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Pluralism v. Relativism

An Appraisal of Isaiah Berlin's Defence of Pluralism

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TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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*Whether the hero be ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian, gentile or Jew,
his journey varies little in essential plan.*

-- Joseph Campbell, 1949

ABSTRACT

Isaiah Berlin's conception of pluralism is often confused with relativism. The purpose of this thesis is to assess the solidity of his arguments concerning the distinction between the two theories against the backdrop of two interpretations by two very different thinkers that similarly approximate pluralism to relativism: John Gray, the radical pluralist, and Leo Strauss, the steward of naturalism.

Berlin tendered a conception of pluralism whereby the inevitable conflict among values proves they are equally valid, equally absolute and sometimes incommensurable, thus rendering the inevitability of choice a fundamental element of the human condition. This theory emerges as an alternative to monism, but its distinction from relativism merits special consideration given that both theories are often regarded as similar.

Despite acknowledging variety within ethics, Berlin argues the theories remain distinct for two reasons: first, pluralism allows for the possibility of judging moral choices as right or wrong beyond their respective contexts whereas relativism does not; and second, pluralism, unlike relativism, asserts values are objective because they are universal. Each of these two arguments shall be assessed from two angles respectively: the first analysis will address the capability for moral choice considering the incommensurability factor and the role context plays in decision making; whereas the second shall look at the claim that values are universal from the point of view of its implications and the theory's foundations. In conclusion, Berlin's arguments appear to stand the test.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	3
Abstract	5
Introduction: The Lesson of a “Hedgefox”	7
1. From the One to the Many	12
1.1. The Perennial Fallacy	13
1.1.1. The Ideal	13
1.1.2. The Pursuit	17
1.2. The Realm of Ethics	23
1.2.1. The Roots of Morality	23
1.2.2. The Human Horizon	26
1.3. Windowed Boxes	33
2. Two Critics of Isaiah Berlin	37
2.1. Gray	38
2.1.1. Agon	39
2.1.2. Flourishing Humanity	43
2.2. Strauss	48
2.2.1. The Modernity Crisis	50
2.2.2. The Historicist Loophole	52
2.3. Reluctant Accomplices	58
3. Pluralism v. Relativism: The Trial	60
3.1. Truth Among Plurality	61
3.1.1. The Capability for Moral Choice	61
3.1.1.1. Incommensurability and Moral Reasoning	62
3.1.1.2. The Significance of Incommensurability	66
3.1.1.3. The Question Overhaul	69
3.1.1.4. Moral Choices	71
3.1.2. Context is Key... “For Better or Worse”	72
3.2. Kaleidoscopic Universe	78
3.2.1. Pluralism of Universals: Theoretical Implications	79
3.2.2. Universal Pluralism: Theoretical Foundations	83
3.3. The Verdict	91
Conclusion: Untidy Universe.....	97
Bibliography	103

INTRODUCTION

THE LESSON OF A “HEDGEFOX”

Isaiah Berlin experienced life as one man seeing through many spectacles. Personally influenced by three cultural strands, Russian, British and Jewish,¹ amidst what can perhaps be called the most stormy century in terms of ideology, the 20th century, his inquisitive mind led him to explore the history of the ideas he witnessed unfold throughout his lifetime. This journey unveiled one of his most notable claims about morality: Pluralism. Choice is, for this theory, a central property of human life, evincing a plurality of equally legitimate and universal moral ends. The admission of diversity often causes pluralism to be misconstrued as another theory: Relativism. This view grounds the validity of multiple moral outlooks in the contexts from which they emerge. It is the purpose of this thesis to assess whether Berlin succeeds in defending pluralism against confusions with this other theory.

The defining element of pluralism is truly the inevitability of conflict and its inherent necessity for choice among equally ultimate ends. The theory does not, to be sure, merely state that there are different manifestations of the same universal values.² It goes deeper, claiming there are *many* different legitimate combinations of values. This is why the theory has come to be known as “value-pluralism,” even though Berlin never employed the term. Correspondingly, this version of pluralism will be confronted with what the author qualified as the relativism “of judgement of values.”³

Pluralism first emerges out of the rebuttal, not of relativism, but of monism – the long

¹ Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 433-9.

² As notes George Crowder, “value-pluralism is not mere ‘plurality of belief,’ the idea that different people or different groups of people believe different things.” (Crowder, *Liberalism & Value Pluralism*, 3.)

³ In one of Berlin’s most straightforward efforts of distinguishing pluralism from relativism he writes: “There are two types of relativism, that of judgments of fact, and that of judgements of values. The first, in its strongest form, denies the very possibility of objective knowledge of facts, since all belief is conditioned by the place in the social system . . . It is, however, only the second type of relativism, that of values or entire outlooks, that is in question here.” (Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 77.)

held assumption that there can only be one holistic answer to moral queries. Indeed, as an interpreter of the many ideological currents that have shaped Western political and philosophical discourse, namely since the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, Berlin found that most were reluctant to accept what was an all-pervading conviction in his thought:

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 realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others.⁴

Berlin famously epitomised the pluralist and monist outlooks in an essay inspired by an ancient line “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”⁵ Yet, a more accurate way to portray pluralism, and Berlin himself for that matter, would be “the fox knows many things because, like the hedgehog, it knows one big thing: choice is inevitable.” Michael Ignatieff believed Berlin “was a fox who longed to be a hedgehog”⁶ while Steven Lukes depicted him as an “old-fashioned fox.”⁷ George Crowder, on the other hand, claimed Berlin was “a hedgehog whose single underlying message is, ironically, that of value pluralism.”⁸ Unlike these critics, the argument, which will here be presented, rather entails a combination of the two archetypes. Pluralism is the outlook of a “hedgefox.” Berlin is many things, an “empiricist, realist, objectivist, anti-rationalist, anti-relativist,”⁹ not to mention a pluralist and a liberal, because he knows one big thing: choice is “a permanent characteristic of the human predicament.”¹⁰

Isaiah Berlin was a hedgefox not just in outlook but in style as well. Instead of

⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 213-4.

⁵ This line, attributed to the Greek poet Archilochus, inspires Berlin's famous essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” (Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 437-498.)

⁶ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 203.

⁷ Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*, 114.

⁸ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 5.

⁹ Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*, 114.

¹⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 43.

consistently presenting his views in a systematic theory, he left an extensive body of essays in which his ideas come across through his appraisals of many influential thinkers. Because of this, his views are frequently regarded as inconsistent, scattered or even “characteristically compressed and allusive.”¹¹ Curiously, however, the very fact that the author ends up demonstrating the same convictions throughout a lifetime of writings without setting out to do so, actually reinforces how coherent his central beliefs were. Henry Hardy, who has laboriously assembled and compiled Berlin’s scattered works, has come to be persuaded of this: “I do indeed believe that Berlin has a clear underlying vision that is not always expressed as lucidly and consistently as it might be.”¹² Hence, the present work will attempt to tease out from Berlin’s variegated remarks his central view of pluralism, and why he was so sure it was not relativism.

Berlin’s overall view of pluralism will be extracted from the many avenues of thought he explored in his journey throughout the history of ideas. The first chapter, “From the One to the Many,” will therefore begin with his denial of monism and his views on the social sciences methodological debate, passing through the ideas he imported from the Counter-Enlightenment, finally ending with his defence against relativism. The second chapter, “Two Critics of Isaiah Berlin,” will look into two of the most notable interpretations of Berlin’s work, by two very different thinkers: John Gray, the radical pluralist, and Leo Strauss, the devout monist. Despite their differences, it will be demonstrated how these two critics are inadvertently aligned in deriving relativist consequences from Berlin’s position. In the third chapter, “Pluralism v. Relativism,” the main problems detected in Berlin’s proposal which lead to a confusion with relativism, will be put under a thorough trial at the end of which its sustenance will be proved.

¹¹ Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism,” 3.

¹² Henry Hardy goes on to say “one can tease it out from his scattered remarks, rejecting confused statements and refining unfocused ones. . . . The more one reads, the more obvious it becomes that the central ideas are clear and strong. If he nevertheless doesn’t always state them as well as he might, this may be because it wasn’t a project for him to do so: rather they emerge incidentally from discussions of other issues. (In an email conversation with Henry Hardy on May 26th, 2015.)

Finally, in the last chapter entitled “Untidy Universe,” an overall view of pluralism shall be recounted in order to ground some very pertinent considerations about the challenge faced by contemporary political theory.

The world Berlin experienced was evidence of what the clash of different moralities can lead to when they are blinded an all-pervading ancient fallacy in Western philosophy: “the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion,”¹³ he vehemently asserted. Because of this view, Isaiah Berlin is often associated with “Cold War liberalism” alongside thinkers such as Raymond Aron and Karl Popper.¹⁴ In fact, according to his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, Berlin’s most original claim was not pluralism, but the connection between pluralism and liberalism. Regardless of its originality, this statement is certainly the most problematic for Berlin. As shall later be demonstrated, this is the view that dominantly earns Berlin the charge of inconsistency, for those positions are often construed as mutually exclusive instead of mutually entailing. In any case, this discussion cannot be fully addressed here, even though this study will inevitably lead to a clear stand about it: such views misinterpret, and actually blatantly disregard, Berlin’s arguments according to which there is no discrepancy among the two positions.

The utter cruelty that monist ideologies spread throughout the twentieth century led to the recognition of the need for a morally tolerant society. Tolerance, as a means to an “uneasy equilibrium”¹⁵ has since become the archetypal feature of liberalism, for today a liberal society has become practically synonymous with a plural society. Yet, as Timothy Garton Ash observed, Isaiah Berlin’s conception of pluralism is even more relevant in

¹³ Berlin, “A Message to the 21st Century,” *The New York Review of Books*, October, 23, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/oct/23/message-21st-century/>.

¹⁴ Müller, “Fear and Freedom,” 46.

¹⁵ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 20.

this day and age than it was in the time that led him to conceive it.¹⁶ In today's overpopulated and interconnected world, deeply entrenched cultural backgrounds, religious views and different ways of life converge in the so called open society the West prides itself in promoting. Not only do these conceptions inevitably clash among themselves but, in a growing number of cases, they contest the very values that sustain the state that strives to accommodate them.

“[P]olitical philosophy,” argued Berlin, “is but ethics applied to society.”¹⁷ Pluralism, therefore, entails deep practical implications for the times we now live in, since the challenge of allowing for a plural society to prevail within a political framework has never been so arduous. Whether this philosophical postulation holds its ground against relativism is important to assess the validity of the core values any political system is built upon.

¹⁶ The scholar observed that in the Europe of today, “the problems we face, the challenges, are particularly to do with the living together, the friction, the rubbing off against each other of people with very different backgrounds, traditions, religions, languages, nationalities, some would say cultures.” (Garton Ash, “Isaiah Berlin and the Challenge of Multiculturalism,” *The Isaiah Berlin Lecture*, lesson n.2, 36m podcast, July 3rd, 2008, iTunesU - Oxford University, starting at minute 10.)

¹⁷ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 2.

CHAPTER I

FROM THE ONE TO THE MANY

Isaiah Berlin's conception of pluralism was gradually uncovered and refined throughout his long life of inquiry, rather than systematically theorised. Quite consistently with his nature,¹⁸ instead of a coherent proposal, it is as if all of his work is a collection of evidence that demonstrates pluralism accords with the reality of the human moral experience. The purpose of this chapter is to uncover the many elements that sustain this unwavering conviction of Berlin's.

The author's view of pluralism will be contextualised within the many threads of his thinking. Pluralism is, for Berlin, the opposite of monism, and he usually explains the first in contrast with the latter. Therefore, the ensuing subchapter, "The Perennial Fallacy," will begin with the author's refutation of monism, followed by his views on the social sciences' methodological debate. Berlin's positions on both the human moral makeup and its appropriate methodological approach combine Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment ideas. In "The Realm of Ethics" his appreciation of romanticism and of other critics of the Enlightenment will be expounded. Delving into the "history of ideas," Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder were Berlin's main source of inspiration concerning pluralism. Because they are regularly portrayed as relativists, one of Berlin's most committed dissertations on the difference between pluralism and relativism is built upon those author's contributions. These arguments shall be the focus of the last part of this chapter, entitled "Windowed Boxes."

¹⁸ According to Steven Lukes, Joseph Brodsky wrote "In the realm I was from . . . 'philosophy' was a by and large a foul word and entailed the notion of a system. What was good about *Four Essays on Liberty* was that it advanced none, since 'liberty' and 'system' are antonyms." (Cit. Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural," 81.) Lukes finds this statement an exaggeration, citing several liberal thinkers who have exhibited "the *esprit du système* that Berlin so notably lacks," although he readily acknowledges that Berlin's views "are, it is true, inimical to such system-building and his favourite liberal heroes – Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Alexander Herzen – are none of them builders of systems." (Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural," 81.)

1.1. THE PERENNIAL FALLACY

1.1.1. The Ideal

“If men never disagreed about the ends of life . . .”¹⁹ These words open Isaiah Berlin’s arguably most notorious essay: “Two Concepts of Liberty.” This *disagreement*, which permeates all dimensions of human existence, spanning from the innermost human world to the relations both between men and groups of men, embodies an often disconcerting fact of human life: choice among conflicting and equally valid ends, with the inherent sacrifice of all but the one designated, is inevitable. This uncomfortable truth has fostered a lasting desire to transcend it. Thus, most of Western Philosophy, from Ancient Greece to present times, rests on one “demonstrably false”²⁰ assumption: there is only one right answer to each pestering question of mankind. In Berlin’s words,

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 simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. 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.²¹

In opposition to this “ancient faith,” monism, lies pluralism. Based, not on an understanding of what reality should be, but on “the world that we encounter in ordinary experience,”²² which reveals how misleading such a “pursuit of the ideal”²³ actually is. Choice itself entails the notion of sacrificing something that is valuable. Otherwise, why would choice need be made at all? Human nature attributes value to several ends, some of which may collide or be at odds with each other, rendering the prospect of compatibility or of a harmonious order among them, no more than a “metaphysical

¹⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 166.

²⁰ Ibid, 214.

²¹ Ibid, 213.

²² Ibid, 213-4.

²³ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 1-20.

chimera.”²⁴ Hence, “the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is,” Berlin famously claims, “an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.”²⁵

In attempting to escape the agony of value loss, utopian grails truly aim at eliminating choice altogether. The problem is, for Isaiah Berlin, not just that these aspirations are “an attempt to pulverize society into the imaginary constituents of . . . false societies,”²⁶ but that they inadvertently propound a dehumanizing effect. Choice is an integral component of human nature. Denying this “seems . . . to falsify the knowledge of men as free agents.”²⁷

The centrality of choice in Berlin’s overall work gives way to several ramifications. Among them, the most prominent²⁸ and problematic is the claim that pluralism entails liberalism.²⁹ This very intricate discussion falls outside the scope of this thesis but shall inevitably adjoin it where it is warranted for the appropriate understanding of the current analysis. The connection between choice and human nature, on the other hand, is of critical importance to this study, and shall be later addressed in detail. For now, the inevitability of choice stands as evidence for pluralism as true, which in turn is simultaneously demonstrated by, and a demonstration of, the falsity of monism.

The validity of pluralism is simply sustained by empirical observation, rather than by some “remote, or incoherent, ideal,” which is the case with monism.³⁰ True experience reveals “that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual

²⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 213.

²⁵ Ibid, 214.

²⁶ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 9.

²⁷ Berlin, *Liberty*, 216.

²⁸ In his account of Isaiah Berlin’s life, Michael Ignatieff considered the author had three core convictions: “in moral pluralism, liberal freedom and their mutual entailment.” (Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 286.)

²⁹ Two clarifications on Liberalism and the notion of Liberty should be made. (1) For Isaiah Berlin, pluralism entails liberalism, but liberalism does not necessarily entail pluralism. His essay “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life” demonstrates how Mill’s liberalism is monistic. (Berlin, *Liberty*, 218-79.) (2) Berlin makes a distinction between “Liberty” in a political sense and in a basic sense: in the first sense, it is a value pursued as part of a society one wishes to live in; whereas in the second sense, “liberty” is equated with the capacity to choose, which, according to him, can never be eliminated. (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 218.)

³⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 217.

rivalry with one another.”³¹ Everyday life exposes men to alternatives they must weigh against each other, regularly demanding the partial or entire sacrifice of something valued, and sometimes requiring impossible choices among equally cherished goods or equally dreaded evils. These latter cases convey, not just that values are not all compatible among themselves, but that when they conflict, there may be no standard to weigh them against – they are incommensurable.

Monism, in whatever philosophical guise it appears, seeks coherence. A tidy world. This means that it seeks to transcend conflict, either by finding one, or a selection of overarching values, that will be known as preferable to other values; or by establishing a ranking of values; or by fixing a standard against which to measure all apparently conflicting values. What would a world where all human ideals were simultaneously realized look like? More importantly, what would life be like if no choice among alternatives were necessary? Would the notion of values even exist? How, without choice, would people mould their lives? Would there be purpose? A horizon to contemplate? And, how ideal would life be in a utopian world? Berlin would probably remark as he often did: “I don’t want the universe to be too tidy.”³²

One of the main tenets of Berlin’s contribution is the wariness against the application of abstractions upon reality. This is why he is generally thought of as a “Cold War liberal,”³³ for the ideologies of his time – Nationalism, Communism, Totalitarianism – brought oppression and led to the most terrible inhumane acts, practiced in light of a certain yet illusive ideal. Bearing witness to utopian constructions wreaking hell on Earth, Berlin saw himself gradually morph into a historian of ideas while searching for the underlying

³¹ Ibid.

³² Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 125.

³³ The association between Isaiah Berlin and Cold-War Liberalism is largely accepted. Jan-Werner Müller writes specifically on Berlin as part of this stage of liberalism, which Judith Shklar named as “liberalism of fear,” defining it as “a skeptical liberalism concerned primarily with avoiding the worst, rather than achieving the best.” (Cit. Müller, “Fear and Freedom,” 47-48).

notions that were embodied in such devastating creeds. What he found was, of course, the perennial assumption. Because there was only one answer, there could not be many, therefore all possible alternatives were necessarily wrong, which in case of conflict, meant they needed to be eradicated.

But, as Berlin claims, monism has been present in Western philosophy since the cradle of its birth. So what vested these ideologies with such certainty that men fervently pursued them to their ultimate consequences during his lifetime? In one of the many instances the author discoursed on monism, the perennial fallacy, he explained that it lies on a “three legged-stool” made up of three core propositions:

- i. [T]o all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer, all the others answers being incorrect . . .
- ii. [A] method exists for the discovery of these correct answers. Whether any man knows or can, in fact, know it, is another question but it must, at least in principle, be knowable, provided that the right procedure for establishing it is used.
- iii. [A]nd perhaps the most important . . . follows from a simple, logical truth: that one truth cannot be incompatible with another truth; all correct answers embody or rest on truths; therefore none of the correct answers . . . can ever be in conflict with one another.³⁴

The first and last propositions pertain directly to what has been said so far: (i.) there is an assumption according to which each genuine question has one possible answer; (iii.) and the truth forms one perfect whole of which all single right answers are a compatible part. The second statement, however, answers an additional question: if there is a truth, how can it be found? Certainty of an answer arises from the certainty of the method employed to find it. If such a method can be uncovered, then men are able to pursue the ideal.

³⁴ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 25-26. (Numeration added.)

1.1.2. The Pursuit

The Enlightenment earned its designation because it brought clarity to many of the tantalizing mysteries that long intrigued mankind. Reason unveiled many secrets of physics and mathematics, of the human body and biology, nature and the universe at large. It rid men of the obscurity of unquestioned beliefs, superstitions and of downright ignorance. Yet those who looked only to the light became blind to everything else. What they thought to have eradicated, they merely replaced: incontrovertible faith, not in God, but in Reason. The path to the correct answer to each of the many perennial mysteries was unearthed: the scientific method.

The Enlightenment, then, brought an exalted approach to the pursuit of answers which, up until that point had been thought of as outside the human reach, whether because man was ill equipped to understand them or because they belonged to an outer realm he was not meant to access. The successive breakthroughs in the natural sciences spawned the conviction that similar advances, including in matters of morality, could be achieved in the humanities through the use of the scientific method as well. And so Berlin points out the convictions that result from monist assumptions when coupled with the rational method, when applied to political philosophy:

- i. All men have one true purpose, which is that of rational self-direction;
- ii. The ends of all rational beings must be combined in a universal and harmonious pattern which some men are more prepared to grasp than most;
- iii. All conflict is avoidable in the light of unobstructed and fully realized reason;
- iv. Once all men have become wholly rational beings they will follow the rational law that is one and the same for all and therefore achieve liberation.³⁵

Berlin makes this enumeration in an effort to demonstrate how the value of freedom,

³⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 21.

whether negative or positive,³⁶ can be constructed in such a way that it becomes quite its opposite – liberation means freedom from choice, not freedom of choice.³⁷ What is relevant in this example, for the purpose of this thesis, is that once again applying the rational method to morality results in an obliteration of alternative valid, and even rational ends. Human choice is nothing but an illusion. One further conclusion ensues: there is a gross assumption that the world the humanities study is the same as, and abides by the same laws which rule the physical world.

While Berlin was committed to rational thinking, throughout his work he denounced the limits of reason, and the potentially destructive results it could lead to when employed as if such limits did not exist. In several instances, Berlin makes the argument that there is only a very small part of the knowable world that can be systematically understood. In “The Purpose of Philosophy,”³⁸ he draws the distinction between questions that imply their own answer and those which leave man perplexed about how to answer them. All of philosophy is an attempt to shuffle the latter kind into the first kind, which is made of either “two baskets:”³⁹ the *empirical basket*, consisting of the data of observation; and the *formal basket*, comprised of questions which depend on calculation upon fixed axioms and rules of deduction, like mathematics or grammar. Yet, the author considers even this distinction to be a “drastically over-simple formulation (because) formal and empirical elements are not so easily disentangled.”⁴⁰ Even if they were, they would cover only a microscopic part of the vast reality they are meant to uncloak, for as observes Berlin,

When one considers how many such facts – habits, beliefs – we take for granted in thinking or saying anything at all, how many notions, ethical, political, social, personal, go to the making of the outlook of one single person, however simple and unreflective,

³⁶ In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin distinguishes the notion of liberty in two senses: a negative sense of non-interference – “freedom from;” and in a positive sense conveying the ability to lead a prescribed form of life – “freedom to.”

³⁷ George Crowder calls this phenomenon whereby Liberty becomes oppression the “inversion thesis.” (Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 68-71.)

³⁸ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 1-14.

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

in any given environment, we begin to realise how very small a part of the total of our sciences . . . are able to take in.⁴¹

In this passage, Berlin is referring to “sciences” in the sense of the overall scientific knowledge, be it of the physical or the human world.⁴² But even though all gnostic pursuits are limited in this way, the author emphasises how the makeup of the inner human world is, unlike “the furniture of the external world,” far more difficult to “observe and describe”, to articulate into “concepts and categories.”⁴³ Yet, this world, “the world of mind and will and feeling”⁴⁴ is knowable nonetheless. Actually, it is even more knowable to man because, contrary to what is generally regarded as a disadvantage in the humanities when compared to the natural sciences, man himself is the object of study.⁴⁵ “In history we are the actors, in the natural sciences mere spectators.”⁴⁶

This is a notion that Berlin inherits from Giambattista Vico, a seventeenth century critic of the Enlightenment he was greatly influenced by. In expounding this author’s conception of human history, which Berlin subscribes to, he remarks: “The greater the man-made element in any object of knowledge, the more transparent to human vision it will be; the greater the ingredient of external nature, the more opaque and impenetrable to human understanding.”⁴⁷ According to Vico, there was an “impassable gulf” amid the “constructed” (*factum*, what is made) and the “given” (*verum*, what is true) along which

⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin is referring to the “sciences” in the sense of, not just the natural sciences, but the humanities as well. (Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 15.)

⁴² Berlin explains that the natural sciences aid in the understanding of history, a tale of the human world, but must not be confused with it: “Under the ‘natural sciences’ I include all those sciences which go to the making of, but are not themselves, historical thought: archaeology, palaeography epigraphy, demography, physical geography and anthropology, astronomical, chemical or biological methods of dating, and all the other ancillary disciplines which are needed for the measurement of time spans, and all the other material factors affecting human life, without which there can be no accurate knowledge of the human past.” (Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 325.)

⁴³ Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 17-18.

⁴⁴ Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 343.

⁴⁵ Berlin expands on this idea in this very detailed and illustrative passage: “Human history did not consist merely of things and events and their presences and sequences . . . as the external world did; it was the story of human activities of what men did and thought and suffered . . . It was concerned, therefore, with motives, purposes, hopes, fears, loves and hatreds, jealousies, ambitions, outlooks and visions of reality; with the ways of seeing and of acting and creating, of individuals and groups. These activities we knew directly, because we were involved in them as actors, not spectators. There was a sense, therefore, in which we knew more about ourselves than we know about the external world . . .” (Ibid, 342.)

⁴⁶ Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 109.

⁴⁷ Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 342. (Italics added.)

“all provinces of knowledge could be classified (on) this scale of relative intelligibility.”⁴⁸

Man can only truly know what he himself has made. And the man-made world is significantly different than the surrounding world it attempts to understand through his man-made categories.

Kant made the distinction between categories that are equally perceivable to all sentient beings because they are based on an exterior world that they share; and those which are perceived differently when applied to fields such as history, morals and aesthetics. The difference between these perceptions was due, not to the variety of empirical content they represented, but to the models, categories or spectacles through which they were seen. The subject matter of philosophy is, for Berlin, nor empirical or formal, but “the permanent or semi-permanent categories in terms of which experience is conceived and classified.”⁴⁹ If the task of philosophy is to clarify the lenses through which men view reality, the task of history is to enable men to experience what reality must have been like in another time and place.

Understanding is a different kind of knowledge than the kind that the *scientific method* can grasp. It amasses a much broader and convoluted area of cognition, based solely on human experience, at the cost of certainty and verifiability. Berlin called this sort of unexplainable knowledge the *sense of reality*:⁵⁰ “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 novelists and ordinary persons endowed with understanding of life (at its normal level called common sense) alike display.”⁵¹ In further elucidations of this rather obscure notion, the author equates this

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 11.

⁵⁰ Berlin builds up on this concept from Vico's notion of *fantasia*, which is described as an ability to imagine the world as someone else by an exercise of imagination, thus resurrecting the past. (Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 67.)

⁵¹ Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, 25.

understanding to the knowledge that the gardener has as opposed to that of the botanist, or that one means when saying he *knows* a friend, in the sense that he grasps his character, his “nuances of personality and feeling.”⁵²

Because morality is an ingredient of this amorphous reality, belonging to the inner human world only known to those who experience it, this sense of reality is required in order to grasp all that falls out of the very limited knowledge that logical theorems or observable data may apprehend. “For the only thing which convinces in matters not capable of proof, in the sense in which the propositions of mathematics or logic, or even those of empirical science, can be said to be so, is a direct appeal to experience, a description of what we think right or true which varies with what our audience has itself in some sense, however inarticulately, known or felt.”⁵³

Isaiah Berlin devotes significant attention to the methodological debate between the natural sciences and the humanistic fields of study. His scepticism towards the scientific method when applied to the understanding of the human makeup, namely political and philosophical, had largely to do with his appreciation for variety and nuance among human beings, cultures and civilizations. His arguments both on method and on pluralism abundantly spring from Giambattista Vico’s ideas, but from one other critic of the Enlightenment as well: Johann Gottfried von Herder. These authors’ influence on Berlin shall be addressed after another insight into the world of morality is explored.

The failure to acknowledge the much wider and intricate part of the knowable world, “to clothe these dry bones in the flesh of living reality,”⁵⁴ by the eighteenth century’s *philosophes* was, according to Berlin, not only understood, but exaggerated by the

⁵² Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 352-3.

⁵³ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 16.

⁵⁴ Berlin, *The Sense of Reality* 22.

romantics, which created a movement he regarded as “even more revolutionary - far newer and more original”⁵⁵ than all the theses that came before it. Berlin finds in the romantic movement a point of rupture in which, not only the blind faith in the promise of reason is fiercely opposed, but the perennial assumption that ruled rationalism alongside so many other doctrines in western philosophy met its contender: the possibility of, not one, but many answers to its fundamental questions.

⁵⁵ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 11.

1.2. THE REALM OF ETHICS

1.2.1. The Roots of Morality

The Enlightenment's excessive faith in reason ignited a strong counteraction that came to be known as romanticism. Fuelled by the perennial desire to find the universal answers to all mysteries, the French *philosophes* aimed to release humanity from the chains of unquestioned claims and beliefs that infused the many different cultural heritages they regarded with contempt. They thought of themselves as illuminated beings who, because they saw the *light*, believed the rest of the world to be submerged in obscurity. Their mission was to return to the cave in order to release the rest of mankind from its chains by drawing it out into the sunlight.⁵⁶ This dry and mechanical outlook, vested in its superior attitude, bred in Germany a need to reclaim its value as a nation. The Franco-Prussian war was the ultimate political expression of this movement that spread through the arts, literature and the humanities as a whole, eventually seeping through the realm of philosophy and political thought. This age ushered in a plethora of original notions - *authenticity, uniqueness, passion, variety, sincerity* and even *unconformity* were, for the first time, ascertained as values. These notions are still vastly present in contemporary outlooks. “(They) transformed our world, and the words in which they were formulated speak to us still.”⁵⁷

At the heart of romanticism, Berlin uproots one thesis he finds has not yet been appropriately delineated. Beyond the emergence of new values, a deeper revolution took place: a paradigm shift in how values are perceived. Until the nineteenth century “whatever view (was) taken, objective or subjective, absolute or relative, naturalistic or

⁵⁶ The philosophes would actualise Socrates's “Allegory of the Cave” as recounted in Plato's “Republic,” in book 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 20.

metaphysical, a priori or a posteriori, individualist or social, a *statement of value* or purpose *described facts* and *represented reality*. It was obviously crucial that – literally a matter of life and death – to *discover* what the truth in matters of conduct was, that is, what the *true values* were.”⁵⁸

What was truly original about this movement is that it conceived the possibility of values belonging, not to the existing and discoverable world, but to the realm of human creation – “The painter creates; he does not copy. He does not imitate; he does not follow rules; he makes them. Values are not discovered, they are created; not found, but made by an act of imaginative, creative will, as works of art, as policies, plans, patterns of life are created.”⁵⁹ If “will is the creative function,” man makes his own world, which is distinctive from any other because it arises from his own unique self, view, choice. Humanity is rich in variety, therefore the realm of ethics engulfs, not one, but many moral conceptions.

For Berlin, the “true father of Romanticism”⁶⁰ is Fichte, who interprets the notion of the *self*, the *ego*, as a “mortal expression” or a “finite entity”⁶¹ with a transcendent spiritual world. “I am not determined by ends: ends are determined by *me*,”⁶² Fichte writes. But the influence of this doctrine led to the *self* being associated with a superpersonal form, like Hegel’s notion of the *state*, Marx’s notion of *class* or Goethe’s notion of the *zeitgeist*.⁶³ Whereas the first interpretation, taken to its extreme, led to the individual’s obsessive pursuit of authenticity and singularity, culminating in dissociation with society to the

⁵⁸ Ibid, 13. (Italics added).

⁵⁹ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 239.

⁶¹ Ibid, 44.

⁶² Cit. Ibid, 240.

⁶³ Ibid, 44.

point of sheer eccentricity, deviancy, lunacy and even irrationalism; the latter led to movements such as nationalism, communism and totalitarianism.⁶⁴

Berlin's appreciation for the innovative insights precipitated by the romantics did not drive him to any of their ultimate consequences, of course, just like his faith in reason did not lead him to overestimate its utility. What he did incorporate into his own thought was this notion that values belong to a personal dimension, inevitably conditioned by the cultural milieu that each individual is absorbed into. "Man is the source of values in the sense that values are not independent entities existing apart from people,"⁶⁵ writes the author. For Berlin, as shall soon be explained, values are rooted in man on several levels: from mankind, to cultures and individuals. While the first leads to the idea of universality, the two other senses are connected to the ideas of diversity and uniqueness. Herein lies an unexpected combination of objectivity and subjectivity of ends.

The centrality of choice is, once again, manifest in Berlin's notion of human nature. Values are intrinsic to man as a self-creative being. "By values I mean what I regard as purposes in terms of which I live my life, interwoven with other purposes, creating a kind of network of purposes,"⁶⁶ he explains. Indeed, he once remarked: "In a sense I am an existentialist."⁶⁷ However, the individual or cultural horizon is created, not by inventing, but by choosing values from a universe shared with all humanity.

⁶⁴ The argument that romanticism is at the root of the ideological movements of the 20th century is one of the prominent features of Isaiah Berlin's work. Yet, it shall not be explored in this work because it is not essential to the author's understanding of pluralism and its difference from relativism.

⁶⁵ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 203.

⁶⁶ Throughout his work, Isaiah Berlin employs several terms interchangeably: "values;" "ends;" "goods;" "principles;" "ideals;" "purposes;" "conceptions of the good;" "outlooks;" "constellations of goods;" "ways of life." The view that values are connected to each individual's outlook is evident when he explained that "values are goods, not virtues, not whole conceptions of the good or cultural traditions. Values are things in the light of which I live my life. Values are that which in the end I appeal to. . . . [I]f you choose (something) for its own sake, it's a value for you. There is no need to be good. Values are values. Values are those ends – not just by themselves, but concatenations, horizons – they are like networks of those things that I do because they are what they are, not a means to something else; ends for the sake of which I do what I do." (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 221.)

⁶⁷ Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," 101.

Berlin claims values are objective in the sense that all men are capable of perceiving them. This is why Berlin parts from Kant's understanding of morality – Berlin agrees ends are ultimate, but he cannot understand how that attribute is independent from personal evaluation. “(T)he values that I sacrifice, as opposed to the values which *I choose*, are the values which *I regard as ends* in themselves, and not means to other ends.”⁶⁸ This is very different from saying that values are true whether one understands them or not, like Kant's notion of known a priori categorical imperatives.⁶⁹ “Because when I say right or wrong, I mean in the light of values that *I*, in my personal life, *regard as ends* in themselves, everything else being a means toward them, for the sake of which *I am prepared to act*, and which in some way form, with other values, the constellation of values which *shapes my way of life*.”⁷⁰

The idea of a creative human self through which different individual and cultural outlooks are created is one of the points where pluralism resembles relativism. According to Berlin, the claim that values are objective is what keeps these theories apart.

1.2.2. The Human Horizon

The two critics of the Enlightenment who most influenced Berlin's stance on pluralism precede the romantics. They are the already briefly mentioned Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder – “the fathers of modern historicism.”⁷¹ To them Berlin attributes the conceptualization of cultural variety as a value and the idea of historical

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin traces back to this Kantian notion some of the most destructive ideologies of the twentieth century, for the notion of a “higher self” or of a “better self” entails that such a self is defined by standards most individuals may not know, and therefore lead to ideologies which propose individuals should relinquish their flawed will and behave according to what those who are prepared to know the higher self indicate. It is one form of invalidating the human will because it does not match what some might consider to be a better version of everybody's inner-self. (Berlin, *Liberty*, 197.)

⁷⁰ Berlin and Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 100. (Italics added.)

⁷¹ Ibid, 77.

periods and civilizations being incommensurable. Aside from these arguments for diversity, Berlin derives evidence of universality from these authors' works as well. Viewing the past through other people's perspective, attempting to experience the world in different ways based on the information they gathered about it, enclosed within it the constituent ingredients of pluralism.

Only because the historian is human is he able to "descend to," "enter," "feel (him)self into"⁷² the perspectives of others. "[I]f anything is meant by the term 'human', there must be enough that is common to all such beings."⁷³ Therefore, this capacity for "imaginative insight,"⁷⁴ which Vico called *fantasia*,⁷⁵ entails two fundamental revelations that set pluralism apart from relativism: (1) it is possible to transcend cultural barriers; and (2) values are intelligible because they are conceivable, therefore recognizable, to any human being for the sheer fact that they are, indeed, human. As Berlin pointed out,

[T]hey are inviting us to look at societies different from our own, the ultimate values of which we can perceive to be wholly understandable ends of life for men who are different, indeed, from us, but human beings, *semblables*, into whose circumstances we can, by a great effort which we are commanded to make, find a way, 'enter,' to use Vico's term.⁷⁶

For Berlin, values are, as was earlier demonstrated, intrinsic to human experience, rather than exterior entities that can be unveiled by the scientific method. "Without people there are no ends,"⁷⁷ he claimed. The very human condition renders values intelligible, even though they may not be known, because circumstances have not yet brought them to light. This is to say, it is possible for human beings to value several different ends that may arise out of variable contexts. In spite of this variety, however, all of the possibilities of what might be valued are enclosed within the limits of what is conceivable by human

⁷² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 85.

⁷³ Ibid, 63.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 62.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 67.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 82.

⁷⁷ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 203.

beings: “Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles are many. But not infinitely many; they must be within the human horizon.”⁷⁸ All that is humanly possible to value is accessible to all those who share the human condition. “Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them,”⁷⁹ writes Berlin.

Human nature enables the intelligibility of values, which in turn limits the number of values. One can understand (without necessarily accepting) why, in a set of circumstances defined by time, space, culture and personal circumstances, one would choose a particular value or a set of values to inform their way of life. Human beings are, therefore, united in what is conceivably valuable, instead of locked within the circumstances they live in, incapable of grasping reality beyond the terms in which they learned to view it.

On the other hand, men are united by a set of values they cannot but have – “a minimum without which societies could scarcely survive.”⁸⁰ This notion of a common moral minimum cuts across every society – “we cannot help accepting these basic principles because we are human.” Which is not to say “there exists an objective code, imposed upon us from without, unbreakable because it is not made by us.”⁸¹ The importance of these notions, the human horizon and the moral minimum, are relevant to demonstrate the objectivity of values, not in the Kantian sense of being outside, but in the sense of being knowable within the common human experience.

It is the self-creative capacity for choice that instigates the diversity the human horizon

⁷⁸ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 12.

⁷⁹ Berlin goes on: “We are free to criticize the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all.” (Ibid, 11.)

⁸⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁸¹ Ibid, 216.

harbours. Objectivity and diversity are but two among the three dimensions that enclose the pluralist moral landscape advanced by Berlin. “The concrete situation is almost everything,”⁸² he argued. Context, the combination of time and space, is the third element that explains the variety of moral outlooks. It is vital on several levels: it provides the experience that allows values to be intelligible; it determines the terms, the spectacles, through which one conceives values; it narrows the alternative ends one may pursue; and it is simultaneously defined by the values one chooses to pursue. Values “either choose the people or people choose them. Both happen. You find yourself already possessing some ends, but you can change them.”⁸³

The relationship between human nature, choice and context underlies the plural reality of conflicting and incommensurable ends that Berlin endeavours to demonstrate. How these three elements interact is one of the most confusing and often contradictory parts of his work. He is attempting to depict the inner human world as a vessel between possibilities and their manifestations on varying degrees of context, that span from the most abstract level of what is humanly conceivable as valuable, the human horizon, to the very concrete situation that can only be particularly experienced or created by the self.⁸⁴

For Berlin, the fundamental characteristic that is truly defining of pluralism, however, is the inevitability of conflict. This aspect, which lends pluralism its tragic component, is as old as philosophy itself. In fact, it is what has nurtured the perennial desire for a harmonious, constant order of values that prevents the sacrifice of equally valid goods. By accepting conflict cannot be evaded, pluralism demonstrates how there can be no universal priority of values: they are absolute, ultimate and intrinsically equal. However,

⁸² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 11.

⁸³ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 203.

⁸⁴ See Chapter 3.1.2. “Context is Key... ‘For Better or Worse,’” which expands on the particular and complex relevance of context and the revelation of values.

what is typically considered the theory's most problematic feature is a particular kind of evaluative relationship between incompatible ends, incommensurability, for it seems to lead to the irrationality of judgment, despite the terms of said judgment being intelligible. Berlin does not specify what exactly he means by this, rather using it in several degrees of intensity. Yet the notion of incommensurability is one of the most recent philosophical conundrums, and there are many more interpretations with which Berlin's claims would also be consistent. In any case, the claim that some values are incommensurable is one of the causes for confusion between pluralism and relativism. Therefore, it shall later deserve special attention in order to assess the differences between the two theories.

Berlin's conception of pluralism unveils a moral world that only exists as part of what is potentially experienced by human beings. Hence, this world acquires different shapes according to the context one can directly experience or imaginatively "enter." This context is comprised of several possibilities that may materialize as one exercises their human capacity to choose among what they consider intelligibly valuable. The human world is merely united in possibility, which unfolds into a diverse reality as it materializes. These alternatives embody values that, as cannot be repeated enough, are not part of a cohesive cosmos, being many times incompatible and incommensurable among each other. "The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition."⁸⁵

Yet, the tragedy of choice and the impossibility of devising an abstract order of values must not be read as utter implausibility of compromise. "[W]e must not dramatize the incompatibility of values—there is a great deal of broad agreement among people in different societies over long stretches of time about what is right and wrong, good and

⁸⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 214.

evil.”⁸⁶ These agreements allow one to identify “quasi-universal principles”⁸⁷ which are “enough to base morality on, political as much as personal morality.”⁸⁸

The human horizon is set by the boundaries of what is recognizably valuable to mankind. Beyond the ends one actually pursues, it includes the ends one would also like to pursue, but cannot; ends one would never pursue but understands how someone else could; and ends one’s experience has not made known, even though they are intelligible if one is exposed to the circumstances in which they would understandably arise. Choice and context cut across the universality of values within the human horizon, combining it with the diversity that also characterizes pluralism.

Context, then, is vital to moral judgements. Yet, Berlin believes the notions of values themselves are objective, because otherwise men could not grasp them when remote from the specific circumstances from which they emerge. They are objective in the sense that they are knowable, intelligible, but not known a priori. Berlin explains,

This judgement . . . depends on how we determine good and evil, that is to say on our moral, religious, intellectual, economic and aesthetic values; which are, in their turn, bound up with our conception of man, and of the basic demands of his nature. In other words, our solution of such problems is based on our vision, by which we are consciously or unconsciously guided, of what constitutes a fulfilled human life . . .⁸⁹

This stand comes very close to cultural relativism, a confusion Berlin insisted on dispelling until the end of his life. He believed that relativism was not the only alternative to universalism. One could, and should, acknowledge the impact of the terms in which the world is conceived - which are inevitably conditioned by the concepts and categories

⁸⁶ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 11.

⁸⁷ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 214.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 91.

⁸⁹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 214-5.

each person comes into contact with throughout his life journey - without being locked in “windowless boxes”⁹⁰ or “impenetrable bubble(s).”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 88.

⁹¹ Ibid, 11.

1.3. WINDOWED BOXES

Berlin considered the romantic movement, as has been demonstrated, “certainly the largest step in the moral consciousness of mankind . . . the last great transvaluation of values in modern history.”⁹² The notion of values as objects of discovery became replaced by the novel idea that values are a human creation. Herein Berlin finds the seeds of relativism: “a doctrine according to which the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with *no objective correlate* which determines its truth or falsehood.”⁹³ Though similar, for Berlin, this perspective is not to be confused with pluralism - the view that values, whether of one person, group or culture, may clash or be at odds with each other “does not entail relativism of values, only the notion of a plurality of values not structured hierarchically.”⁹⁴

Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder are usually associated with relativism, a view Berlin originally partook in. They propounded a historical approach, a method of understanding humanity, which valued “the cultural autonomy of different societies (whether divided by space or time) and the incommensurability of their systems of values.”⁹⁵ Yet, looking deeper into their work, he found that these authors actually tendered pluralist conceptions.

From Vico and Herder, Berlin derives several ideas that shape his own pluralistic construction. First, variety is valuable in and of itself. Second, different outlooks arise out of different experiences made of “expressions and interpretations, which took the form

⁹² Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 13. (Italics added).

⁹³ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 83.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 79.

of words, images, myths, ritual, institutions, artistic creation, worship.”⁹⁶ Also cultures, nations or historical periods are not susceptible of being judged superior or inferior, rather being incommensurable with each other. Finally, understanding different conceptions of life is, not only possible, but all the more accurate when the analysis takes into account the background of those contexts. “Indeed, this notion is not compatible with a view of the world according to which truth is everywhere one, while error is multiple . . .”⁹⁷

The difference between the relativist and the pluralist outlooks lied in the possibility of knowledge being objective. While Vico and Herder argued that the intelligibility of thoughts and actions are relative to context, they did not argue that they were “inescapably determined”⁹⁸ by it. This was, according to Berlin, an idea that would later rise through movements such as the German romantic irrationalism, the schools of social anthropology and disciplines that explored the notions of illusion and reality from a seemingly objective standpoint (psychology and sociology).

Yet the historicism propounded by the authors under consideration was directed at the possibility, not the impossibility, of understanding different outlooks beyond their own. “The history of ideas offers few examples of so dramatic a change of outlook as the birth of the new belief *not so much in the inevitability*, as in the value and importance, of the singular and the unique, of variety as such.”⁹⁹ The emphasis lies in the idea that men’s view of the world is not detachable from his experience of it, which in turn is deeply embroidered in the tapestry of his culture. He thinks and expresses himself through the “categorical spectacles” that his culture’s identity, language, myths and rites impart. “[I] mean that to understand (historical) movements or conflicts is, above all, to understand

⁹⁶ Ibid, 78.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 58-59.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 80.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 58.

the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events.”¹⁰⁰

If the scientific method was guided by the false assumption that all of reality was composed of universal laws that, once found, would disclose the single right answer to every question; then the historical method revealed a man-made reality comprised of a plurality of equally valid possibilities. These historicists do not equate difference, conflict or incomparability of values and different outlooks with relativism, nor do they take them to mean that there is only one valid answer against multiple mistaken perspectives, i.e. monism. “We are urged to look upon life as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective; incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard.”

Vico and Herder demonstrated that there is no universal standard or overarching criterion according to which cultures can be ranked. Their method revealed the validity of variety simultaneously with the objectivity of the values and thoughts within it. This is possible because, regardless of the endless manifestations of human life, human they still are. If “in the house of human history there are many mansions,”¹⁰¹ no mansion is unreachable to those who belong to the same house: Humanity.

Isaiah Berlin found in Vico’s and Herder’s work the first signs of pluralism, for these authors managed to construe a multifarious morality that combines universal elements with legitimate moral diversity. They are the first to perceive reality in this way, being ahead of their time in the sense that they already denied monism without falling into the soon to come relativism. The focal element that Berlin derives out of these historicists’

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 68.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 83.

contributions is the argument that communication presupposes something common, universal and therefore objective among human beings, underpinning human diversity.

According to Berlin, the objectivity of values, together with the possibility of criticizing moral decisions despite cultural and personal influences, amount to the two main arguments that set pluralism apart from relativism. Still, the author never succeeded in fully silencing relativistic interpretations of his work. The ensuing chapter will analyse two outstanding interpretations of Berlin's pluralism, which culminate in relativism by following two opposing paths, in order to assess how strongly Berlin's arguments sustain pluralism against such allegations.

CHAPTER II

TWO CRITICS OF ISAIAH BERLIN

For Isaiah Berlin, pluralism arises out of the dismissal of monism without accepting relativism, thus combining a degree of universality with a degree of dependability on context. Yet, can Berlin's thesis truly stand as an alternative between these two extremes, or does it fall prey to the problems he denounces in both of them?

Two critics of Isaiah Berlin offer deep and provocative reflections of his work: John Gray and Leo Strauss. One, with great admiration for both the man and his views, attempts to refine them, while inadvertently arriving at a relativist outcome. The other flagrantly equates pluralism with relativism, portraying it as part of a wider crisis, which arises out of the denial of monism and naturalism.

Both these critics, whether intentionally or not, offer very strong arguments that conflate pluralism with relativism. In the spirit of the previous chapter, their most characteristic claims relevant to the subject at hand will be exposed. In the end, their most pertinent arguments against Berlin's position will be evinced in order to finally contrast them with Berlin's views in the following chapter.

2.1. GRAY

John Gray is an unconventional liberal thinker who critiques Isaiah Berlin's views while being substantially indebted to them in his own contributions. Seeing himself as "working both within and against the liberal tradition,"¹⁰² Gray commends Berlin's positions on ethical pluralism and on liberalism for being innovative, in moral philosophy and within the liberal tradition respectively. However, he rejects there is an inherent connection between them. In fact, he takes Berlin's argument on pluralism "all the way down,"¹⁰³ stripping liberalism from any universal authority, merely ascribing to it the same validity as that of any illiberal regime.

John Gray endorses Berlin's ethical position, which he qualifies as a "stronger version of value-pluralism,"¹⁰⁴ for not shying away from the uncomfortable yet true possibility of values being, not just uncombinable but, more importantly, incommensurable. This, for Gray, not only undermines any monistic or universal claim, including liberalism's, but also recasts the traditional understanding of choice within the liberal tradition.

According to Gray, whereas "all of recent liberalism turns on a conception of rational choice . . . from which liberal principles are supposedly derived," Berlin rather derives "the value of freedom . . . from the limits of rational choice."¹⁰⁵ Thus, he terms the author's conception of liberalism as "agonistic," according to which the unfinished human self is created out of both rational and "radical" choices among rivalrous and incommensurable goods. When a conflict arises between incommensurable goods, reason is incapable of solving it. Therefore, the only possible choice is radical which, instead of being guided by rational principles, is at best based on cultural commitments.

¹⁰² Horton, "John Gray and the Political Theory of *Modus Vivendi*," 155.

¹⁰³ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 198.

¹⁰⁴ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 83.

¹⁰⁵ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 44.

Gray's reasoning leads to two critical conclusions: on one hand, it admits that the validity of some moral choices may be culturally bound; and on the other hand, it thwarts the possibility of a theory or set of principles settling moral dilemmas. The problem with this reading of Berlin's work is that it is evocative, if not indistinguishable, from cultural relativism. In this chapter, the main traits of Gray's interpretation of Berlin's thought will be exposed, thus laying part of the foundation for the main analysis that is object of this study: the comparison between Isaiah Berlin's pluralism and relativism.

2.1.1. Agon

John Gray identifies conflict as an all-pervasive element in Isaiah Berlin's thought. The term "agonistic," rooted in the Greek word for "contest," became mostly characteristic of his interpretation of Berlin's liberalism, but for Gray it is actually agonistic pluralism that is the "bottom line in his thought."¹⁰⁶ Both are agonistic in the sense that they hinge on the ineradicable aspect of conflict as an integral feature of the human condition. For Gray, though, what is truly laudable in Berlin's conceptualization of conflict is that it grants the possibility of some *agons* occurring between incommensurable values.

Value-pluralism, according to Gray, elicits three main corollaries. First, the "*anti-reductionism about values*" whereby the diversity of human goods has "no common denominator." Secondly, "goods are often incompatible and sometimes rivalrous," whether they clash between themselves or belong to necessarily uncombinable ways of life, therefore substantiating a "*non-harmony among values*." And thirdly, "there is no *summum bonum* or hierarchy of goods" that permits weighing or ranking values. Not only can values be incompatible, but "*value-incommensurability*" may also occur.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 37.

¹⁰⁷ Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company," 20.

Acknowledging Berlin's imprecision in the use of the term "incommensurability," Gray follows Joseph Raz in clarifying its meaning: "Two valuable options are incommensurable if 1) neither is better than the other, and 2) there is (or could be) another option which is better than one but is not better than the other."¹⁰⁸ Both Raz and Gray take "incommensurability" to mean "incomparability." It is not, according to them, "rough equality," for assessing equal validity entails comparable terms. Nor is it "indeterminacy," which arises out of the impossibility of ascertaining the truth or falseness of comparable valuable options. Finally, the term is not to be confused with "incompleteness" or with "imperfection" in the criteria of evaluation, which is to say, the vagueness or uncertainty of the categorization or ranking of valued objects. In fact, it is when a moral conflict is beyond all these contiguous alternatives that one is surest to be faced with incommensurable options. The consequence of incommensurability or incomparability, is not indifference toward the merit of values, but, as Raz puts it, "the inability of reason to guide our action."¹⁰⁹

For Gray, one further implication of incommensurability in ethics ensues: "the reality of an ultimate diversity of incomparable forms of human excellence or flourishing (and of an equal diversity of incomparable evils)."¹¹⁰ Insofar as pluralism applies to non-moral values,¹¹¹ it is actually a "thesis of abundance, not scarcity."¹¹² Yet when moral values are concerned, pluralism cannot but be besieged by an element of tragedy. Choice, with its inherent sacrifice of deeply cherished values, is inevitable. It is the concoction of conflict and incommensurability that spawns the central problem with this thesis: "Value-pluralism

¹⁰⁸ Cit. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 86.

¹⁰⁹ Cit. Ibid., 88.

¹¹⁰ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 88.

¹¹¹ Since Gray does not elaborate, John Kekes presents a good account of the difference between moral and non-moral values. The former require a correlation between human beings, whereas the latter consist of either an independently experienced benefit by a person, or a benefit that is derived from nonhuman sources. For instance, the possession of a material good in and of itself in a non-moral value. Yet if one illegitimately comes into the possession of an item that is known to belong to another, the action of returning said item to its owner would be qualified as moral. (Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 45.)

¹¹² Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 80.

bites, as a position in ethical theory, when it is further maintained that such diverse forms of human flourishing are not only rationally incomparable, but also uncombinable, and sometimes constitutively or necessarily uncombinable.”¹¹³ This inherent competitiveness of values is precisely what renders it worthy of the term “agonistic.”

Gray identifies the manifestation of pluralism on three separate but inseparable levels. A very nuclear level, where conflicts within values, such as liberty, occur due to their complex nature riddled with rivalrous and incommensurable elements. On a second level, ultimate values may clash within a moral system ranging from particular ways of life to entire cultural traditions. Finally, diversity may also arise out of different cultural forms. This last level, which Gray calls “cultural pluralism,” is by his own admission where pluralism becomes most easily confused with cultural relativism:

[D]ifferent cultural forms will generate different moralities and values, containing many overlapping features, no doubt, but also specifying different, and incommensurable, excellences, virtues and conceptions of the good.

. . . There are goods that have as their matrices social structures that are uncombinable; these goods, when they are incommensurables, are also constitutively uncombinable. This is the sort of incommensurability that applies to goods that are constitutive ingredients in whole ways or styles of life. This is the form of incomparability among values, *cultural pluralism*, that is most easily confused with moral relativism . . .¹¹⁴

John Gray actually concedes that Berlin’s views involve a degree of relativism. Indeed he admits that “relativism about ideals of life cannot be avoided.” But this measure of relativism within pluralism does not culminate in that theory’s consequences, for even though moral outlooks are culturally bound, “ideals are not beyond criticism.”¹¹⁵ The difference between the theories resides in the distinction between ideals of life and universal values. “Contrary to moral relativists,” argues Gray, “there are generically human

¹¹³ Ibid, 89.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 80.

¹¹⁵ Gray, “Reply to Critics,” 327.

goods and evils; but such universal values do not amount to a universal morality, for there is no right way of settling their conflicts.”¹¹⁶

To be sure, it is not that cultures are incommensurable, thus shielded from the possibility of being rationally evaluated. “They are different ways of settling universal conflicts, and *when* their worth cannot be compared it is because no one settlement is best or right.”¹¹⁷

Gray’s use of the word “when” indicates that it is not among cultures as such that incommensurability arises. Cultures are only exempt from judgement beyond their own terms “when” a particular conflict of incommensurables brings their different combinations of universal values to a stalemate. This conflict can be experienced between collective entities and within one individual swayed by diverse cultural influences.

Isaiah Berlin’s ethical position is, for John Gray, discernible from relativism as well as subjectivism and scepticism because all these philosophical stances deny precisely what pluralism implicitly asserts: “We have knowledge of moral reality.” Based on their experience, human beings genuinely “know” that conflicts between irreducible and incommensurable values occur. The author finds in Berlin’s thought what he deems “a variant of ethical realism”¹¹⁸ (which) asserts a moral reality that is undetermined, in that although its contents are highly determinate, as are their conflicts, there is no ‘right answer’ when these values are among incommensurables.”¹¹⁹

Gray’s interpretation of Berlin’s pluralism is intricately connected to his understanding of the role choice plays as a convergence between a general human nature and its particular and diverse cultural expression. To better apprehend his overall reading of Berlin and his

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 328.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. (Italic added.)

¹¹⁸ As John Horton points out, John Gray later claims pluralism is really a version of moral irrealism. (Horton, “John Gray and the Political Theory of *Modus Vivendi*,” 158.) According to this ethical view, Gray writes, “The hard core of ethical life is found in those experiences that cannot be altered by changing our beliefs about them. . . . In an irrealist view, we can be in error about the good life, but not all questions about the good have one true answer.” (Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 64.)

¹¹⁹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 98.

particular exegesis of the author's agonistic pluralism, these converging elements must be further elucidated.

2.1.2. Flourishing Humanity

John Gray derives from Isaiah Berlin's conception of human nature a historicist notion of the self, in which choice plays a central role. "We make ourselves what we are," he claims, "in circumstances that are not of our making – through . . . the choices we make among the incommensurable goods and evils we confront unavoidably in our lives."¹²⁰ Human beings are thus portrayed as self-transforming creatures who are partly authors of, and partly conditioned by, their cultural heritages. Simultaneously, cultures are partly creators and partly regenerated by human beings. "Self-creation through choice-making occurs not only in individual life but also collectively."¹²¹

Thus Gray detects a romantic streak in Berlin's thought whereby choice, as a function of self-creation, is an integral component of human life. Yet, human beings do not create themselves *ex nihilo*, "for the self that transforms itself through the choices it makes is itself unchosen."¹²² Each individual charts their identity out of the terms through which they have experienced life. In a sense, culture does have a determining effect on human beings but only to the extent that they are capable of redefining their cultural influence for themselves and return it as an influence on others that can resonate throughout the overall cultural outlook, thus renewing it. For Berlin, Gray writes, "choice-making is a power of agents whose identities are always partly inheritances."¹²³ Accordingly, human nature is conceptualized in a historicist perspective, but contrary to historical determinism, the

¹²⁰ Ibid, 176.

¹²¹ Ibid, 107.

¹²² Ibid, 108.

¹²³ Ibid, 108-109.

human will is the fundamental determining element, for identities are “historical creations” of an “inventive species.”¹²⁴

Hence, the self is an unfinished entity whose purpose is not the unattainable completion or perfection, but its diverse expression, which is a value in and of itself. “Human beings constitute themselves, not only as individual agents, but as practitioners of diverse cultural traditions, with distinctive collective identities . . . each with its own history.”¹²⁵ Gray’s qualification of Berlin’s account of human nature will soon be expounded, but for now, it is important to note that he understands it as being common but not universal or homogenous. Diversity is not derived out of variations of the same nature, as Hume¹²⁶ understands it, “rather, diversity is the most evident expression of man’s nature as a species whose life is characterized by choice.”¹²⁷

In fact, it is in Berlin’s characterization of human nature that his romantic persuasion is most evident, for he contends that no truer or higher self can be discovered or realized. Instead, each self is singularly created through choice, with no final destination in sight. It is “perpetually reinvented . . . and it is inherently plural and diverse.”¹²⁸ Of course the diversity of human identities, whether individual or collective, arises out of the impossibility of combining all human values in one single life or conception of the good. Identities are partly defined by the exclusion of values that cannot be realized together with the ones that are chosen, attesting to a moral reality of “pluralist expressivism.”¹²⁹

The reality of agonistic pluralism conflates with that of the historical self, hence conditioning the terms by which choice creates distinctive moral expressions of life.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 109-110.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 107.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 110.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 59.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 199.

Human nature and moral pluralism have, then, a bearing on choice itself. If, as Gray echoing Raz believes, incommensurability “marks the inability of reason to guide our action,”¹³⁰ then the alternative to rational choice is “radical choice – choice without criteria, grounds, or principles.”¹³¹ But, precisely because the self is not constituted *ex nihilo*, radical choice is merely groundless in reason, for the will does not necessarily choose randomly in the absence of rational guiding principles. Decisions are often “summations or precipitates of our experiences and of the forms of life to which we belong.”¹³²

Gray actually deemphasises the voluntarist element in Berlin’s conception of the self when claiming “radical choices may well not be reason-based and yet not be acts of will.” Most radical choices are rather best characterized “as retrospective reconstructions of human experience,” or “expressions . . . of identities and forms of life that the choosing self already partakes of.”¹³³ How is this view different from cultural relativism, which according to the same author is “the view that human values are *always internal* to particular cultural traditions and *cannot* be the objects of any sort of *rational assessment or criticism?*”¹³⁴

Gray lays hand of Berlin’s arguments against relativism in his own rejoinder to this recurring criticism that is directed at him as well. He retorts that, even though values may be preferred based on cultural inheritances, their knowability is based on a common moral framework known to all humanity. In other words, moral values are universal even though moralities are not. Furthermore, the cultural basis of certain choices does not render all choices immune to moral judgement.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 88.

¹³¹ Ibid, 97.

¹³² Ibid, 109.

¹³³ Ibid, 192.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 80. (Italic added.)

Gray readily denies any semblance of a common human nature, as it is customarily formulated, in Isaiah Berlin's conception of it. Choice and its inherent diversity infuse human nature with a mutable and dynamic quality as opposed to an unalterable and static one.¹³⁵ Notwithstanding, he reckons Berlin identifies a "common framework of moral thought as having a substantive content that is universal," thus pointing toward a "constant core in human nature, a *common human nature*, from which the *universal element* in morality springs."¹³⁶ In this "universal element" resides what mainly sets pluralism apart from relativism, but in no way does it entail universalism. "When faced with universal conflicts, people can reasonably solve them in different ways. Particular moralities, or ways of life, are – at least in part – local settlements of universal conflicts. The moral minimum that Berlin has in mind is universal in the sense that it is to be sought everywhere. That does not mean it will be everywhere the same."¹³⁷ It is Gray's interpretation of this particular implication of "universality" in pluralism that leads to his most characteristic claim about Berlin's views: the denial that pluralism entails liberalism, or any other universal moral claim.

John Gray argues that, even though pluralism and liberalism are connected in many ways, Berlin cannot consistently defend pluralism while advocating the fundamental importance of the value of negative liberty. "The argument between value-pluralism and liberalism fails," writes the critic, "because the range of worthwhile forms of life is . . . wider than any that can be contained within a liberal society."¹³⁸ In other words, the author believes there are worthwhile ways of life that are illiberal. Such outlooks are worth preserving so long as they have no universalist pretention, like Marxism or Christianity, or even if particularist, they are not radical such as nationalism. Such legitimate systems according to Gray, would be the case of Hinduism, Shintoism or Orthodox Judaism. Instead of universal liberalism,

¹³⁵ Ibid, 101.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 102. (*Italic added.*)

¹³⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 188.

the author would later advance the proposal of a “*modus vivendi*” among different moral systems, which is merely a means to finding terms where common ends among different legitimate outlooks may be achieved, thus enabling a “peaceful coexistence.”¹³⁹ This view would be more consistent with what he believed was Berlin’s true position: that even though pluralism entails nothing, it can support a moral minimum in which not only negative liberty, but several essential values would be precariously held in equilibrium.¹⁴⁰

This priority of a moral minimum over the value of liberty John Gray detects causes him to conclude that “Berlin is not so much a theorist of liberty as a philosopher of human decency.”¹⁴¹ His commitment to an unbiased interpretation of pluralism seems to approximate the theory’s implications with those of relativism, for he legitimizes any system that may suppress values which he himself acknowledges are part of a minimum of decency so long as they do not aspire to be universally applicable. These more problematic statements will be carefully analysed in the third chapter in order to reach an answer to the central concern of the present study: is pluralism different from relativism?

¹³⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Gray notes that “an ideal of minimal decency does not follow from the truth of value-pluralism as a matter of logic. Nothing follows from value-pluralism except the falsity of any idea of an ultimate moral harmony.” (Ibid, 20.) He nevertheless argues that “what Berlin plausibly argues is that value-pluralism can be used to support a moral minimum, precarious, shifting and ridden with conflicts, which has priority over any political ideal.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 6.

2.2. STRAUSS

Leo Strauss is an extant custodian of naturalism in the thick of what he deems the “crisis of modernity.” His critique of Isaiah Berlin’s contribution as part of this crisis is concise, but striking nonetheless. Yet, in vindicating Natural Right, his legacy carries with it an overall rebuttal against all views emanating from the romantic movement, thus producing a weighty case against them. Therefore, many arguments that lie beyond his direct analysis of Berlin’s proposal are, not only applicable to it, but of great significance to the present analysis.

The same premise that stands as evidence of pluralism for Berlin, is precisely what galvanizes Strauss into the central pursuit of his philosophical career: “the problem posed by the conflicting needs of society cannot be *solved* if we do not possess knowledge of natural right.”¹⁴² The contrast between the two thinkers could not be more glaring. The repudiation of what is at the core of Strauss’s endeavour is precisely what lies at the core of Berlin’s thinking: “the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life,” which in turn means, “that the belief in some single formula can in principle be found . . . is demonstrably false.”¹⁴³

Notwithstanding, these authors have more in common than meets the eye. Both delve into the history of ideas to ground their claims; both are wary of the effort to apply to the humanities a methodological approach resembling that of the natural sciences, thus

¹⁴² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 3. (Italic added)

¹⁴³ Berlin, *Liberty*, 214.

stripping their conclusions of what is fundamentally human in a blind attempt to be “objective;” both denounce relativism as a morally isolating view that confines moral judgement to particular contexts thus annihilating the possibility of judging right from wrong beyond them; and both consider values to be objective and knowable.

More importantly, Strauss and Berlin agree on the fundamental premise that makes them leap in opposite directions: values conflict. What sets them apart is that one believes there is *one*, yet to be uncovered, final solution to moral conflicts; while the other believes there are *many* valid, but conflicting, solutions demonstrable by “ordinary experience.”¹⁴⁴ Whereas Berlin regarded Strauss as a believer in the “ancient faith”¹⁴⁵ in “some remote, or incoherent, ideal,”¹⁴⁶ Strauss considered Berlin’s position “entirely relativistic,” thus becoming a “characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism.”¹⁴⁷

For Strauss, then, Berlin’s pluralism is no more than a reluctant and inconsistent version of relativism, earning him the lead in his critical essay “Relativism.” The problems Strauss detects in this author’s pluralism echo his general claims about the “crisis of modernity,” which can be succinctly characterized as a loss of purpose arising from the questioning of the very foundation of liberal convictions - the belief in natural right edified upon the bedrock of ancient philosophy. Therefore, the ensuing exposition of this critic’s point of view will begin by broadly setting his main position as the background of his critique of Berlin’s ethical stand, which will be later analysed in detail in the third chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 213.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 212.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 216.

¹⁴⁷ Strauss, “Relativism” 140.

2.2.1. The Modernity Crisis

Leo Strauss's main contention is that only knowledge of natural right can provide a reliable standard by which the conflicting needs of society can be rationally solved. He believes the success of the United States as a nation is due to its earlier unrelenting faith in its founding principles. Yet, the author suspects that, once the influence of German thought hit its shores, the famous passage "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." which harbored the convictions that account for it being "the most powerful and prosperous of the nations of the earth,"¹⁴⁸ became no longer representative of its people's beliefs. Modern thought ignited a crisis in liberalism. Once the rational basis for freedom was abandoned, liberalism lost its basis altogether.

The denial of natural right means that, at best, that desired standard can merely be found within the confines of what is humanly known, which in turn is conditioned by each civilization's ideals. Since these ideals are only measured against the standards of the civilization they belong to, they cannot but be equally valid when compared to those of other civilizations. The consequence of this denial breeds relativism and ultimately nihilism.

According to our social science, we can be or become wise in all matters of secondary importance, but we have to be resigned to utter ignorance in the most important respect: we cannot have any knowledge regarding the ultimate principles of our choices, i.e., . . . our principles have no other support than our arbitrary and hence blind preferences."¹⁴⁹

Strauss is well aware that a "wish is not a fact."¹⁵⁰ The mere need to find an absolute solution to moral conflicts is not reason enough to justify its existence. He presents two

¹⁴⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

key arguments against the crisis that cast doubt on the moral framework underlying liberalism.

First, even though knowledge of natural right cannot be proved, neither the possibilities of it existing or of it being rationally knowable have yet been disproved. Not only is the “consent of all mankind” irrelevant for demonstrating its existence, but, if natural right is rational, it cannot be universally known without the cultivation of reason – “one ought not even to expect any real knowledge of natural right among savages.”¹⁵¹

Second, if an absolute standard is denied, then what are any of the modernist claims based on? In other words, how true can theories such as nihilism, relativism and possibly pluralism be if there is no ultimate truth to be affirmed?

The grounds on which the social sciences¹⁵² reject natural right, according to Strauss, are History on one hand, and the distinction between Facts and Values on the other. The arguments he presents on both these fronts are reiterated in his attack on Berlin’s pluralism. Therefore, the analysis of these contentions will provide for a more cemented examination of his final claim, which is no more than the object of the present reflection: if pluralism is but relativism in disguise.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵² Leo Strauss identifies a rift between classic and contemporary naturalism. Whereas the former follows a teleological view of the universe by which “all natural beings have a natural end . . . which determines what kind of operation is good for them,” the latter, influenced by the modern natural sciences which have taken a nonteleological direction, has become faced with a dilemma: either the conception of human life follows the nonteleological approach becoming united with the natural sciences; or the humanities remain teleological while the natural sciences do not, thus generating a dualist conception of science. Acknowledging that the solution to the problem of natural right hinges on the solution to this dilemma, Strauss concedes he cannot address it in full, therefore circumscribing his analysis to the rejection of natural right by the social sciences. (Ibid, 7-8.)

2.2.2. The Historicist Loophole

Isaiah Berlin is no doubt influenced by historicism and by nineteenth century German thought. His conception of human nature and his position on scientific methodology owe these currents a great deal of inspiration. Moreover, as an empiricist, it is history that sustains Berlin's main premise, according to which, values conflict and may be incommensurable between each other. It is, therefore, of the highest import to attend to Leo Strauss's disquisition on the subject for he is one of its most pronounced and revered critics.

Leo Strauss considers the historicist critique of natural right is truly aimed at human thought as such, for the rejection of its existence is attributed to the incapability of man knowing it. Whereas earlier dismissals of natural right were due to a high regard for nature, resigning human affairs such as right and justice to the imperfect and arbitrary realm of social convention,¹⁵³ the modern historical view rather rejects the notion of nature being of a higher order altogether. Either man and his varying conceptions of the good belong to the realm of nature, or they are placed alongside it, belonging to a realm of freedom or history.

Philosophy, according to Strauss, is classically conceived as the attempt to grasp the eternal, "to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun," which is to say "from the world of opinion as opposed to knowledge."¹⁵⁴ Historicism, though, confines human thought to the realm of opinion, to "the cave," thus deeming it incapable of grasping the eternal.

¹⁵³ Strauss qualifies all views that submit matters of right to human convention, as opposed to the natural norm, as "conventionalism." (Ibid, 10-11.)

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 11-12.

History, then, is the ultimate source of knowledge, the highest authority. What is natural is, not uniformity, but the individual. Liberation resides in the pursuit of each man's version of happiness. These versions or choices are equally valid, not susceptible to being judged superior or inferior to each other. The lack of common standards, either between individuals or entire civilizations, entails that their choices cannot be measured outside themselves. There is, therefore, no end to history, for all moments in it are equally valid with no progress between them. Accordingly, history cannot be finished. It is an endless process.

All universal norms are thus discredited. Standards, resting only upon free choice, become subjective; therefore no objective grounds upon which to judge right from wrong remain. In other words, historicism opened the way to nihilism. "The attempt to make man absolutely at home in this world ended in man's becoming absolutely homeless."¹⁵⁵

Since human thought is historical, choice presupposes a frame of reference. But if reasoning is necessarily based on one among many comprehensive views of the whole, these views cannot be validated by reason itself. They are all equally legitimate, rendering choice among them utterly groundless, unsupported by any certainty other than choice itself.¹⁵⁶ What is interesting about this argument is not the awkward implication of groundless choice proving once again the need to secure an absolute standard. Rather, Strauss is pointing out *the* most significant inconsistency in historicism, and hence the genetic deficiency in all the modernist philosophical views it inspires. If reason is based on a particular frame of reference, and by implication absent beyond its confines, then

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵⁶ According to Strauss, historicism in its radical form actually limits human choice by sentencing it to a matter of fate, for if choice cannot but be based on a comprehensive view, then individuals are only "free in the sense that (they) are free either to choose in anguish the world view and standards imposed on (them) by fate or else to lose (themselves) in illusory security or in despair." (Ibid, 27.)

historicism is either relative to one frame of reference or a mere groundless claim. Either way it is not an absolute truth, or perhaps it is proof of universally valid knowledge. “Historicism cannot deny this possibility. For its own contention implies the admission of this possibility.”¹⁵⁷

Strauss invalidates historicism using its own argument against it on two fronts. On one hand, by claiming to be universal, historicism admits the possibility, not to mention the necessity, of a universal truth. On the other hand, if human thought is historical, therefore ephemeral, historicism, as a human realisation, cannot but be temporarily valid.

Aside from this fundamental contradiction, one other inconsistency is detected by Strauss. “Historicism explicitly denies that the end of history has come, but it implicitly asserts the opposite.” Hegel proposed that “every philosophy is the conceptual expression of the spirit of its time.”¹⁵⁸ If there is one particular time in which the truth of historicism is made evident, then such a claim can only be made because this time is assumed to be the end of history. Any overall claim about humanity would require a peak moment to occur. This would mean that there is at least one moment in time that is superior to others in terms of the awareness of reality.

Leo Strauss seemingly succeeds in unveiling historicism’s inherent contradictions. But the author also finds within it proof of some all-pervading truth. History appears to reveal, especially concerning philosophy, that certain themes and problems are constant despite their varying formulations across time and space. “If the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 29.

limitation or of grasping something trans-historical.”¹⁵⁹ There is, therefore, an “unchanging framework”¹⁶⁰ in human thought, regardless of the historical period it belongs to.

Leo Strauss detects a loophole in the historicist’s thesis, whereby its own assertion rescinds its validity. By claiming there is no universal truth it empties its own claims of any sustainability, for what good is a truth about humanity that is only momentarily or relatively valid? Indeed, the historicist denial of an absolute standard, placing its only standard within the unsteady reality of time and culture, is bound to infuse all of its conclusions with their characteristic unsteadiness. Until now, Strauss’s view of the consequences of renouncing the existence of an absolute standard have been exposed. In the next chapter, the author demonstrates another loophole: how the attempt to proceed without any standard whatsoever is impossible.

Even though Isaiah Berlin admittedly was not influenced by Max Weber’s ideas, both thinkers present strikingly similar views. The most glaring difference between the two lies in their take on methodology within the social sciences. Weber, as “the father of sociology,” advocated a neutral approach that, as earlier demonstrated, Berlin could never accept. Differences aside, these thinkers seem to share the same underlying premise in their different conceptions of morality. Apart from the historicist lineage that permeates both authors’ ideas, Weber believes that, according to Strauss, “there is a variety of unchangeable principles of right or of goodness which conflict with one another, and none of which can be proved to be superior to the others.”¹⁶¹ Therefore, it is pertinent to examine two of the arguments which Strauss directs at Weber, since he then reiterates them against Berlin: one demonstrates how historicism, once again, is no

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 36.

more than a self-refuting loophole; while the other questions the validity of the “empirically grounded” claim in which both authors ground their overall conceptualizations.

In “Relativism” Strauss directs the same criticism at Berlin he had earlier aimed at Weber. “Experience,” he writes, “knowledge of the observable *Is*, seems to lead in a perfectly unobjectionable manner to knowledge of the *Ought*.”¹⁶² Just like for Berlin, as for Vico and Herder for that matter, Weber’s historical approach entails “understanding people in the way in which they understand themselves.”¹⁶³ For this thinker, a clear “understanding” requires a judgement free attitude towards its subject, which in turn warrants a fundamental distinction between facts and norm of value - between *Is* and *Ought*. In order to faithfully accomplish this feat, “understanding people in the way in which they understand themselves”¹⁶⁴ requires, by implication, understanding values as they are understood by the people whom the social scientist intends to understand. Therefore, Strauss notes, “the social scientist would have to bow without a murmur to the self-interpretation of his subjects.”¹⁶⁵ There is, consequentially, a conflation between the *Is* and the *Ought*, utterly voiding the distinction between them. The human scientist’s frame of reference is underpinned by the fluctuating realities of culture and of time. Either way, historicism leads to relativism.

So evaluation is inevitable. Not only in ordinary human thought, but in contemplating human thought. Assuming the claim that there is no rank among values is correct, can it really be held that no value system is better than the other? Is the system that privileges one value over another equally valid to the one that allows for two values to partially coexist? In Strauss’s words: if “there is no hierarchy of values . . . a social scheme that

¹⁶² Strauss, “Relativism,” 137.

¹⁶⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 56.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 55.

satisfies the requirements of two values is preferable to one whose scope is more limited.”¹⁶⁶

This conclusion begs one final question about the fundamental claim about the conflicting nature of morality both Berlin and Weber make. “The question,” the critic asks “is whether that premise has really been demonstrated, or whether it has merely been postulated under the impulse of a specific moral premise.”¹⁶⁷ In other words, Strauss returns to his fundamental argument: on what grounds, or by what standard, can one claim historicism, nihilism or relativism to be the absolute truth?

As a naturalist, Leo Strauss’s critique of anyone who denies an absolute source of morality beyond human nature is truly aimed at the foundations of his claims. His critique of Berlin is no different. Indeed, so long as this author derives pluralism from “ordinary experience,” a temporary standard, Strauss inevitably asks what of its validity if it cannot be timeless? In other words, can pluralism stand the test of time? This question will be answered in chapter three.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 66.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 64.

2.3. RELUCTANT ACCOMPLICES

The two critics of Isaiah Berlin under analysis stand for opposite positions. John Gray is a resolute pluralist while Leo Strauss, an abiding monist. Curiously, though, when considering Berlin's work, whether unwillingly or intentionally, both reach similar conclusions that convert pluralism into relativism.

John Gray commends Berlin for breaking with the existing liberal tradition by acknowledging its rational limitations when claiming values are not only conflicting but incommensurable. Following Raz, he believes incommensurability marks the limits of rational choice, thus relaying moral decisions to the realm of cultural fate. This view places pluralism remarkably close to cultural relativism, for it seems to condition the validity of each choice to the standards of each culture. On the other hand, Gray claims that pluralism necessarily undermines any universal view, including liberalism, thus believing Berlin is mistaken in his argument that pluralism supports liberalism. He believes Berlin truly meant to claim pluralism sustains a minimum of decency, which is comprised of universal yet conflicting and incommensurable values. Therefore, negative liberty, even though part of this nucleus, has no overriding power over other values, thus undermining liberalism's universal validity. Accordingly, Gray proposes a theory of *modus vivendi*, which merely attempts to find terms of compromise among legitimate cultural outlooks.

If Gray's possible confusion between pluralism and relativism is inadvertent, Leo Strauss's is quite intentional in his interpretation of Berlin's pluralism as relativism. For Strauss, any theory that rejects the truth of an absolute standard, i.e. of natural right, is necessarily a version of either relativism or nihilism. His pertinent criticism of Berlin's pluralism finds the need for an "absolute stand" inconsistent with the claim about the

equal validity of values. Therefore, he asks two questions: how is one to determine, laying hand of Berlin's aforementioned words, the "truth or falsehood" of any moral judgement without an absolute standard?; and if the truth of pluralism is grounded in "ordinary experience," which is by any historicist view a fluctuating standard, how can pluralism and its correlated value of negative liberty be a universal truth?

Interestingly, it seems that Gray and Strauss are fighting for opposite causes armed with the same weapons, for there is a parallel in their arguments for and against pluralism respectively. On one hand, both Gray and Strauss argue that incommensurability or equal validity will render the legitimacy of moral judgements dependent on variable standards. On the other hand, Strauss's second question is identical to Gray's claim that pluralism undermines liberalism or any universal morality. In fact, both these authors reach the same conclusion that Berlin's pluralism cannot consistently support universal liberalism. Strauss even goes further by implying that pluralism actually undermines pluralism.

Given these preliminary considerations, the following assessment of whether Berlin's pluralism holds against his own defence from relativism shall unfold under two questions: what are the implications of incommensurability for the validity of moral choice?; and can any universal claim be derived from pluralism or made about it? The first question will shed light on the possibility of moral judgements being considered true or false, while the second will dwell on the meaning of objective values, thus examining Berlin's argument against relativism.

CHAPTER III

PLURALISM V. RELATIVISM: THE TRIAL

Isaiah Berlin's arguments against relativism essentially amount to the following two: values are objective; and ethical judgements are not immune to moral criticism. From a relativist's standpoint, a moral decision is, in the author's own words "simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood."¹⁶⁸

However, both John Gray and Leo Strauss advance arguments that undermine this position. It is the purpose of this chapter to assess whether Berlin's defence of pluralism against relativism stands the tests posed by those two critics. In order to do so, despite being intertwined, each of Berlin's arguments as stated above shall be analysed against the backdrop of those author's interpretations.

In "Truth Among Plurality," the possibility of knowing moral truth and falsehood will be juxtaposed with two characteristic claims Berlin makes about pluralism: values are incommensurable and context dependent. In "Kaleidoscopic Universe," the notion of the objectivity of values, which is for Berlin derived out of their universality, will be examined from two opposite ends: that of its implications and that of its foundations. Once Berlin's defence against relativism has faced its trial, by having each of his two arguments face a twofold appraisal, "The Verdict" on their soundness shall at last come to fruition.

¹⁶⁸ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 83.

3.1. TRUTH AMONG PLURALITY

3.1.1. The Capability for Moral Choice

Isaiah Berlin claims the ability to judge right from wrong beyond context is one of the factors that separate pluralism from relativism. This argument is often considered vulnerable because incommensurability and context are characteristic elements of Berlin's conceptualisation of values.

It has been repeatedly stated throughout this study that choice is the crux of Berlin's full array of convictions. For John Gray, however, it is not any choice, but only one particular kind of choice that lies at "the heart"¹⁶⁹ of those convictions: radical choice. The crucial type of conflict in Berlin's "agonistic pluralism"¹⁷⁰ is, for the critic, the conflict between incommensurables.

Following Raz, Gray believes that incommensurability "marks the inability of reason to guide our action."¹⁷¹ The critic derives two consequences from this interpretation. First, "there is no 'right answer' when . . . conflicts are among incommensurables."¹⁷² Second, choice will be, not arbitrary, but grounded in contextualized experience. "Berlin's belief that choice-making is . . . deeply shaped by the language and form of life that is contingently theirs, is bound to qualify his idea of radical choice,"¹⁷³ writes Gray. If context is the surrogate of reason when it is absent, then the standards of choice are solely confined to it. Pluralism appears to become like relativism.

¹⁶⁹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 97.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁷¹ *Cit. Ibid*, 88.

¹⁷² Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 98.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 109.

So the first vulnerability of Berlin's argument about moral judgement is his claim about incommensurability because it precludes the existence of a "right answer" and relegates choice to the miscellany of cultural domain. However, context is a central feature of Berlin's pluralism regardless of incommensurability. It alone represents the second vulnerability of Berlin's argument for, like relativism, it is essential not only for the revelation of values, but for their many possible combinations, conflicts and priorities.

Like Berlin, Gray believes that "ideals are not beyond criticism."¹⁷⁴ Neither, however, substantiate this claim. The ensuing subchapters will assess the implications of incommensurability and contextual influence for moral judgment.

3.1.1.1. Incommensurability and Moral Reasoning

What did Isaiah Berlin actually mean by the term "incommensurability?" George Crowder ventures in the strenuous task of inventorying Berlin's many uses of the term. The author concludes that Berlin alternates between a moderate and a radical version of incommensurability, even though it appears Berlin may have even used the term in all three senses Crowder unearthed. Sometimes, when referring to the impossibility of weighing values on a "scale,"¹⁷⁵ Berlin is using the term in the sense of "immeasurability," according to which there is no common currency that permits the quantitative evaluation of values. But this sense is rather weak,¹⁷⁶ for even though it denies a cardinal order of values, it still allows for ordinal ranking, which allows values to be ranked in reference to a quality. But Berlin denies this in instances when he admits no term of comparison whatsoever. In this stronger connotation, incommensurability means

¹⁷⁴ Gray, "Reply to Critics," 327.

¹⁷⁵ For example, in a footnote in "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin writes "it may well be that there are many incommensurable kinds and degrees of freedom, and that they cannot be drawn up on any single *scale* of magnitude." (Berlin, *Liberty*, 177.)

¹⁷⁶ As notes George Crowder, the term incommensurability always means immeasurability for value-pluralists, "but it is not the whole of what they usually understand by that idea." (Crowder, *Liberalism & Value Pluralism*, 51.)

“incomparability,” resulting in the arbitrariness of choice. This is the sense that incommensurabilists such as Raz and Gray adopt.¹⁷⁷ Finally, Crowder finds in Berlin a more moderate meaning of incommensurability, according to which values cannot be ranked in the abstract, but can be ranked when put into context. Crowder assumes Berlin’s use of the term in these varying degrees is discrepant and therefore designates this latter sense as the author’s “better view,”¹⁷⁸ for the strongest meaning of the term, “incomparability,” would render pluralism equal to relativism.¹⁷⁹

Assuming incommensurability means incomparability, the position soon to be expounded is still similar to Crowder’s. Even if a ranking of values may not be possible in some concrete circumstances, incommensurability is more manifest among values in the abstract. Indeed, context plays a determining role in moral decisions by substantially restricting, and possibly eliminating, the occurrence of incomparability.

The philosophical debate on incommensurability “is as yet in a very early stage.”¹⁸⁰ Interesting arguments have demonstrated that, when put to the test, what many philosophers intend to convey by using the term as described by Raz¹⁸¹ can actually be accounted for in some other way. This can be explained by a gradual refinement in the terminology used to explain moral reasoning.

¹⁷⁷ Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 49-52.

¹⁷⁸ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 139.

¹⁷⁹ George Crowder argues that Berlin’s claim that pluralism entails liberalism can only remain consistent if incommensurability means unrankability, which questions “the extent to which we can rank values for good reason in the abstract or in general.” (Crowder, *Liberalism & Value Pluralism*, 52.) Otherwise, pluralism will be equal to relativism, a position, which he attributes to John Gray, pointing out that his argument entails no difference between liberalism and Nazism. (Crowder, “Gray and the Politics of Pluralism,” 171-88.) Gray in turn finds this accusation “absurd” arguing that universal values do set limits to what is a decent society without needing to add up to liberalism and without derailing into relativism. (Gray, “Reply to Critics,” 328-9.) Also, Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams address Crowder’s argument in “Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply,” considering Crowder confuses two ideas: the priority of one value over others *in all cases* is not a requirement of reason; and that in each particular case reason cannot say which value should prevail. The authors accept the first position and reject the latter. (Berlin and Williams, “Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply,” 338.)

¹⁸⁰ Chang, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁸¹ Joseph Raz notoriously defines incommensurability as: “Two valuable options are incommensurable if 1) neither is better than the other, and 2) there is (or could be) another option which is better than one but is not better than the other.” (Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 325.)

Since choice is for Berlin a constitutive element of human nature, evaluation, whether moral or not, is an intrinsic function of reason. “To think is to generalise, to generalise is to compare.”¹⁸² His view of moral reasoning can be explained in light of what is the standard theory for most incommensurabilists: “comparativism.” This theory assumes “all choice situations are comparative,”¹⁸³ based on the “trichotomy thesis” according to which relations of value can be either *better than*, *worse than* or *equally good*.¹⁸⁴ When the trichotomy cannot apply to a value relation, the result is regularly assumed to be incomparability, circumventing the possibility of justified choice. This is the position held by Raz. But this theory merely describes the conclusions a comparison may lead to instead of explaining how comparative reasoning in morality actually operates.

Ruth Chang has deeply contributed to the terminological refinement of moral evaluation. It is not possible to explore how her work reveals the many ways in which apparent incomparables are in fact comparable, but the following considerations shall suffice to illustrate at least two sides of value-dynamics present in Berlin’s work.

For Chang, “all comparisons necessarily proceed in terms of a value.” The author advances terms such as “covering value” and “choice situation” that when ill-defined lead to most incomparabilist arguments.¹⁸⁵ Each “choice situation,” then, balances values

¹⁸² Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 207.

¹⁸³ Chang, “Introduction,” 9.

¹⁸⁴ According to Ruth Chang, the *Trichotomy Thesis* is almost universally assumed as valid, for it is largely believed that it exhausts the logical space of possible comparisons between values. Yet Chang proposes a fourth value relation of *parity* - “if items are neither better nor worse than one another, and yet a small improvements in one does not make it better than the other, the items are on a par. . . . The core idea of parity can be approached by focusing on the idea of an *evaluative difference* with respect to a covering value.” This notion restricts the possibility of incomparability outside of the traditional trichotomy, for an evaluative difference necessarily presupposes a comparison. Therefore, Chang demonstrates one further way in which there is an alternative explanation for what at first seems to be incomparable. (Ibid, 25-27.)

¹⁸⁵ In the introduction of a collection of essays entitled “Incommensurability, Incompatibility and Practical Reason,” incidentally dedicated to Isaiah Berlin’s memory, Ruth Chang offers a comprehensive summary of the state of the debate on incommensurability as incomparability and explains many of the relevant terminology required by the discussion, of which the following is here highlighted: (1) “A ‘value’ is any consideration with respect to which a meaningful evaluative comparison can be made;” (2) “Every comparison must proceed in terms of a value,” called “covering value,” like the value of philosophical talent; (3) “Most covering values may have contributory values,” for instance, the value of philosophical talent may have contributory values such as originality or clarity of thought; (4) Every comparison or “value relation” requires a “choice situation;” (5) “Every choice situation is governed by some value. Call this the *choice value* (which is) roughly, ‘what matters’ in the choice situation.” (6) A value relation is considered *positive* if a comparison holds between it and *negative* if nothing can be said about it. This is to say, a value relation is either positive or negative whether one can say or cannot say two values are better than, worse than or equally good in relation to one another. Based

in reference to a “covering value,” which is roughly “what matters” in that situation. Claiming values are evaluated “in reference” to other values is the same as saying that values are compared “in relation” to each other.

Values are *relative* to values. This points to one of the senses in which Berlin certainly employed the term incommensurability: “To assume that *all values* can be graded on *one scale* . . . seems to me . . . to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle, perform.”¹⁸⁶ Pluralism, as opposed to monism, accepts there is no one standard that can hierarchise the totality of ends that men are capable of pursuing. “[E]nds (are) equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute.”¹⁸⁷ They can be ordered in a myriad of ways according to the many values that can serve as standards of comparison between them. Much like the chemical elements listed in the periodic table, all ends are equally valid in themselves and may materialize in a variety of ways depending on which other values they may come into contact with.

At this very high level of abstraction, the relationship among values unfolds into a kaleidoscopic panorama of different constantly shifting assemblages. These concoctions are narrowed by context. Chang advances another very elucidating distinction between “intrinsic values” and “bearers of value,” drawing a line between the reference to values as abstract notions and values concretely instantiated in particular circumstances.¹⁸⁸ This distinction helps demonstrate how the degree of comparability increases when referring to the latter compared to the former, just like Crowder proposes.

on these terms, Chang concludes that “two items are incompatible with respect to a covering value if, for every positive value relation relativized to that covering value, it is not true that it holds between them.” (Chang, “Introduction,” 5-7.)

¹⁸⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 216. (Italic added.)

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 213.

¹⁸⁸ “Following Chang,” declares Steven Lukes, “I shall say that comparison is best thought of as holding between ‘particular bearers of value’ – ‘between *goods, acts, events, objects* and *states of affairs* that instantiate or bear value (or disvalue), not between abstract values themselves. Thus we want to know whether, with respect to the goodness of places to live, an economically poor community with breathtaking landscapes is better than a moderately prosperous community blanketed with unsightly features and smokestacks – not whether, with respect to the value, goodness of places to live, the value of beauty is better than the value of prosperity.” (Cit. Lukes, “Comparing the Incomparable,” 63-64.)

One of Berlin's recurring examples of value conflicts pertains to freedom and security. "Security, and indeed freedoms, cannot be preserved if freedom to subvert them is permitted,"¹⁸⁹ he noted. One cannot compare freedom and security in terms of worth in the abstract, but one can judge that in a situation of calamity, security overrides freedom, and that under oppressive conditions, people are willing to sacrifice security by fighting for their liberty. In circumstances of stability, on the other hand, a compromise between the two values is usually in place. Indeed, both Berlin and Bernard Williams second this idea when saying "the pluralist path . . . will accept that a value which has more weight in one set of circumstances may have less in another."¹⁹⁰ Liberty and security, when pondered in a situation of calamity, are truly being weighed "in relation" to a third value: life. Like freedom, the value of life is a complex value. In different circumstances, different aspects of the value of "life" are prioritised: life preservation and quality of life. They either totally or partially nullify each other. Yet none of them lost their essential importance in human life.

In sum, incommensurability is a symptom of abstraction. The more concrete a moral challenge is made the more likely it is for a comparative evaluation to yield a positive result, which is to say to determine whether a value option is either better, equal or worse than another.

3.1.1.2. The Significance of Incommensurability

Incommensurability is, no doubt, a characteristic element of pluralism as the antithesis of monism, for it deflects any harmonizing ambitions. But how significant is it for practical

¹⁸⁹ Berlin, "A Message to the 21st Century."

¹⁹⁰ Berlin and Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: a Reply," 327.

choice? As was just demonstrated, conflict among incommensurables is quite a rare occurrence in the immensity of particular conflicts one faces throughout life.

It is interesting to observe that the term at issue is scarcely present in Berlin's key statements on pluralism. In "Two Concepts of Liberty" the term only makes an appearance once, in a footnote.¹⁹¹ Yet the word "conflict" is mentioned sixteen times. Similarly, in "The Pursuit of the Ideal" incommensurability also appears only once whereas the term conflict appears five times, six if one counts the word "conflicting." Moreover, in what is perhaps his most complete definition of pluralism,¹⁹² the term makes no appearance at all. Granted, in the final section of "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin does write "that human goals are many, *not all* of them *commensurable*, and in perpetual rivalry with one another."¹⁹³ But this very quote points precisely to how incommensurability is merely a possible occurrence within the inevitable reality of conflict – the "perpetual rivalry" between values. In fact, when Steven Lukes asks Berlin about the possibility of values being incommensurable, he at once clarifies: "Some are."¹⁹⁴

Gray, of course, would likely find this conclusion no more than a ploy to avoid an uncomfortable truth. However, Gray misplaces the cause of his and Berlin's conclusion: the reason why values cannot be singularly ranked has more to do with the equal validity of ends in themselves, not so much incommensurability and the limits of reason. "[W]e 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,"¹⁹⁵ Berlin said. It is equal validity that demonstrates there are not one but many valid answers to

¹⁹¹ Isaiah Berlin uses incommensurability in the strict sense mentioned earlier: "It may well be that there are many incommensurable kinds and degrees of freedom, and that they cannot be drawn up on any single scale of magnitude." [Berlin, *Liberty*, 177. (Italic added.)]

¹⁹² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 83.

¹⁹³ Berlin, *Liberty*, 216. (Italic added.)

¹⁹⁴ Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," 103.

¹⁹⁵ Berlin, *Liberty*, 213-214.

moral conflicts. Moreover, Berlin many a time cautioned against exaggerated interpretations of his doctrine – “we must not dramatize the incompatibility of values - there is a great deal of broad agreement among people in different societies over long stretches of time about what is right and wrong, good and evil.”¹⁹⁶ If the inevitability of conflict is not to be overstated, then, by Berlin’s terms, Gray is overplaying the importance of one particular kind of conflict, the conflict among incommensurables.

What is characteristic of pluralism is the multiplicity of goods as opposed to their unicity, not the inability of reason to solve some dilemmas. Reason, in fact, determines which values square up in a dilemma, even though it may not be able to decide it by determining which value is “better than” or “worse than” the other. In such cases, reason shows values in conflict are either equally good or incommensurable. For practical reason, it must be asked, what difference does a choice between conflicting equally good ends make from a choice between conflicting incommensurable ends? Does the fact that, according to the trichotomy thesis, the first is the positive result of a comparison whereas the second is a failure of the trichotomy to hold, make a difference to the one who is choosing? The result is the same, because there will be a sacrifice of an *equally right* alternative.

Therefore the possibility of incommensurability within a concrete situation, even though not disproved, merely accounts for some types of choices. For practical terms, it makes no difference whether to sacrifice or to compromise an incommensurable value or an equally good value. But this argument merely lays the foundations for the real question at hand: if values are tied, whether incommensurable or equally valid, is it possible to determine the truth or falsehood of a moral claim?

¹⁹⁶ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 19.

3.1.1.2. The Question Overhaul

Gray claims “there is no ‘right answer’ when . . . conflicts are among incommensurables,”¹⁹⁷ while also arguing that “ideals are not beyond criticism.”¹⁹⁸ Is there a contradiction? The very formulation of the question “how to determine *the* truth or falsehood of a moral choice” is misleading as to the problem it seeks to expose. Its language is reminiscent of a fallacy - the perennial fallacy.¹⁹⁹ The phrasing of the question seems to imply there is only one right answer when a choice need be made. It is not that the language is necessarily wrong, but it is likely to be read in a misleading way: “how to determine which moral choice is true?”

This potential interpretation assumes a moral dilemma can have only one true solution or right solution. But according to pluralism, a moral dilemma can lead to more than one “true” answer, just as it can lead to more than one “wrong” answer. “[P]luralism,” argues Berlin, “merely denies that there is one, and only one, true morality or aesthetics or theology, and allows equally objective alternative values or systems of values.”²⁰⁰ Therefore, a more unambiguous formulation of that question would be: “if there are many equally valid ends, is it possible to discern which are true and which are false in a particular context in which they collide?”

Whether objective values are known within the common moral minimum or actually known across the wide range of possibilities enclosed in the human horizon,²⁰¹ “what is clear is that values can clash”²⁰² on both levels. In fact, choice would scarcely be much of a burden if ends were susceptible of being ranked. Herein monism is discredited. It is not

¹⁹⁷ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 98.

¹⁹⁸ Gray, “Reply to Critics,” 327.

¹⁹⁹ The expression “perennial fallacy” symbolises the monist assumption that long influenced Western Philosophy, according to which there can only be one valid answer to every question, as explained in Chapter 1.1. entitled “The Perennial Fallacy.”

²⁰⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 90.

²⁰¹ See Chapters 1.2.2., 3.1.2. and 3.2. about the notions of human horizon and the moral minimum.

²⁰² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 12.

the choice between good and evil, between better and worse, that is difficult. It is the challenge between goods or between evils that is truly taxing. Why? Because, in the first case, the chosen good can never compensate for the loss of the other,²⁰³ and in the second case there is simply no gain whatsoever. In fact, a choice may very well lead to a simultaneously right and wrong option. “[S]uch conflicts are sometimes tragic, in that whatever we do, we commit a wrong”²⁰⁴ Gray observes.

This has no bearing on the truth or falsehood of ends as such. The need to choose indeed leads to the prevalence of one value over another in case of conflict. But this does not mean that the choice is necessarily truer or better than the one not chosen. There is a fallacy whereby it is assumed that an actual choice entails the value-demotion of the unchosen alternatives. What does follow from the need to choose is the evidence of conflicting ends, whether in the form of goods or of evils. Because ends are ultimate, meaning they are “values which I regard as ends in themselves, not means to other ends,” the act of choice reveals that they are, to the one who chooses, if not better or worse, as equal as the alternatives they sacrifice – “the values that I sacrifice, as opposed to the values I choose, are the values which might be equally ultimate for me.”²⁰⁵

The pluralist universe allows for many different possibilities that human beings, through their natural capacity for choice, may elect in detriment of the other possibilities.

These values, almost if not entirely universal, are not always harmonious with each other. Some are, some are not. . . . Justice has always been a human ideal, but it is not fully compatible with mercy. Creative imagination and spontaneity, splendid in themselves, cannot be fully reconciled with the need for planning, organization, careful and responsible calculation. Knowledge, the pursuit of truth—the noblest of aims—cannot be fully reconciled with the happiness or the freedom that men desire.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Crowder, *Liberalism & Value Pluralism*, 7.

²⁰⁴ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 98.

²⁰⁵ Berlin and Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 101.

²⁰⁶ Berlin, “A Message to the 21st Century.”

Choice merely charts a course amid alternatives, which would be equally valid if chosen, for the simple fact that the act of choice implies the sacrifice of an alternative.

3.1.1.4. Moral Choices

What are the implications of incommensurability for moral reasoning? The answer appears to be twofold. First, when applied to values in the most abstract of senses, incommensurability entails the impossibility of the single universal order monism strives for. This means there are many possible rankings of values. Second, context has a narrowing effect on all types of conflicts, usually revealing the relevant terms of comparison. Though on this level the conflict between incommensurables is not very significant, it does not cancel out the possibility of “a,” not “the,” right choice being made. Incommensurability, like the conflict among equally valid ends, means there is not just one valid choice in a given situation. As Gray pointed out, in the absence of rational principles, choice will be guided by the moral inclinations imprinted by experience, which have a rationale of its own.

The conflicting nature of moral ends and the inevitability of choice among them is pluralism’s central claim, not because values are relative to different contexts, but because they are ultimate components of mankind’s universe of values. This is, indeed, why pluralism is the antithesis of monism, which presupposes that the answers to such questions fit into a “cosmic jigsaw puzzle.”²⁰⁷ There are two main confusions regarding this statement. One is the belief that, by itself, the lone revelation that values conflict, without the element of “incommensurability,” adds nothing new to what philosophy has

²⁰⁷ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 4.

always acknowledged. Not only does this claim unduly overemphasize the importance of this characteristic, it misplaces the main claim of pluralism: the *inevitability* of conflict points to the fact that values are equally ultimate. Moral philosophy may have always recognized moral conflict but, as Berlin tirelessly pointed out, most of it denied its inevitability, and probably none of it considered it evidence of the *equal validity* of values in abstraction.

The other frequent confusion, often leading to the conviction that pluralism is as disturbing as relativism, is that the claim that there is no *one* best value or order of values means that there can be no “right” choice whatsoever. “We know that nothing we do is right because, whatever we do, we do something wrong,”²⁰⁸ as Ronald Dworkin put it. Yet, monism, as an alternative, does not necessarily prevent the sacrifice of a valued end just because it claims the priority of one higher value as “right.” Pluralism, though, claims that there may be more than one “right” priority and corresponding sacrifice of values to a particular dilemma.

3.1.2. Context is Key... “For Better or Worse”

Both Relativism and Pluralism claim values are context dependent. Only, they do it differently. For the first, context is both source and boundary of evaluation standards.²⁰⁹ *The truth* about values is thus *limited* to cultural or personal interpretation, to their “windowless boxes”²¹⁰ or “impenetrable bubble(s).”²¹¹ In pluralism, on the other hand, context plays a much more complex role, with multiple layers across which variety and objectivity meet.

²⁰⁸ Dworkin, “Do Liberal Values Conflict,” 81.

²⁰⁹ Note that the validity of a monist system is consistent with relativism, either cultural or subjective, so long as it is grounded in a collective or personal view respectively.

²¹⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 88.

²¹¹ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 11.

Both theories find in context the key to the revelation of values, for the knowledge of values is directly connected with the experience of reality. Though pluralism, unlike relativism, does not confine a moral outlook to an individual experience or a cultural outlook. Values are objective in the sense that they are intelligible to all those who share the human condition. The only sense in which they are wholly dependent on context is that they belong to the “context” of human experience. Of course, “being human” is experienced differently by each person, both individually and as part of a community. But the knowability of values transcends that particular experience.

Values are universal in the sense that they stem from the common experience of humanity, i.e. a “context” that is universally known to all who live through human life. “[I]f anything is meant by the term ‘human’, there must be enough that is common to all such beings,”²¹² Berlin observed. There is, therefore, a common context that underlies all particular contexts life can generate, thus enabling men to *understand* humanity better than anything else they cannot actually experience. This idea is evocative of the Vico inspired notion of man being better capable of understanding the world he shares with other men than the world he does not share with, say, a rock - “His deepest belief was that what men have made, other men can understand.”²¹³

What holds this fluctuating moral cosmos together is human nature, and what indicates its presence is the ability to communicate among those who partake in it. The intelligibility of values is the sufficient condition of their objectivity while remaining empirically known within a common human nature. “The possibility of . . . communication between human beings, depends upon the existence of some common

²¹² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 63.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 62.

values, . . . Those who are out of touch with the external world are described as abnormal or, in extreme cases, insane.”²¹⁴

The conception of human nature, i.e. of human context, is twofold:²¹⁵ a combination of a “human horizon” and of a “common moral minimum.” The difference between these two dimensions of universality is marked by what is possibly valuable and what is necessarily valuable to each person if they are to be considered human at all. The horizon sets the limits of what is humanly conceivable in terms of value while the minimum core is comprised of the values that are inevitably experienced in any human life. Hence, Berlin consistently grounds human diversity and human universality within a range of several degrees, which extend from a common center to a kaleidoscopic periphery of conceptions of the good. The totality of possible values correlates to humanity as a whole, which within it contains several different combinations of goods expressed in singular lives as well as collective traditions.

This kaleidoscopic periphery is pervaded by an immense variety of equally valid combinations, or “constellations of values,” which vary according to different cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Therefore, particular contexts which are both space-bound and time-bound provide the circumstances “in reference” to which values can be ordered. In sum, the interaction between context and values, according to the pluralistic understanding, occurs at many levels: the most abstract level of what is humanly conceivable as valuable – the human horizon; an intermediate level given by the cultural environment one experiences, which provides the terms and concrete possibilities the individual may know; the particular circumstances in which choices are

²¹⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 24.

²¹⁵ João Pereira Coutinho writes: “É neste sentido que, embora Berlin afirme que não existe uma natureza humana fixa, existe porém uma natureza humana comum: uma natureza que não pode prescindir de determinados valores vitais que são do interesse de todos os Homens. . . . Os Homens serão idênticos na sua humanidade, ainda que não desejem coisas idênticas.” (Pereira Coutinho, “Política e Perfeição,” 391.)

actually made among alternatives that cannot all harmoniously coexist; and, of course, the context one creates for oneself as one ponders the alternatives that, even though not all simultaneously pursued, are the makeup of one's moral universe, for they constitute what one's experience has enabled oneself to value.

This means that, even though each person can only abide by certain values in a given time and place, they remain free to conceptualise beyond their momentary constraints and choose otherwise.²¹⁶ "Values change. . . . (One can) suddenly see the universe in a different fashion,"²¹⁷ Berlin noted.

There is one more sense in which context bears relevance for this distinction, which correlates to the problem discussed in the previous chapter. If context reveals values, it can also have a distorting effect that leads to a misguided understanding of their application. In other words, an inadequate understanding of context may lead to the "falsehood," rather than the "truth" of a moral outlook.

Values, while remaining within the human horizon, may be "falsely" conceptualized because other elements of the "understanding" of reality are misconstrued. "I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining men, believe . . . and commit the most unspeakable crimes." Such was the case of the Nazis for Berlin. This conception of values is not beyond the understanding of those who do not share it, for when faced with the same "false belief about reality, one could come to believe that they are the only salvation."²¹⁸

This is an error about context, not about the notion of values themselves. If one is

²¹⁶ This is the idea of "basic liberty" by which Berlin meant that the capacity to choose can never be eliminated so long as a person remains human. (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 218.)

²¹⁷ Ibid, 125.

²¹⁸ Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, 15.

convinced that human worth is variable according to race, and threatened by inferior kinds, then it is understandable that the interpretation of the value of “life” may lead to the belief that those menacing breeds should be eradicated.²¹⁹ However, “a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family”²²⁰ is beyond human understanding. Herein lies a crucial difference in the implications of a relativist versus a pluralist understanding of values. For the first, Nazi values are morally “true” because their validity is grounded in the conception of that social context. For the pluralist, context, even though essential for the intelligibility of values, may lead to a false conception of them when some elements of that context are falsely construed. The possibility of judging certain cultural or personal interpretations of morality as either true or false is thus consistent with Pluralism.

For Isaiah Berlin, Pluralism opposes Relativism in the sense that context is always an enabler of moral judgment without confining it. Still, the same element that enables morality to be known, can also distort it when falsely construed. It is one thing to say one can only practice what their context permits and an entirely different thing to say that one cannot see and evaluate alternative possibilities as ethically right or wrong. How this is to be done remains the ultimate question of philosophy even though that no philosophical endeavour can fully satisfy it. It was Berlin’s conviction that the task of philosophy was to clarify the “categorical spectacles” through which man construes reality:

It is certainly a reasonable hypothesis that one of the principal causes of confusion, misery and fear is . . . blind adherence to outworn notions, pathological suspicion of any form of critical self-examination, frantic efforts to prevent any degree of rational analysis

²¹⁹ In this sense, Jonathan Riley writes: “Berlin’s argument is that, even in an indecent culture such as that of Nazi Germany, most people still recognize the common moral minimum but their recognition is perverted by their truly absurd belief that some people are subhumans: their appalling mistake leads them to exclude the subhumans from the scope of the common moral minimum. In short, even in such a context, most are not divorced from normality altogether, although they are led astray by “monstrous untruths” that bend their generic powers of reason and empathetic understanding in indecent directions.” (Riley, “Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Minimum of Common Moral Ground,’” 75-76.)

²²⁰ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 217.

of what we live by and for. . . . The goal of philosophy is always the same, to assist men to understand themselves and thus operate in the open, and not wildly, in the dark.²²¹

But that is not the direct aim of pluralism, though. The theory rather claims that there may be several morally valid options that can be accepted or rejected by people who do not adhere to them. The impossibility of moral judgment outside of one's moral outlook is not one of its direct implications, as is the case with relativism. Hence, it seems Berlin remains consistent when arguing pluralism does not hamper the possibility of moral assessment.

²²¹ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 14.

3.2. KALEIDOSCOPIC UNIVERSE

On the surface, Berlin's conception of human nature appears to be loaded with inconsistencies. He combines a romantic inspired notion of a creative, mutable and unfinishable self with a common human nature marked by the shared intelligibility of moral goods. This apparent contradiction dissipates once one considers the twofold notion of universality presented by the author, which combines the human horizon and the common moral minimum.

The notion of a common minimum is apparently reassuring until one realizes that, yet again, its content is both vague and thin, and is still shaped by a plurality of conflicting equally valid ends. As George Crowder observes, "the historical record provides little evidence of anything actually desired or admired by all human beings except goods or virtues described at the highest level of generality."²²² A parallel between Berlin's description of the common moral minimum and H. L. A. Hart's notion on "the minimum content of natural law" is usually drawn. According to this author, "without such a content laws and morals could not forward the minimum purpose of survival which men have in associating with each other."²²³

Even though the determination of the content of the moral minimum²²⁴ is extremely pertinent, it is not necessary to dwell on it in order to ascertain whether Berlin's claim of the universality of values is a sufficient condition for the distinction between pluralism

²²² Crowder, "Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin," 13.

²²³ Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 193.

²²⁴ Isaiah Berlin's notion of the moral minimum is also, for many, reminiscent of the John Rawls's concept of the "overlapping consensus." There are, indeed, many similarities between these two thinkers, but Berlin himself pointed out the differences between them: "justice is an ultimate value it is not compatible with mercy. It just isn't. . . . You should be as just as you can be without being too merciless. You are as merciful as you can be without being too unjust. That's one point. The other is the irrational impulses of men, to which I pay attention but Rawls doesn't. I think that you cannot establish political government purely on the basis of what is rational, though some people obviously think you can. But I think that there are too many irrational drives in men which even universal psychoanalysis may not eliminate, which are nevertheless part of basic human nature as I conceive it. If people didn't have deep irrational elements in them there would be no religion, no art, no love. None of these things are justifiable by purely rational means." (Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," 113.)

and relativism.²²⁵ In order to do so, this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the central conclusion both John Gray and Leo Strauss arrive at, even though they are arguing opposite positions: pluralism subverts liberalism. They write, respectively:

Though pluralism in ethics and liberalism in politics may be connected in a number of ways, none of these linkages can secure the universal primacy of the value of liberty that Berlin at times asserted.²²⁶

and,

[I]f he had limited himself to saying that liberalism is merely his ‘own subjective end,’ not intrinsically superior to any other subjective end, that . . . no conclusive case can be made for or against liberalism . . . he would never have contradicted himself.²²⁷

Although the conclusions of these two critics are strikingly similar, these authors emphasize two different aspects of the same problem: the implications of pluralism for any universal moral claim on one hand; and the epistemic inconsistency of universal claims when empirically grounded, namely that of pluralism and of liberalism. Accordingly, the problem shall be examined from these two different angles.

3.2.1. Pluralism of Universals: Theoretical Implications

John Gray argues that the truth of pluralism is inconsistent with any universal moral claim, including that of liberalism. In his own words, “what Berlin plausibly argues is that value-pluralism can be used to support a moral minimum, precarious, shifting and ridden with conflicts, which has priority over any political ideal.”²²⁸ Simultaneously, Gray holds that “there is nothing distinctively liberal about the moral minimum that Berlin proposes

²²⁵ In any case, Jonathan Riley proposes: “Berlin’s objective value pluralism is constrained to give priority to a core set of human rights and associated sphere of liberty. This minimum of human rights constitutes a generally accepted standard of humanity, or threshold of human decency, which is not necessarily fixed. The threshold of decency may be represented as a boundary line that divides the common moral world into two zones, to wit, a zone of decency above and including the boundary, where human rights are respected, and a zone of indecency below the boundary, where human rights are violated. (Riley, “Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Minimum of Common Moral Ground,’” 72.)

²²⁶ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 5.

²²⁷ Strauss, “Relativism,” 140.

²²⁸ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 5-6.

here: as a prescription for decency it will no doubt include some reference to negative liberty, but liberty will have no overriding importance.”²²⁹ For the critic, if pluralism is true, then liberalism is as valid as any illiberal regime. In other words, liberalism is only relatively valid to the liberal moral outlook that privileges liberty as an overriding ideal. It appears, however, that the very position by which Berlin is inconsistent implicates Gray himself in a blatant contradiction in terms.

First, a misinterpretation of Berlin’s liberalism must be clarified. Berlin in no occasion affirms, and in many instances expressly denies, that negative liberty, or any kind of liberty, has an overriding value. “Nothing that I assert,” says the author “should be taken to mean that freedom in any of its meanings is either inviolable, or sufficient, in some absolute sense.”²³⁰ Why, then, does he believe pluralism entails liberalism? Because both are underpinned by choice. To be a pluralist is to admit there are many legitimate conceptions of the good, therefore if one is a pluralist, one necessarily believes there should be freedom of choice. More importantly, because choice is such an essential part of what it means to be human, then it cannot but be a part of the moral minimum. Therefore, Berlin’s argument is not that liberty is an overarching value, but that it is an essential one. It’s “universal” moral claim “is no more than a minimum; its frontiers are not to be extended against sufficiently stringent claims on the part of other values, including those of positive liberty itself.”²³¹

Gray himself admits that “the idea of a moral minimum is the claim that we should strive to settle moral conflicts in ways that do least damage to universal human values”²³² and that it “will no doubt include some reference to negative liberty.”²³³ This position is, in

²²⁹ Ibid, 20.

²³⁰ Berlin, *Liberty*, 52.

²³¹ Ibid, 53.

²³² Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 20.

²³³ Ibid.

fact, compatible with his esteemed conception of a self-creative human nature. Yet he considers that there are “worthwhile forms of life which will be compromised or destroyed, by the exercise of freedom of choice.”²³⁴ Gray patently contradicts himself by asserting that the values withheld in the minimum core, of which liberty is “no doubt” part (especially given that it is so vital to the very notion of human nature), must be done the “least damage,” while at the same time defending that a way of life that is jeopardized by the freedom of choice is worthwhile.

The contradiction runs even deeper. Gray argues that if pluralism is taken “all the way down,”²³⁵ then illiberal ways of life are just as legitimate as liberal ones, so long as they make no universal claim. He thus proposes a theory of *modus vivendi*,²³⁶ according to which a peaceful coexistence between a diversity of equally valuable forms of life is pursued, not as an ideal, but as a means to an end that is generally valued by all those societies.²³⁷ But how could such “peaceful coexistence” be attained without non-interference, which is to say, without negative liberty?

Gray contrasts universalist views of life, such as Marxism, Christianity or Islam, against particular conceptions like Hinduism, Shintoism or Orthodox Judaism. Assuming these conceptions are actually not universalist, what Gray is arguing is that they are legitimate so long as they accept there are other ways of life that are equally legitimate. As Berlin observed, this merely means that “the Shintoists are liberal with respect to the rest of the world. If you are a pluralist, there must be somewhere where a choice different from your own is permitted.”²³⁸ So what Gray is actually standing for is that illiberalism within

²³⁴ Ibid, 185.

²³⁵ Ibid, 198.

²³⁶ Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 135-139.

²³⁷ John Gray points out, however, that he is not claiming pluralism entails *modus vivendi*. (Ibid, 136.)

²³⁸ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 217.

a particular system is legitimate so long as it is liberal without? This brings this analysis to its final point.

John Gray, as a resolute pluralist, sustains his positions by interpreting pluralism “all the way down.” Yet, when presenting his understanding of *value*-pluralism, he noted “the way” encompassed three separate though intertwined levels: among different cultural forms; within any morality or code of conduct; and within complex values themselves.²³⁹

So why should *modus vivendi* or negative liberty be applied between different moral outlooks and not within them, allowing these values to compete on all three levels? In fact, if one considers the other argument against relativism, it is possible to discern right from wrong ways of life in reference to objective standards, namely the ones which are almost timelessly held as true – the minimum core. This begs the question: how can one way of life, which constantly suppresses one of the minimum values of mankind, be good or decent? Either Gray admits, as he does, that there are standards by which the morality of a way of life can be assessed, or he is, by his own terms, advocating relativism.

In sum, John Gray, despite misinterpreting Berlin, actually contradicts himself by arguing that the author’s notion of pluralism is consistent with the priority of a moral minimum, which “no doubt” includes negative liberty, while at the same time considering illiberal regimes legitimate ways of life. “Berlin is not so much a theorist of liberty as a philosopher of human decency,”²⁴⁰ Gray remarks. Yet it rather seems that because Berlin is a philosopher of decency, he believes negative liberty is essential among a moral minimum core.

²³⁹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 79-80.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

In refuting Gray's arguments, it has hopefully been demonstrated how the universalism of equally valid ends contained within pluralism need not lead to cultural relativism. Rather, because such values are universal, it means that any decent society should pursue them, albeit in different ways. Concerning Gray's position, however, there is one question left unanswered: What good is *modus vivendi*, a theory that legitimizes different political systems structured in accordance with different moral outlooks, in a globalized world such as the one we now live in? This is to say, in a world that is evermore demanding of political coordination beyond local boundaries, with every day multiple clashing conceptions of the good, "peaceful coexistence" is an end mostly sought within, rather than without this new global society. This question will be later addressed as this study is concluded. Before, that, one further question requires elucidation – Can pluralism stand by its own standards or, like relativism, is it self-refuting?

3.2.2. Universal Pluralism: Theoretical Foundations

Leo Strauss made it his life mission to guard the truth of natural right, denouncing by implication any theory based on historicism as a symptom of the modern crisis of liberalism. Therefore, his critique of Berlin's pluralism is mainly directed at its empiricist foundations. In a detailed analysis of "Two Concepts of Liberty," he begins by addressing the problem of the conflicting validity of negative and positive liberty, but only to shift his attention from the "location" to the "status"²⁴¹ of the frontiers of liberty. The focus of this chapter will also be aimed at this part of his critique, since the other question is not essential to ascertain the difference between pluralism and relativism.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Strauss, *Relativism*, 137.

²⁴² Although it is not possible to explore this avenue of thought in which Strauss points out other alleged inconsistencies in Berlin's thought, it will merely be stated that this study is aligned with José Tomaz Castello Branco's position, according to which Berlin is often misinterpreted, as is the case with Strauss. When differentiating negative liberty from positive liberty and other values with which it is often confused, Berlin is mistakenly interpreted as attributing an overriding importance to negative liberty, when in fact he

Strauss mainly accuses Berlin's thesis of being a reluctant kind of relativism. Indeed starting by addressing it in an essay, precisely entitled "Relativism," he finds Berlin's position even more contradictory than ordinary relativism, for not only is it self-refuting, but it proposes there are universal principles. "The demand for the sacredness of a private sphere needs a basis, an 'absolute' basis; but it has no basis,"²⁴³ the critic observes.

The critic begins by pointing out that Berlin grounds the moral minimum in his idea of human nature - a historicist conception. He remembers the author's words about such minimum rules and commandments: "they are accepted so widely, and are grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being."²⁴⁴ Strauss therefore asks: how can empiricism, "the experience of men until now,"²⁴⁵ serve as basis for any eternal principles? The problem, for this author is, if "ordinary experience"²⁴⁶ is a mutable reality, from which one derives precisely the multiplicity of equally legitimate ends and moral views, then how can any universal claim be asserted, including the one about its own existence? In other words, if there is no reference to an absolute and fixed reality, then all claims can merely be relatively valid. Those "sacred frontiers" are only sacred in the present context, not beyond them.

According to Berlin, one criterion for establishing such "sacred frontiers" is that their absence leads to "inhumanity."²⁴⁷ But Berlin's most pertinent argument concerning the

admits on many occasions that it competes and many a time is less important than other values. Castello Branco writes referring to Strauss's interpretation: "A existência de 'fins em si mesmos' ou de 'valores últimos,' seria por si só, suficiente para demonstrar a impossibilidade do pluralismo e, com ela, a incoerência da ideia de liberdade negativa. Uma tal interpretação, porém, não poderia estar mais afastada da verdade que o pluralismo afirma. De facto, de outra forma não se poderia entender o próprio pluralismo, já que o que este afirma é, precisamente, não a inexistência de valores absolutos, mas antes o conflito entre eles." (Castello Branco, "Pluralismo, Liberdade e Tolerância," 190-191.)

²⁴³ Strauss, "Relativism," 138.

²⁴⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 210.

²⁴⁵ Strauss, "Relativism," 139.

²⁴⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 213.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 53.

foundations of his claims is that history, even though ridden with so much diversity, is also stable enough to reveal certain patterns from which one can draw universalizable truths, including of course those pertaining to morality. Such patterns correspond to “categories” that can be perceived by everyone who shares the human condition.

To share such a condition means there is an experience of reality that is common to all those who bear it. “Such permanent features are to be found in the moral and political worlds too: less stable and universal, than in the physical one, but just as indispensable for any kind of intersubjective communication, and therefore for thought and for action.”²⁴⁸

Interestingly, Strauss himself seems to share this view when, in “Natural Right and History” he criticises historicism based on, well, historicism itself. He observes that “if the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical limitation or of grasping something trans-historical.”²⁴⁹ Berlin argues exactly the same thing when saying that “categories which, if not eternal and universal, are far more stable and widespread than those of the sciences; sufficiently continuous, indeed, to constitute a common world which we share with medieval and classical thinkers.”²⁵⁰ The most enduring and coherent conceptual system is thus the ultimate “empirical test”²⁵¹ for assessing the adequacy of the basic categories of thought and moral evaluation. “Sacredness” is thus derived from that which is less variable in experience or, in other words, from constant experience.

So far, Berlin almost stands Strauss’s challenge, being even well served by this author’s arguments against his position. He is saying that one can infer universal aspects of

²⁴⁸ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 216.

²⁴⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 24.

²⁵⁰ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 221.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 215.

human thought from their constancy throughout the diversity of human experiences enclosed within history. Yet, Strauss points out one more contradiction, perhaps the ultimate one, in Berlin's thought: Berlin claims history is unfinished and unfinishable, while at the same time arguing that "principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed."²⁵² In so doing, Berlin is conceding there are timeless truths. But if the source of values is based in what can be known to man, which is to say on what can be experienced, then principles only "exist" temporarily, for experience is far from a timeless reality. Moreover, Berlin denied the existence of *a priori* truths – "I don't know what it would be like to recognise certain beliefs as being true independently of what anyone might possibly think."²⁵³

Strauss questions how can eternal principles be based on empiricism. Such situation would require, he argues, "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. But this would also mean that in the most important respect history, or progress, would have come to its end."²⁵⁴

Berlin, like Vico and Herder, denied the idea of progress. However, Strauss's observation points out that the discovery of "sacred principles" from experience would necessarily require moments that are, so to speak, more aligned with the "truth." So these moments would be "better" than the moments when that knowledge has not yet been found or has been forgotten. Such a judgment implies the admission of progress. In fact, as Strauss notes when criticizing not Berlin, but Weber, if there is a variety of values, despite there being no hierarchy among them, "a social scheme that satisfies the

²⁵² Berlin, *Liberty*, 217.

²⁵³ Berlin and Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes," 106.

²⁵⁴ Strauss, "Relativism," 139.

requirements of two values is preferable to one whose scope is more limited.”²⁵⁵ In other words, a time that allows for the knowledge of more values, of more principles, is again a “better” time than times that only acknowledge a portion of said values. Indeed, Berlin actually acknowledges this when he remarks: “The whole value of discovering the past and studying other cultures is to understand more, so that you understand yourself *better*.”²⁵⁶ Yet he denies the notion of an historical evolution as a “march of events (that) can plausibly be represented as a succession of causes and effects,” leading to an end.

It appears that one cannot admit the possibility of judgment without admitting the notion of progress, for to say one moment is better than a preceding one is, by definition, saying there was progress between the two. Berlin can only be consistent in denying progress and accepting judgment if he applies that term in two different senses. He rejects progress in the sense that there is no final purpose to which the succession of cultures leads. They are incommensurable as Vico and Herder proposed, a part of a “historical cycle” with “their own expressions and interpretations” of their “own autonomous values.”²⁵⁷ But, on the other hand, Berlin accepts the possibility of some cultures being better than others based on their wider and clearer recognition of moral universal principles. Otherwise, he would fall into relativism according to his own terms. In fact, Berlin even conceded that Vico was “in a sense” a relativist, for he believed “that one culture was in no position to criticize the values of another.”²⁵⁸

By defending pluralism is different from relativism because it admits there are “objective correlate(s)” which determine the “truth or falsehood” of moral views, Berlin need not admit an “end” to history is necessary, as Strauss suggests.²⁵⁹ However, he must concede

²⁵⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 66.

²⁵⁶ Berlin and Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 100. (Italic added)

²⁵⁷ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 77-78.

²⁵⁸ Berlin and Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin: in a Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 88.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 83.

that different moral outlooks can be compared in order to assess their truth or falsehood. In order to do so a reference to a standard is necessary. Both authors admit this. What they disagree on is the “status” of said standard. Strauss believes it must be one and absolute, while Berlin believes it needs only to be observed as an all-pervading yet conflicting pattern throughout the variety of human “expressions.”

These constant patterns are to be found within the confines of what human nature permits. Accordingly, truth and falsehood presuppose no “end” of history, only an “end” of human nature – the human horizon. Within its limits, one finds a “finite” variety of values of which a “common minimum” is “sacred” because it holds true for *all* men – it is universal.

The positions of Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin fundamentally diverge on two counts based on where they think the truth lies and what they think that truth is. One is a naturalist monist because he seeks a perfect harmonious truth outside man while the other is an empiricist pluralist for believing truth can only be found within man himself. When asked about their differences, Berlin replied that Strauss believed “in absolute good and evil, right and wrong, directly perceived by means of a kind of a priori vision, a metaphysical eye – a Platonic rational faculty which has not been granted to me,”²⁶⁰ whereas Berlin thought “that all there is in the world is persons and things and ideas in people’s heads – goals, emotions, hopes, fears, choices, imaginative visions and all other forms of human experience.”²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Jahanbegloo, “The Magic Eye of Leo Strauss.”

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Now, it is possible to answer Strauss's initial question: "can there be eternal principles on the basis of 'empiricism?'"²⁶² Yes, because the "experience of men up to now"²⁶³ reveals that all men know *within* them the same truths. Therefore, truth may be "self-evident,"²⁶⁴ not because of an outside natural order revealed by a "metaphysical eye," but because there is an inside conflicting moral order which all men experience.

Yet, Strauss and Berlin converge on one axis: the central role of philosophy plays in the quest for the truth. Strauss holds the classical view of philosophy as the search for an eternal truth which lies outside of man, in a better and perfect world – a natural order. Berlin, on the other hand, believes "the truth" can only be found within and among men, through their experience, which is all they know. From this empiricist stand, Berlin derives the universal truth of pluralism – a truth that reveals reality is made of a combination of constant and variable elements. What is sacred, for Berlin, is what is necessarily experienced as valuable in any human life. Yes, experience can also blur, distort the interpretation of the "sacred principles," which is why it is up to philosophy "to assist men to understand themselves and thus operate in the open, and not wildly in the dark."²⁶⁵

Both Strauss and Berlin agree the revelation of anything sacred depends on philosophy. The difference lies in the direction each looks to while exercising this "often agonizing and thankless but always important activity"²⁶⁶ – outside or inside of man. Strauss regards the inside of man as an imperfect and inconstant source, looking outside of him for a singular, perfect and eternal truth. Berlin, uses the philosophical lens to look inside the human experience seeking to clarify what is invariably true to all men. He finds at least

²⁶² Strauss, *Relativism*, 139.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Note that, as indicated in the chapter dedicated to Strauss's critique of historicism, he begins "Natural Right and History" by saying the crisis of liberalism is due to the loss of faith in the famous claim included in the "Declaration of Independence:" "We hold these truths to be self-evident." (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 1.)

²⁶⁵ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 14.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 14.

one sacred truth: *all* men *know* that they must choose between *conflicting values*. Pluralism is thus, not self-refuting, but self-accepting.

3.3. THE VERDICT

Isaiah Berlin presents a view of morality whereby there are many universal and equally valid ends to life that will at times clash within particular circumstances, thus imposing the burden of choice between them upon every human being. Instead of envisioning a world where the need to choose can be transcended by finding *one* universal solution to every conflict, Berlin rather affirms there are *many* possible answers to moral dilemmas. This acceptance of moral diversity elicits a semblance of relativism, a theory that grounds the validity of *many* moral orders in the *many* cultural or personal backgrounds from which they originate. Despite their similarities, pluralism and relativism remain different positions. For Berlin, those differences boiled down to two main arguments, the first of which shall now be recapitulated.

Berlin claimed that pluralism allowed the possibility of objectively determining the truth and falsehood of moral solutions, which is to say that that judgment could be made by any human being regardless of where they stand in time or in space. For relativism, on the contrary, truth can merely be subjective, for it is measured against standards which belong to either a culture or an individual. Yet how can moral truth be discerned if there are limits to moral reasoning?; If there are many equally valid alternatives?; And if the very knowability of objective values and moral solutions to conflicts is context dependent?

Once the two first questions are clarified the need for their answers subsides. First, the idea that moral reasoning is limited is derived out of the claim that some values are incommensurable. Even though Berlin's use of this term is ambiguous, it was possible to assess that he meant this was an attribute of some conflicts among values, more likely to

be observed when such values are compared in the abstract than when circumstances are revealed more concrete. Indeed, if Berlin often pointed out that “we must not dramatize the incompatibility of values,”²⁶⁷ then *a fortiori*, one should definitely not overemphasize the incommensurability observed within some incompatibilities, as does John Gray.

Most of the doctrine follows Joseph Raz by equating incommensurability with incomparability, ascribing to it the “inability of reason to guide our action.”²⁶⁸ The current intensity of the debate about this type of moral conflict is perhaps indicative, not of its ample importance, but of a void that hitherto existed in the philosophical debate altogether. Perhaps because of the “perennial fallacy,”²⁶⁹ moral philosophy has mostly been focused on the source of values²⁷⁰ rather than on the relationship between values. Once a pluralist view of ethics was tendered, attention was drawn to that relationship. Knowledge of the complexity of moral reasoning - a comparative process among abstractly equal and universal ends that may yield in concrete circumstances a positive relation between values, i.e. “better than,” “worse than” and “equal to,” or a negative one whereby the comparison fails *in toto* – appears to be at a very elementary stage. Perhaps due to this, the term “incommensurability” accounts for yet to be discovered positive, albeit complex, value relations.

Still, even if incommensurability, or incomparability, is indeed a feature of some moral conflicts, its importance has been overplayed within the notion Berlin advanced of pluralism. The true problematic element of this theory lies in the fact that there are *many* equally valid values and equally valid solutions to conflicts. What is characteristic, or at

²⁶⁷ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 19.

²⁶⁸ Cit. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 88.

²⁶⁹ The expression “perennial fallacy” symbolises the monist assumption that long influenced Western Philosophy, according to which there can only be one valid answer to every question, as explained in Chapter 1.1. entitled “The Perennial Fallacy.”

²⁷⁰ Prichard’s intuitionism and foundationalist approach to morality (Cahn and Markie, *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, 467); Ayer and Stevenson’s emotivism (487-504); and Hare’s logic of prescriptivity and universalizability (504-14) were the topics of philosophical debate in Oxford when Isaiah Berlin was specializing in philosophy in the early 1930’s.

“the heart,”²⁷¹ of pluralism is precisely the plurality of moral ends en lieu of a singular moral order. Reason is, of course, capable of identifying those ends. The fact that it is of no use when confronted with a choice among comparable equals or incomparables merely reinforces what is the central element in Berlin’s pluralism: the inevitability of choice.

With this in mind, one can observe how the second question earlier mentioned can now be clarified. The quest for “the truth” usually conjures up the perennial fallacy that has long pervaded that pursuit, misguiding one towards the search for only one answer to a particular moral conflict. If pluralism claims the possibility of multiple moral truths, there is no inconsistency between the possibility of knowing truth and falsehood within a variety of valid solutions. A different question, of course, is “how” to tell the difference between moral truths and moral falsehoods. The answer is twofold: truth is determined in reference to objective standards; and it requires an ulterior element to be assessed – context. The former is part of Berlin’s second line of defence against relativism and shall soon be readdressed, while the latter shall now be recounted.

The importance of context for the revelation of values is one of the main counts in which the kinship between pluralism and relativism is more prominent. Relativism places the standards of moral choice within what is directly experienced by each person, either as an individual (subjective relativism) or as part of a culture (cultural relativism). It presents a view of morality made up of moral islands, “windowless boxes”²⁷² or “impenetrable bubble(s),”²⁷³ where people cannot correlate to others who have experienced life differently. But as Berlin points out “intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to

²⁷¹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 97.

²⁷² Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 88.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 11.

them, and acts as a bridge between them.”²⁷⁴ Context, as the framework for experience, plays in pluralism an enabling role rather than a limiting one. There is, of course, a common context experienced by all those who bear the human condition, rendering all that is possibly valued and necessarily valued intelligible to every human being. In Berlin’s words, values are universal so long as they belong to the “human horizon,” which encloses within it a “minimum core” that all humanity craves in order to live a dignified existence.

Besides this common context, there are levels of specificity to particular contexts which are indeed limited by time and space. Context, in this sense, carries a more direct revelatory function, for it shapes the way each human being becomes acquainted with what is universally valuable. Such is the influence context exerts on moral outlooks that, when ill perceived, it can lead to terrible moral “falsehoods,” as was the case with Nazism. This is the point where pluralism and relativism part ways. Moral judgment is not entirely relative to specific contexts. Because there is a wider human context in which specific contexts occur, it is always possible to transcend these latter contexts by reference to the former. More importantly, it is possible to objectively discern what is true or not despite being within or outside a particular context that generates a given moral solution.

In sum, it appears Berlin’s claim that, unlike relativism, pluralism is consistent with the possibility of finding moral truths within the many possibilities of a plural moral universe holds against the alleged limits of moral reasoning and despite the importance specific contexts have in framing the intelligibility of values. What of Berlin’s other argument, however?

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

Berlin's second line of defence against relativism lies in the claim that values are objective because they are universal. Having already demonstrated how this element is essential for the determination of the truth of moral claims, a problem of deeper proportions emerges for the theory with this claim: how can pluralism be consistent with universal values? This last question led the investigation back to the relativist views Gray and Strauss derive out of their understanding of what Berlin meant by the universality of values. The question was thus analysed from two opposite angles against the backdrop of these two critics' interpretations: that of its implications according to Gray; and that of its foundations as denounced by Strauss.

Gray argues that, even though values are universal, moralities are not. Therefore, liberalism is morally equivalent to any illiberal system. Among the many inconsistencies in this argument, the most important one is that it forgets that objective values serve as standards of truth. If, like Gray admits, negative liberty is part of the minimum core of values, then it is a necessary condition for a decent society. Therefore, by arguing that illiberal societies are just as valuable as liberal ones, he is claiming indecent societies are equally valuable as decent ones. Berlin can only consistently remain "a philosopher of human decency,"²⁷⁵ as Gray believes he is, by deriving at least one universal implication from pluralism: a moral minimum, of which a "measure of negative liberty"²⁷⁶ is part, must be manifest in any society that is considered decent.

Finally Strauss argues that, like relativism, pluralism is self-refuting because its truth is derived out of "ordinary experience." He questions how can any eternal principles be based upon a historicist view of reality, which is in turn unfinishable. Berlin's thesis stands this final epistemological test, by grounding universal truth in what is universally

²⁷⁵ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 6.

²⁷⁶ Berlin, *Liberty*, 216.

experienced by all men as such. The assessment of such universality requires no “end” to history, for it is enclosed within a “finite” human horizon instead. Hence, pluralism consistently asserts a reality of multiple valid moral outlooks which result from different combinations of universal elements. In other words, Berlin’s argument for pluralism as separate from relativism is successful: indeed, it is possible to assess the moral validity of diverse combinations of objective goods.

The dissection of Isaiah Berlin’s arguments for the defence of pluralism against the allegations of relativism here analysed appears to reveal they stand their ground. The theories are indeed similar for legitimizing moral diversity and by sharing empiricist roots. But this happens differently for each. Relativism takes diversity and empiricism to their ultimate consequences. Not only does it obsolete morality’s purpose itself, for it frustrates the very possibility of objective moral judgment; it is also self-refuting, since it admits no universal claim about morality. Pluralism, as far as this analysis is concerned, manages to successfully reconcile diversity and universality, by describing a universally knowable moral realm that can validly manifest in a myriad of ways throughout the many concrete circumstances, which time and space may produce. Its values are many, equal and agonistic, but the moral realm that harbours them is one – human experience. Pluralism is a moral theory that is, perhaps thus far, the most congenial to humanity itself – a heterogeneity of particular existences that stems from a homogenous human nature.

CONCLUSION

UNTIDY UNIVERSE

Isaiah Berlin considered political theory a branch of moral philosophy. He defined it as “an aspect of thought (and sometimes feeling) about men’s relationships to each other and to their institutions, in terms of purposes and scales of value which themselves alter as a result of historical circumstances of varying types . . .”²⁷⁷ The many answers it has generated to what is its central concern, “the question of obedience and coercion,”²⁷⁸ are tied to the all-pervading conviction in Berlin’s thought: choice is an “inescapable characteristic of the human condition.”²⁷⁹ This empirically known fact grounds pluralism as a moral philosophical position that branches out into political theory, which must cope with its implications. This chapter will expand on Berlin’s insight for the political demands of the present day.

In one of Berlin’s most successful attempts to synthesize his very complex conception of Pluralism, he writes,

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 of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective ends. Incompatible these ends may be; but their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all.²⁸⁰

Pluralism thus emerges simultaneously as an alternative to the monist notion of one coherent moral whole and to the relativist conceptualization of many remote moralities. Each of these theories blindly privileges one of the two opposing purposes the balance

²⁷⁷ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 14.

²⁷⁸ Berlin, *Liberty*, 2.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 30.

²⁸⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 83.

of which is the central concern of political theory: conformity and divergence. Ultimately, political theory is concerned with finding some basis for agreement capable of sustaining genuine “obedience,” and avoiding “coercion,” while preserving a legitimate variety of human life “expressions.”

Monism sacrifices variety for agreement whereas relativism forfeits agreement in order to preserve variety. Pluralism yields to neither of those extremes. According to Berlin, the theory rather leads to the proposal of a *via media* between the two theories: a moral minimum must lie at the core of all societies that aim to be decent.²⁸¹ Fully aware of how mild his suggestion is when compared with utopian aspirations,²⁸² Berlin reckons:

Of course social or political collisions will take 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 constant need of repair—that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behavior.²⁸³

This minimum, as Gray observes, “is universal in the sense that it is to be sought everywhere. That does not mean it will be everywhere the same.”²⁸⁴ This begs three questions: What constitutes this shifting minimum?; How is it to be defined?; And what of its implications for political theory?

Berlin was characteristically vague about the content of the moral minimum. The few hints he made at it are consistent with what is regarded as human rights or H. L. A. Hart’s “minimum content of natural law.”²⁸⁵ As for how its content is to be revealed, is for Berlin a philosophical inquiry about man’s fundamental categories of thought:

²⁸¹ Ibid, 19.

²⁸² As observes João Pereira Coutinho, “o abandono de uma sociedade perfeita não implica, para Berlin, o abandono de uma «sociedade decente», uma sociedade capaz de evitar «extremos de sofrimento», ainda que esse imperativo possa ser mais modesto, e seguramente menos inspirador, do que as grandes construções perfectibilistas.” (Pereira Coutinho, *Política e Perfeição*, 364.)

²⁸³ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 20.

²⁸⁴ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 20.

²⁸⁵ See introduction to Chapter 3.2. - “Kaleidoscopic Universe.”

These are characteristically philosophical questions, since they are questions about the all but permanent ways in which we think, decide, perceive, judge, and not about the data of experience – the items themselves. The test . . . is ultimately empirical: it is the degree of their success in forming a coherent and enduring conceptual system.²⁸⁶

More importantly, how can political theory cope with *many* right answers to its “central question (of) obedience and coercion?”²⁸⁷ The fact of the matter is that, even if pluralism accurately unveils a world of many equally legitimate moral possibilities, concrete context allows for the choice of only one moral alternative.

Does this mean that the inevitability of choice in political terms entails a sort of “practical monism,” whereby pluralism accurately describes the moral validity of *many possible* solutions, but only allows for *one actual* choice to be practiced? Or could this rather lead to a “practical relativism” that grounds the legitimacy of many abstract monist moral scripts in each different culture? Both would require an abstract prescription of which values should be prioritized in upcoming concrete situations. None are either necessary or possible to achieve.

On one hand, as Berlin demonstrated, the most consummate attempts to homogenise mankind have, not only failed, but resulted in the most atrocious and contemptible episodes of its history. “If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems,” the author observed, “then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise.”²⁸⁸ On the other hand, cultures are not “organic wholes” that are “hermetically sealed off from one another,” as John Gray pointed out. On the contrary, “they are different ways of settling

²⁸⁶ Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 215.

²⁸⁷ Berlin, *Liberty*, 168.

²⁸⁸ Berlin, “A Message to the 21st Century.”

universal conflicts (that) make conflicting demands in the life of (single individuals.)”²⁸⁹ This is, incidentally, why the author’s proposal of a *modus vivendi* among political systems, which embody conflicting moral outlooks, is not an appropriate response to the real challenge pluralism currently poses – a reality of constant cultural clash within a single political order.

How, then, does the theory of pluralism correlate to the practice of pluralism for political purposes? Never has the answer to this question been more pertinent than it is now. Political systems are no longer associated with a singular culture in an attempt to adapt to the unprecedented cultural diversity they now harbor, especially in the West. Moreover, in today’s world, the physical barriers between societies are rapidly disappearing. Not only can people commute easily and constantly between countries, the communication revolution has enabled people to have an instant impact in faraway places.²⁹⁰ This constant and intense communication across diverse backgrounds is evermore demanding of a common basis for agreement.

If political theory is, as Berlin stated, a branch of moral philosophy, moral neutrality is not an option, since “detachment is itself a moral position.”²⁹¹ As Lord Raymond Plant points out, “a religion seeking a role in a liberal society can do so only if it is a liberalised form of that religion.”²⁹² A Catholic cannot refuse to accept a gay couple in their business establishment or a Muslim may be required to dress differently than his faith requires, for example.²⁹³ Inevitably, any political solution will embody a moral stand on which values to privilege at the cost of others.

²⁸⁹ Gray, “Reply to Critics,” 328.

²⁹⁰ In “What Pluralism, Why Pluralism and How?” Kei Hiruta explores the challenges of pluralism within the “global village” by addressing Charles Ess’s argument about *pros ben* pluralism in an attempt to clarify the challenges and “‘new species’ of ethical problems” posed by information ethics.

²⁹¹ Berlin, *Liberty*, 22.

²⁹² Plant, “Religion in a Liberal State,” 1.

²⁹³ *Ibid.* 1-2.

Political values can, at best, be defined in reference to “the central question of politics.”²⁹⁴ A separation between political morality and personal morality must be clearly stated. They should be established in reference to the aim, or “covering value,” of peaceful coexistence, leaving it up to each individual to “self-create” his own moral outlook. In other words, they should concern the limits between “the measure of negative liberty”²⁹⁵ and of “obedience and coercion”²⁹⁶ between citizens and their political power.

On the other hand, accepting pluralism entails that the *many* valid political aims should be abstractly stated as guidelines for moral action in concrete situations, leaving which action to adopt up to the moral agent’s decision in said circumstances. Therefore, there is a horizon of universally recognized equal values. They will always compete, which is why none is supreme although some are essential. The concrete choices among them relate to the concrete context in which they may collide.

This view is actually consistent with the legal systems found in most western states, for values are abstractly stated as constitutional principles which inform the abstract and general law – *abstract* because it is aimed at *all situations* of a particular kind; and *general* because it is directed at *all people* who may be found in such situations. The concrete and particular decisions are left to the administrative and judicial powers – *concrete* because they are applied to a *contextualized case*; and *particular* because they are directly devised in order to apply to a *specific person*.

This realization only reinforces the accuracy of pluralism. On one hand “preserving an

²⁹⁴ Berlin, *Liberty*, 168.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 216.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 168.

uneasy equilibrium”²⁹⁷ among moralities requires a sufficiently abstract system that acknowledges universal equally valid political goods, among which lies the respect for the many possible combinations of equally valid personal goods. On the other, actual moral choice is performed at the level of the concrete situation, thus enabling all necessary elements for a morally “true” outcome to be achieved.

Isaiah Berlin was certain of one big thing: choice is inevitable. He appreciated the innumerable expressions human life could generate. “I don’t want the universe to be too tidy,”²⁹⁸ the “hedgefox” once remarked. Still, Berlin reckoned, “more people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed.”²⁹⁹ Men can only disagree about the ends of life because ends are known and sought by all men alike.

²⁹⁷ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 20.

²⁹⁸ Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, 125.

²⁹⁹ Berlin and Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin: in Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 119.

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