



Value Pluralism and Communitarianism

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Some theorists have argued recently that Berlinian value pluralism points not to liberalism, as Berlin supposed, but, in effect, to some form of communitarianism. To what extent is this true, and, to the extent that it is true, what kind of communitarianism fits best with the pluralist outlook? I argue that pluralists should acknowledge community as an important source of value and as a substantial value in itself, but they should also be prepared to question traditions and to respect values other than community. In particular, pluralism points to personal autonomy as playing a special role when we must choose among incommensurable goods in conflict. Consequently, the pluralist outlook is at odds with conservative communitarianisms that tend to place existing traditions beyond question, and with radical variants of communitarianism, such as Marxism and classical anarchism, which look forward to future communities in which the need to cope with hard public choices has largely been eliminated. Rather, Berlinian pluralism fits best with a liberal or moderate kind of communitarianism that balances community with other goods, especially personal autonomy.

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Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's sense is the idea that fundamental human values are irreducibly multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes incommensurable.¹ Berlin believed that pluralism has a natural affinity with liberalism. Pluralism, he thought, obliges us to confront hard choices among conflicting incommensurable values, choices best made in the spaces of personal liberty that liberals' universal principles guarantee. More recently, however, thinkers like John Gray have argued, in effect, that pluralism suggests an approach to politics that is closer to the themes of communitarian writers than to those of liberal universalists (Gray, 1993, 1995a, b, 2000a, b). The hard choices of pluralism, Gray has sometimes insisted, can be resolved rationally only within the context of an existing moral or cultural tradition. This emphasis on local context (present to some degree in Berlin too) seems to intersect with the familiar communitarian stress on the 'situated self' and the role of the particular community as the principal source from which people derive their values. This contextualism, in turn, might be taken to imply that we should be concerned



for community not only as a source but also as an object of value, the matrix within which people form the understandings and commitments they need to negotiate clashes among incommensurable goods. Perhaps, then, it is communitarianism rather than liberalism that is the better political expression of a pluralist view of value.

I shall argue that while there are indeed important links between pluralist and communitarian insights, there are also significant points of disjunction or qualification. Pluralism excludes ‘monist’ solutions to moral and political questions, according to which all such questions can be answered by appeal to a single way of ranking or commensurating competing values. Consequently, pluralists should oppose excessive reliance on abstract universal rules such as utilitarianism. However, they should also avoid uncritical dependence on the particular value rankings embodied in local cultures and traditions. Pluralists should acknowledge community as an important source of value and as a substantial value in itself, but they must also be prepared to question traditions and to respect values other than community. In particular, pluralism points to personal autonomy as playing a special role when we must choose among incommensurable goods in conflict. Consequently, the pluralist outlook fits better with some forms of communitarianism than with others. It is at odds with conservative communitarianisms (like Gray’s) that tend to place existing traditions beyond question, and with radical socialist variants, which threaten to restrict value diversity and reduce room for reasonable disagreement. Rather, the kind of communitarianism that fits best with the pluralist view is a liberal or moderate form that balances community with other goods, especially personal autonomy. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that the best political expression of Berlinian pluralism is liberal universalism after all, but a liberal universalism that accommodates what is valuable in communitarianism.

I begin by reviewing Berlin’s account of pluralism and its liberal implications before going on to chart the main areas of similarity and difference between pluralism and communitarianism in general. In the final section I consider the bearing of these arguments on different varieties of communitarianism, those of the left, the right and the centre.

Berlin and Value Pluralism

Berlin’s account of pluralism emerges out of his search for the intellectual roots of 20th-century totalitarianism. These he finds in several sources, but ultimately in moral monism, the view that all ethical questions have a single correct answer and that all these answers dovetail within a single, coherent moral system (Berlin, 1997, 6–16, 2000, 11–14, 2002, 212–217). Such a system will be dominated by one value, or a small set of values, which overrides or



serves as a common currency for all others. An example of an overriding good might be Plato's Form of the Good; Bentham's utility is the classic account of a common currency for all values. For Berlin, monism is potentially authoritarian, since it seems to point to a single vision of the good, and therefore of the good political society, as universally valid and justifiably enforceable even at great cost. If a single value overrides or commensurates all others, then that value by definition justifies the sacrifice of all others. Berlin thus holds monist thinking ultimately responsible for the totalitarian horrors of the 20th century.²

Monism is also false, according to Berlin. Such a view does not do justice to the depth and persistence of conflict in human moral experience. Rather, 'the world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others' (Berlin, 2002, 213–214). The moral world we know is better captured, that is, by the idea of value pluralism, according to which basic human goods cannot be easily ranked or commensurated but are irreducibly multiple, frequently incompatible and incommensurable with one another. This is a world of moral conflict, disagreement, dilemma, and hard choices. In such a world there is no possibility, even in principle, that all goods can be realized simultaneously, or that there is only one rational way of ranking them. If goods are incommensurable, then each is its own measure. Depending on the circumstances, there will be many reasonable ways of ranking them; yet we cannot be indifferent among these alternatives, because each will bring real losses as well as gains. Consequently, there is no possibility in a pluralist world of a 'final solution' to all moral and political problems, no possibility of moral or political perfection (Berlin, 2002, 212). Along with monist utopianism falls the standard justification of totalitarian dictatorship, the idea that one goal overrides all others and justifies any sacrifice.³

It is important to note that Berlin distinguishes pluralism from relativism, both ethical and cognitive. Against strong relativists, he insists that at least some values and concepts are universal. This must be true, he argues, if we are to account for our capacity to understand and empathize with the goals and values of other cultures. If we were wholly culture-bound, the purposes of other peoples would mean no more to us than the behaviour of ants. What makes other cultures recognizably human for us is a shared field of experience common to all human beings — a 'human horizon' which embraces generic goods such as liberty, justice, equality and courage. Such goods, although interpreted in different ways in different places and times, enable us to make sense of other cultures as human, like our own (Berlin, 1990, 11, 80). Further, we can also recognize conflicts among these generic goods as universal phenomena. In contrast with the tendency of cultural relativists to emphasize



moral conflict among different cultures, each externally bounded and internally univocal, Berlin's picture presents moral conflict as running along lines within and across cultural boundaries. The same fundamental collision between public duty and family loyalty dramatized by Sophocles recurs in the ethical thought of Sartre.⁴

Still, the pluralist emphasis on hard moral choices might seem to have one feature in common with strong relativism: it may appear to undermine not only utopianism and totalitarianism but also any reasoned moral or political position. Any such position will involve judgements that privilege certain values over others. If those values are incommensurable, then what reason do we have to choose in one direction rather than another?

Berlin's work contains at least three different responses to this problem. First, he sometimes seems to believe that incommensurable values are wholly incomparable with one another, and that consequently choices among them must be ultimately non-rational, or not guided by any reason that is decisive over others (Berlin, 1997, 320). If this is his view then his commitment to liberal solutions in preference to the alternatives looks arbitrary. Indeed, on this strong reading of incommensurability, no political position is rationally justifiable since any such position rests ultimately on a non-rational plumping for one set of values rather than another.

However, Berlin more often presents a second view of pluralist choice: that reasoned choice among incommensurable goods is possible, if not in the abstract then at least in (some) particular cases (Berlin and Williams, 1994). For example, liberty does not always outrank equality, nor does equality invariably trump liberty. But there may be good reason to reduce liberty in order to achieve the minimum of material equality needed for well-being under modern conditions (Berlin, 2002, 172). Whether liberty or equality should take priority in a given case depends not on any absolute monist ranking or decision procedure but on the particular context in which the conflict is instantiated. Incommensurables such as these cannot be ranked in the abstract, but there may be good reason to rank them in particular cases. As Berlin puts it in this mood, 'the concrete situation is almost everything' (Berlin, 1990, 15). This is not to deny the possibility of genuine dilemmas in which there is no decisive reason to favour one option over another. It is to deny that *every* case will be an irresolvable dilemma. Decisive reasons to choose in one direction rather than another may be generated by context. Conflicts among incommensurables in particular cases tend to arise in a context that includes certain background commitments, whether those of the individuals concerned or those of the society to which they belong. It is by reference to those background commitments, such as those of contemporary standards of 'well-being', that we may be able to resolve such conflicts rationally.⁵



Berlin's contextual account of choice under pluralism is an improvement on his strongly subjectivist, 'plumping' view, but it has a major limitation when considered against the background of his political thought as a whole. Part of his overall purpose is to assert the universal claims of personal liberty, the 'frontiers of freedom', as part of any decent modern political system (Berlin, 2002, 52–53, 171–174, 211). However, if political principles can be justified only contextually, then the claims of liberty will depend on context. The guarantees of which Berlin speaks will be justifiable within pre-existing liberal contexts, that is, within societies that already possess liberal institutions and traditions. But what, then, can liberals say to those societies without such institutions and traditions — arguably the very societies they would most urgently want to address? The contextual case for liberalism does not appear adequate for Berlin's declared purposes, or for the purposes of most liberals.

Berlin has a third response to the problem of choice under pluralism; however, one that appeals beyond particular contexts to principles of universal scope. Here, he infers ethical and political implications from the concept of pluralism itself. His texts yield two main arguments along these lines. The first turns on the idea and value of choice itself. If pluralism is true, then 'the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom' (Berlin, 2002, 214). The pluralist outlook emphasizes moral plurality and conflict. On this view, choice moves to center-stage in moral experience as unavoidable. If we must choose, Berlin argues, we must value freedom of choice, hence by implication a liberal order based on negative liberty. The trouble is that this argument, at least in the form in which Berlin presents it, passes too rapidly from the necessity of choice to the value of choice, hence freedom of choice. If choices among conflicting basic goods are sometimes painful and tragic, as Berlin emphasizes, then it might be a fair response to avoid such choices as far as possible, and one way of doing so may be deliberately to reduce our negative liberty. The necessity of moral choice, by itself, appears compatible with authoritarian as well as with liberal politics.

Berlin's second universalist argument from pluralism to liberalism is less explicit but more immediately compelling. The basic claim is that pluralism implies an anti-utopian outlook, which is more in keeping with liberalism than some of its principal ideological rivals. For Berlin, the ideal of social and political perfectibility is not only implausible but 'incoherent' (Berlin, 1990, 15). This is so at two levels. First, it is logically impossible to realize all genuine human goods simultaneously, since some goods necessarily clash with others. A person who cultivates the life and virtues of a rugged individualist cannot simultaneously live well as a team player or family man. A society animated by the values of liberalism cannot enjoy the goods of solidarity or tradition to the same extent as socialist or conservative societies. All human lives consciously



or otherwise trade off moral gains against losses. Might it be argued, however, that perfection can be achieved in another way: that even if we must accept trade-offs, there is one uniquely superior account of what those trade-offs should be? This is denied by the second level of imperfectability implicit in Berlin's pluralism. Some goods not only conflict with one another but are also incommensurable. This means, as already seen, that there is no single formula for ranking goods that is applicable in all cases. Hence, there can be no perfect human life, either in the sense of a life in which all values fit together harmoniously, or in the sense of a life in which all value conflicts are resolved by a single correct ranking.

The political implications of inevitable social imperfectability are twofold. On the one hand, it rules out as merely utopian those political theories that project the possibility of a wholly perfected political society. The list of views included here contains some prominent historical opponents of liberalism, in particular classical anarchism and Marxism. On the other, pluralist imperfectability suggests a positive recommendation too: only those forms of politics are plausible which acknowledge and accommodate the effects of imperfection, in particular dissatisfaction, alienation and significant social conflict. Prominent among the political forms that met this description is liberalism, the historical mission of which has always been to palliate or manage social conflict rather than eliminate it. For liberals, the task of the state, or of political institutions more generally, is not to realize all human goods or resolve all moral conflicts, to perfect the life of the individual or to harmonize relations among social classes or groups. Rather, it is to underwrite the necessary (but not sufficient) pre-conditions for individual and group striving and to manage social conflict so as to prevent it from becoming damaging to those same pre-conditions. In short, pluralism commends liberalism by way of anti-utopianism.

This second argument is persuasive as far as it goes, and it goes a considerable distance, but it is incomplete. Although liberalism answers to pluralist anti-utopianism, so too do other political forms. Conservatism, in particular, seems also to meet the pluralist bill as Berlin describes it. Conservatives, too, stress the imperfectibility of the human condition and the need to contain and channel the resulting dissatisfactions and conflicts. But unlike liberals they would recommend as a framework for this palliative work not personal autonomy, toleration and individual rights, but adherence to local tradition. It is no accident that the chief ideological alternatives to the liberal reading of value pluralism have been broadly conservative in character, as I shall discuss later.

I conclude that Berlin's attempts to link pluralism with liberalism are, as he states them, inadequate. The argument from context is severely limited by its dependence on a pre-existing liberal tradition. The argument from choice is logically flawed. The anti-utopianism line, while eliminating some opponents



of liberalism, does not single out liberalism as uniquely the best political expression of pluralism. This does not mean that we should dismiss these arguments completely, since later I shall show that they can be resuscitated and improved. First, however, I shall explore the possibility that the true politics of pluralism are less liberal than communitarian.

Pluralism and Communitarianism

Might pluralism find its fullest political expression not in liberalism, as Berlin supposed, but in communitarianism? Such an alternative reading has indeed been proposed by John Gray, John Kekes and Michael Walzer, whose arguments I shall come to later. First, I shall set out a brief account of the core elements of contemporary communitarianism, before examining these from a pluralist point of view.

Communitarianism, at its most general, emphasizes the role and value of community in our lives. This basic message has two main dimensions: community is both an object and a source of moral value. As an object of value, the claims of community are often contrasted in the communitarian literature with those of modern individualist society. Amitai Etzioni, for example, sees contemporary American society as excessively individualistic, having lost touch with the shared values of the past. Those values were challenged and overturned in the 1960s, in some cases rightly, by a new emphasis on personal liberty. The trouble is that the old norms have been replaced not by an alternative consensus but by a vast diversity of personal lifestyle choices. The result is a contemporary society characterized by ethical divergence, disagreement, uncertainty and alienation, indeed 'rampant moral confusion and social anarchy' (Etzioni, 1995, 24). What is missing is a sense of moral commonality, 'a society in which certain actions are viewed as beyond the pale' (Etzioni, 1995, 24–25). The roots of morality lie in community, and so we need to restore community in order to recover our sense of moral direction.

If the roots of morality lie in community, then community is not only an object but also a source of value. This, too, is a truth that has been lost sight of in the modern world, according to many communitarians. The problem here is 'individualism' in a more philosophical sense. Much contemporary social and political thought shores up excessive social fragmentation by accepting a 'methodological' individualism, according to which the ultimate social unit is the individual person conceived 'atomistically' as self-contained, self-reliant and self-determining (Taylor, 1985). A favourite communitarian target in this regard is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls famously imagines principles of justice being chosen by persons placed behind a 'veil of ignorance', which models impartiality by preventing them from knowing



certain identifying facts about themselves: their natural assets, social and economic circumstances, and conception of the good life. For Michael Sandel (1982), Rawls's image of 'the self prior to its ends' is incoherent. We cannot think of ourselves in this way, Sandel argues, because we are inescapably 'encumbered' with, or 'constituted' by, certain ends or values, namely those of the communities that form us. We are not atomized but 'situated' selves, bearers of identities that are inherited or received rather than chosen by us. These identities, in turn, shape those choices and judgements that we do make. It follows that, contrary to the impression given by liberal thinkers like Rawls, there are limits to the extent to which persons choose their values autonomously. Our choices are shaped by our identities, and these are not themselves chosen. Our moral values are, to a much greater degree than the liberals realize, the creations of our communities.

Two points are worth noting before I proceed to compare communitarianism with pluralism. First, communitarianism is not necessarily opposed to liberalism. Much of the literature of communitarianism has taken liberalism as its target, giving rise to the long-running 'liberal-communitarian' debate of the 1980s. But the proper opponent of communitarianism is not liberalism but methodological individualism (Miller, 1999). It is true that some of the leading liberal thinkers of recent times — Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, Ronald Dworkin (1977), Robert Nozick (1974) are the usual examples — seem to make individualist assumptions of this kind, and that is why so many communitarians have taken liberalism to be their target. But not all liberals are methodological individualists, as illustrated by the work of writers like Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz, whom I shall discuss later. This suggests a second point: just as we should distinguish different versions of liberalism, so too should we allow that there are significant differences among communitarians. The account I have sketched of community as an object and source of value can be regarded as the common core to which all communitarians (although in different ways and with different emphases) subscribe. But there is very considerable divergence among communitarians when it comes to drawing out the political implications of these arguments. I deal with that political divergence in the next section.

How should pluralists respond to communitarianism? First, what view should they take of community as an object of value? Most pluralists would surely be happy to acknowledge community as a genuine human good. Berlin, for example, is a strong advocate of what he calls 'the need for belonging', which he believes is found in all human beings. In particular, he singles out national belonging as an especially powerful ideal (Berlin, 1979, 333–355, 2002, 200–208). This sense of being at home among your own people is essential to human flourishing, and its denial — as in the case of the Jewish experience, which Berlin shares — can be deeply damaging. So, if it is true that modern



societies neglect or undermine the value of community, then Berlinian pluralists can agree with Etzioni that there is a case for the recovery of community as a goal of public policy.

However, the communitarian stress on the revival of community will be qualified by pluralists in two ways. First, although pluralists are likely to follow Berlin in accepting community as a genuine good, they will add that community is only one such good among others. These others must also be taken seriously and weighed in the balance in cases of conflict. Thus, Berlin is scarcely a supporter of the view that national belonging overrides all other values — that, indeed, is the kind of monist view which he associates with fascism, and which he counters with his concept of value pluralism. Berlin's nationalism is a liberal or civic nationalism, in which belonging is balanced by other considerations, especially personal liberty.

Second, pluralists will observe, again following Berlin, that some value conflicts are conceptual in nature, such that value A can be promoted only and necessarily at the price of value B. Perhaps, then, the loss of some substantial degree of community is the price that must be paid for gains in other goods, such as individual liberty. Further, conceptual conflicts of this kind can break out within a complex notion like 'community'. Perhaps the lost American moral community lamented by Etzioni was a sacrifice made unavoidable by the emergence and public recognition of other communities, new or previously voiceless, such as those celebrated by feminists and the defenders of gay rights. Pluralists, therefore, while willing to join with communitarians in defence of 'community' as a legitimate human good, will be alive to possible conflicts between community and other goods, and to conflicts among different kinds or instances of community. They will not always see community as trumping other goods, or accept that traditional conceptions of community outweigh other notions of community. What exactly the trade-off or balance should be between community and other values, or between conflicting versions of community, is of course a large question that has attracted a range of pluralist answers. These correspond to the different political interpretations of communitarianism I mentioned earlier, some of which I shall consider in the next section.

What about the other dimension of the communitarian thesis: community as a source of value? Here, too, pluralists will be sympathetic to a degree. The communitarian notion of the situated self is very much in keeping with pluralist contextualism. Just as communitarians insist that our moral choices are shaped by the values of the communities that form our identities, pluralists similarly point to the values of our society or culture as providing a context within which we can make reasoned choices among conflicting incommensurables. Thus, Berlin refers to the role in such choices of following 'the general pattern of life in which we believe', and of judgements 'dictated by the forms of life of the



society to which one belongs' (Berlin, 1990, 18, 2002, 47). Similar arguments are advanced by Gray and Kekes, as I shall show later. To this extent pluralists seem to agree with communitarians in looking to the settled standards of a given community to provide moral signposts.

Further, and relatedly, pluralists would agree with communitarian suspicions concerning liberal claims to neutrality. On the communitarian view, the self is not prior to its ends but constituted by them; moreover, these are the ends of the community. It follows that another Rawlsian claim must be rejected: that 'the right is prior to the good'. Rawls believes that his veil of ignorance will enable us to identify a conception of justice that is neutral among substantial conceptions of the good life. This neutral justice will inform a framework of 'the right' that all citizens can accept, whatever their disagreements about how exactly one should live, because the right does not depend on any particular conception of the good. But if, as communitarians claim, persons are inseparable from the values of their communities, then there can be no wholly neutral realm of the right. If people accept certain principles of justice, they do so because those principles reflect values with which they identify. The right is inevitably an expression of the good: of that conception of the good that holds sway within the relevant community. Similarly, pluralists would say that any political system reflects a particular selection and ranking of substantial human goods. A liberal system is not neutral among conceptions of the good; rather, it places special weight on those values that are characteristically liberal: individual liberty, toleration and so forth (Gray, 1995b, 71–73). This is not to say that liberalism cannot be defended from a pluralist (or indeed communitarian) point of view. I shall construct such a defence later. My point here is only that pluralists would agree with communitarians that neither liberalism nor any other political position can be justified on the basis of complete neutrality. Both persons and politics are intimately linked with particular conceptions of the good. As Berlin writes, 'neutrality is also a moral attitude' (Berlin, 2002, 23).

Again, however, pluralist support for typically communitarian tendencies needs to be qualified. While pluralists would accept an important role for community as a source of value, pluralism does not imply that community is the only, or even the most significant, such source. First, the basic pluralist claim in this connection is Berlin's idea that reasoned choice among incommensurables is possible in a concrete context. But 'context' can be defined in various ways, some narrower, some wider. Berlin does sometimes identify the background values of an existing way of life as providing a context for pluralist choice. But that is not to say that this is the only way in which a reason-generating context can be conceived. Joseph Raz provides an alternative view when he refers to the 'conditions' of modern industrial society as forming a context in which the liberal value of personal autonomy becomes



an essential component of the good life for anyone (Raz, 1986, 369–370). This is clearly a much wider reading of the context for pluralist choice than the appeal to a local way of life, and in Raz's hands it suggests a much broader defence of liberalism than that suggested by Berlin's references to local patterns of life.

Second, recall that Berlin also believes that we can identify rational criteria for choosing among incommensurables that go beyond context — or at any rate appeal to the widest possible ethical context, that of human experience. His case for the value of negative liberty refers not merely to local tradition, or even to socio-historical conditions, but to certain features of the concept of pluralism itself: the role of choice, and the incoherence of utopianism. The case is therefore a universal one, grounded in what Berlin see as a central aspect of the human condition. It is a case that, as I argued, has problems and limitations in the form in which Berlin presents it. But I believe that his case can be improved. His basic insight is a sound one: the concept of pluralism itself can be made to yield universal principles with significant political implications. I bring these out in the next section.

Pluralist Communitarianism: Right, Left or Centre?

So far I have compared the general or core commitments of pluralists and communitarians, revealing both similarities and differences. The two views converge to the extent that they accept community as both an important objective and a significant source of value. But pluralists are more inclined than communitarians to see community as, first, only one value among others, with no greater intrinsic weight than considerations like liberty, justice and so forth; and, second, as only one source of value among others, which include broader conceptions of context, and perhaps universal principles implicit in the notion of pluralism itself. Supposing, however, that pluralism and communitarianism share at least some degree of affinity, I want now to go deeper by taking different versions of communitarianism into account. What kind of communitarianism is most sympathetic to pluralists? Or, to put it another way, what is the most pluralist form of communitarianism?

To organize this inquiry, I draw on the typology of communitarianisms proposed by David Miller (1999). Miller observes that while all communitarians share the core doctrine of the situated self (to which I would add the core commitment to community as an object of value), they diverge over the political implications of this. Another way of putting this point is that communitarians differ with one another over the kind of 'community' they advocate, or to which they draw attention. At any rate, Miller divides communitarianism politically into 'right', 'left' and 'centre' forms, respectively, conservative, socialist and liberal. I shall take these in turn.



Right communitarianism

Conservative communitarians emphasize the role and value of the community of tradition; respect for existing tradition is their key principle. Alasdair MacIntyre may be taken as representative of this view, in his insistence that what is good for individuals depends on the role defined for them by their community — whether this is the family, city, tribe or nation. ‘I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition’. Tradition, on this view, encompasses individual identity and is morally authoritative. Even ‘rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it’ (MacIntyre, 1981, 221).

Some pluralists have supported this conservative view. That appears to be true, for example, of Berlin in the passages in which he refers to ‘the patterns of life in which we believe’, and similar formulations. The same line has been more single-mindedly pursued by John Gray and John Kekes, who argue broadly as follows. Under Berlinian pluralism there is no uniquely correct, universally applicable way of ranking incommensurable goods when they conflict. How, then, can we choose among them? Liberals appeal to abstract, universal principles such as human rights or Rawlsian justice to provide criteria for reasoned choice among incommensurable options, but these are essentially monist devices since they depend on a prior privileging of some values over others. Rather, we can choose rationally among clashing incommensurables only by reference to an overarching conception of the good life, that is, an existing tradition that is accepted as locally authoritative. Thus for Gray, ‘judgements of the relative importance of such goods appeal to their role in a specific way of life’ (Gray, 2000b, 98). Similarly, according to Kekes, ‘the grounds on which such judgements rest are the conceptions of a good life regarded as acceptable in the surrounding tradition’ (Kekes, 1993, 77). Pluralism, in short, implies a conservative politics of respect for local tradition.

One problem with this position has already been mentioned: the claim that existing tradition provides the only framework for pluralist choice rests on a narrow interpretation of ‘context’. In addition, I suggested that, following Berlin’s lead, pluralists might look beyond local context to the possibility of deriving broader principles from the concept of pluralism itself. Two such principles are especially useful in questioning the conservative case.

The first is a principle of ‘diversity’. Gray himself sees pluralism as implying a universal case for diversity, in the sense of a diversity of cultures or ‘incommensurable human flourishings’ (Gray, 1993, 291, 298). If there are many intrinsically valuable goods, then there must be many intrinsically valuable ways of combining those goods, that is, many legitimate cultures. But



Gray uses this doctrine of cultural diversity to support his traditionalism. He argues that, on a pluralist view, liberal or other universalist principles (but presumably not support for cultural diversity itself) are merely expressions of one cultural outlook among others, with no special claims to privilege, since cultures, being incommensurable, cannot be ranked. A major problem with this argument is that it confuses pluralism with cultural relativism. On a pluralist view, it is goods rather than whole cultures that are incommensurable; cultures cannot be wholly incommensurable because pluralists acknowledge the validity of at least some generic human goods. Consequently, the 'diversity' criterion implicit in pluralism should refer primarily to a diversity not of cultures but of goods or values. The general idea is captured by Bernard Williams: 'if there are many and competing values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More, to this extent, must mean better' (Williams, 1978, xvii). Pluralists must take seriously the moral force possessed by all human goods. But then pluralism implies respect not simply for cultural diversity, but for cultural patterns that are themselves internally diverse. That imperative cuts across respect for cultures, or for existing traditions, which may themselves promote the plurality and diversity of human goods to varying degrees. The principle of diversity gives pluralists critical leverage against existing traditions; it does not underwrite the authority of traditions regardless of their content.

A second principle on which pluralists can question the authority of tradition is summed up in Charles Larmore's phrase, 'reasonable disagreement' (Larmore, 1996, 122). This draws on Rawls's notion of 'the fact of reasonable pluralism', which refers to the phenomenon of widespread disagreement among human beings concerning the content of the good life (Rawls, 1993, 63). Reasonable disagreement may be especially evident in modern societies, but on the pluralist view the problem is rooted in the moral experience of humanity at large: it is a permanent possibility in all human societies because of the deep structure of human value. Traditional and other conceptions of the good life are essentially generalized rankings of values, including incommensurable values. Although I have argued that pluralists should not accept that all such conceptions are automatically on a moral par, nevertheless the wide range of genuine human goods implies a wide range of legitimate permutations of those goods, that is, of reasonable rankings. Many such rankings will be equally reasonable, and concerning these there is consequently room for people to disagree on reasonable grounds. Pluralists cannot resolve the deepest value conflicts simply by citing a local or personal conception of the good, because under pluralism these are subject to reasonable, and therefore permanent, disagreement. Gray has come to accept something like this point in his more recent work, acknowledging that pluralists cannot rest content with appeals to tradition because rival traditions can come into conflict (Gray, 2000a, b).⁶



It should be added that such conflicts occur not only among settled traditions, but also within them, and within individual persons.

To summarize: conservative claims to the authority of tradition are undermined, from a pluralist point of view, by the possibility of broader interpretations of the context for choice among incommensurables, by the desirability of value diversity within as well as among ways of life, and by recognition of reasonable disagreement concerning the merits of rival traditions. I conclude that pluralism offers scant support to the more conservative forms of communitarianism.

Left communitarianism

The kind of community envisioned by left-wing or socialist communitarians is distinguished by two main ideals: equality and collective self-determination (Miller, 1999, 177–178). Equality here refers principally to equality of status in opposition to class and economic divisions. Collective self-determination implies active participation by people in public decision making, that is, an ideal of strong citizenship. Different versions of this broad vision include classical forms of Marxism and anarchism, democratic socialism and social democracy. The case of Marxism and anarchism has already been mentioned: these utopian views will be rejected by pluralists on the basis of value conflict and incommensurability. But what about the more moderate forms of socialism?

Some of these, too, suffer from serious problems when seen from a pluralist perspective. First, the socialist emphasis on equality traditionally involves either the outright abolition or at least the placing of significant restrictions on private property and the free market. The danger in this from a pluralist point of view is that it threatens to restrict diversity and disallow reasonable disagreement. At an extreme, public control of the economy, by concentrating economic as well as political power in the same hands, can lead to authoritarianism. Power passes to a political class, which is then able to impose on others its own, often narrow, conception of the good. Even if the extremes of authoritarianism are avoided, the defining socialist project of public control of the economy tends to check the operation of one of the great engines of value diversity, namely the market. This is not to say that the market alone is sufficient to maximize value diversity, since the free market tends, like all institutions, to privilege certain goods (in this case negative liberty, self-reliance, the competitive virtues) and neglect or diminish others (community, social solidarity, social justice). But a vigorous market, if not a sufficient condition for a diverse society, is likely to be a necessary condition. Pluralists should therefore be highly sceptical of socialist equality, at least in its stronger forms. They also have reason to be wary of the socialist ideal of collective



self-determination. So far as this includes a strong emphasis on active citizenship, it suggests a substantial conception of the good that many people do not and need not share. To insist on participation as a central obligation for all persons nevertheless would be to violate the pluralist principles of diversity and reasonable disagreement. As Berlin writes, ‘the freedom of the individual or the group may not be fully compatible with a full degree of participation in a common life, with its demands for cooperation, solidarity, fraternity’ (Berlin, 2002, 48).

In general, therefore, pluralism requires that the canonical socialist commitments to public ownership and participatory democracy be strongly qualified. The form of socialism that is most likely to fit the bill is the most moderate, namely social democracy, in which egalitarian and participatory goals are pursued within the framework of the market and civil liberties. In this connection an especially interesting view is that of Michael Walzer, who argues for an explicitly ‘pluralist’ account of social democracy in *Spheres of Justice* (1983). Walzer’s position is recognizably communitarian in its respect for the ‘shared understandings’ of particular political communities. His pluralism is expressed through his notion of different goods as occupying distinct distributional ‘spheres’ (e.g. money, membership, healthcare, and so forth). Distributive justice cannot be reduced to one or a few rules; rather, there are as many rules as there are major categories of goods, since each has its own social meaning which determines its appropriate distribution. Finally, the social-democratic dimension of Walzer’s view emerges through his idea of ‘complex equality’, in which no one sphere will be permitted to dominate the others. When the boundaries between the spheres are maintained, those people who are strong or fortunate in one area will not necessarily be so effective in another. Different people will flourish in different ways, and no one will achieve dominance overall.

Pluralists will find this picture sympathetic to a degree, with one major reservation. They will appreciate Walzer’s idea of the separate spheres, which reflects the pluralist principles of incommensurability and diversity. Complex equality, too, may be attractive to pluralists. While many socialists would regard this as a merely attenuated form of equality, pluralists can support it for that very reason: it gets away from the traditional socialist ideal of ‘simple equality’, or equal shares of a single dominant good, an ideal which (as Walzer recognizes) tends to conflict with individual liberty. The reservation is that Walzer’s pluralism is undermined by the strength of his emphasis on local shared understandings. The shared understandings of a particular society could reject complex equality and permit the dominance of one sphere over the others. From a pluralist point of view, Walzer makes the conservative mistake of attributing too much moral authority to existing traditions, that is, the mistake of conflating pluralism with cultural relativism. Pluralism certainly



acknowledges a role for contextual judgement, and for community traditions as one form of context, but pluralists, for the reasons given earlier, need not accept existing shared understandings as conclusive.

On the whole, pluralists should be more wary than welcoming of socialist forms of communitarianism. Marxism and anarchism are utopian views rendered incoherent by the central pluralist idea of value conflict and incommensurability, but even the more moderate versions of socialism are likely to be in tension with the principles of diversity and reasonable disagreement. Walzer shows how pluralism can be combined with social democracy, but this sits uncomfortably with his conservative reading of existing communities as morally authoritative.

Centre communitarianism

In David Miller's classification, liberal versions of communitarianism advocate communities characterized by respect for individual rights and personal autonomy. Will Kymlicka may be taken as representative of this view (Kymlicka, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2002). Orthodox liberal thought, Kymlicka argues, has tended to see the claims of communities or cultures as opposed to individual liberty, a view typified by Mill's reference to 'the despotism of custom' (Mill, 1974, 136). But liberals have good reason to value community, including minority communities, and to do so on the basis of liberty. Cultural communities in effect provide their members with a moral map with which to make sense of the choices confronting them. The map can be revised, or even departed from altogether, but for most people it is a necessary starting point, an essential condition for exercising autonomous choice. This means, however, that the value of community is largely instrumental to that of personal autonomy. It follows that liberals should promote only those kinds of community that are genuinely supportive of autonomy. Communities should, at least in principle, be liberalized where autonomy is at risk.

This is the kind of communitarianism that fits best, I believe, with the pluralist outlook. The pluralist case for liberal communitarianism is based in part on the principles of diversity and reasonable disagreement already mentioned. These principles, I have argued, undermine conservative and socialist forms of communitarianism. Conversely, they also suggest arguments in favour of liberal forms. The liberal emphasis on individual liberty and toleration of minority beliefs and practices connects strongly with the accommodation of diversity and reasonable disagreement. This is not to say that there are no limits to liberal accommodation — I noted earlier that pluralists will agree with communitarians that liberal principles and institutions are not wholly neutral, but embody distinctively liberal rankings of goods. But all societies embody *some* ranking of values. What distinguishes the liberal



ranking from its rivals is its exceptional capacity for accommodating different individual and group projects and identifications. Liberalism, like all other political positions, rests on a conception of the good, but in the liberal case this is especially capacious (Galston, 1991, Chapter 8).

Pluralism also suggests a case for liberal communitarianism by way of personal autonomy. Pluralism and individual autonomy have been linked, for example, by Joseph Raz. If autonomy is valuable, according to Raz, then values must be plural in Berlin's sense, because autonomy presupposes the existence of 'an adequate range' of genuinely valuable options (Raz, 1986, 372). Conversely (although this is not a point made by Raz), pluralism generates a case for personal autonomy.⁷ As I have argued, pluralism rules out reliance on both abstract monist rules like utilitarianism and conservative traditionalism. Both abstract rules and local traditions represent particular value rankings that may be challengeable for good reason in particular cases. Pluralists should be willing to question the applicability of these pre-determined norms, and to rely on their own judgement in a strong sense. In other words, pluralists should be prepared to be autonomous because there are no ready-made norms conclusive enough to relieve them of that burden. If autonomy is required for good judgement under pluralism, then pluralist judgement is best made in a political environment supportive of autonomy: that is, liberalism.

But why, it might be objected, may one not, consistently with pluralism, simply 'plump' for one option or another? Why should we be committed to 'good reasons' and 'good judgement' at all? The answer is that, as we saw in connection with the diversity argument, pluralism requires us to take seriously the full range of human goods, and this in turn requires us to reflect rationally on our choices where those goods conflict. If pluralism is true, then many goods make a genuine contribution to human well-being. To recognize and respect that contribution is part of what it is to accept the truth of pluralism. In particular cases some of these goods may conflict, and we shall have to choose among them. But even when we choose against a good, we should, on the pluralist view, recognize that the good we forego is still valuable. It follows that pluralist choice should not be merely arbitrary or casual. If these are genuine human goods, we must not be indifferent to them, even when we have to choose against them. Consequently, choices among such values call for a reasoned response in which we should try to think about what particular package of values is desirable and coherent in the particular case before us (Kekes, 1993, 97–98). To take plural values seriously is to be committed to practical reasoning. Practical reasoning under pluralism cannot be confined by any single rule or tradition, but must be autonomous. Such a strong emphasis on personal autonomy suggests a broadly liberal form of politics.

I have now laid out three pluralist arguments for a liberal form of communitarianism — from diversity, reasonable disagreement, and personal



autonomy respectively. Note that all of these can be seen as revising the arguments offered by Berlin. The principles of diversity and respect for reasonable disagreement echo Berlin's anti-utopianism, his insistence on accommodation rather than transcendence of difference and conflict. But the anti-utopian line already found in Berlin is sharpened in the arguments I have presented by considerations that give us reason to prefer liberalism not only to Marxism and anarchism, but also to conservatism. The argument from personal autonomy recalls Berlin's stress on choice, but gives a fuller account of why pluralist choice implies a case for liberty: personal liberty (in the form of autonomy rather than merely negative liberty) is required for good choice, in the sense of choice that answers to the pluralist imperative to take seriously the full range of human values.

The liberal-pluralist vision of a community that encourages personal autonomy attracts objections from two different, indeed opposed, directions. First, some critics allege that there is little to unite such communities, either internally or as groups within a larger political society (Scruton, 1980; MacIntyre, 1985, Chapter 17). Within the autonomy-based community individuals may pursue radically divergent life projects, and among communities of this kind the claims of minorities count for as much as those of dominant majorities. What is lacking at both levels, so the objection runs, is a substantial conception of the good in which all members share.

This objection is, in essence, the view of conservative communitarians, and I have already pointed to its weakness from a pluralist perspective, namely its failure to satisfy the principles of diversity and reasonable disagreement. Pluralists can and should accept that social unity is an important good. But they must also have regard to diversity and reasonable disagreement, and therefore insist that unity be based on terms acceptable to all concerned and not just to dominant individuals or groups. Again, this does not mean that the focus of unity must be culturally 'neutral' or insubstantial; it does mean that the kind of unity that is sensitive to pluralism must be capacious or accommodating. The liberal stress on personal autonomy generates opportunities and capacities in people to choose among many different paths.

This last claim, however, provokes a second objection to autonomy-based liberalism as a meeting point of communitarian and pluralist ideals. William Galston, for example, accepts that a desirable community of communities would be framed by liberal principles, but argues that those principles should not include a commitment to personal autonomy. This he judges to be too sectarian a basis for a just liberal settlement, since too many minority groups reject individual autonomy as a valid component of the good life (Galston, 2002, 25–26). Rather than an 'Enlightenment liberalism' based on personal autonomy, the best political regime for a multicultural society is a 'Reformation liberalism' based on toleration. This latter will include toleration



of minority ways of life that are explicitly non-liberal in their acceptance of traditional, prescriptive roles for women, religious fundamentalism in the education of children, and so forth. Such a position is supported, according to Galston, by Berlinian pluralism, since pluralism implies the legitimacy of multiple conceptions of the good, including many such conceptions that do not privilege the values of liberalism.

Two replies are possible to Galston's objection.⁸ First, Galston himself sees that the 'expressive liberty' of non-liberal groups to live as they please can be accommodated by a recognizably liberal society only on condition that the members of these groups are permitted a right of exit into the surrounding society. But since a genuine freedom to exit requires the possibility of judgement that is genuinely independent of the group's norms, it may be questioned whether Galston's position does not imply a personal autonomy standard after all. Second, as I argued earlier, value pluralism does not imply support for cultural pluralism without qualification. The pluralist principles of diversity and reasonable disagreement cut across the claims of cultures: pluralists should prefer not merely a diversity of cultures, but a diversity of internally diverse cultures. For a culture to be internally diverse, its members must be genuinely free to follow different paths of their own choosing, and again this would seem to require the capacity for independent judgement, that is, personal autonomy.

Conclusion

I have argued that the outlook of Berlinian pluralism is closest to centrist or liberal forms of communitarianism, especially the autonomy-based liberal-communitarianism of Kymlicka and Raz. That position reflects a convergence between, on the one hand, the core communitarian doctrines of the importance of the community as an object and source of value, and, on the other hand, the pluralist recognition of community as a substantial human good, and of the role of context in framing choices among conflicting incommensurable values. But the view I defend also avoids the excesses of certain forms of communitarianism: conservative deference to tradition, the authoritarianism and uniformity of some socialist variants, and the insufficiently qualified group tolerance of 'Reformation' liberalism, which either returns us to conservative traditionalism or collapses into autonomy-based 'Enlightenment' liberalism after all.

A final question is whether the 'liberal communitarianism' I defend here properly counts as a form of communitarianism at all. Someone might object that the emphasis on personal autonomy in this view really negates the distinctive communitarian stress on the situated self and unchosen goods.



It seems to me that such an objection assumes that either conservative or socialist accounts of communitarianism are definitive, an assumption that injects political prejudice into a philosophical starting point. Kymlicka and others have made a convincing case that individual autonomy and a concern for the role and value of community are not necessarily at loggerheads. However, for those not persuaded by that reply, I am happy to withdraw the term ‘communitarianism’ altogether, and to concede that it is the liberal component of the position that is essential. Berlin’s intuition that pluralism and liberalism are somehow linked is fundamentally correct. But it is surely worth asking what kind of liberalism this is, and worth pointing out that the pluralist answer to that question converges with some of the insights of communitarianism.

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Notes

- 1 For Berlin’s account of pluralism and its political implications, see, principally, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1997, 2002), ‘Pursuit of the Ideal’ (1990, 1997), and ‘My Intellectual Path’ (2000). Commentaries include: Hausheer (1983); Kocis (1989); Lukes (1991, 2003); Gray (1993, 1995a, b, 2000a, b); Kekes (1993, 1997, 1998); Mack (1993); Crowder (1994, 2002a, b, 2004a); Galipeau (1994); Walzer (1995); Larmore (1996); Dzur (1998); Newey (1998); Blokland (1999); Mack (1999); Riley (2000, 2001, 2002); Dworkin, Lilla and Silvers (2001), Part II; Galston (2002); Gaus (2003, Chapter 2).
- 2 Not all monists are authoritarians, however. Berlin’s view is not that monism is linked to tyranny by necessity, but that monism can lead to authoritarianism along a slippery slope of psychological association. His position here parallels his famous account of the way positive conceptions of liberty, although not necessarily anti-individualist, are vulnerable to becoming twisted in that direction ‘not always by logically reputable steps’ (Berlin, 2002, 179).
- 3 It should be conceded that Berlin’s account of the truth of value pluralism, which rests on our ‘ordinary experience’ of moral conflict (Berlin, 2002, 213), is not conclusive. Monists could reply that our perception of these conflicts is superficial and compatible with there being an underlying monist order we have not yet understood. But this logical possibility seems hollow given that the monist order is still undiscovered after many centuries of inquiry. On the case for value pluralism in general, see Nussbaum (1986, 1992), Raz (1986), Stocker (1990), Lukes (1991), Nagel (1991), Kekes (1993), Hurka (1996), Chang (1997) and MacKenzie (1999).
- 4 Compare Sophocles’ *Antigone* with Sartre’s story (1948, 35–36) of the man who has to choose between joining the Resistance and staying home to look after his mother. Note also that the distinction between Berlin’s pluralism and relativism also separates his position from that of contemporary post-structuralists and those inspired by them. For example, Berlinian pluralism is quite different from the ‘agonistic pluralism’ of Mouffe (2000). According to Mouffe, following Foucault, the plurality of values is relative to, or generated by, the plurality of power relations. However, Berlin would deny that our values are so narrowly determined: see his essay, ‘Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought’, in Berlin (1990).
- 5 This marks another point at which Berlin’s view contrasts with the ‘agonistic pluralism’ of Mouffe, for whom conflicts among plural values ‘cannot be resolved through deliberation and



rational discussion': Mouffe (2000, 126). For more detailed accounts of rational choice under pluralism, see Nussbaum (1986, 1992), Stocker (1990), Kekes (1993, 1997, 1998), Berlin and Williams (1994), Chang (1997); Richardson (1997), Crowder (2002a, 2004a) and Galston (2002, 2005).

6 Gray's proposed solution to the problem of conflicts among traditions is his notion of *modus vivendi* (Gray, 2000a, b). For problems with this from a pluralist point of view, see Crowder (2002a, 119–122, 2004a, Chapter 7).

7 This argument is more fully developed in Crowder (2002a, Chapter 8; 2002b, 468–469; 2004a, b, Chapter 7).

8 See Crowder (2004b). Galston's pluralism has also been discussed recently by Talisse (2004).

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