

LIBERAL PLURALISM

The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice

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PLURALISM IN ETHICS AND POLITICS

This book brings together and develops themes that have occupied me over the past decade of scholarly and public life. It defends a liberal theory of politics that is pluralist rather than monist and (in John Rawls's sense) comprehensive rather than freestanding or "political."

LIBERALISM

Let me begin by stating what I believe it means to be a liberal, in the theoretical, not political, sense of the term.

Liberalism requires a robust though rebuttable presumption in favor of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit, within a broad range of legitimate variation, in accordance with their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value. I call this presumption the principle of *expressive liberty*. This principle implies a corresponding presumption (also rebuttable) against external interference with individual and group endeavors.

To create a secure space within which individuals and groups may lead their lives, public institutions are needed. Liberal public institutions may restrict the activities of individuals and groups for four kinds of reasons: first, to reduce coordination problems and conflict among diverse legitimate activities and to adjudicate such conflict when it cannot be avoided; second, to prevent and when necessary punish transgressions individuals may commit against one another; third, to guard the boundary separating legitimate from illegitimate variations among ways of life; and finally, to secure the conditions – including cultural and civic conditions – needed to sustain public institutions over time. Specifying the

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content of these conditions requires a mode of inquiry that is empirical as well as theoretical.

Two consequences follow from this account of public institutions. First, for public purposes, the value of these institutions, and of the public activities they shape, is understood as instrumental rather than intrinsic. For some individuals, to be sure, public life will be an element (perhaps even the dominant element) of what they define as the intrinsic meaning and value of their own lives, but this conception is not part of an understanding of liberal politics that is binding on all members of the political community. An instrumental rather than intrinsic account of the worth of politics forms a key distinction between liberalism and civic republicanism.

Second, liberal public institutions are understood as limited rather than plenipotentary. There are multiple, independent, sometimes competing sources of authority over our lives, and political authority is not dominant for all purposes under all circumstances. Liberalism accepts the importance of political institutions but refuses to regard them as architectonic. (I call this understanding of the limits of politics the principle of *political pluralism*.)

If this is roughly what liberalism means, why be a liberal? One answer draws from experience and common sense: Broadly liberal public regimes tend over time to satisfy more of the legitimate needs of their publics and to generate more unforced, sustained loyalty than do other forms of political association. A second answer (offered by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism*)¹ suggests that liberalism draws from, and comports with, a widely shared stock of freestanding moral premises concerning relations among human beings and the nature of political association.

PLURALISM AND MONISM

While each of these answers has merit, neither is sufficient. I suggest that liberalism derives much of its power from its consistency with the account of the moral world offered by Isaiah Berlin and known as value pluralism. The concluding section of Berlin's "Two Concepts of

¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism; with a New Introduction and the "Reply to Habermas"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Liberty”² has helped spark what may now be regarded as a full-fledged value-pluralist movement in contemporary moral philosophy. Leading contributors to this movement include Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, Joseph Raz, Steven Lukes, Michael Stocker, Thomas Nagel, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Larmore, John Gray, and John Kekes.³ During the past decade, moral philosophers have clarified and debated many of the complex technical issues raised by value pluralism, as well as broader objections to the overall approach.⁴

Throughout this book I explore many of these issues and defend value pluralism at some length. For the purposes of this introduction, a few basics will suffice.

1. Value pluralism is not relativism. The distinction between good and bad, and between good and evil, is objective and rationally defensible.

2. Objective goods cannot be fully rank-ordered. This means that there is no common measure for all goods, which are qualitatively heterogeneous. It means that there is no *summum bonum* that is the chief good for all individuals. It means that there are no comprehensive lexical orderings among types of goods. It also means that there is no “first virtue of social institutions”⁵ but, rather, a range of public goods and virtues the relative importance of which will depend on circumstances.

2 In Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

3 See Bernard Williams, “Conflicts of Values,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stuart Hampshire, “Morality and Conflict,” in *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Steven Lukes, “Making Sense of Moral Conflict,” in *Moral Conflict and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Charles Taylor, “The Diversity of Goods,” in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

4 See Ruth Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); also Glen Newey, “Metaphysics Postponed: Liberalism, Pluralism, and Neutrality,” *Political Studies* 45 (1997): 296–311, and “Value Pluralism in Contemporary Liberalism,” *Dialogue* 37 (1998): 493–522.

5 Which John Rawls asserts justice to be in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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3. Some goods are basic in the sense that they form part of any choiceworthy conception of a human life. To be deprived of such goods is to be forced to endure the great evils of existence. All decent regimes endeavor to minimize the frequency and scope of such deprivations.

4. Beyond this parsimonious list of basic goods, there is a wide range of legitimate diversity – of individual conceptions of good lives, and also of public cultures and public purposes. This range of legitimate diversity defines the zone of individual liberty, and also of deliberation and democratic decision making. Where necessity (natural or moral) ends, choice begins.

5. Value pluralism is distinguished from various forms of what I will call “monism.” A theory of value is monistic, I will say, if it either (a) reduces goods to a common measure or (b) creates a comprehensive hierarchy or ordering among goods.

Just as one must ask why it makes sense to be a liberal, one must ask why value pluralism is to be preferred to the various forms of monism that thinkers have advanced since the beginning of philosophy as we know it. In the course of this book I shall try to develop a systematic answer, but a few preliminary remarks may be helpful.

To begin, monistic accounts of value lead to procrustean distortions of moral argument. The vicissitudes of hedonism and utilitarianism in this respect are well known. Even Kant could not maintain the position that the good will is the only good with moral weight; whence his account of the “highest good,” understood as a heterogeneous composite of inner worthiness and external good fortune.

Second, our moral experience suggests that the tension among broad structures or theories of value – consequentialism, deontology, and virtue theory; general and particular obligations; regard for others and justified self-regard – is rooted in a genuine heterogeneity (or as Thomas Nagel puts it, “fragmentation”) of value. If so, no amount of philosophical argument or cultural progress can lead to the definitive victory of one account of value over the rest. Moral reflection is the effort to bring different dimensions of value to bear on specific occasions of judgment and to determine how they are best balanced or ordered, given the facts of the case.

Similar difficulties arise when we are confronted with a plurality of specific interests or goods, rather than of moral structures. For some

years I served as a White House official responsible for managing a portion of domestic policy on behalf of the president. Over and over again I had the same experience: I would be chairing an interagency task force designed to reach a unified administration position on some legislative or regulatory proposal. As the representatives of the departments argued for their various views, I found it impossible to dismiss any one of them as irrelevant to the decision, or as wholly lacking in weight. Nor could I reduce the competing considerations to a common measure of value; so far as I or anyone else could tell, they were irreducibly heterogeneous. The issues were qualitative, not quantitative: In the particular circumstances, which considerations should be regarded as more important, or more urgent? If a balance was to be struck, what weighting of competing goods could reasonably be regarded as fair?

I found it remarkable how often we could reach deliberative closure in the face of this heterogeneity. Many practitioners (and not a few philosophers) shy away from value pluralism out of fear that it leads to deliberative anarchy. Experience suggests that this is not necessarily so. There can be right answers, widely recognized as such, even in the absence of general rules for ordering or aggregating diverse goods.

It is true, as John Rawls pointed out more than thirty years ago, that pluralism on the level of values does not rule out, in principle, the existence of general rules for attaching weights to particular values or of establishing at least a partial ordering among them.⁶ But in practice, these rules prove vulnerable to counterexamples or extreme situations. As Brian Barry observes, Rawls's own effort to establish lexical priorities among heterogeneous goods does not succeed: "[S]uch a degree of simplicity is not to be obtained. We shall . . . have to accept the unavoidability of balancing, and we shall also have to accept a greater variety of principles than Rawls made room for."⁷ But, to repeat, the moral particularism I am urging is compatible with the existence of right answers in specific cases; there may be compelling reasons to conclude that certain trade-offs among competing goods are preferable to others.

⁶ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 42.

⁷ Brian Barry, *Political Argument; A Reissue with a New Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. lxxi. Barry goes on to suggest that something like the Original Position, understood as embodying the requirement that valid principles must be capable of receiving the free assent of all those affected by them, might nonetheless lead to general principles for balancing competing values.

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COMPREHENSIVE AND FREESTANDING POLITICAL THEORIES

Some philosophers argue that it is theoretically improper and practically imprudent to link political principles to other parts of philosophy, even ethics or value theory. Political theory should be freestanding, not “comprehensive.” For reasons that I discuss at length in Chapter 4, I disagree: Political theory cannot be walled off from our general understanding of what is good and valuable for human beings, or from our understanding of how human existence is linked to other beings and to existence simpliciter. I am not advocating “foundationalism”; indeed, it is not clear that this architectural metaphor really clarifies anything. The point is not foundations but, rather, connections. Theories in any given domain of inquiry typically point to propositions whose validity is explored in other domains. Thought crosses boundaries.⁸

FOUR TYPES OF POLITICAL THEORY

On the basis of the twin distinctions between pluralism and monism and between comprehensive and freestanding conceptions, I suggest that there are four main types of political theory:

1. *freestanding/monist*. John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* is an example; it seeks to decouple political theory from other domains of inquiry while preserving the various lexical orderings defended in *A Theory of Justice*.
2. *comprehensive/monist*. Classical utilitarianism is an example of this kind of theory. So, intriguingly, is Ronald Dworkin’s latest contribution.⁹
3. *freestanding/pluralist*. Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* is an example of this category. While Walzer offers a wide range of legitimate plural values both among and within public cultures and refuses to give any public value pride of place for all purposes, he proceeds empirically/historically and refrains from proposing any broader theory of good, value, or existence.

⁸ See my *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Chapter 2.

⁹ See his *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 4–5. For a fuller account, see my review in *The Review of Politics* 63, 3 (Summer 2001): 607–611.

4. *comprehensive/pluralist*. On some interpretations, Joseph Raz's *Morality of Freedom* is an example of this genre. In recent writings, John Gray uses comprehensive pluralism to argue for a vision of politics in which institutional and deliberative legitimacy reflects a wide range of local conditions.

In this book, I present and defend what I call "liberal pluralism" as the preferred conception of comprehensive/pluralist theory. In the process, I argue against taking autonomy to be a defining liberal value, as Raz appears to do, and also against Gray's effort to drive a wedge between pluralism and liberalism.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF PLURALISM

The consequences of pluralism include not only a distinctive type of political theory but also distinctive conceptions of (inter alia) public culture, public philosophy, constitutionalism, deliberation, public policy, democracy, and free association. For example, from a liberal pluralist point of view, I argue, there are multiple types of legitimate decision making, and democracy is not trumps for all purposes. Another example: From a liberal pluralist point of view, public institutions must be cautious and restrained in their dealings with voluntary associations, and there is no presumption that a state may intervene in such associations just because they conduct their internal affairs in ways that diverge from general public principles.

The relationship between voluntary associations and publicly enforced civic norms has emerged as a key point of disagreement among contemporary liberals. Some argue that civic goods are important, or fragile, enough to warrant substantial state interference with civil associations. It is a mistake, they believe, to give anything like systematic deference to associational claims.¹⁰ I disagree. I begin with the intuition that free association yields important human goods and that the state bears a burden of proof whenever it seeks to intervene. My accounts

10 Two important recent examples of this genre are Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), and Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). For remarks on Macedo, see my review in *Ethics* 112, 2 (January 2002): 386–391. For Barry, see my review in *The Public Interest* 144 (Summer 2001): 100–108.

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of value pluralism, expressive liberty, and political pluralism lend theoretical support to this intuition and help explain why we should not see state power as plenipotentary.

PLURALISM AND CIVIC UNITY

While focused on individual and associational liberty, the account of politics I offer in this book is certainly not anarchist, libertarian, or even “classical-liberal.” I make a place for citizenship and civic virtue and for education directed toward their cultivation. Some readers may believe that on its face, this civic dimension of my argument is at odds with my pluralist professions.

I think not. Pluralism does not abolish civic unity. Rather, it leads to a distinctive understanding of the relation between the requirements of unity and the claims of diversity in liberal politics. Liberty cannot be exercised or sustained without a public system of liberty. Politics may be instrumentally rather than intrinsically good, and partial rather than plenipotentary, but it is nonetheless essential. There is no invisible civic hand that sustains a system of liberty; such a system must be consciously reproduced. There are limits that education conducted or required by a liberal pluralist state must not breach. But within those bounds it is legitimate and necessary and must be robust.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

The argument of this book proceeds as follows:

Beginning with a puzzle about the relation between civic unity and associational plurality, Chapter 2 distinguishes between two approaches to liberalism – one based on the core value of individual rational autonomy, the other on respect for legitimate difference – and argues for the diversity-based approach as offering a better chance for individuals and groups to live their lives in accordance with their distinctive conceptions of what gives meaning and value to life. Chapter 3 begins the task of defending this preference by offering three sources of legitimate diversity: expressive liberty understood as the fit between outward existence and inner conceptions of value; Berlinian value pluralism; and political pluralism understood, along the lines of early-twentieth-century British thinkers such as Figgis, as the denial of the plenipotentary power of

state institutions over all aspects of social life. Chapter 4 defends the propriety of linking political theory to other branches of philosophy (especially moral theory) by questioning the cogency of Rawls's rejection of "comprehensive" theorizing. Chapter 5 argues, against John Gray and others, that Berlin was right to see deep compatibility – relations of mutual support – between value pluralism and liberal politics. Exploring an analogy with jurisprudence, Chapter 6 offers an account of presumptions as a way of moving from open-ended value pluralism to the kinds of partial agreements that organized political life requires.

Chapter 7 argues that if we take value pluralism seriously, we are driven to understand democracy as only one among several legitimate sources of political authority and modes of decision making. Chapter 8 suggests that if we follow through the implications of the three sources of legitimate diversity discussed in Chapter 3, we must conclude that the authority of state institutions over the education of children, while robust, is nonetheless limited by parental claims that are morally fundamental, rather than derivative from contingent public decisions. Chapter 9 brings many of these considerations together into an account of the public framework and constitutional principles of the liberal pluralist state. Chapter 10 concludes the argument with reflections on the relation between value pluralism and key civic goals of justice and unity.