judge others, given a plurality of options: we may imaginatively appraise other societies, cultures, political systems and traditions given our common humanity. Thus we have the opportunity for consideration and appreciation, or reflection and condemnation.[258]

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[255] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12-13. Berlin tells Jahanbegloo something very similar. See Jahanbegloo, 38-39.
[256] "Historical Inevitability," 101.
[257] Ibid., 101.
[258] Berlin also talks about a similar process of insight and comprehension in the essay, "General Education." There, when speaking of how to lower the barriers between the sciences and humanities, Berlin says that what is needed is more "than an attempt to 'civilise' a chemist by dwelling on the properties of *The Divine Comedy*, or of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or of the *Agamemnon*, or to try to talk a Greek scholar into taking a canter past the principal landmarks of elementary physiology or the theory of numbers. The problem is one of grasp of mental processes, what Whitehead correctly calls adventures of ideas, not of throwing up hastily constructed bridges between 'cultures'. If this task is to be performed, it can be accomplished not by precept but only by example – by the discovery or training of teachers of sufficient knowledge, imagination and talent to make the student see what they see: an

Now as I have pointed out: relativism asserts that incomparability necessarily follows from incommensurability. Pluralism, however, does not make this claim, which means that pluralism allows one to compare alternative outlooks, and, more importantly, decide between them. Whereas 'radical choice' trails in the wake of relativism, pluralism pulls no such idea along. Indeed, the choice pluralism allows for is of a reasoned sort, whereby values or standards are compared and contrasted, and the final decision is explicable. Berlin states *emphatically* that when we make decisions, we decide in light of the pattern of our own beliefs, of our own societies, cultures, communities or groups:

> If we wish to live in the light of reason, we must follow rules or principles; for that is what being rational is. When these rules or principles conflict in concrete cases, to be rational is to follow the course of conduct which least obstructs the general pattern of life in which we believe ... even those who are aware of the complex texture of experience, of what is not reducible to generalization or capable of computation, can, in the end, justify their decisions only by their coherence with some over-all pattern of a desirable form of personal or social life ...[259]

Such a statement, obviously, sounds quite a bit like what a sophisticated relativist might say; after all, sophisticated relativism also holds that our actions and decisions can be explained by reference to certain standards or 'patterns of life'. That Berlin even admits that some of our judgments are, in actuality, subjective or contingent, it would seem that the distance between him and sophisticated relativism shrinks even further.[260] But the one thing Berlin holds that relativism – in any form – does not, is that a lack of

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experience which, as anyone knows who has ever had a good teacher of any subject, is always fascinating, and can be transforming." See: Isaiah Berlin, "General Education," in The Power of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 219.

[259] Berlin, "Introduction," lv.

[260] Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 104.

commensurability does not entail a lack of comparability; that is, that just because we lack overarching standards which allow for a 'slide-rule' comparison of different situations, groups or values, does not mean that we completely lack a means of comparison. Rather, as his discussion of the 'sense of reality' indicates, such a means is readily available.

As I have indicated, Berlin depicts the 'sense of reality' as a form of understanding that allows individuals to grasp, by means of their imagination, the whole of a situation. It is a capacity, he explains, which allows certain individuals to be aware of the "specific contours and texture of a particular political and social situation." It is something, again, which is "perfectly ordinary [and] empirical ...", though it may be regarded as a "gift," as it were.[261] "What are we to call this capacity?" Berlin asks in one place:

> Practical wisdom, practical reason, perhaps, a sense of what will 'work', and what will not. It is a capacity, in the first place, for synthesis rather than analysis, for knowledge in the sense in which trainers know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras, as opposed to that in which a chemists know the contents of their test tubes, or mathematicians know the rules that their symbols obey.[262]

This ability to 'see the whole of a situation', to synthesize diverse phenomena, to understand or grasp what works and what will not it seems to me, is what allows pluralism, or Berlin's version of pluralism, to overcome the question of comparability. For knowing what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, especially in light of an awareness of not only the values that you hold, but in light of an awareness of the values

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[261] Berlin, "Political Judgment," 45-46.
[262] Ibid., 47.

others hold, provides one with the leverage for comparison. It allows, that is, for the ability to compare incommensurables.

Let me explain this further. The sense of reality, it seems to me, is the sort of sensibility that is typically expressed as the ability to comprehend and discriminate things simultaneously. That is, the sense of reality is the ability of individuals to distinguish between the important and unimportant, if not the moral and immoral. A form of understanding and judgment, it is perhaps best described as a type of moral imagination – which is how Kekes puts it. "The systematic cultivation, practice, and achievement of moral imagination" he says,

> is one traditional task of the humanities. Its interest is not in the causes of human conduct but in its significance. Its aim is not to form law-like generalizations but to concentrate on the reciprocal interaction between particular individuals and their cultural contexts. The explanation it yields is not of how anyone would act in that particular context but of why particular individuals have acted as they did in that context. Its task is partly descriptive, yet what it describes are not the objective possibilities that are open to everyone but the evaluations by individuals of what they take to be the possibilities that confront them as different ways of shaping their own future. It aims to explain what happened not by identifying the causes that made it happen but by identifying the reasons the agents rightly or wrongly believed themselves to have for doing what they did rather than the numerous other things they might have done. [263]

This, it seems to me, is the function the sense of reality serves for Berlin: it is a faculty that allows us to grasp and understand a situation, and then make a judgment regarding what we encounter.

Another way of explaining Berlin's position would be to invoke what Ruth Chang

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[263] Kekes, 104.

has called a 'covering value.' According to Chang, instances where there frequently appears to be both incommensurability and incomparability are often anything but. True, she argues, there may in fact be incommensurability, or the lack of a common means of measurement; however, this does not preclude a means of comparison. According to Chang's argument, when we judge two incommensurables we do so in reference to another idea or term, something that grounds the comparison and makes it meaningful. This is what she calls the 'covering value.' As she explains it, the covering value makes comparison possible by stipulating a reference point that makes the comparison possible.[264] So when we compare apples and oranges, we compare them in reference to their "goodness as a housewarming gift" or "with respect to preventing scurvy."[265] Or when we compare the Protestant work ethic to the samurai warrior's code, we do so either in terms of honor or loyalty. The covering value, as Chang portrays it, is something that allows us to escape incomparability, even if we cannot slip the bounds of incommensurability.

Now, as Galipeau and others have rightly noted, Berlin says that we always judge in light of a given context. This context can easily be read as something that makes our choices meaningful in the manner of Chang's covering value, insofar as the idea of a context provides a point of reference that is similar to Chang's idea. That is, the idea of context allows us to orient ourselves and make a decision given some reference point. But I do not believe that Berlin's actual defense of comparison revolves around such a view; that is, I do not think that the idea of context – or of a covering value – is the

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[264] "Every comparison must proceed in terms of a value. A 'value' is any consideration with respect to which a meaningful evaluative comparison can be made. Call such a consideration the *covering value* of that comparison." (Chang, 5.)
[265] Chang, 7.

decisive point for Berlin. Instead, as I have argued, I think the significant point for Berlin is the common nature individuals share, as illuminated by the so-called sense of reality. In other words, Berlin's belief in a common human horizon as rendered intelligible by our faculties of imagination and empathy is the means by which we overcome incomparability. And this is quite different that what Chang suggests.

It seems to me that Chang's idea of a covering value – or the idea that decisions are made in a context – does not actually resolve the problem of comparison. For to state that questions are always decided in light of a relevant context or covering value seems to load the issue; it seems to suggest that one or the other of the values (or contexts) involved will have the issue weighted their way. Take, for example, Chang's reference to the samurai's code of honor and the Protestant work ethic. It appears from the way Chang has phrased this example that obviously the samurai's code of honor is more appropriate for the ways of war, while the Protestant work ethic is more appropriate for the workplace. But, as anyone who has perused the business section of a bookstore will tell you: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has found a home in an interesting place. Similarly, the spirit of the Protestant work ethic is sometimes considered to be the inspiration for the organization of the German military prior to the devastating wars of the last century. Given that both the samurai's code and Protestant work ethic have 'intruded' into the other's respective sphere – given, that is, that businessmen find the samurai's code useful, while the military may find the mentality of the Protestant work ethic advantageous – it seems something more is needed to explain how one decides between them. For the ideals of one do not appear as inappropriate or unrelated to the tasks of the other as Chang would suggest. A single covering value – or given context –

is simply not enough to justify the decisions one makes. Thus the reason why I believe Berlin invokes a common human horizon and speaks about the sense of reality. Together these ideas provide a means for comparison that Chang's covering value or the idea of context cannot. Together these ideas allow one to overcome the problem of comparability via the intuition of a shared human nature.

The idea of intuition leads me to a further consideration I would like to make, one which involves the work of John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls considers the role of what he calls "intuitionist theories" of morality. He characterizes these theories as ones that claim there are a "complexity of moral facts" which require "a number of distinct principles" where "there is no single standard that accounts for them or assigns them their weights."[266] He continues by stating that intuitionist theories "have two features:"

> first, they consist of a plurality of first principles which may conflict to give contrary directives in particular types of cases; and second, they include no specific method, no priority rules, for weighing these principles against one another: we are simply to strike a balance by intuition, by what seems to us most nearly right.[267]

While the "intuitionist doctrine" may in fact "be true", Rawls nevertheless disputes it. He argues instead that it remains possible "to set forth ... recognizably ethical criteria that account for the weights which, in our considered judgments, we think appropriate to give to the plurality of principles."[268]

Now what I would like to highlight about Rawls' discussion is that intuitionism seems very similar to the idea of pluralism. Like intuitionism, pluralism holds that there

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[266] John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 34.
[267] Ibid., 34.
[268] Ibid., 39.

are a variety of distinct principles that cannot be reduced to a single standard of comparison. That is, pluralism, like intuitionism, holds that values – or principles – are incommensurable. As I have shown, the problem of incommensurability raises no small concern for many scholars, as they believe it undermines our ability to make reasoned moral judgments. In other words, incommensurability is assumed to entail racial choice, which is regarded as a sign of relativism. This seems to be Rawls' fear about intuitionism, insofar as intuitionism holds that "there are no substantive criteria for [moral] guidance ..."[269] Clearly Rawls' concern about intuitionism is very similar to the concern others have had about pluralism and the issue of relativism as regards Berlin; which is to say, there is a concern about how one makes meaningful moral choices. It would therefore be useful, I think, to consider whether or not Berlin's view of pluralism is akin to the idea of intuitionism as Rawls understands it. And I would like to do so by means of a comparison of Berlin's views with those of Charles Larmore.

Larmore's *Patterns of Moral Complexity* is an attempt to restore the ideas of judgment and imagination as they pertain to morality. According to Larmore, modern discussions of moral philosophy provide a diminished conception of these faculties, ones that interpret our capacities for judgment and imagination as little more than forms of calculation whereby an architectonic or schematic rule is applied to a given situation. Both those who ascribe to utilitarianism and those who consider themselves 'Kantians' take the fundamental feature of morality to be the appropriate application of a particular principle to a given situation, and therefore exhibit what Larmore considers a diluted form of judgment and the imagination. From Larmore's perspective Rawls is one such

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[269] Ibid., 40.

theorist, as his 'principles of justice' are an attempt to specify those rules or categories which allow for the determination of what is right in cases of moral controversy. Yet, as Larmore makes clear, there are instances of moral conflict in which our ability to make such determination is muddled; that is, there are instances in which architectonic moral principles are unable to provide the guidance needed to resolve the problem. In such situations, individuals have recourse to their faculty of judgment, as supplemented by their imagination. As Larmore portrays it, the "moral imagination is the ability to elaborate and appraise different courses of action that are only schematically determined by the given content of moral rules, in order to learn what in a particular situation is indeed the morally best thing to do."[270] In other words, our capacity to imagine various courses of actions invokes our faculty of judgment, as the latter is required to decided between competing 'higher-order principles.'[271] Judgment, as Larmore presents it, is inextricably bound to the faculty of the imagination.

Clearly a similarity can be seen between Larmore's depiction of the role of judgment and Berlin's sense of reality. Both rely upon some sense of the imagination, insofar as this faculty is taken as a means for settling moral disputes. Moreover, both highlight the significance of imaginative insight for moral deliberation and discrimination. For Berlin, it is our imaginative ability to enter into the experience of others that allows individuals to discriminate between different moral perspectives, while for Larmore the imagination allows the individual to appraise different moral options.

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[270] Larmore, 12.

[271] "Of course, we do possess higher-order moral principles such as utility, or Kantian universalizability, one of whose tasks is to adjudicate moral conflicts. But many times the verdicts rendered by these higher-order principles for a particular case diverge, and then – because there are no higher rules to be invoked and because no *absolute* ranking of these principles is plausible – judgment may have to direct us how to choose." (Larmore, 9)

And this the point of comparison I would like to stress: given the condition of pluralism, both Berlin and Larmore regard the capacity of imagination as invoking reasoned reflection, not subverting it. As Larmore puts it: "Moral imagination ... clearly involves the exercise of judgment."[272] Similarly, Berlin says that the "capacity called imaginative insight" allows us to discern what remains the same for a variety of societies and historical epochs, "otherwise we should have no historical truth at all."[273] It is, as noted before, what Berlin says is often termed 'practical wisdom' or 'practical reason'. Confronted with moral diversity – or the difference of values and standards – both Berlin and Larmore rely upon a sense of judgment that is evoked by the faculty of the imagination. So far from arguing that moral diversity or conflict leads to the denial of reason – or entails our reliance upon some form of moral intuition – they indicate that deliberation is an integral part of pluralism. Reasoned judgment, in other words, has a significant role to play for pluralists such as Larmore and Berlin. Indeed, as Larmore puts it: "We might say fairly that *moral disagreement* arises chiefly in areas where judgment must be exercised."[274] In my opinion, this is an excellent summation of Berlin's position.

iv

As I have argued in this chapter, Berlin's critics allege that the problem of pluralism is a problem concerning incomparability. It is said that the lack of commensurability means that individuals are without a way of justifying their choices. That is, without some sort of overarching standard or objective measure of behavior our

[272] Ibid., 12.
[273] Berlin, "The Sense of Reality," 25-26.
[274] Larmore, 14.

decisions must be 'ungoverned by reason', arbitrary or radical. When confronted with two conflicting values or alternative sets of beliefs, it is claimed that there is no way we can pick between them without giving way to subjectivism. Pluralism is said to lead to relativism since it cannot avoid the problem of incomparability in light of the issue of incommensurability.

Now Berlin's response to the charge of relativism is this: subjectivism assumes a lack of commonality between the individuals or societies that confront one another. As experience indicates, however, there *is* some sort of unity between various groups or individuals; indeed, everyone shares in some sort of common human nature. Understanding, then, is possible between those who disagree; which is to say, our choices are not 'ungoverned by reason'. So the question, then, is not one of subjectivity; it is one of exclusivity; that is, it is one of choosing this option (or value or sets of values) over that one, when you cannot have both. In other words, the problem of pluralism is not one of subjectivity, but one of *incompatibility*. And this is a much different issue. As it stands, we can affirm one set of beliefs over or against another, insofar as we can imaginatively weigh or compare them. And compare them we can via our so-called 'sense of reality', a faculty which allows us to tap into those shared features, those common facets of existence, that are otherwise known as human nature. The deep chasms, then, which relativists claim separate individuals or communities, do not exist. Moreover, the divides we face are not insurmountable. Comparison and comprehension, even in the face of incommensurability, remain possible. This, I think, is Berlin's response to the issue of relativism. That said: I would like to turn my attention to one final issue, this being the just mentioned problem of incompatibility. It

is this issue, I think, which has led some to characterize Berlin's view as 'tragic', and it is this issue, I believe, which is a distinctive feature of Berlin's thought.

Chapter 4

Pluralism and Tragedy

i

There is one final issue regarding Berlin's views about pluralism that needs to be discussed. This is the idea that his work is somehow 'tragic'. As more than a few commentators have noted: Berlin's thoughts about pluralism entail a less than optimistic picture of the world. Indeed, Berlin himself points out that pluralism assumes a less than sanguine view of human relations, and he states that one particular result of pluralism is the complete repudiation of the idea of the perfect life.[275] Such an observation has led at least two commentators – Gray and Riley – to conclude that Berlin's is an "agnostic liberalism," a liberalism "of conflict and unavoidable loss among rivalrous goods and evils ..."[276] This characterization of Berlin's thought is quite interesting, as it highlights something significant about his interpretation of pluralism. And this is that where many, today, regard pluralism as something quite benign, Berlin holds otherwise. Where others, that is, apparently assume that diversity can only lend itself to 'celebration', Berlin argues that those of deeply divided beliefs will often find themselves seriously opposed to one another. In other words, there is a difference between Berlin's position and the more optimistic interpretation of pluralism, a difference that revolves around an

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[275] "Liberty and equality, spontaneity and security, happiness and knowledge, mercy and justice – all these are ultimate human values, sought for themselves alone; yet when they are incompatible, they cannot all be attained choices must be made, sometimes tragic losses accepted in the pursuit of some preferred ultimate end. But if ... this is not merely empirically but conceptually true ... then the very idea of the perfect world ... is in fact conceptually incoherent. And if this is so ... then the very notion of the ideal world, for which no sacrifice can be too great, vanishes from view." ("My Intellectual Path," 23)

[276] Gray, 7. Riley makes use of this term throughout his discussion in "Interpreting Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism."

understanding of the nature of value conflict.

According to those who interpret pluralism as a form of 'multiculturalism', groups of different beliefs should learn to 'affirm' one another. The thought, here, is that the differences between the values individuals hold is not so sharp as to set them at odds with one another in any serious fashion. Indeed, according to the thrust of this position, the role of the government should be to support everyone, or to promote *every* conception of the 'good'. As John Kekes puts it in *The Morality of Pluralism*:

> If a state were indeed committed to pluralism, it would have to support all these institutions, and others too of course, and by supporting them it would have to take an active role in advocating very many substantive vales ... For it is by supporting the particular system of education, justice, legislature, taxation, and so forth, that have emerged in a society that the plurality of values could be fostered and protected. This conception of a pluralistic state, therefore, would not only permit, but actually require, the state to become the champion of quite an extensive range of substantive values.[277]

Clearly this conception of pluralism is one that downplays the potential tension between different values or various moral beliefs. Indeed, in Kekes' opinion, cases of irresolvable moral conflict are actually quite rare.[278] Small wonder, then, that he proposes that the role of the state be that of an 'advocate'; for where conflicts are minor or negligible, conflict resolution will not be difficult.[279] Such a conception of the political consequences of pluralism, however, is not Berlin's.

As should be clear at this point, Berlin takes quite seriously the idea that values clash, and that when they do it is nothing less than a matter of grave importance. His

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[277] Kekes, 215-216.
[278] Ibid., 215.
[279] Ibid., 216.

resistance to monism is partially based upon the thought that it disingenuously attempts to dilute value conflict, or that it frequently interprets moral confrontation as little more than a form of 'false consciousness'. As he says in "The Pursuit of the Ideal": the belief in an ideal society or utopia wherein all problems "generate their own solutions, which can be peacefully realised" is "a piece of metaphysical optimism for which there is no evidence in historical experience."[280] Similarly, the thought that those "who know the answers to some of the great problems of mankind must be obeyed" by those who do not is little more than an "excuse ... for unlimited despotism on the part of an elite which robs he majority of its essential liberties."[281] Clearly Berlin has no patience for those who would deny what our experience of morality makes so readily clear – that discord and disharmony are hallmarks of human existence – and he refuses to take the edge off the idea of value conflict. It is here, I think, that one of the most distinctive traits of Berlin's position lies. For he does not believe that the proper political response to pluralism is 'affirmation', or the promotion of all so-called visions of the good life. Instead he argues for toleration. And it is what Berlin specifically says about the conditions of toleration that I wish to discuss in this chapter, as I believe it will illuminate why his views are 'tragic'. To that end, as a matter of clarification, I would like to discuss the following things.

First, I want to consider the issue of *incompatibility*. As I indicated in the previous chapter, it appears that relativism's fundamental insight into the nature of value conflict has little to do with the issue of incommensurability (which I believe relativists misinterpret), and more to do with the issue of incompatibility. Relativism, as I pointed

[280] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 14-15.

[281] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 14.

out, wrongly confuses incommensurability and incomparability, alleging that because we have no common standard, or overarching rule of measurement, we have no way of comparing different moral systems. According to Berlin, however, this is not the case with pluralism, which holds that incommensurability does not preclude incomparability. As I showed, Berlin argues that because we share a common human horizon, as well as possess a 'sense of reality' which allows us to imaginatively and empathetically enter into, and appraise, the situation of others, we possess the possibility of both comprehending, and evaluating, the beliefs and values of those who are different than us. Incommensurability may well be the case when we are confronted with different moral systems; incomparability, however, is not.

So the question, then, is what causes conflict? What, in other words, cause values to collide, and different moral beliefs not merely to diverge, but frequently to quarrel with one another? Clearly relativism correctly notes that there are quite sharp and profound differences and disagreements between cultures and societies. But if these things are not the result of incommensurability and incomparability, what, then, are they the result of? The answer, I think, is found with the idea of incompatibility.

As I will try to show in this chapter, two ideas are often run together during discussions about incompatibility. The first is that values are, to a certain extent, *exclusive*. In other words, one value cannot be realized without excluding the achievement of another value. The second is the idea that values are sometimes set against one another, or are *oppositional*. From this perspective, some values intrinsically pull in different directions, or are essentially antagonistic to one another. So far as the tragedy of his thought goes, it seems that Berlin believes that something is lost when one

value is achieved at the expense of another. In other words, the gain of one value frequently entails the loss of another. Exclusivity, then, indicates the part of the grounds for his 'tragic' view of politics. Regarding the idea of the opposition of values, Berlin apparently holds that some values – *by their very nature* – conflict with one another. Such a conception of value conflict differs sharply from that of other pluralists who hold that value conflict is the result of a presumed 'failure of reason.' The assumption of the latter position seems to be that if our minds were firmer, or if we had a better grasp of a particular situation, the conflict between values, as well as any losses that might follow, could be avoided. This, unfortunately, is not Berlin's view. Where others suggest that the tragedy of pluralism is the result of a failure of our ability to be rational or reasonable, Berlin argues instead that it is simply a consequence of man's moral existence. That is, the tragedy of pluralism results less from our inability to figure out what to do when confronted with mutually exclusive moral obligations, but from the simple fact that often our moral values are often quite simply opposed. Less a failure of practical reason, the tragedy of pluralism is that some values are fundamentally incompatible, both in terms of their exclusivity, and by way of their being opposed to one another. With this in mind, I would like to now turn to the idea of incompatibility, and try to show its singular significance for the idea of pluralism.

ii

In "Pluralism and Coherence" Thomas Nagel addresses the sources of value conflict in Berlin's political philosophy. As Gray, Nagel considers Berlin to be a "moral realist", or some who "believed that there were real, noncontingently conflicting

values."[282] Such a characterization leads to the further observation that there are "two types of non-contingent conflict between values" to be discovered in Berlin's work.[283] There is, on the one hand, conflict that is the result of value incompatibility; and there is, on the other hand, conflict that is the result of value opposition.[284] It is this distinction between value incompatibility and value opposition that I would like to explore here, as I think Nagel's observation is especially accurate. Only, where he uses the term 'incompatibility' I would like to use that of 'exclusivity.' For upon further consideration I think that the types of value conflict Nagel describes in his essay are *both* forms of incompatibility, a term which is used rather broadly by Berlin. So, in keeping with Berlin's use of this term, I will discriminate between two different ways in which values may be incompatible, as opposed to suggesting, as Nagel seems to, that there is only one type of value incompatibility. In this way I hope to remain faithful to Berlin's use of the term, as well as utilize Nagel's theoretical distinction, a distinction that I believe to be well made.

Incompatibility understood as the exclusivity of values is simply the fact that not all values may be realized together. That is, given two or more values, the achievement of one may entail the loss, or sacrifice, of the other. To use Nagel's words, the exclusivity of values is "the impossibility in principle of realizing one value while

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[282] Thomas Nagel, "Pluralism and Coherence," The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin, ed. Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert Silvers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 105.
[283] Ibid., 106. That Nagel considers Berlin's conception of value conflict to be "non-contingent" is important, for there are those – such as Jahanbegloo – who suggest otherwise. As Jahanbegloo puts it at the end of his introduction: "Berlin shows us there are no absolute values in history." I think this is demonstrably false. The problem is not that Berlin refused to believe in absolute values – it is, instead, that he *did* believe in absolute values. This is why the collision of values, or value conflict, is such an important issue for him. In any event, if Jahanbegloo were right Berlin would have to assert that values are subjective, and this would make him a relativist. As I showed last chapter, this is definitely not Berlin's position. See: Ramin Jahanbegloo, "Introduction," in Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: Recollections of an Historian of Ideas, (London: Phoenix, 1992), xv.
[284] Ibid., 106.

realizing the other, or without frustrating the other."[285] In other words, the exclusivity of values is a situation wherein individuals (or societies) are confronted with two values or goods, but can only chase one of them, the other being necessarily barred from pursuit. As Nagel explains it: "One can't lead both a rural and an urban life, or a life of hard physical exertion and of intellectual contemplation." The decision to follow one such life, or aspire to one set of values, necessarily excludes the ability to follow another type of life, or another set of values. Again, in such instances, incompatibility arises as a form of exclusivity. As the saying goes: you can't have your cake and eat it too.

Incompatibility as a form of value opposition arises when values are fundamentally opposed to one another. That is, value opposition arises when values more than differ, but pull in dramatically different directions. Indeed, in some instances, these different directions may pit the values one against the other. As Nagel characterizes it, value opposition arises "when each value actually condemns the other, rather than merely interfering with it."[286] Although this may overstate the case a bit – value opposition may not actually result in the blanket condemnation of opposite goods – the fundamental insight, I think, is sound: some values, by their very nature, are rivals. And, as rivals, these values cannot but come into conflict with one another. Thus, incompatibility should be understood as a form of value opposition; which is to say, some values stake claims that set them against similar demands by equally valid values.

So what does Berlin say about value incompatibility? Given his insistence that conflict is unavoidable, what does he say about the ground of this conflict? In light of his belief that we are frequently faced with tragic choices, what are his opinions about

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[285] Ibid., 106.
[286] Ibid., 106-107.

the source of this tragedy?

As Nagel rightly notes, Berlin says two things, both of which are tied to the idea of value incompatibility. First, Berlin indicates that values are incompatible because they are exclusive. For example, Berlin says that happiness and knowledge are often (but not always) incompatible, as the attainment of one may preclude the realization of the other. As he puts it in "European Unity and its Vicissitudes": "Knowledge is an absolute goal; and so perhaps are peace or happiness: but knowledge of some fatal fact may destroy peace or happiness. If this is so, then there is no help: I am committed to the collision between these incompatible ideals."[287] This particular formulation of incompatibility is repeated elsewhere, as, for instance, in "My Intellectual Path," where Berlin states:

> Again, knowledge and happiness may or may not be compatible. Rationalist thinkers have supposed that knowledge always liberates, that it saves men from being victims of forces they cannot understand; to some degree this is no doubt true, but if I know that I have cancer I am not thereby made happier, or freer – I must choose between always knowing as much as I can and accepting that there are situations where ignorance may be bliss.[288]

A similar exclusivity is said to exist by Berlin between the knowledge and the value of liberty. As he puts it in "From Hope and Fear Set Free": "I wish to make no judgment of value: only to suggest that knowledge is a good is one thing; to say that it is necessarily ... compatible with ... freedom ... is something very different."[289] This point is put a little differently in the essay "Historical Inevitability", where Berlin suggest that knowledge can lead to a repudiation of the idea of moral responsibility.

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[287] Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 191.
[288] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 22.
[289] Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free," 198.

"The growth of knowledge," he says there, "brings with it relief from moral burdens, for if powers beyond and above us are at work, it is wild presumption to claim responsibility for their activity or blame ourselves for failing in it."[290] And similarly: "If determinism is true, the concept of merit or desert, as these are usually understood, has no application."[291] Exclusivity also seems to be a problem for the values of liberty and equality, as when Berlin points out that "perfect liberty ... is not compatible with perfect equality." For as he strikingly explains it: the freedom of the wolves may mean the death of the lambs.[292]

Now the thing to note in all of these examples is that the values about which Berlin speaks are not necessarily opposed to one another. Individuals may be intelligent *and* happy. Liberty *can* be balanced with equality. Knowledge *may* be conducive to the assumption of responsibility. Nothing, in other words, in any of these pairings entails the sort of rivalry that arises when incompatibility is understood as value opposition. The point, instead, is that *too much* of either of these ideals tends to exclude the other. That is, too much intelligence may make one unhappy. The worry-wart, for example, who loses his ability to enjoy life from constant niggling over every possible bad consequence of a given action indicates the exclusion of happiness as a result of thinking, or knowing, too much. Similarly, an excess of freedom can potentially subvert the ideal of equality. As Berlin stresses: *laissez-faire* economics oppressed, if not

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[290] Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 77-78.
[291] Berlin, "Introduction," xv.
[292] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 22. The complete passage is: "Liberty ... is an eternal human ideal, whether individual or social. So is equality. But perfect liberty ... is not compatible with perfect equality. If man is free to do anything he chooses, then the strong will crush the weak, the wolves will eat the sheep, and this puts an end to equality." Compare: "Freedom for the wolves has often meant death for the sheep." ("Introduction," xlv.) Also: "...but total liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs ..." ("The Pursuit of the Ideal," 12) And: "Full liberty for the wolves cannot be combined with full liberty for the sheep." (Jahanbegloo, 142)

crushed, a great many people during the 19th and early 20th centuries.[293] And, finally, knowledge of each and every cause of an action will absolve individuals of accountability. In other word, if the springs of our behavior are fully known, then we can no longer be said to be morally culpable. Again, the indication of these particular examples is that incompatibility is the result of exclusivity, not opposition. Nothing in these matching necessarily entails the sort of vigorous confrontation that follows as a result of value opposition.

The case is different with incompatibility understood as value opposition. Here we find those instances of outright conflict where values may be said to be at war with one another, if you will. That is, when the incompatibility of values is understood in the oppositional sense, than their confrontation between becomes quite sharp and antagonistic. Examples of such conflict, according to Berlin, can be found with Machiavelli's depiction of the rivalry between Christian and Pagan virtues. As Berlin explains it to Jahanbegloo, Machiavelli makes it clear that

> one cannot be a Christian and an heroic Roman citizen at the same time. Christians must remain humble, to be trampled on at times; Romans resist this successfully. This implies an irreconcilable dualism. One can choose one life or the other, but not both ...[294]

The virtues of humility and modesty, honesty and compassion are not the virtues of the successful statesman, who must be inclined towards "energy, vigorous self-assertion, [and the] pursuit of power and glory ..."[295] Consequently, Machiavelli's significance lies in his "forcing men to make a conscious choice ...", a choice "between two entire

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[293] Berlin, "Introduction," xliii-xliv.
[294] Jahanbegloo, 45.
[295] Ibid., 44.

worlds", for which men "have lived ... and fought and died ..."[296] Similarly, the contest between liberty and welfare can reach extremes, for in "their pursuit of social welfare, humanitarian liberals, deeply outraged by cruelty, injustice, and inefficiency, discover that the only sound method of preventing these evils is not by providing the widest opportunities for free intellectual and emotional development ... but by eliminating the motives for the pursuit of these perilous ends ..."[297] The result is the "dogmatic organization of the life of the spirit" along the lines laid out by Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, who would strip individuals of their freedom that they might be content.[298]

Another such confrontation is found between the ideals of justice and mercy. For as Berlin portrays it: "either the law takes its toll, or men forgive, but the two values cannot both be realised."[299] Such a comparison is also made in "Two Concepts of Liberty," where Berlin claims "justice and generosity, public and private loyalties, the demands of genius and the claims of society can conflict violently with one another."[300] And as he says in "European Unity and its Vicissitudes": "If we choose justice, we may be forced to sacrifice mercy."[301] Another instance of the opposition of values is found with the contest that may arise between "reason and knowledge" and the "craving for

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[296] Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 63. The full quote is: "The great originality and the tragic implications of Machiavelli's theses seem to me to reside in their relation to a Christian civilization. It was all very well to live by the light of pagan ideals in pagan times; but to preach paganism more than a thousand years after the triumph of Christianity was to do so after the loss of innocence – and to be forcing men to make a conscious choice. The choice is painful because it is a choice between two entire worlds. Men have lived in both, and fought and died to preserve them against each other. Machiavelli has opted for one of them, and he is prepared to commit crimes for its sake."

[297] Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," 26.

[298] Ibid., 33.

[299] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 22.

[300] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 167.

[301] Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 201. Compare: "Justice, rigorous justice,is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be no less ultimate values for them – mercy, compassion – as arises in concrete cases." ("The Prusuit of the Ideal," 12)

self-expression and self-assertion ..."[302] The former leads to the realization of one's place in the cosmos, to "realism, worldly wisdom, calculation and their rewards – popularity, success, power, happiness, [and] peace ..."[303] The latter, on the other hand, leads to "defiance for its own sake, idealism, sincerity, purity of motive, resistance in the face of all odds, noble failure", in short, to "heroism and martyrdom ..."[304] The point should be clear: as with Christian and Pagan virtues, liberty and welfare, justice and mercy, the Rational and the Romantic ways of life do not merely diverge, but may part so sharply, so forcefully and strongly, that the pursuit of one pits it against the pursuit of another. And here, according to Berlin, is where the tragedy lies.

The tragedy, according to Berlin, is that given the competition between values – given, in other words, the incompatibility of values – men must make a choice. It is impossible, he says, when we are confronted with competing goods or goals or ideals, to act as if we might avoid the problem As he says in "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will": "if it is the case that not all ultimate human ends are necessarily compatible, there may be no escape from choices governed by no overriding principle, some among them painful, both to the agent and to others."[305] Faced with such a situation, men "must choose, and in choosing one thing lose another, irretrievably perhaps."[306] "That we cannot have everything," he explains in "Two Concepts of Liberty", " is a necessary, not a contingent, truth."[307] "The world that we encounter in ordinary experience," he continues:

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[302] Ibid., 192.
[303] Ibid., 193.
[304] Ibid., 193.
[305] Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 235.
[306] Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 201.
[307] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 170. Berlin reiterates this in the "Introduction" to *Four Essays on Liberty* when he says "one cannot have everything." ("Introduction," li)

> is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others.[308]

It is therefore impossible – if not irresponsible – to seek to shirk our moral duties, and avoid making a decision. As Berlin explains it: "To move in a frictionless medium, desiring only what one can attain, not tempted by alternatives, never seeking incompatible ends, is to live in a coherent fantasy."[309]

This is a point Berlin never tires of reiterating; that is, he doggedly insists that in choosing one thing we may lose something else. "[C]hoices must be made," he says, "[and] sometimes tragic losses accepted in the pursuit of some preferred end."[310] As he explains it to Jahanbegloo:

> Choices can be very painful. If you choose A, you are distressed to lose B. There is no avoiding choices between ultimate human values, ends in themselves. Choices can be agonizing, but unavoidable in any world we can conceive of. Incompatible values remains incompatible in them all.[311]

Again, this is a point Berlin repeats: "Human ends conflict, and no amount of calculation can save us from painful choices and imperfect solutions."[312] And finally: "The need to choose, to sacrifice some ultimate values to others, turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament."[313] According to Berlin, then, choice and loss are inescapable parts of the human condition.

This last statement – that choice and loss are permanent aspects of human

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[308] Ibid., 168.
[309] Berlin, "Introduction," liii.
[310] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 23.
[311] Jahanbegloo, 142-143.
[312] Ibid., 75.
[313] Berlin, "Introduction," li.

existence – raises an interesting feature about Berlin's views. And this is that, unlike some, Berlin regards the contest of values as something fixed, something objective, something absolute. That is, the incompatibility of values is not a fleeting problem, the result of some kink in human rationality, a crease that eventually might be straightened or ironed out. It is, instead, a given; as much a part of the human condition as eating, breathing or sleeping.

Such a take on value conflict is quite different from other interpretations of this issue, interpretations which argue that we *can* redress the incompatibility of values. Dworkin, Raz, and Kekes, for example, all suggest, in their own way, that the incompatibility of values can be overcome. For instance, Dworkin – who apparently is interested in defending monism – argues that values are *interdependent*. In other words, he argues that values are not discrete things which exist in and of themselves, but a set of objects, if you will, which are closely tied to one another. Taking as his starting point Berlin's discussion of the differences between liberty and equality Dworkin makes the case that there is another view of liberty that is not so starkly pitched against equality. As he puts it:

> We might say: liberty isn't the freedom to do whatever you might want to do; it's freedom to do whatever you like so long as you respect the moral rights, properly understood, of others.[314]

Dworkin's point is quite simple, and this is that we may conceive of liberty in such a way that it is not opposed to the idea of equality. And the test of this issue, according to him, is whether a "breach" of one value entails a "violation" of the other.[315] In his

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[314] Dworkin, "Do Liberal Values Conflict?", 84.
[315] Ibid., 88.

opinion, there are clearly times when we allow for the violation of a value, yet do not consider there to be any subsequent loss. In such instances, it seems clear that there is little to no value conflict, or that, at the very least, the conflict between values is exceptionally muted. Berlin's insistence, then, upon the tragic nature of the pluralism is questionable, if not altogether mistaken.

Along these lines Raz provides another conception of value pluralism, one that holds that the conflict of values stems not from the nature of values themselves, or any tendency they might have to oppose or exclude one another; but from the limitations of reason. In his opinion, value conflicts arise because two goods present themselves to us, and we have difficulty deciding between them. Both options, Raz argues, are equally viable, equally worthy of being pursued, and this causes us to become confused: we simply are unsure of what to do. As he characterizes it:

> In typical situations, reason does not determine what is to be done. Rather it sets a range of eligible options before agents, who choose among them as they feel inclined, who do what they want to do or what they feel like doing.[316]

And again: "reasons merely render actions intelligible."[317] This does not mean, however, that we have reasons for acting. For "[e]xplanations by reference to reasons do not explain everything."[318] Consequently, there is "an independent role" for the will, which fills the void left by the shortcomings of reason, and explains why individuals choose as they do. Such choices, as Raz explains them, ultimately result from the "appeal" an option has for an individual, rather than any intrinsic merit the value might have, or for any explicable reason. Value conflict, then, such as it exists, is more a

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[316] Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency," 127.
[317] Ibid., 127.
[318] Ibid., 127.

reflection of the hesitations and uncertainties that arise around a person's appetites and desires, than anything attributable to values in and of themselves.

Finally there is Kekes. As I pointed out previously, Kekes does not consider value conflict to be as prevalent or acute as Berlin does. Indeed, one of his particular criticisms of Berlin is that Berlin and others "see life as beset by conflicts as the unavoidable consequence of the plurality of values."[319] "At the root of their mistake," Kekes says, "there is the confusion between the true claim that many values are incompatible and incommensurable and the false claim that we cannot resolve conflicts among them."[320] And, he continues, "[w]e can and we continually do resolve such conflicts, and the price we pay is very much less than grievous loss."[321] Rather than the tragedy of pluralism Kekes argues on behalf of what he terms "moral progress." The thought, here, is that both individuals and societies have shown moral improvement, as seen through the gradual transformation of Western civilization from being a "shame culture" to one which emphasizes the inherent goodness of life (or 'lives', as the case may be).[322] "Life is often hard," Kekes insists, "but it is rarely tragic."[323] And the acknowledgement and promotion of different ways of life is proof of this.

Now, as I have indicated, what Dworkin, Raz, and Kekes have in common is the belief that the conflict of values is neither so sharp nor acute as to be irremediable. Each of them – for different reasons – holds or asserts that values are less than opposed to one another, or juxtaposed against one another in such a way as to be easily reconciled. Dworkin, for instance, believes that values are interdependent. Raz holds that value

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[319] Kekes, 92.
[320] Ibid., 92.
[321] Ibid., 92.
[322] Ibid., 152-159.
[323] Ibid., 92.

conflict results from our inability to decide between options presented to us by reason. Kekes argues that history shows a shift in our moral foundations, such that we are no longer ashamed of differences, but exultant. All three together assume that value conflict can be overcome, or dealt with. All three are therefore at odds with Berlin's conception of pluralism.

Berlin, as I have indicated, considers choice and loss to be an inextricable part of the human condition. Unlike Dworkin, he does not consider values to be 'interdependent' or related in such a way that one value can incorporate, or take on, the concerns of another. Rather, Berlin considers values to be quite 'independent'; and he holds this position for a very simple reason. According to Berlin, the assumption of interdependency promotes theoretical ambiguity. In other words, the thought that values are tightly yoked leads to obscurity regarding significant issues, obscurity which ends up threatening the values involved. As he explains it in "The Search for Status":

> Things are what they are; status is one thing, liberty another; recognition is not the same as non-interference. In the end we all pay too dearly for our wish to avert our gaze from such truths, for ignoring such distinctions in our attempts to coin words to cover *all* that we long for, in short for our desire to be deceived.[324]

It seems that Berlin's insistence that values are distinct or independent is the result of his belief that the attempt to stretch them so that they overlap only leads to theoretical confusion. As he says in the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, "Spiritual freedom, like moral victory, must be distinguished from a more fundamental sense of freedom, and a more ordinary sense of victory, otherwise there will be a danger of confusion in

[324] Berlin, "The Search for Status," 198-199.

theory and justification of oppression in practice, in the name of liberty itself."[325] This idea is put a bit differently in "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," where Berlin says, "Sometimes a demand turns into its opposite: claims to participatory democracy turn into oppression of minorities, measures to establish social equality crush self-determination and stifle individual genius."[326] And in yet another formulation of this sort of reductionism, Berlin characterizes a tendency of our times as being one in which there is a push "to assimilate all men's primary needs to those that are capable of being met by these methods: the reduction of all questions and aspirations to dislocations which the experts can set right."[327] No matter how it is stated, though, Berlin's point remains the same: the attempt to redress moral conflict gains nothing by confusing one value with another.[328] In this, I believe – contra Dworkin – he is right.

Regarding Raz's contention that value conflict is in some way the result of a failure of reason, Berlin's response is to insist that it is a result of the nature of values themselves. In other words, Berlin suggests that value conflict is not the result of a limitation of reason, but is, instead, the consequence of the opposition and exclusivity of values. That is, value incompatibility itself yields discord, not any assumed shortcomings by our rational capacities. "To realize what such values are," he says, "is

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[325] Berlin, "Introduction," xxxix.
[326] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," 47.
[327] Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," 35.
[328] Berlin makes this point explicitly concerning the relationship of positive and negative liberty. He says: "Nothing is gained by identifying freedom proper, in either of its senses, with these values, or with the conditions of freedom, or by confounding types of freedom with one another. The fact that given examples of negative freedom ... may, in many cases, be wholly undesirable, and should in any sane or decent society be curtailed or suppressed, does not render them genuine freedoms any the less; nor does that fact justify us in so reformulating the definition of freedom that it is always represented as something good without qualification – always leading to the best possible consequences, always likely to promote my 'highest' self, always in harmony with the true laws of my own 'real' nature or those of my society and so on, as has been done in many a classical exposition of freedom, from Stoicism to the social doctrines of our day, at the cost of obscuring profound differences." See: Berlin, "Introduction," lvi-lvii.

at times to recognise that they are both absolute and irreconcilable. In this way tragedy enters into life as part of its essence ..."[329] The idea that the 'essence' of values entails unavoidable conflict is repeated elsewhere, such as when Berlin says: "These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are."[330] But a more specific refutation of Raz's position is found when Berlin states:

> If I am right in this, and the human condition is such that men cannot avoid choices, they cannot avoid them not merely for the obvious reasons which philosophers have seldom ignored, namely that there are many possible courses of action and forms of life worth living, and therefore to choose between them is part of being ... capable of moral judgment; they cannot avoid choice for one central reason ... namely that ends collide; that one cannot have everything.[331]

"The need to choose," he concludes, "to sacrifice some ultimate values to others, turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament."[332] Berlin's response, then, to the idea put forward by Raz – that value conflict is the result of reason's inability to choose from amongst a variety of options – is to state that this is not so, that we *do* choose, because choice is inescapable. Again, value conflict and the tragedy it entails is a part of the 'essence' of values themselves, and thus an "inescapable part of the human condition."[333] The incompatibility of values is real and objective, not the result of a failure of reason that the will sets straight. We understand our options – the tragedy arises from choosing one or the other, not from a lack of clarity about them.

As for Kekes's suggestion that values are more compatible than Berlin supposes because of identifiable moral progress – I cannot help but find this a most questionable

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[329] Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," 191-192.
[330] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13.
[331] Berlin, "Introduction," li.
[332] Ibid., li.
[333] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 169.

notion. The idea that humanity has taken a step forward by replacing 'shame culture' with an acknowledgement of diversity seems exceptionally 'thin', especially in light of the horrible wars that were waged during the middle of the last century, as well as those that took place at its end. If anything, the persistent persecution throughout the world of those who do not share the same values, who do not exhibit the same beliefs, who do not 'affirm' the same good, indicates anything but progress. Tragedy abounds, and for precisely the reasons Berlin mentions: because values sometimes diverge so sharply as to not merely be exclusive, but as to be opposed to one another. To assume that people have overcome their fear of social stigmatization in no way indicates moral advancement or a cause for the celebration of diversity; it merely marks another point of possible conflict, another probable realm of wretched contention. To paraphrase Berlin: the idea of progress may be a source of psychological comfort or spiritual succor; it certainly is not something we can verify. Keke's assertions on behalf of moral progress simply cannot be maintained in light of extraordinary evidence to the contrary.

So what hope does Berlin offer? How does *he* respond to the grave tragedy he so strongly acknowledges? Rather vaguely, to tell the truth. He speaks of compromise and moderation, of balancing competing views within the boundaries of what he calls a 'shifting equilibrium'. "Of course social or political collisions will take place;" he says in one place:

> the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimized by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in need of constant repair – that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to

lose our way.[334]

This "precarious equilibrium", he suggests rather boldly, is the "best that can be done ... [to] prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices ..."[335] It is an idea Berlin repeats elsewhere, such as in "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" where he says: " ... we cannot sacrifice either freedom or the organization needed for its defense, or a minimum standard of welfare. The way out must therefore lie in some logically untidy, flexible, and even ambiguous compromise."[336] And he asserts this again in "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" where, during a discussion of monism, when he states: "But if one believes this doctrine to be an illusion, if only because some ultimate values may be incompatible with one another ... then, perhaps, the best that one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of different groups of human beings – at the very least to prevent them from attempting to exterminate each other, and, so far as possible, to prevent them from hurting each other ..."[337] Ambiguous compromise, then, is Berlin's solution to the conflict of values.

But why is this? Why, that is, must the compromise between values necessarily be 'ambiguous'? Because, Berlin tells us, "no solution can be guaranteed against error, [because] no disposition is final."[338] Since Berlin disavows monism he also rejects any

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[334] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 19.
[335] Ibid., 17-18.
[336] Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," 39.
[337] Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," 47. Berlin also repeats this to Jahanbegloo. He says: "When truths or ultimate values are incompatible with each other ... then if the total suppression of one of these truths or basic human goals, and thereby, in some situations, terrible despotism, is to be avoided, a tolerable compromise must be achieved. This is a dull thing to say. If intolerable alternatives are to be avoided, life must achieve various types of uneasy equilibrium. I believe this deeply: but it is not a doctrine which inspires the young. They seek absolutes; and that usually, sooner or later, ends in blood." See: Jahanbegloo, 73.
[338] Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," 40.

schema or system that claims to provide a final solution to our moral dilemmas. In other words, Berlin's pluralist views lead him to the conclusion that an open-ended, potentially revisable framework is the best we can do. As he puts it:

> a loose texture and toleration of a minimum of inefficiency, even a degree of indulgence in idle talk, idle curiosity, aimless pursuit of this or that without authorization – 'conspicuous waste' itself – may allow more spontaneous, individual variation ... and will always be worth more than the neatest and most delicately fashioned imposed pattern."[339]

And this makes sense. For the point, according to Berlin, is to avoid extremes of misery and distress. As he says in "The Pursuit of the Ideal": "The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering."[340] That pain and suffering take many forms – that tragedy itself has many faces – goes without saying. That our social and political arrangements should be sensitive to this variation – that there should be the possibility for 'conspicuous waste' – also goes without saying. For since our problems are neither final nor absolute, neither should our priorities be.[341] As often as not solutions breed unexpected and unforeseen problems; hence, the ways in which we deal with them, the way, that is, in which we establish our main concerns and meet our challenges, must be open to revision. And if this is a disquieting or disturbing response to value conflict, then so be it. For as Berlin reminds us: "the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the

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[339] Ibid., 40.
[340] Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 17.
[341] Ibid., 17. As Berlin tells Jahanbegloo: "Philosophy comes from the collision of ideas which create problems. The ideas come from life. Life changes, so do the ideas, so do the collisions ... Because of this, and the social changes that breed new problems, the very idea that you can even in principle find solutions to all questions, is absurd." See: Jahanbegloo, 27.

certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past."[342] Far from being a weakness or shortcoming, then, Berlin's insistence that the incompatibility of values is best met by compromise is actually one of his strengths. For as he rightly intimates: in an imperfect world the best one can hope for are imperfect solutions. Anything else is an assertion of pride and willfulness, arrogance and assumption, selfishness and egoism. In other words, the claim that the conflict of values can be met with precision and specificity, surety and certainty, is to claim nothing less than omniscience. And that, Berlin tells us, is simply a recipe for bloodshed.

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Berlin's, then, *is* a tragic conception of pluralism. Because of the incompatibility of values, understood in terms of the exclusivity of values, as well as their opposition or fierce rivalry, individuals are faced with the necessity of making choices. Our values are discrete entities, Berlin informs us, which frequently pull in different directions. Sometimes they pull so hard that what is at first a difference of tendency becomes outright confrontation. As a result, we must make a choice, and, in so choosing, perhaps suffer a loss, a loss which may or may not be permanent. For the consequence of the incompatibility of values is that individuals cannot enjoy all virtues together. That is, we cannot achieve every good; cannot maximize every value; cannot attain all of our aspirations. Again, choices must be made and losses accepted, as the disparate nature of values does not allow for their full realization. And in this ours is a tragic situation.

But Berlin is not necessarily a pessimist. Just because we are faced with

[342] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 172.

unavoidable choice and the prospect of loss, does not mean that balances cannot be struck, or some sort of moderation of the conflict achieved. As Berlin indicates with his discussion of the idea of a 'shifting' or 'uneasy' equilibrium, it is possible to reconcile our conflicting commitments. It is possible, that is, to attain some sort of acceptable compromise, which allows for the realization of some, if not all, of our ideals. Granted, this compromise cannot be permanent; but that should not cause us dismay. For given a condition of constant confrontation and conflict between values, to expect a final settlement is to indulge in a flight of fantasy. Berlin's may not be the hopeful vision of pluralism which some hold, wherein we affirm and applaud every conception of the good life; but neither is it a dark one. If he does anything it is remind us that the necessity of choosing – that choice itself – is an essential part of the human condition. As he says in "Two Concepts of Liberty" this

> may madden those who seek for final solutions and single, all-embracing systems, guaranteed to be eternal. Nevertheless, it is a conclusion that cannot be escaped by those who, with Kant, have learned the truth that out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.[343]

And while this may be a rather bleak assessment to some, it is not nearly as grim as the consequences of believing in a final solution, a solution which would tempt men to treat each other as means to ends, as something less than fully human. If anything, his is an invitation to further reflection, a summons to be sensitive to the complex texture of reality, a call to vigilance. Berlin's view may be tragic, but it certainly is not pessimistic.[344]

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[343] Ibid., 170.

[344] "Fundamentally, I am a liberal rationalist," Berlin tells Jahanbegloo. "The values of the Enlightenment, what people like Voltaire, Helvetius, Holbach, Condorcet, preached are deeply sympathetic to me. Maybe

Conclusion

Isaiah Berlin is not a relativist. That is the simplest statement of what I have tried to argue here. A liberal, a pluralist, someone with a sophisticated political position, Isaiah Berlin is anything but an individual who believes morality is subjective, who believes that our moral commitments are groundless, who believes that the differences between peoples, cultures, races and groups are so sharp as to be irremediable. His is, instead, a complex conception of the moral, an astute appreciation of the political, and an intricate presentation of how the two are related. So, by way of concluding my study I would like to review, briefly, what I think the fundaments of his position are.

Berlin's position is a 'negative' one. That is, Berlin's commitment to liberalism is best understood as one that relies primarily upon a critical appraisal of alternatives to liberalism, rather than a positive account of liberalism itself. Berlin, in other words, does not seek to show the virtues or benefits of liberalism directly, so much as indirectly, through a critique of the sources of paternalism and authoritarianism. Central to this endeavor is a consideration of the struggle between monism and pluralism. Defined and distinguished by particular issues – a 'field of relations', if you will – Berlin treats monism and pluralism as antipodes, or as two disputants engaged in a contest about the nature of morality. Regarding issues of parsimony and method, universality and harmony, monism and pluralism provide quite different responses to certain pressing problems – which is really no surprise. That these two positions are pitched as opposites

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they are too narrow, and often wrong about the facts of human experience, but these people were great liberators. They liberated people from horrors, obscurantism, fanaticism, monstrous views. They were against cruelty, they were against oppression, they fought the good fight against superstition and ignorance and against a great many things which ruined people's lives. So I am on their side." (Jahanbegloo, 70)

of one another is not nearly as significant for Berlin as what these differences entail. For according to him the political consequences of pluralism and monism prove to be decisive in deciding why one should support liberalism over its rivals and competitors.

According to Berlin's argument, monism's assumption of universality leads to the corruption of positive liberty. Positive liberty – a value concerned with the individual's ability to be 'self-directing' – has strong ties to the idea of autonomy. Basically, positive liberty holds that individuals are free if they are in control of their lives; if, that is, they are able to shape and direct their lives in accordance with their wishes. This is quite different, according to what Berlin says, than the idea of negative liberty, which is merely concerned with issues of intrusion. In other words, where positive liberty takes up the question of what individuals want to do or be negative liberty is concerned only with the extent to which individuals are interfered with. As Berlin points out in one place, an individual who is tied to a tree merely wants to be free; what he or she does with their freedom is another question.[345] Of course the distinction between positive and negative liberty has raised quite a row – as I have shown, many scholars either doubt the efficacy of Berlin's discrimination, or seek to show that positive liberty is in some sense prior to negative. And as I have also shown, such criticisms are a bit off, in so far as they rest upon a misunderstanding of Berlin's position. Berlin is not interested in slighting positive liberty so much as he is in clarifying how positive liberty can become corrupted by monism. Basically the issue is this: monism, which holds that the ends of man are the same for everyone, attaches itself to positive liberty, which simply holds that individuals have goals. The assumption that one person's purposes hold true for

[345] Berlin, "My Intellectual Path, 15.

everyone else leads to the paternalism that underlies many authoritarian regimes. So the extension of one vision of the good life to the whole of humanity provides the opportunity to pervert positive liberty, and persecute those who dissent. Although Berlin makes it quite clear that this process is logically inconsistent, he also tries to make it clear that it is one with quite devastating results – especially in the last century. So his task regarding his defense of liberalism is to show that non-liberal options are oppressive. And he does this by trying to show that non-liberal politics depend upon a monistic conception of reality that is inherently paternalistic and threatening.

Of course indicating the dangers of monism does not automatically validate a pluralist's commitment to liberalism. While monism may be shown to be potentially perilous this does not mean that pluralism is any less problematic. For as Berlin's critics insist: pluralists still have to explain why they value liberalism over, say, socialism, or a theocracy. What exempts liberty from the clash of values that typifies pluralism? Upon what grounds can one ever justifiably claim to be a liberal? In short, is pluralism nothing more than a form of relativism, wherein morality is based upon an individual's subjective preferences and little else?

For Berlin the answer is that pluralism is not relativism, in any way, shape or form. Relativism, as the critics rightly note, *does* regard morality as being subjectively based. Whether in its simple or its sophisticated form relativism maintains that our moral commitments are ultimately irrational: the result of personal preferences, or habit and custom. Moral values and their social manifestations differ dramatically, the relativist claims, and consequently we cannot rationally comprehend why others hold different beliefs. All we can say, in the end, is that our values differ, and where they

differ dramatically we will probably come to blows. Incommensurability – or the lack of a common standard – for the relativist, entails incomparability – or a complete break between societies and cultures. This is not Berlin's position.

Berlin believes that it is possible to understand the beliefs and values of those who differ from us. That is, he believes in what he calls a common human horizon, which is basically a shared framework of moral values. In his opinions, there is a limit to the number of values that exist, and within these parameters we may observe the diversity that characterizes pluralism. In other words, within the boundaries of the human horizon exist the various and many societies and cultures and political groupings that are the hallmark of humanity. Berlin argues that though these social clusters are in fact quite different, there remains the possibility of comprehending and appraising one another. Through the use of what he calls the sense of reality Berlin makes the case that it is possible to enter into the experience of others and ascertain what it is they believe and why. In other words, within the boundaries of the human horizon, we may imaginatively grasp what others are about. And in so doing – in our ability to be sensitive to the values and beliefs and ends that others hold – we can make evaluations, we can judge. For the pluralist, incommensurability does not entail incomparability. A common measure may be lacking; an ability to appreciate and to comprehend is not. With this foundation we may affirm the value of liberty and liberalism.

But Berlin's is not a sentimental conception of pluralism. He does not think that we can simultaneously affirm all the various conceptions of the good life that exist. Choices have to be made, he tells us, and in choosing we may lose something of worth. As Berlin reminds us, our values may be exclusive and opposed, and in so being become

incompatible. And it is this incompatibility that causes grief and suffering, and is the source of tragedy. Berlin's, then, is not a view of pluralism that regards diversity as necessarily being a blessing. Instead, his is a view that notes the diversity of the world and specifies the problems this raises for us. Though respect is something we should strive for people should be prepared for situations where this is not possible. We should be prepared, in other words, to compromise when we can, and tolerate if we must. Although celebration is a possibility for the pluralist, it is not guaranteed. The incompatibility of values simply will not allow us to take our commitments lightly.

This, then, is Berlin's vision of pluralism. It is one that takes seriously the confrontation between pluralism and monism, and seeks to defend the former by showing how the latter leads to despotism. The course of this defense entails a quite insightful discussion about liberalism and the values thereof, one that does not attempt to tie liberalism directly to pluralism, so much as illiberal practices to monism. More, it is a defense that is well aware of the problems relativism poses for pluralism, and it attempts to redress these issues by indicating how relativism and pluralism differ on the question of incommensurability. Finally, Berlin's political vision is one that cannot be considered optimistic, even if it is not necessarily pessimistic. Since pluralism emphasizes the confrontation and conflict that arises when values collide – and holds that these collisions are not infrequent – it cannot be considered a position which is exceptionally cheering. For all that, however, it is not a dark and brooding conception of reality, for such a view of life would be quite at odds with someone such as Berlin, who was renowned for his humility and gentleness, his decency and affability. If, in the end, his position does not make the pretentious or grandiose claims for which many thirst,

that says less about Berlin than it does others. For to demand an unassailable political position is to demand something which cannot be given within this world. And Berlin, modest as he was, could not pretend to a knowledge that in fact no human has.

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