

MORAL CONFLICT, TRAGEDY AND POLITICAL ACTION IN ISAIAH BERLIN'S
POLITICAL THOUGHT

by

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ABSTRACT

A persistent question in political theory concerns how we ought to make sense of moral conflict. How we conceptualize moral conflict affects not only how we view and respond to opposition, dissent and disagreement, but also how we navigate and confront the moral dilemmas with which political life confronts us – be it how to balance the potentially conflicting claims of rights and utility, or how to distribute scarce resources. A prominent, if contested, account of the moral dimension of political life is the theory of value pluralism developed by Isaiah Berlin, which posits that the sources of value are fragmented, generating values and moral principles that are often both incompatible and incommensurable.

Through a careful engagement with the political thought of Berlin, this dissertation examines what value pluralism entails for how we conceptualize moral conflict and what it means for how we think about political action and judgment. It develops an interpretation of Berlin’s account of moral conflict and tragedy, his critique of monist, relativist and subjectivist accounts of value, as well as an account of his political ethic.

This dissertation argues that value pluralism gives us a more compelling account of moral conflict than rival theories. It avoids the reductionism of monist accounts of value and avoids the conceptual (and moral) problems that plague relativist and subjectivist accounts of moral conflict. More importantly, value pluralism, it argues, helps us develop an approach to politics and political action – a political ethic, in short – that is better able to navigate moral dilemmas in a way that is consistent with our moral experience. It avoids introducing the kind of problematic incentives for political action and judgment that plague rival accounts of value. Conceiving moral conflict in tragic terms, as Berlin insists, gives us reason to confront normative questions from a more grounded, context-sensitive, perspective. It also helps us think more productively about political disagreement and compromise.

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1. INTRODUCTION

He believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present, or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were nonetheless binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulae, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies.

– Isaiah Berlin on Alexander Herzen. (PSM, 523)¹

The strongest case of conflict are genuine dilemmas, where there is decisive support for two or more incompatible courses of action or inaction. In that case a decision will still be necessary, but it will seem necessarily arbitrary. When two choices are very evenly balanced, it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem. But when each seems right for reasons that appear decisive and sufficient, arbitrariness means lack of reasons where reasons are needed, since either choice will mean acting against some reasons without being able to claim that they are *outweighed*.

~ Thomas Nagel²

If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.

~ Isaiah Berlin (L, 214)³

This dissertation is about Isaiah Berlin's approach to moral conflict: how we should make sense of it, why we should take it seriously, and what its implications are for politics and

¹ Isaiah Berlin, "Herzen and His Memoirs," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger

² Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 128-129. Nagel's emphasis.

³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty, Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 214. This book title will hereafter be referred to as *L*.

political action. There are many reasons for why we should take moral conflict seriously, but perhaps the strongest reason is that we have good reason to believe it is an inescapable facet of the world that we inhabit. It is also something that has profound effect on politics and political action. How we understand moral conflict affects not only how we view and respond to opposition, dissent and disagreement, but also how we conceive of and construct principles and institutions to deal with and arbitrate political conflict. It also shapes how we respond to the challenges, dilemmas and seeming paradoxes with which the ever-changing political landscape confronts us. Politics and governance is not simply about fostering economic growth, or trying to raise living standards. It is about making choices and prioritizing between competing demands, obligations and moral goods, in light of sometimes incompatible moral principles and cultural norms. The question of whether and to what extent illiberal religious and cultural claims should be accommodated is a familiar one, as is the question of how to balance the claims of privacy and freedom against the need for security. But these are just the tip of the iceberg. Poverty alleviation through economic growth may conflict with our desire to minimize harm to the environment, or our wish to respect communal relationships; the virtues of local governance and regional autonomy may entrench inefficiency and inequality. Doing what is best for the national economy might mean taking measures that wipe out entire industries and create untold economic hardship for certain individuals and communities. The list goes on and on. How we confront, make sense of, and deal with these types of question will depend in large part on our account of moral conflict.

Through a careful engagement with the political thought of Isaiah Berlin I will seek to shed light on the nature of moral conflict and explore its often paradoxical implications for political action. Much of the scholarly commentary on Berlin's thought has focused on the question of whether Berlin's conception of value pluralism is compatible with, or can ground a justification for, liberalism. This has had the unfortunate effect of burdening Berlin's thought with questions he did not set out to answer. Indeed, much of the early critical analysis on Berlin's thought has focused on a fairly narrow set of issues; his account of liberty; his conception of value pluralism and its implications for liberalism. However, more recent academic work has begun to shed light on some previously neglected areas of his thought – his early work on epistemology,

his account of reason, his work on Russian political thought, and his political ethic. In offering an interpretation of Berlin's political ethic that incorporates his early work on political judgment and statecraft with his mature views on tragedy and political action, this dissertation aims to contribute to this effort. What we get from Berlin's thought is not so much a theory of liberalism as an account of the moral dimension of political life. Berlin, one could say, is more of an Edmund Burke than a John Rawls. He is someone who sheds light of the nature of political life, its ambiguities, complexities and paradoxes – and tells us something about how we might navigate this difficult terrain. Berlin's political thought is important, therefore, not because it can offer solutions to the issues moral conflict gives rise to, but because it provides us with a framework from which to understand the moral dimension of political life and think about its implications for political action and judgment.

1.1 Making Sense of Moral Conflict⁴

But before we proceed to examine Berlin's claims more closely, let us take a step back. It is a commonplace to point out – and it is indeed undeniable – that people hold, or subscribe to, a diversity of moral beliefs, and that people, parties and movements pursue a wide array of different social, economic and political goals. The question is how we ought to understand, or make sense of, this diversity of values, ends and conceptions of the good. Does this diversity simply reflect different means of pursuing essentially the same thing – some measure of happiness, or flourishing? Are most genuinely good things, in the end, if understood properly, compatible? Are some, or most, of these diverse moral beliefs simply a reflection of epistemic ignorance or the illusions of men and women lacking the ability to think seriously about normative questions? What makes values, obligations, or moral principles binding? What, in the end, is at the root of moral conflict? And what role can reason play in negotiating or resolving persistent moral disagreements? How we answer these questions has profound implications for how we conceptualize and approach politics.

⁴ The following section owes a lot to Steven Lukes' *Moral Conflict and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), and particularly the chapters "Making Sense of Moral Conflict" and "Taking Morality Seriously."

One of the animating questions behind this project concerns what it is that gives rise to persistent conflict and disagreement. I have come to believe that there is something deeply problematic about the common view that conflict is merely a function of imperfection. John Mackie expresses this view, which he argues was shared by Hobbes and Hume, among others, when he writes, “limited resources and limited sympathies together generate both competition leading to conflict and an absence of what would be mutually beneficial cooperation.”⁵ These ‘flaws in the universe’, as it were, are what lie at the root of conflict and disagreement, according to this perspective. Morality is needed, on this view, precisely to overcome the problems generated by limited resources and limited sympathies. The implication being that if we could get our morality right and if we could get people to behave morally, then conflict would become a thing of the past. In the words of David Hume, “If men had been overwhelmingly benevolent, if each had aimed only at the happiness of all, if everyone had loved his neighbour as himself, there would have been no need for the rules that constitute justice.”⁶ If men and women were guided by genuinely moral considerations, in other words, if they were genuinely empathetic and generous, conflict would cease. Or in the words of James Madison, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”⁷

Notice that this view is perfectly consistent with a view that recognizes a plurality of interests as well as cultural and religious perspectives. The problem is not that people believe in different things or that they have different interests; the problem is that they refuse to place the common interest above their own partial considerations. If only people could learn to see the world from the perspective of others, if only they could learn to be guided by impartial considerations, conflict would effectively cease and mutually beneficial cooperation would further the interest of all.

While there are some obvious attractions to this view, it introduces a perspective on conflict that is deeply problematic in its implications and that impoverishes our understanding of moral conflict. An immediate problem this perspective runs into is that people disagree fundamentally and hold constitutively incompatible views about moral

⁵ John Mackie, quoted in Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 21.

⁶ David Hume, quoted in Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 24.

⁷ James Madison, “The Federalist No. 51,” in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 262.

questions – regarding the nature of justice, what ends a political association ought to pursue, the nature of the good, the status of rights, and so forth. So the next question we must ask if we want to understand the roots of persistent conflict and disagreement is what accounts for *moral* conflict? How are we to make sense of it?

The question of how to interpret the nature and sources of moral conflict is heavily contested. This can in part be attributed to the difficulty involved in analyzing the phenomena. As Steven Lukes has observed, it would be misleading to imagine that “there is a phenomena, or a set of phenomena, that can be recognized as moral conflict” of which one could then inquire “how is one to make sense of it?”⁸ How one makes sense of it will determine “the range of recognizable instances” of which there is moral conflict. In other words, how one makes sense of, or interprets, moral conflict will determine which kind, when, and indeed if there is something that can be recognized and characterized as moral conflict. The problem is that the appearance of moral conflict – of people holding conflicting moral beliefs, of seemingly equally compelling moral claims, or intuitions, demanding different courses of action – need not reflect any genuine moral conflict. There are several ways of interpreting moral conflict, many of which attribute what to Berlin is evidence of moral conflict to ignorance, irrationality or other contingent factors. To Aristotle, “conflicting moral beliefs” was “a mark of ignorance”; to Marx, it was a reflection of a contingent socio-economic structure; to Kant, a sign of moral immaturity, a failure to adequately consult reason.⁹ When moral conflict is understood in these ways, it becomes a surface phenomena, something needless or transient. The very notion of genuine moral conflict evaporates, as does the notion of a genuine moral dilemma.¹⁰ That does not, in itself, entail that these theories are wrong. But as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, there is good reason for holding that Berlin’s conception of value pluralism offers a more solid and compelling account of moral conflict than these and other rival theories.

⁸ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 3

⁹ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 3.

¹⁰ See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 357-366; Terrance McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), ed., Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/moral-dilemmas/>>.

Following Berlin, I will argue that moral conflict should be conceived as a reflection of what one might call, in Thomas Nagel's phrase, 'the fragmentation of value' – i.e., a product of the divergent paths moral reasoning unveils, not irrationally, error, the burdens of judgment, or contingent socio-economic or political factors.¹¹ Moral values can emerge from different perspectives – be they relational, impersonal, private, or ideal, etc.¹² – and will be intimately bound up with historically and contextually grounded conceptions of human nature and social life. Importantly, moral conflict is not simply a product of the fact that people value different things, or believe in different Gods or moral principles; it is a product of the fact that many genuine moral goods – the very objects, or ends, that we with good reason value – are incompatible and incommensurable.¹³

Berlin's conception of value pluralism, then, it is worth emphasizing here, posits not merely that there is reasonable disagreement about the nature of the good (though it believes this to be the case also). It is a theory about the nature of the good. In contrast to moral monism, it holds that the good is plural, that there is a plurality of incompatible ultimate ends, that are, in a matter of speaking, valid, or true. The claims of right, utility, loyalty, virtue and many other values are the source of binding moral claims. Value pluralism thus complicates the liberal insistence on giving consistent priority to the claims of right. It is also worth emphasizing here that value pluralism should not be confused with the proposition that there are many different roads to self-realization.¹⁴ Value pluralism posits that there is a plurality of genuine and valid *ultimate* ends.

Berlin's conception of value suggests that the fragmentation of value results in four sources of moral conflict.¹⁵ (1) Moral conflict occurs between a plurality of incompatible yet equally ultimate goods, ends or objectives – such as freedom, equality, fairness, courage, and justice. These are also, Berlin insists, fragmented internally,

¹¹ Nagel, "Fragmentation."

¹² Nagel, *Ibid.* 134.

¹³ See Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ch. 7, for an elaboration of this distinction. This is what distinguishes Berlin's conception of pluralism from the pluralism of Rawls and the pluralism on which most modern conceptions of liberalism are founded, as Larmore argues.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 155

¹⁵ I owe this categorization of the different sources of moral conflict to Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, pp. 5-9. Lukes, however, links Berlin's value pluralism with only the first of source of moral conflict. This, I believe, is a mistake. Berlin's concept of value pluralism captures all four sources of moral conflict.

producing conflict between incompatible freedoms, forms of equality, incompatible conceptions of justice, and so forth. (2) Moral conflict occurs between incompatible belief systems, such as culturally or religiously grounded holistic worldviews – Machiavelli’s pagan values are incompatible with the Christian virtues. (3) Moral obligations conflict. The obligation to care for one’s sick mother may conflict with an obligation to help a friend in need. (4) Finally, different kinds of moral claims and principles, conflict – most significantly perhaps, claims grounded in consequentialist moral reasoning will often conflict with deontological moral claims. The claims of public interest, for instance, may conflict with rights-based claims. But we should also include here, as Lukes does, the claims of particularistic duties, be it friendship or loyalty to a particular institution or way of life.¹⁶

The nature of moral conflict, Berlin insists, is such that many values (though not all) are constitutively (i.e., non-contingently) incompatible as well as incommensurable. The idea that moral conflict should stem from incompatibility is in some respects an obvious point, but one that needs to be stressed nevertheless, as it is by no means uncontested. When Berlin speaks of conflicting ultimate ends, or values, or when he speaks of conflicting moral obligations, the issue at hand is incompatibility. This incompatibility can be partial, as when an effort to increase security encroaches on liberty, or it can be complete, such that a commitment to one necessarily condemns the other. The pagan values of Machiavelli’s Prince cannot be reconciled with the Christian virtues.¹⁷

The contention that values are incommensurable was one of the central claims of Berlin’s thought. If accurate, and I will argue that we have good reason to think that it is, it would indicate that moral conflicts are not of such nature as to be capable of being settled by reason or some such similar impartial faculty or method.¹⁸ Incommensurability

¹⁶ Ibid, 8-9. Lukes draws on Charles Larmore’s *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for the contention that the claims of ‘particularistic duties’ ought to be included alongside consequentialist and deontological claims.

¹⁷ Niccolo Machiavelli, “The Prince,” in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994). Berlin emphasizes this point in “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in PSM.

¹⁸ For elucidation of the concept of value incommensurability, see Nagel, “Fragmentation”; Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, pp. 11-12 and ch. 3; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 49-53; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, pp. 321-366; see also Ruth Chang ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

indicates that there is no common currency, no common measurement or standard, by which different moral beliefs, or ends or values can be comparatively ranked or weighed – meaning, moral values, principles and claims are irreducible to each other. Two alternatives are incommensurable if neither can be said to be higher or equal to the other. Incommensurability should not be confused with indeterminacy, as this would imply that the incomparability is a product of missing information; nor does it signal non-additivity.¹⁹ The concept of incommensurability is a complex one, and the next chapter will examine the concept more closely. At this point, it should be stressed that incommensurability does not entail unintelligibility, or preclude assessment and/or judgment. Berlin for one was insistent that different moral beliefs could be understood, through the use of the faculty of empathy, or fantasia.²⁰ And in being able to do so, it also becomes possible to pass judgment on other beliefs. Incommensurability, then, does not, or need not, entail cognitive or ethical relativism. It does rule out the possibility, however, of settling moral conflicts by appeal to some kind of objective, or neutral, standard. When one is dealing with a conflict that involves incommensurability, one has to rely on choice and judgment rather than calculation or the application of some faculty – such as reason or deliberation (which is not to say that reason and/or deliberation cannot inform the application of judgment).

Incommensurability has a big impact on how we conceptualize the intractability of moral conflict. Conflict, as Lukes has observed, “may signify diversity, incompatibility or incommensurability,” representing “a scale of increasing intractability”²¹ – with incommensurability suggesting the most intractable form of conflict. It is important to distinguish Berlin’s conception of value pluralism, therefore, from accounts of pluralism that merely claim that there is moral diversity or that moral goods are sometimes incompatible. One can hold that there is moral diversity without conceding that different values are either incompatible or incommensurable. And one can

¹⁹ Non-additivity would signal that when two things are incommensurable, it is because one of them is qualitatively higher to the point where comparison is not possible. For example, a Christian might claim that the ten commandments are incommensurable with positive law. This is not what Berlin took the term to mean.

²⁰ See for instance “Giambattista Vico and Cultural History,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2003). This book title will hereafter be referred to as CTH.

²¹ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 9.

hold that moral goods, or values, are incompatible without conceding that they are incommensurable. Thus, despite the popularity of various theories of pluralism today, despite the widespread agreement that we live in a disenchanted world, a world with a plurality of meanings, conceptions of the good, religious, culturally and morally embedded beliefs, Berlin's conception of value pluralism remains highly contested. In fact, the claim that values are sometimes both incommensurable and (constitutively) incompatible is denied by most of the major traditions in political thought.²²

It is worth emphasizing here the distinctness of Berlin's claim. Berlin is not merely committed to the view that there is, as a matter of fact, a diversity of *beliefs* about the nature of the good (different moral and religious perspectives and views, etc.); he is committed to the view that the nature of the good is fragmented and plural. This is why he insists that values can be incompatible without this entailing error, that one of the claims is false. In other words, Berlin is not merely saying that when values clash what we have are two incompatible *beliefs* about morality coming into conflict (though of course he recognizes that this can often happen). A monist or a skeptic could say that moral conflicts occur because people disagree about the nature of the good while still being committed to the view that when people's beliefs about morality conflict, it must either be the case that both beliefs are wrong (wholly or partly) or that one of them is right. Under no circumstances can both beliefs be right. For Berlin, both beliefs can be right because there are incompatible (but no less genuine and absolute) values.²³

There are a few ways of arriving at a different interpretation of moral conflict than the one presented above. In order to get an accurate sense for where Berlin's claims fit within the existing literature, it is worth taking some time to explore these.²⁴ One way is to deny the incompatibility component of moral conflict. There are two ways of doing this: (1) by positing a form of inner providence or purpose to the world – i.e. by understanding the world through the lens of a religious perspective; or (2) through some form of moral utopianism. The first serves to fit the conflict that manifests itself in the world within a broader pattern such that everything can be construed as serving the same

²² This point is emphasized by John Gray, see *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 2.

²³ For a contrary perspective, Ronald Dworkin makes a sophisticated case for the unity of value. See *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁴ The following discussion owes much to Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, pp. 13-15.

higher purpose – thereby depriving the (apparent) conflict of its reality. The latter tends to deny not the *reality* of moral conflict but its *necessity*. Marx arguably does this, as Lukes and Kolakowski have argued persuasively.²⁵ Although he was a critic of the tendency within certain strands of liberalism to assume that economic interests were harmonious, moral conflict was for Marx ultimately a reflection of the corrupting and alienating effects of socio-economic structures that do not facilitate the realization of humanity's true communal being. As a result, moral conflict was a contingent phenomenon. The forces of history and revolution would usher in a new socio-economic structure, allowing people to finally overcome their alienation. After which the interests of the individual and the interests of the community would naturally be conceived as harmonious. Neither would need to be sacrificed to the other. All values that are genuine and essential to man would be able to be fully realized.

Both interpretations suffer from obvious failings. Both rely on a heavily normative account of man and eschatological hopes there is little reason to share. In denying either the reality or necessity of moral conflict, both serve to obscure rather than shed light on the phenomenon of (at least apparent) moral conflict. But perhaps more problematically, both interpretations give us grounds for being dismissive of moral conflict and for not taking moral claims at face value.

Another strategy for arriving at a different interpretation of moral conflict is by denying that moral goods, values, or principles are incommensurable. Here too there are basically two ways of doing this: (1) by holding that moral goods, or values, have a higher or true form, or exist within a hierarchy; or (2) by positing that the questions and problems that arise as a result of morally grounded conflicts 'admit of truth' (*one* truth). Aristotle, Plato, and adherents of the neo-classical schools of thought – such as Allan Bloom – hold the former to be true.²⁶ Moral conflict, according to this perspective, can only be the product of a lack of insight into the true nature of the good. Conceived in their proper forms, within their proper boundaries, moral goods are neither incompatible nor incommensurable. Conflicts arise because people pursue goods, or cling to values

²⁵ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 14.

²⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

that are false, inferior or self-interested, or because they fail to recognize the proper limits of a particular value and therefore push it too far. Genuine moral dilemmas cannot exist, only perceived moral dilemmas, for every moral problem admits one answer and one only.

The latter perspective is less committed to an a priori hierarchy of values, yet similarly denies that genuine moral conflicts can give rise to dilemmas of the type described by Nagel, where the use of reason, or some similar method, would be unable (even in theory) to establish the correct course of action. Normative questions, this perspective holds, admit of (one) truth. Conflicts between incompatible moral ends, obligations, and values are not incommensurable, and can be settled by the application of reason or some similar faculty or method. On what grounds, or by what method or faculty, moral questions are to be settled, according to this perspective, depends on what is seen as providing the ultimate criterion for moral judgment. Two influential schools of thought deserve our attention here: the Kantian and utilitarian.

Kantian and utilitarian theories represent two examples of schools of thought that deny that moral conflicts can involve incommensurability. Both theories represent attempts to ground absolute criteria for moral reasoning and judgment, and, as a result, neither can admit the existence of genuine moral conflict or genuine moral dilemmas (understood in the sense described by Nagel). In specific situations, of course, it may be hard to *know* which course of action is appropriate, so a Kantian or utilitarian can admit that one may face situations that are *perceived* to involve moral conflict. Yet, in any such situation there is only one right action – the one that maximizes utility or the one that conforms to the demands of practical reason.

The moral implications of a strict adherence to either one of these doctrines will tend to be problematic and reflects the inability of both approaches to make sense of moral conflict. From a classical utilitarian standpoint, as is a commonplace to point out, the moral separateness of persons is not respected.²⁷ There is nothing to prevent the justification of exploitation and abuse of individuals should it serve to maximize utility.²⁸

²⁷ See H. L. A. Hart, “Between Utility and Rights,” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 79, No. 5, Jun., (1979).

²⁸ There are of course in-direct forms of utilitarianism – such as J. S. Mill’s – which stipulate that utility is maximized if something akin to a deontological ethic provides the criteria for action – i.e. which hold that

Kantians, on the other hand, have trouble dealing with the problem of ‘dirty hands,’ with the notion that sometimes good outcomes can only be produced by immoral actions, as Lukes points out.²⁹ Robert Nozick’s libertarianism illustrates tellingly how a strict anti-utilitarian deontological approach can end up reproducing precisely the kind of moral failing that it purports to reject (of blatantly ignoring individual suffering and exploitation), as H.L. Hart has argued.³⁰

In a different way, subjectivist and relativist theories of pluralism are also unable to make sense of moral conflict, or, for that matter, give us grounds for taking it seriously. From a subjectivist standpoint, the notion that moral conflict might be rooted in reasons is denied (for emotivists, for instance, reasons are but rationalisations of our emotive preferences). Relativists, on the other hand, as Lukes has argued, have trouble accounting for moral conflict in the first place. In effect, relativists explain *away* moral conflict by “proposing a structure in which apparently conflicting claims are each acceptable in their own place.”³¹ Relativists also have trouble making sense of conflict within cultural boundaries. If everything is relative, or if everything is equal (and if the claim is ‘rough equality,’ then the incommensurability component has been denied), then it is not clear why we should not simply be indifferent to moral conflict. It is not clear, in other words, why moral conflict should be something of concern in the first place.

There is good reason, in other words, to adapt the interpretation of moral conflict that emerges from Berlin’s account of value pluralism. It avoids the reductionism of monist accounts of value, without succumbing to the pitfalls of subjectivism and relativism.

1.2 Moral Conflict and Political Action

Our account of moral conflict is important on a number of levels. It shapes our conception of politics. It shapes how we view and respond to opposition, dissent and political disagreement. It also shapes how we deal with the moral dilemmas and ethical

exploitation, torture and abuse can never be justified on utilitarian grounds. It is not clear, however, that indirect forms of utilitarianism work absent some assumption of progress or harmony of goods.

²⁹ Lukes, “Marxism and Dirty Hands,” in *Moral Conflict*.

³⁰ Hart, “Utility and Rights.”

³¹ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 4. See also Lukes, *Moral Relativism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

paradoxes with which political life confronts us. Indeed, for Machiavelli, it was essential that the Prince act with the knowledge that in order to *do* good it may be necessary to violate the Christian moral law.³² Machiavelli was not a value pluralist, strictly speaking. Yet he recognized the problem of dirty hands. Those who believed that good consequences would necessarily come to those who were pious and abided by the Christian virtues were fools, and disastrous consequences would follow if Princes took their advice seriously. Unless the Prince has made sense of moral conflict, in other words, the actions he or she takes and the judgments he or she makes are likely to be poor. Max Weber was similarly critical of those blinded by an ethic of ultimate ends.³³ Unable to make sense of the ethical paradoxes of political life, they lack the capacity to make sound political judgments. Indeed, their ethic commits them to a disastrous approach to political action.³⁴

Berlin, as is well known, was a fierce critic of value monism. Less well known – but equally important – is that he was also a fierce critic of relativist and subjectivist accounts of moral conflict. Berlin’s critique of these ways of (mis-)understanding moral conflict center on the view of politics and the approach to political action they might be said to entail. He was also concerned with how they affect political judgment. The reality of moral conflict entailed, for Berlin, that there was an inescapable and ever-present tragic dimension to politics. This tragic dimension emerged from the fact that different goods, different moral claims and principles, conflict within a shared horizon of values. It was not a product of a conflict of good with evil, or the rational with the irrational. It was essential, Berlin felt, to be cognizant of this tragic dimension – to interpret, in other words, moral conflict as being fundamentally tragic in nature. It not only alerts us to the genuine costs and losses that accompany politics, he insisted, but it helps us understand the fragility of moral goods, the ease with which values can be undermined or turned on

³² Machiavelli, “The Prince.” 48.

³³ Max Weber, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Spiers, fifth printing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Steven Lukes makes a similar point in regards to Marxism and the problem of dirty hands (*Moral Conflict*). Given its account of the moral dimension of political life, how Marxism makes sense of moral conflict, Marxism, Lukes argues, can lend justification to political action completely divorced from any immediate moral considerations. We can also note Amartya Sen’s recent work on identity and violence, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton, 2006). Sen has sought to show how an exclusively identity-based conception of moral life can lend itself to a troubling view of political conflict and help justify violence. How we understand the moral dimension of political life, in other words, matters.

their heads if they are not carefully nourished. Like Aristotle, Berlin thought political judgment needed to be grounded in particulars. General formula and abstract principles provide little guidance. This meant it was essential that our judgment be grounded in a proper understanding of the ethical paradoxes and moral dilemmas with which political life confronts us. A sensible and responsible ethic must combine unflinching commitment with pragmatic flexibility and a willingness to be inconsistent.

Berlin's political thought, I want to suggest, provides us with a framework from which to ground and evaluate approaches to, and principles of, political action. I have chosen to refer to this framework as a political ethic, but it would be wrong to infer from this that Berlin's writings provide us with a firm set of ethical principles. It sheds light on the limits and possibilities of political action, what we ought to look for in political judgment, and speaks to the role of compromise and principled commitment in political life.³⁵ In particular, much in accordance with Sen's recent work in *The Idea of Justice*,³⁶ it tells us that political action ought not aim to achieve a kind of perfect justice (for there is no such thing) but rather that it ought to aim to make the world a little better for those who inhabit it. This means political action aimed at alleviating suffering, indignity and undue hardship, not ideal solutions.³⁷ It means affording a central role to compromise, yet without forgetting the importance of unflinching commitments. What emerges from Berlin's thought, therefore, is, in many ways, I suggest, a defense of politics – the messy world of half-solutions, conflict and compromise. When faced with a conflict between incompatible values, we have to make choices, Berlin insists. There is no mean that can preserve the essential properties of each. The only way to not sacrifice permanently values that we cherish is through compromise and the willingness to be inconsistent in what we favour. Loss is inescapable.

If there is a single principle, or sensibility, that informs Berlin's thought it is his "moderation in consistency," to borrow a phrase from Leszek Kolakowski.³⁸ It is a

³⁵ This issue has been explored in Avishai Margalit's recent work *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), which draws on Berlin's conception of value pluralism.

³⁶ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

³⁷ Much like Sen, Berlin urges us to move away from a focus on what a perfectly just society would look like. Political action requires us to make judgments without absolute criteria.

³⁸ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), vii.

principle that informs virtually every aspect of his thought, his epistemology, his moral ontology, and – as I will attempt to demonstrate – his political ethic. Berlin was an anti-reductionist who believed in the methods of science, rationalism and empiricism; he was a critic of conservative complacency and progressive exuberance; he saw values as historical creations, contingent and fragile, yet no less binding; he believed in the necessity of cold unflinching commitments, as well as utilitarian compromises. Another way to phrase it would be to say that Berlin displayed a remarkable ability to inhabit the space of paradox and tension without reaching for something more firm and stable – what John Keats referred to as ‘negative capability’.³⁹ To capture what is at the heart of Berlin’s thought, we have to refrain from the temptation to remove Berlin from this place of tension and paradox by pushing him to one side of the divide. The substantive aspects of Berlin’s thought that this study will deal with – his critique of monism, the dangers of not taking moral conflict seriously, his political ethic – are perhaps best understood as a defense of, and a plea for, the importance of inhabiting this space, and the danger of reaching for more solid ground.

1.3 Interpreting Berlin

This work will attempt to engage with and capture what I will call Berlin’s political ethic. This will mean focusing on and incorporating some areas of Berlin’s thought relatively neglected in the existing academic literature. Much of the scholarly attention that Berlin’s thought has attracted has focused on the meaning of his conception of value pluralism and whether it supports or undermines justifications for liberalism. A great deal of attention has also focused on Berlin’s work on liberty. As I will show in this study, this skewed focus has done a disservice not merely to our understanding of Berlin’s contribution to political thought; it has also helped prevent a thorough understanding of what Berlin took the concept of value pluralism to mean and entail. More recently, scholars have begun to correct for this by exploring some previously neglected areas of his thought – his account of reason, his epistemology, his work on Russian thinkers, and

³⁹ Inspiration for this interpretation of Berlin came via George Packer's interpretation of U.S. president Barack Obama as the "negative capability president," following his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. See George Packer, "Peace and War," *The New Yorker*, December 21 (2009).

his political ethic.⁴⁰ By drawing on some of Berlin's early work on political judgment, his essays exploring the art of statecraft, as well as his engagement with the writings of Alexander Herzen and Ivan Turgenev, I aim in this dissertation to contribute to this effort and to help paint a more well-rounded and accurate account of Berlin's political thought and ethic.

I make a number of interpretative contributions in this dissertation, both large and small. On the small side, a few points are worth noting here. I offer a slightly modified account of the sources of moral conflict to which value pluralism gives rise. I suggest that the interpretations developed by John Gray and George Crowder do not quite capture the fragmentation of value Berlin's account of value pluralism sheds light on. Also on the small side, I offer a modified account of Berlin's understanding of tragedy and its roots in value pluralism. Much important work has already been done on this issue, not least by Beta Polanowska-Sygulka.⁴¹ My account does not challenge the prevailing view, but suggests more attention must be paid to the *interaction* between freedom and necessity in Berlin's account of what it is that makes value conflicts potentially tragic. Doing so, I suggest, helps unlock a richer account of what Berlin took the ethical implications of value pluralism to be.

The larger interpretative contribution concerns what I, in broad terms, have chosen to call Berlin's political ethic. Let me note a few of the more consequential claims

⁴⁰ Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (May 2004); Alex Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," *Political Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Aug 2004); Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 95 (June 2001); Jamie Reed, "From Logical Positivism to 'Metaphysical Rationalism': Isaiah Berlin on the Fallacy of Reduction," *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008); Jason Ferrell, "The Alleged Relativism of Isaiah Berlin," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (2008), 41-56, and "Isaiah Berlin as Essayist," *Political Theory*, 40:5 (2012); Joshua L. Cherniss and Henry Hardy, "Isaiah Berlin," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed., URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>, see particularly section 5; Andrzej Walicki, "Berlin and the Russian Intelligentsia," in *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin*, ed. George Crowder and Henry Hardy (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007); Aileen Kelly, "A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Ronald Dworkin ed al. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001); see also: Aileen Kelly, "Introduction: A Complex Vision," in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin Books, [1978] 2008); Ronald H. McKinney, SJ., "Towards a Postmodern Ethics: Sir Isaiah Berlin and John Caputo," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 26:3 (1992), 395-407. McKinney's article prompted a reply by Berlin where he took issue with a number of McKinney's characterizations of his views. See Berlin, "Reply to Ronald H. McKinney," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 26:4 (1992), 557-560.

⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin and Beta Polanowska-Sygulka, "Pluralism and Tragedy," in *Unfinished Dialogue* (New York: Prometheus, 2006). This book title will hereafter be referred to as UD.

I make in this dissertation. I suggest, first, that the prevailing account of his ethic – where Berlin is interpreted as being committed to a cosmopolitan ethic – is misconceived. There are a number of problems with the cosmopolitan interpretation. Most significantly, it interprets Berlin’s ethic in too Kantian of a vein. Berlin’s ethic, I suggest, is more akin to a form of moral particularism.⁴² This means also, I suggest, that Berlin leaves more room for reasoned and judgment based solutions to moral dilemmas than Gray’s interpretation allows. Second, I offer an interpretation of Berlin’s critique of “hedgehogs” that, I suggest, helps resolve some of the problems and difficulties interpreters have struggled with. In particular, I suggest that previous interpretations have failed to capture the link between Berlin insistence on the importance of recognizing certain types of moral dilemmas as tragic in nature (that is to say, as pitting one incommensurable moral good against another) and his account of the type of background assumptions sound political judgment requires.

* * *

The following is a brief review of the central questions with which Berlin’s interpreters and critics have engaged with. The meaning and implications of value pluralism has been the source of much debate in the academic literature. John Gray, Thomas Nagel, Steven Lukes, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Stuart Hampshire, Charles Taylor, George Crowder, William Galston, Joseph Raz, and Amartya Sen, among others, have grappled with the question of what, precisely, value pluralism means and what its implications are for how we think about moral conflict, politics and multiculturalism.⁴³ Much interpretative work on Berlin’s thought, consequently, has been at pains to situate his

⁴² Jonathan Dancy, "Moral Particularism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/moral-particularism/>>. Notice that I say “akin” to a form of moral particularism. I am not suggesting Berlin’s ethic fits precisely or neatly with Dancy’s particularism. In particular, it is not clear how Dancy’s particularism accommodates the tragic dimension to moral dilemmas Berlin identifies.

⁴³ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*; Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value”; Steven Lukes, *Moral Conflict*; Bernard Williams, “Conflict of Values,” in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983); Charles Taylor, “The Diversity of Goods,” in *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) and *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2002); William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Joseph Raz, *Morality of Freedom*; Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

political thought – and particularly his value pluralism – in relation to the moral foundations of political liberalism. Towards that effort, the central questions interpreters have pursued through his writing have concerned issues of foundational justification: Can value pluralism ground a justification for liberalism, and if so, what kind of liberalism? Would it differ from the liberalism of Rawls, or from various species of multiculturalism? Or does value pluralism actually challenge liberalism’s claim to universality?⁴⁴ The common interpretative strategy has been to argue that value pluralism – as conceptualized by Berlin – sits in a kind of uneasy tension with liberalism, on account of the ambiguous treatment the concept of incommensurability receives in Berlin’s writings. Is Berlin a proponent, the question has been, of a kind of radical incommensurability, rendering impartial comparisons of value completely impossible – which would mean value pluralism poses a challenge to liberalism – or does he favour a softer kind of incommensurability, one that does not undermine, and can perhaps even be made to support, liberalism’s claim to universality? If we take incommensurability seriously, the question has been, can liberty and rights be given consistent priority over other values? Or does value pluralism support something closer to communitarianism?⁴⁵

How interpreters have answered these questions has hinged, in many cases, on how another interpretative quandary has been resolved, concerning Berlin’s relationship to the Enlightenment. Here the question has been whether Berlin ought to be seen as a Counter-Enlightenment thinker, as someone who rejected the central tenets of the

⁴⁴ In addition to the work of Gray, Crowder and Galston cited above, see: Yael Tamir, “A Strange Alliance: Isaiah Berlin and the Liberalism of the Fringes,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1 (1998); Ella Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin,” *The Review of Politics* 72 (2010); Michael Walzer, “Are There Limits to Liberalism?” *New York Review of Books*, October 19 (1995); Steven Lukes, “The Singular and the Plural,” in *Liberals and Cannibals* (New York: Verso, 2003); Amy Gutmann, “Liberty and Pluralism in Pursuit of the Non-ideal,” *Social Research* 66 (Winter 1999); Jason Ferrell, “Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 8. 3 (Aug 2009); Eric Mack, “Isaiah Berlin and the Quest for Liberal Pluralism,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 7 (July 1993); Graeme Garrard, “The Counter-Enlightenment Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (1997).

⁴⁵ See in particular George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 5; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, and “The Case for Decency,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 13 (2006). See also Graeme Garrard, “Strange Reversals: Berlin on the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment,” *The One and the Many*; Sidney Hook, “Isaiah Berlin’s Enlightenment,” *Commentary*, 69:5 (May 1980); Mark Lilla, “Wolves and Lambs,” in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*; Steven Lukes, “An Unfashionable Fox,” *Liberals and Cannibals* (New York: Verso, 2003). Numerous essays on this topic can also be found in “Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 93, part 5 (2003), ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler.

Enlightenment. While it is true that Berlin was a critic of some of the central features of (at least one strand of) the Enlightenment – its monism and its excessive faith in the powers of reason and science in dealing with moral and political problems – it is important to note that he was not an enemy of the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ His critique of the Enlightenment notwithstanding, “he firmly believed in the place of reason in ethics and the objectivity of values,” as Lukes has noted.⁴⁷ And he explicitly rejected the various strands of subjectivism, emotivism and relativism that litter the academic landscape, as well as the radical incommensurability (or cognitive relativism) found in thinkers like Richard Rorty and Jean-Francois Loytard.⁴⁸

As I have already indicated, this study will attempt to go down a somewhat different path and focus on a set of different, though not wholly distinct, issues. While I will seek to recover a political ethic from Berlin’s thought and interrogate its implications, this should not be confused with an effort to recover a philosophical doctrine in Berlin’s thought that would either ground or challenge the moral foundation of liberalism.⁴⁹ I believe Alex Zakaras is right in his observation that “rather than arguing for or against liberalism as a philosophical system, Berlin is often busy showing his readers how to get there – showing the kinds of attitudes and dispositions that make a humane, tolerant politics possible.”⁵⁰ The ethic that emerges from Berlin’s thought is – by his own definition – a liberal political ethic. In a certain sense, therefore, it is true that Berlin’s thought gives us an account of liberalism. But it is liberalism conceived as a practical activity, as a particular way of approaching and dealing with the conflicts, choices and tragic dilemmas with which political life confronts us. It is concerned with how we navigate, confront and deal with moral conflict as it confronts us in the real world; it is not concerned with questions of foundational justification or with developing a conception of justice that could command universal rational consent. Whether or not these principles of political action exclusively support or recommend a particular

⁴⁶ Gray, “The Case for Decency.”

⁴⁷ Lukes, “Unfashionable Fox,” 113.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 113-4.

⁴⁹ Absolute justifications were for Berlin neither necessary for political life and judgement, nor possible to discover.

⁵⁰ Zakaras, “Cosmopolitan Ethic,” 497.

institutional framework – that is, whether it helps ground or lend justification to liberalism – is a different question, not one that I will pursue here.⁵¹

A great deal of literature on Berlin has focused on the merits and implications of Berlin's work on freedom, and particularly his two concepts of liberty.⁵² Negative liberty Berlin understood to mean the absence of interference by others; whereas positive liberty referred to something closer to self-mastery. Much of the literature on Berlin's two concepts of liberty has focused on conceptual questions that are not relevant to this project. Yet it is worth briefly clarifying some common misconceptions. To begin with, it is important to note that Berlin did not consider negative liberty to be the only worthwhile form of freedom. He was not a proponent of maximizing negative liberty or against limiting negative liberty to make room for equality or social justice. Indeed, he saw positive liberty as a valid goal, or value. There is also, as Gray has pointed out, a positive root at Berlin's conception of freedom, which means that even with regards to negative liberty there is an assumption of the capacity for choice making. Negative liberty is not, for Berlin, then, equivalent to the Hobbsian conception of unimpeded motion. Nor is it compatible with a conception of human agency devoid of the capacity for choice-making (of humans as agents blindly obeying the dictates of our appetites).⁵³

A question that this literature on freedom has looked at that is relevant to this project concerns the status of negative liberty in Berlin's political philosophy. Is negative liberty something akin to a meta-value, trumping other values? Or is it just one value among many, not equally essential in all contexts? And how willing was Berlin to

⁵¹ Margalit, Sen, Nagel, Raz, Lukes have all explored, in different ways, what value pluralism entails for political action – Margalit exploring the normative dimensions of compromise; Sen how we might be able to identify and fight injustices absent an understanding of what perfect justice would look like; Nagel, Raz and Lukes how we may be able to make choices in the face of incommensurability. See Margalit, *On Compromise*; Sen, *Idea of Justice*; Nagel, "Fragmentation of Value"; Raz, *Morality as Freedom*; Lukes, "Comparing the Incomparable: Trade-Offs and Sacrifices," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason*; See also Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency," Elizabeth Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods," Elijah Millgram, "Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning," Donald Regan, "Value, Comparability and Choice," and John Finnis, "Commensuration and Public Reason," all from *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason*.

⁵² See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The academic literature that comments, critiques or engages with Berlin's work on liberty is too extensive to be listed here. For a fairly exhaustive list, see Ian Harris, "Berlin and His Critics," in *Liberty*. See John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 1, and George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 4, for thorough reviews of the literature Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" spawned. Gray and Crowder also do much to clear up the many misconceptions that have surrounded the commentary on Berlin's work on liberty.

⁵³ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 14-15.

sacrifice negative liberty to facilitate the realization of other values, or to accommodate other moral considerations? A common interpretative strategy has been to argue that Berlin's commitment to negative liberty sits in an uneasy tension with his conception of value pluralism. The only way to resolve this tension is by pushing Berlin either away from the full implications of his value pluralism or away from an unflinching commitment to negative liberty. Pushing Berlin in one of these two directions, the belief has been, is the only way to make him coherent and consistent.

This perceived need to push Berlin towards a position of either unflinching commitment or relative indifference towards negative liberty, I want to suggest, is rooted in a misunderstanding of the implications of Berlin's conception of value pluralism and reflects a more fundamental misunderstanding of Berlin's political ethic that this project aims to rectify. It is a mistake to think that Berlin is contradicting himself when he says, in one breath, that negative liberty is an absolute value worthy of unflinching commitment and, in another, that negative liberty is rightly limited to make room for other, equally ultimate, values. Value pluralism entails, paradoxically, that while it is impossible to grant antagonistic values "full recognition simultaneously," "each demands total acceptance."⁵⁴ Berlin escapes – or perhaps copes is a better word – with this paradoxical reality by being willing to be inconsistent. "Accepting [these antinomies in the realm of values] as part of man's universal lot, we can elude these antinomies through inconsistency, in order not to reject permanently something we value just because something else we esteem is eternally contradictory to it."⁵⁵ These words are Leszek Kolakowski's but they could equally well belong to Berlin. Berlin's views on the importance of negative liberty may display an inconsistency, in other words, but they are not contradictory.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, "In Praise of Inconsistency," *Marxism and Beyond* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968), 236.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Axel Honneth fails to grasp this point when he argues that Berlin's political liberalism is internally contradictory because Berlin affords negative liberty and cultural belonging the status of absolute rights (see Axel Honneth, "Negative Freedom and Cultural Belonging: An Unhealthy Tension in the Political Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin," *Social Research*, vol. 66, No. 4 (Winter 1999)). For one thing, he does no such thing; Berlin claims that negative liberty and cultural belonging are genuine and absolute values, or moral goods; but he does not afford them the status of rights. But the more interesting problem with Honneth's interpretation is that it assumes that because the values are incompatible one cannot be committed to, or recognize the validity of, both simultaneously. It is true of course that in political life, when faced with

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Interpreting Berlin's thought presents a number of difficulties. Berlin was a prolific writer, and penned a huge number of articles and essays. This presents difficulties less because of the sheer volume than due to the scattered nature of his writing. Although he was prolific, he wrote very few books. Most of his writings are in essay form. In addition, Berlin's essays tend to deal with a wide array of different writers and thinkers, many of whom were relatively obscure. Essays that directly and systematically confront the issues he was ostensibly dealing with (freedom, nationalism, value pluralism, etc.) are few and far between. Berlin also has a not completely undeserved reputation for being inconsistent and ambiguous. This is in part a product of the essay format of his writing. In confronting each of the topics and issues he wrote about separately, it is often far from clear how what he says in one essay squares with what he says in another. Berlin was also, it must not be forgotten, an historian of ideas. One must be careful, therefore, not to read into his text a meaning or intent that may not have been there. He may, after all, have merely been trying to answer a historical question, or explore a particular topic, thinker, or set of ideas.

It is also true that many of Berlin's writings are underdeveloped. Confined to the essay, he often fails to sort out the complex questions that his arguments raise. In addition, it is often hard to distinguish Berlin's views from those of the thinkers he is interpreting. It is not unusual to read a passage where one gets the distinct impression that Berlin is fully behind what he takes the thinker he is interpreting to be saying, only for another essay to give the equally distinct impression that Berlin supports a contradictory contention. Berlin's writings, consequently, not only quite often come across as underdeveloped, they present numerous interpretative difficulties. He was remarkably attentive to the realities and complexities of the modern world, to the reality of moral conflict; yet, despite the remarkable vitality that makes his essays such a pleasure to read, he often conflated distinct issues, questions and nuances and showed a frustrating

incompatible values, one value has to be sacrificed (to at least some extent) if one wants to make room for the other. That is indeed the source of tragedy. It is precisely Berlin's point that any regime, even a liberal democratic one that makes room for cultural pluralism, entails loss and tragedy. Honneth's argument is a good example of the problems that arise when one looks for a fully theorized conception of liberalism in Berlin's thought. If Berlin had been trying to spell out which rights a liberal regime ought to admit, the tension between negative liberty and cultural belonging would indeed be a real one.

reluctance to carefully and systematically develop his arguments and observations. The lyrical quality needed for a great essay appears at times to have trumped the need for careful elaboration. Making sense of Berlin, therefore, is not easy. He seems at times to have meant more than he said; at others, less; at others still, something slightly different. But at the core of his thought, there are a number of important and subtle insights that have yet to be fully explored. The aim of this dissertation is, in part, to bring these to light.

Any interpretative project is forced to confront a number of questions: To what extent do we need to contextualize historically the texts/writings to understand them? To what extent should we let the context and the (apparent) intentions of the author limit and guide the meaning of the texts and the kinds of questions we ask of it? How should one make sense of inconsistencies – is the author contradicting himself? Did he or she change her mind? To what extent are we justified in looking for an underlying coherence? In a sort of Berlinian spirit, I do not believe there is a single right way to answer these questions. The interpretative effort, I believe, benefits from whatever methods and tools it can use. We are certainly aided by understanding the context and the intentions of the author, yet these cannot, on their own, reveal the ultimate meaning of the text. And there is no reason that we cannot let Berlin's thought speak to more contemporary debates and problems. The world we live in may be somewhat different than his world, but its problems are similar enough. And there is also no reason to assume that texts, and particularly the ideas it conveys, cannot contain insights, implications and meanings that the author did not anticipate.⁵⁷

As I have already noted, Berlin has a not completely undeserved reputation for being ambiguous and inconsistent. This raises the question of whether there are good grounds for trying to assemble something akin to a coherent and internally consistent political ethic from Berlin's writings. The risk of attributing to the author views he did not hold in an effort to construct something consistent is a real one no matter who the object of inquiry is, but it is perhaps particularly acute when confronted with a body of work as scattered over a vast array of essays and letters as Berlin's.

⁵⁷ James Tully ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Joshua Cherniss captures the central paradox of Berlin's body of work: "while Berlin's thought did not constitute a centripetal system or converge on a single solution, it did form a cohesive whole, consisting of a set of recurring, overlapping, interrelated concerns and convictions."⁵⁸ There is no doubt that any effort to tease out and piece together a political ethic from Berlin's writings risks distorting to some degree his ideas and philosophy. The question is whether it captures and clarifies something in his political thought. The effort to interpret Berlin in a way that is faithful to his spirit is aided by the fact that the themes and focus of Berlin's writing (if not his particular object of study), not to mention the central set of claims that he forwarded, are fairly consistent throughout his writings. That is not to say that there are not tensions or inconsistencies in Berlin's thought, or that his views did not develop and mature, or that he did not at one time hold views that he later repudiated or modified. Many of these have been well documented.⁵⁹

Making sense of Berlin's thought and accounting for the various ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies that can be found in his writing, then, will require balancing a range of different considerations. These include but are not limited to the historical context in which he was writing and his own background. The latter includes his life path as well as the personal motivations and intentions of his various writings, not to mention his personal influences, both intellectual and social.

A few points are worth emphasizing here. The first concerns Berlin's personal background and the historical context in which he lived. Berlin was a Jewish man born in Riga shortly before the outbreak of World War One – then part of the Russian empire. His most formative years witnessed revolutions, war, social and economic chaos and ideological mobilization on an unprecedented scale. Berlin himself identified three traditions, or identities – Jewish, Russian and British – as having had a profound effect on

⁵⁸ Joshua L. Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin's Political Ideas: From the Twentieth Century to the Romantic Age," in Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy, (London: Pimlico, 2007). This book title will hereafter be referred to as PIRA.

⁵⁹ Berlin himself discussed his intellectual trajectory in a number of articles and interviews. See for instance "My Intellectual Path," in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), this book title will hereafter be referred to as POI; "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH; "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes," in *Salmagundi*, No. 120 (Fall 1998); hereafter CL. See also Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Toronto: Viking, 1998). Cherniss's "Berlin's Political Ideas" also provides an illuminating window into Berlin's early political thought.

him, by virtue of his identity, upbringing and social experiences.⁶⁰ As Crowder notes, Berlin's "sense of human values as multiple, conflicting and incommensurable reflects his own experience of inner division and conflict."⁶¹ Berlin was only a child when the revolutions of 1917 shook Russian society, but the glimpses he personally saw of the fear and the violence that it unleashed made a vivid impression on him. While much of his life – including World War II – was spent in the relative comfort of Oxford and, briefly, America, it is clear that the moral problems and questions that the violence and hardship of that period raised were foremost on his mind. The time he spent in the Soviet Union in the immediate post-war period, meeting Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova also had a profound effect on him, by his own admission.⁶² One cannot understand Berlin's defense of negative liberty, particularly the way he links liberty to human dignity, without an awareness of this context. Similarly, the emphasis on responsibility and judgment, the burdens of statecraft, the inescapability of moral dilemmas, can only be fully understood in light of the dilemmas European leaders and citizens faced in the midst of the twentieth century.

A great deal of Berlin's work can be understood as an effort not just to understand the ideological currents of his day, but as a response to and attack on the totalitarian ideologies of his time. The impact of the rise of fascism, Stalinism and the horrors of World War II on his political ideas – and indeed his conception of liberalism – must always be kept in mind. Judith Shklar has rightfully characterized the liberalism of Berlin and some of his contemporaries as a "liberalism of fear."⁶³ Yet it would be a mistake to interpret Berlin as a thinker whose ideas fit neatly into the cold war ideological divisions. His account of value pluralism challenged not merely to the ideological currents of his day, it also represented a challenge to some of the dominant traditions in the history of moral and political theory.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Berlin, "The Three Strands in My Life," *Jewish Quarterly* 27/2-3 (Summer/Autumn, 1979).

⁶¹ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 13.

⁶² See Isaiah Berlin, "Conversations with Akhmatova and Pasternak," in *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institutions Press, 2004). The book title will hereafter be referred to as SM.

⁶³ Judith N. Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Liberalism: Variations on a Theme*, ed. Shaun P. Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ John Gray emphasizes this point. See Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*.

1.4 Chapter Outline

This dissertation will proceed as follows. Chapters two and three explore Berlin's account of the moral dimension of political life. Chapter two examines Berlin's concept of value pluralism and what it means for how we conceptualize moral conflict. It explores the contention that values are (sometimes) incommensurable and seeks to distinguish value pluralism from various theories of relativism and subjectivism. I argue that the predominant interpretations of Berlin's concept of value pluralism do not adequately capture the fragmentation of value Berlin identifies – particularly as this translates into an account of different sources of moral conflict – and offer a modified account of what value pluralism entails for how we conceptualize moral conflict.

Chapter three explores Berlin's insistence on the link between value pluralism and what might be characterized as the tragic dimension of political life. This link is important to grasp; it helps illuminate what Berlin took to be the normative implications of value pluralism. Against the arguments of some of his critics, I argue that value pluralism is indeed compatible with a tragic conception of moral and political life. The argument of Berlin's critics relies on a conflation of value pluralism with relativism. I begin to explore the normative implications Berlin drew from the reality of value pluralism, what it means for how we approach moral dilemmas and judge the choices available.

Chapters four and five develop an account of Berlin's political ethic. I explore his account of judgment, choice, commitment and compromise, and locate the moral compass of his ethic. Chapter four begins this process by examining how, on Berlin's interpretation, misconceived accounts of moral conflict can shape political action and judgment in problematic ways. The chapter looks at Berlin's critique of two particular ways of misconceiving the sources and nature of moral conflict: monism and what I will with some reservation call relativism. By drawing on Berlin's work on political judgment and his essays on some of the central political figures of the twentieth century, I try to make sense of and, in some respects, rescue Berlin's much criticized critique of monism. I also show that in their implications for political action and judgment, monism and the account of moral conflict that emerged from the more extreme figures in the counter-enlightenment are quite similar, on Berlin's account. Both obscure and deny the reality of

the moral dilemmas with which political life confronts us; as such, both views not only can underpin problematic conceptions of politics and disagreement, but also render more difficult the exercise of negative capability – something that is central to sound political judgment, on Berlin’s account.

In chapter five, I examine what we might term the positive aspect of Berlin’s political ethic, including its moral foundation and practical implications. I suggest his ethic is perhaps best understood as a version of the Max Weber’s ethic of statecraft, seeking to balance an ethic of responsibility with an ethic of conviction. It places an almost inherent value on compromise, yet reserves a central role for unflinching commitment. Value pluralism plays a central role in Berlin’s account here; it is by having made sense of the ethical paradoxes of political life that we are put in a position of being able to make sound political judgments. I proceed to examine the moral foundations of Berlin’s ethic. I argue that it is characterized primarily by a kind of negative utilitarianism where the focus is on minimizing harm and avoiding, where possible, tragedy. Finally, I conclude, in chapter six, by considering some of the broader implications of Berlin’s thought, particularly his conception of value pluralism, for political theory.

2. VALUE PLURALISM AND MORAL CONFLICT

We must choose, and in choosing one thing lose another, irretrievably perhaps. If we choose individual liberty, this may entail the sacrifice of some form of organization which might have led to greater efficiency. If we choose justice, we may be forced to sacrifice mercy. If we choose knowledge we may sacrifice innocence and happiness. If we choose democracy, we may sacrifice a strength that comes from militarisation or from obedient hierarchies. If we choose equality, we may sacrifice some degree of individual freedom. If we choose to fight for our lives, we may sacrifice many civilised values, much that we have laboured greatly to create.
~ Isaiah Berlin (CTH, 201-202)

Moral conflict and tragedy are at the heart of the human predicament, according to Berlin. Conflict is unavoidable not simply because human greed, selfishness and corruption are endemic, or because human institutions are fallible; conflict is not merely a product of non-ideal conditions. On the contrary moral conflict is a product of the fact that genuine, equally ultimate, human goods, values and moral principles are incompatible. Even angels, Berlin insists, would know loss and tragedy. To be cognizant of this, to recognize moral conflict for what it is and to appreciate the tragic dimension of political life was vital to Berlin. If we have not made sense of moral conflict, or understood its implications, he argued, we will do a poor job of dealing with the problems, dilemmas and paradoxes with which the political world confronts us. The fact that values are not only incompatible but often incommensurable means that the political world is liable to present us with moral dilemmas, tragic choices, where we are forced to choose between absolute claims, knowing that no matter what we choose, something of genuine value is likely to be lost irreparably.

This chapter will interrogate Berlin's conception of value pluralism and explore how it grounds Berlin's sensibility for the tragic. It will seek to answer a range of interrelated questions: What precisely is meant by a value? What does it mean to say that values are incompatible and incommensurable? What is the epistemological and ontological status of Berlin's claims? And how specifically does value pluralism differ from the various doctrines of relativism, subjectivism and skepticism that litter the academic landscape? Of particular concern will be how Berlin's conception of value

pluralism grounds and informs a view of the human condition where tragedy plays a central and inescapable role. It is my contention that tragedy is a concept that is central to understanding Berlin's thought. It will not only help us develop a more subtle understanding of value pluralism and what it means for moral conflict, it will also shed light on Berlin's critique of monism as well as relativism, and put us in a better position to understand Berlin's own political ethic.

At its core, value pluralism is a theory that offers to make sense of moral conflict. In contrast to moral monism – which is grounded in the assumption that the world of values admits of (a single) truth – value pluralism posits that the world of values is made up of antagonistic elements. Incompatibility, therefore, does not entail error, that one value, or claim, is false, or rooted in misunderstanding. In politics as in private life, there are a plurality of objectives, values, and moral principles that are “irreducible to each other, inexpressible in homogenous units, and unattainable jointly.”⁶⁵ Yet Berlin's value pluralism should not be confused with a species of subjectivism or relativism. It is rooted in a form of moral realism. Though made by men, values are objective, part of the furniture of the world. Value pluralism, Berlin maintained, emerges from the fact that our moral capacities and reasoning can reveal and generate a plurality of incompatible yet fully defensible moral claims, goods and principles. It is a product of the fragmented nature of our moral universe.

To understand Berlin's sensibility for the tragic, his repeated insistence that there was a tragic dimension to politics that we should be cognizant of, it is important to keep these distinctions in mind. Tragedy for Berlin emerges from the fact that genuine, objective, moral goods conflict. It arises, in other words, from the ‘self-division of the ethical substance,’⁶⁶ the fact that fully defensible and ultimate moral claims, objectives and goods conflict. If there was no shared moral substance (as in some doctrines of relativism and subjectivism), or if incompatible moral truths were deemed to be an a priori impossibility (as in various monistic doctrines), tragic dilemmas could no longer arise except through error or misunderstanding. The dilemmas would be apparent but not

⁶⁵ Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 193.

⁶⁶ Paraphrased from A. C. Bradley, “Hegel's Theory of Tragedy,” in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 71.

real. Value pluralism, to Berlin, shed light on the true face of moral conflict, and thereby revealed the tragic dimension that lies at the heart of the political. Focusing on tragedy thus helps us locate the importance Berlin attached to the *recognition* of tragic conflict and tragic loss. Both monism and relativism, he argued, were grounded in assumptions about the political world that undermine, or work against, the ability to recognize the tragic dimension of politics. As I will explore in this and later chapters, this was a big part of what made political doctrines grounded in their assumptions potentially disastrous according to Berlin. By illuminating rather than hiding this tragic dimension, value pluralism facilitates a conception of politics more attuned to the character, stakes and paradoxes of political conflict.

This chapter will begin by exploring what Berlin means by value pluralism, particularly as it applies to how we understand the nature and sources of moral conflict, before moving on to discuss the concept of incommensurability and the epistemological and ontological status of Berlin's claims.

2.1 Value Pluralism and Moral Conflict

Value pluralism is perhaps most easily grasped when we consider its claims in comparison with moral monism and relativism – two theories of morality Berlin sought to challenge through his conception of value pluralism. Let us begin with monism.

Monism is the belief that truth in matters of morality admit of (a single) truth. Questions such as ‘what is the morally right thing to do?’ ‘what values are most essential to man?’ have “one true answer and one only” (CTH, 5). It may be that it is impossible for actual human beings to know the answer to these questions, and even if the answer was known it may be impossible to implement or act on that knowledge. Human beings may be “too feeble-witted, or too weak or corrupt or sinful,” or the “obstacles, both intellectual and those of external nature, may be too many.” (CTH, 6). But, at least in principle, the fundamental questions in morality could be answered. And if known, monism holds, the true answers to these questions would “necessarily be compatible, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another” (CTH, 6). The world of values, in other words, is to the monist structured in roughly the same way that we conceive of truth in the sciences. Not in the sense that the truth is necessarily conceived as prior to, or

independent of, actual human practices – though for some monists moral truths were no doubt understood that way – but in the sense that incompatibility entailed error, that at least one of the claims to truth must be false (assuming the truth claims are genuinely, and do not merely appear to be, incompatible).

Moral monism, Berlin argued, had been one of the core animating assumptions of Western political and moral thought.⁶⁷ It was shared by the Stoics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers, by the rationalists of the seventeenth century, the empiricists of the eighteenth century, and the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, it was at the heart of the thought of Rousseau, Voltaire, Condorcet, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Bakunin, Bentham, and J. S. Mill.⁶⁸ Through the application of some faculty or method – be it scientific inquiry, mystical insight, deliberation, or the application of pure reason – the deepest questions facing mankind could be answered. Theoretically at least, this knowledge could then be used to organize society in a way that would, if it could be implemented perfectly, facilitate the realization of the values most essential to man, putting an “end to spiritual and intellectual confusion, the reign of prejudice and superstition, blind obedience to unexamined dogmas, and the stupidities and cruelties of oppressive regimes which such intellectual darkness bred and prompted” (CTH, 5). For Plato, philosophic inquiry could reveal the true Forms of the Good, knowledge of which would reveal the most ideal way to order human affairs. For Jews and Christians, sacred texts, prophets or saints told of how one should live. For the empiricists of the eighteenth century, the methods of natural science could be harnessed to answer our deepest moral and social questions and used to rationally re-organize society for the better. Not everyone thought things were quite so straightforward of course. Hegel and Marx, as Berlin points out, held that there were no timeless truths, only historical development and continuing changes to the human horizon. Yet they too believed that in the end the spiritual and intellectual confusion that

⁶⁷ See in particular “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in CTH, pp. 3-5; “My Intellectual Path,” in POI.

⁶⁸ Berlin interpreted Mill as someone who was a value pluralist at heart, but who was wedded through his utilitarianism to a monist framework. This meant that ultimately, what men wanted was basically the same thing – happiness. Berlin suggests that there was perhaps a tension between Mill’s celebration of pluralism, which seems to conceive of the plurality of ends people pursue as being ends-in-themselves (rather than mere means to happiness), and his utilitarianism. See Isaiah Berlin, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” in L.

has plagued mankind could and would be overcome – that once history had progressed sufficiently, man was capable of living in harmony with his true being, realizing fully his most essential faculties (CTH, 6-7). The riddles of history, of human existence, could be solved.

It is important to emphasize a couple of points at this stage. It is not uncommon for monism to be equated with the belief that all good things, all genuine values, are in principle compatible. This is a misconception – one Berlin himself was partly responsible for propagating, but a misconception nonetheless.⁶⁹ The belief that all values are compatible is a form of monism, but the belief in compatibility is not a necessary condition for monism. As I indicated above, the central tenet of monism is the belief that to all genuine questions there is one true answer and one only, all others being necessarily false. One can hold this to be the case without believing that that all values are compatible. Another way to deny the reality of moral conflict is to hold that values and moral claims are never incommensurable.⁷⁰ This means, in effect, that someone can hold, with Berlin, that there is a plurality of human ends and that some of them are incompatible and still be a monist. Libertarianism, for instance, which shies away from promising harmony but is grounded in a fixed hierarchy of values, represents a form of monism on Berlin's account.⁷¹ A libertarian need not deny, for example, that social justice is a good thing. But he or she will maintain that it is a value that does not trump the concern for protecting individual liberty.⁷²

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the muddled treatment the concept of monism receives in Berlin's writings, see Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 126-28; and Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural" and "An Unfashionable Fox."

⁷⁰ William Galston writes that a "theory of value is monistic ... if it either (a) reduces goods to a common measure or (b) creates a comprehensive hierarchy or ordering among goods" (*Liberal Pluralism*, 6).

⁷¹ Berlin makes this point in his "Introduction" to *Four Essays on Liberty* (included in L, pp. 50n). The critics who accused him of wanting to maximize negative liberty, regardless of the cost to equality or social welfare, Berlin points out, were effectively accusing him of being precisely the kind of thinker he himself criticized in "Two Concepts of Liberty" – a monist.

⁷² See for instance F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge), pp. 87-88, where he writes: "If one objects to the use of coercion in order to bring about a more even or a more just distribution, this does not mean that one does not regard these as desirable. But if we wish to preserve a free society, it is essential that we recognize that the desirability of a particular object is not sufficient justification for the use of coercion. One may well feel attracted to a community in which there are no extreme contrasts between rich and poor and may welcome the fact that the general increase in wealth seems gradually to reduce these differences. ... There also seems no reason why these widely felt preferences should not guide policy in some respects. ... It is a different matter, however, if it is demanded that, in order to produce substantive equality, we should abandon the basic postulate of a free society, namely, the limitation of all

Monism is not incompatible, we should also add, with the recognition, or even celebration, of diversity. Aristotle, for instance, recognized a tremendous diversity in nature and human societies. Different objects had different purposes, forms of excellence and flourishing. Yet he also held – and this is what made him a monist – that there was a hierarchy in nature, such that lower forms were meant to serve higher forms. This meant that ultimately the diversity of pursuits and moral goods need not, and should not, be the source of conflict. For utilitarian thinkers like J. S. Mill, or even early theorists of pluralism like Montesquieu, diversity was something to be both celebrated and protected. Yet the source of this diversity was not, ultimately, due to men pursuing radically different ends, or asking different questions of the world, as value pluralism posits – it was a product of men using and trying different means to attain universal and unchanging moral ends, be it happiness or the satisfaction of a set of universal needs.

Third, monism is not incompatible with epistemological modesty. Berlin sometimes comes close to equating monism with fanaticism, writing, for instance, that “monism is at the root of every extremism” (POI, 14). Nonetheless, he consistently says that monism is not incompatible with great skepticism regarding the ability of human beings to not only understand but also change their world. Monism is a set of assumptions about the ultimate structure of the realm of values, not the practical attainability of our ideals or our ability to obtain moral knowledge. Monism is dangerous to Berlin because it based on an intellectual fallacy. This makes it a potentially disastrous guide to political action, particularly since it also facilitates the idea that final solutions exist to moral problems. But that does not mean that monism is incompatible with fundamentally anti-utopian political doctrines.

Value pluralism can be understood as a denial of the central assumptions of monism. The world of values, it posits, is not logically dualistic. It is made up of antagonistic elements. It follows that since values are plural, incompatible and (sometimes) incommensurable, genuine moral questions and moral dilemmas may have more than one fully defensible and justifiable answer. The fact that these answers may conflict does not entail error, that one claim is necessarily false. Value pluralism thus

coercion by equal law. Against this we shall hold that economic inequality is not one of the evils which justify our resorting to discriminatory coercion or privilege as a remedy.”

offers a starkly different way of understanding the sources and nature of moral conflict. From a monist perspective, moral conflict is ultimately attributed to something akin to ignorance, corruption, distortion or error. It may be that we are all ignorant, or that no person has access to the truth, and so conflict is still to be expected; or it may be that socio-economic conditions, or relations of power, distort people's ability to identify what is in their true interest. Monism need not entail, in other words, intolerance towards moral conflict. But on a deeper level, the monist must remain committed to the view that moral dilemmas can only be apparent – a problem of missing information, or knowledge. Value pluralism challenges this view. Moral conflict, it posits, is a product of the very nature of the world of values – its fragmented and antagonistic structure.

2.2 The Nature of Values and the Sources of Moral Conflict

Before we proceed to discuss what distinguishes Berlin's conception of value pluralism from various doctrines of relativism, and delve further into questions regarding the ontological and epistemological claims of value pluralism, it is worth taking some time to clarify what precisely Berlin means by a value and what types of value conflict he included under the umbrella of value pluralism.

The first thing to note is that there is some ambiguity in Berlin's account of what constitutes a value. Berlin uses the word to refer to, and sometimes as if it was interchangeable with, "ultimate ends," "forms of life" and occasionally "moral principles."⁷³ Berlin comes close to giving us a definition when he writes, "There is a world of objective values. By this I mean those ends that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means" (CTH, 11). But, one could ask, are "moral principles" really "ends that men pursue for their own sake"? Do they not, rather, signal moral prohibitions and commands – things that are no doubt relevant to the ends we pursue, and may even shape what ends we pursue, but not ends-in-themselves – if by ends is meant something akin to a goal, or objective. Similarly, while forms of life can often accurately be construed as "ends that we pursue for their own sake" – e.g. when we pursue a vocation, or calling; or when we are forced to choose between conflicting holistic belief

⁷³ For example, he writes, "Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many" (CTH, 12)

systems – it is far from clear that such a definition captures the way in which ‘forms of life’, or belief systems, can underpin and give meaning to various goods, or ultimate ends (forms of justice, fairness, etc.), inform the value hierarchies we foster, and shape the moral principles we see as acceptable. A ‘form of life’ will sometimes be the soil from which our objectives and pursuits in life grow – not the end-in-itself. Berlin no doubt recognized this, but his suggested definition of what constitutes a value conflates things needlessly.

More accurately, as I will make clear, values for Berlin refer to the objects of moral concern that give us grounds, or provide justification, for our pursuits and actions. They need not be ‘ends that we pursue for their own sake’, strictly speaking, in the sense that they need not refer to goals, or objectives. What they do is provide grounds, give justification or moral reason, for pursuits and actions. It is in that sense that we should understand Berlin’s statement that values are those things “to which other things are means.”

John Gray has suggested that value pluralism in Berlin’s thought refers to three types of moral objects, within which, and between which, conflicts will occur. (1) Conflicts will occur between goods, or ultimate values – such as freedom, equality, fairness, security and welfare – that are valued within the same morality or code of conduct. (2) Within these goods, or ultimate values, there will be an internal complexity and pluralism that will generate conflicts – between rival freedoms, rival equalities, and so forth. Both these levels apply to what Berlin would refer to as ends that we pursue for their own sake. (3) Conflicts will also occur between the different moralities and values that are generated by different cultural forms, or forms of life. These will no doubt have overlapping features, but also their own forms of excellence and conceptions of the good. The conflict here will often come to be between more holistic ways of life, or culturally or religiously grounded worldviews. This is because certain goods will be constitutive of particular ways of life: they cannot be traded away without the loss of something greater than the particular good itself.⁷⁴

While acknowledging that Gray’s model finds ample support in Berlin’s writings, George Crowder has suggested that Gray’s third category of value conflict – between

⁷⁴ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 43-44

holistic culturally grounded belief systems – does not capture what Berlin means when talks about different cultural values conflicting. Because there is a human horizon to values, and because there are universal values and goods – fairness and well-being, some notion of freedom and tolerance, courage and sympathy – no culturally grounded belief system could ever be completely incommensurable.⁷⁵ As a result, Crowder has suggested that a more fruitful way of interpreting Berlin would be to understand value conflict as being limited to Gray’s first two categories – between goods, or ends, we pursue for their own sake and sub-goods. Different cultures will prioritize different sets of goods and sub-goods, with some overlap. But it is not the cultures that conflict, only particular goods and constellations of goods within these cultures.

Both Gray and Crowder’s interpretations can find some support in Berlin’s writings, yet it is not clear that either model accurately captures the fragmentation of value we find in Berlin’s account of the sources of value conflict. Gray’s model comes closer to capturing this fragmentation, but not all the examples Berlin gives of different types of moral conflict and dilemmas fit neatly into the model. By value Berlin often seems to mean more than ends that we pursue for their own sake or forms of life. In his writing, value often seems to refer to anything that introduces a genuine moral consideration, generating something akin to moral conflict or a moral dilemma. It seems to refer to anything, in other words, that can justify genuine moral consideration.

We can see this when we examine the different types and sources of moral conflict Berlin uses as examples to drive home the point that values are incompatible. Most often – it is true – Berlin uses examples along the following lines:

Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries; but total liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted (CTH, 12)

Or again,

⁷⁵ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 64; Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 135-6.

liberty – without some modicum of which there is no choice and therefore no possibility of remaining human as we understand the word – may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to leave room for the liberty of others, to allow justice or fairness to be exercised (CTH, 12-13)

In both these quotes, we can see Berlin emphasizing the way in which ultimate ends, morally grounded objectives, conflict. Values here refer to ‘ends’, our ‘primary objectives’. So far this is in line with his definition of values quoted above, and Gray’s model. But Berlin also introduces us to conflicts involving a different type of good.

Spontaneity, a marvellous human quality, is not compatible with capacity for organised planning, for the nice calculation of what and how much and where – on which the welfare of society may largely depend. (CTH, 13)

Can spontaneity really be construed as an “end we pursue for its own sake”? Isn’t it rather, as Berlin suggests, “a marvellous human *quality*” (emphasis added) – something we would no doubt mourn if it were eradicated, and something worth our moral consideration if threatened, but hardly an end-in-itself, or constitutive of a particular form of life.

The way in which the term value is used to refer to a broad array of objects of moral consideration – rather than merely the plurality of incompatible ultimate ends – also comes across in the following passage:

We are all aware of the agonising alternatives in the recent past. Should a man resist a monstrous tyranny at all costs, at the expense of the lives of his parents or his children? Should children be tortured to extract information about dangerous traitors or criminals? (CTH, 13)

Here again, while it is conceivable that one could construe these conflicts as being between ‘ultimate ends,’ such as between the absence of tyranny and personal attachments in the first example, and as between a safer world and compassion in the latter example, doing so seems to misconstrue the source of these moral dilemmas. What makes these types of moral dilemmas so agonizing is not that we can’t achieve all the objectives that we desire; it is that we are burdened by moral *obligations* and conflicting

moral *claims*, or *principles*. We feel it is wrong to torture, yet also feel that we have an obligation to save lives if it is in our power. We feel we must resist tyranny, yet we also feel obligated to not put our family members in harm's way, or cause them suffering. In other words, it is not merely our positive ambitions – to realize particular ends – that are frustrated in these situations; they also force us to weigh the claims of moral prohibitions and non-voluntary obligations. It is not merely the claims of 'ends' or 'objectives' that clash in these instances, it is a broader and more fragmented set of moral values and considerations.

The following is another telling example of the way in which Berlin uses value to indicate objects and claims that warrant moral considerations beyond just 'ends that we pursue for their own sake': in discussing the impact of the Romantic movement, he writes that they have "dealt a fatal blow" to the proposition that

rational organization can bring about the perfect union of such values and counter-values as individual liberty and social equality, spontaneous self-expression and organized, socially directed efficiency, perfect knowledge and perfect happiness, the claims of personal life and the claims of parties, classes, nations, the public interest. (CTH, 236-237)

Notice how Berlin goes from using values to refer to individual liberty and social equality to the "claims of personal life and the claims of parties, classes, nations, [and] the public interest." What Berlin seems to be referring to here are the kinds of moral claims, or moral considerations – principles, obligations, and objectives – that pull us in different directions and complicate moral decisions. The claims of parties and classes, in particular, show that Berlin recognized further dimensions of moral conflict than as simply between 'ultimate ends'. We join parties because we share their goals – the party is not an end-in-itself. But that does not mean that the 'claims of parties, classes, nations' do not generate legitimate moral considerations. Rather, as members of communities, nations, parties, and classes, we have, or may feel, a sense of *moral obligation* to these entities, even if we do not at the present time share their goals. The very fact of having belonged, or identified, with a group or organization can generate a sense of obligation, or responsibility. Even the claims of parties can thus represent objects of legitimate moral concern. Yet it would be wrong to construe conflicts between such claims as being

between ends that we pursue for their own sake or forms of life. They are a product of moral obligations and principles.

We are justified, therefore, in including moral obligations and principles in our account of Berlin's concept of value pluralism.⁷⁶ To systematize what Berlin means by value pluralism, particularly as it translates into an account of the sources of moral conflict, then, we can say that there are four sources of moral conflict.⁷⁷

First, ultimate ends, or objectives, may conflict. The conflict here occurs on two levels. First, conflict occurs *between* different ends. Thus, freedom may conflict with social justice; privacy may conflict with security, equality with fairness, the pursuit of peace with the pursuit of justice,⁷⁸ and so forth. Here the conflict is not merely practical – in the sense that if only the conditions were right, this sort of conflict could be overcome (if the level of wealth was sufficiently high, for instance). Ultimate ends often conflict due to the very nature of these objectives. The policies and practices need for the realization of one cannot help but hurt, undermine or render impossible the realization of another. But ultimate ends, or values, do not only conflict with one another, they can also conflict internally. One liberty may conflict with another, one form of equality with another, one form of justice with another, and so forth.

A second source of moral conflict concerns conflicts between different (more or less) holistic belief systems, or worldviews, be they morally, religiously or culturally grounded. Adherence to one will tend to rule out adherence to another. Conflict here can manifest itself in an individual, as she may be torn between adherence to the beliefs she was raised to (or chose to) follow and the belief in (and accompanying demands) of, say, the majority beliefs in the country where she lives. Or it can manifest itself on a social and/or political level, between the claims, demands and expectations of different individuals or groups.

It is worth noting that Berlin subscribes to what we might characterize as an expressivist account of cultural values, heavily indebted to his interpretation of Herder

⁷⁶ Both Gray and Crowder no doubt recognized that conflicts occur due to the types of conflicts discussed above. I am not suggesting they were blind to these types of conflict. What I am arguing is that their conceptualizations of value pluralism fail to capture an important dimension of what Berlin took value pluralism to mean.

⁷⁷ As I indicated earlier, I owe this categorization to Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 5-9.

⁷⁸ As explored by Margalit in *On Compromise*.

and Vico. Importantly, he explicitly rejects reductionists efforts that would interpret the different practices, norms, and traditions that distinguish cultures as different ways of realizing, or giving expression to, more or less the same set of values – different ways of pursuing happiness, different ways of honoring the dignity of human life, etc. Poetry and prose are not simply different means of expressing the same underlying point, he insisted.

Myths are not, as enlightened thinkers believe, false statements about reality corrected by later rational criticism, nor is poetry mere embellishment of what could equally well be stated in ordinary prose. The myths and poetry of antiquity embody a vision of the world as authentic as that of Greek philosophy, or Roman law, or the poetry and culture of our own enlightened age – earlier, cruder, remote from us, but with its own voice, as we hear it in the Illiad or the Twelve Tables, belonging uniquely to its own culture, and with a sublimity which cannot be reproduced by a later, more sophisticated culture. Each culture expresses its own collective experience, each step on the ladder of human development has its own equally authentic means of expression. (AC, 5)⁷⁹

A difficulty raised by Berlin's account is how to distinguish beliefs and practices that constitute genuine values from those that do not (for Berlin is a moral realist). The mere appearance of different practices and beliefs is not sufficient to give us reason for asserting that people actually subscribe to different values. For Berlin, however, while the mere appearance of diversity is not sufficient evidence for the value pluralist thesis, careful interpretation of the different beliefs, practices, and norms that govern and are given expression through different forms of life *would* reveal – and he argued Vico and Herder had showed this to be the case – a deeper diversity than the reductionist account captures.⁸⁰ He did not argue, however, that cultures were completely other, or that they do not evolve and change. Different cultures have many overlapping features, he insisted. And there is also, importantly, tremendous diversity within cultures.⁸¹

Third, moral obligations may conflict. Sartre's famous example of a person torn between his sense of obligation to care for his sick mother and his sense of obligation to

⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979). This book title will hereafter be referred to as AC. Berlin is channelling Vico's ideas in this passage, but it is still representative of Berlin's mature views.

⁸⁰ See for instance CTH, 8-10.

⁸¹ Berlin, CTH, 12.

go fight on behalf of the Free French Forces provides an excellent example of this type of moral conflict.⁸² Both obligations are reflections of non-trivial values, commitments and, relationships. If conceived in isolation, it would be possible to meet each obligation. The failure to meet either one of the obligations would represent a genuine moral loss, a genuine cost would be incurred – whether to the mother or to, in Sartre’s case, the cause of a free French republic. In doing a ‘right,’ in choosing to honour one obligation and not the other, a ‘wrong’ will also be committed. When it comes to this type of moral conflict, the conflict tends to occur because of the nature of the situation and the kind of demands different moral obligations may make at different times. Obligations are not necessarily chosen or voluntary.

Fourth, and finally, moral conflicts arise between different kinds of moral claims or principles – most importantly, perhaps, between deontological and consequentialist claims. Nagel characterizes this type of conflict as occurring between the claims of general rights (“constraints on action deriving from general rights everyone has, either to do certain things, or not to be treated in certain ways”) and the claims of utility, the effect of what one does on everyone’s welfare.⁸³ It is not hard to see why conflicts may arise between these. Since what counts from a utilitarian perspective is the maximum total utility, how it is distributed among the populace is immaterial. If it would serve the interest of maximizing total utility to degrade and ridicule one person (reducing the utility of that one person, but increasing the total utility of the populace), there would be no grounds for not subjecting that one person to that treatment. With a deontological ethic, it is the principle governing an action, not the consequences, that determine whether or not it is just – thus, to treat someone unjustly would be wrong even if it would help maximize utility.⁸⁴ From a deontological moral perspective consequences simply do not factor. To

⁸² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Meridian, 1975), 354

⁸³ Nagel, “Fragmentation of Value,” 129.

⁸⁴ That is not to say that deontological and consequentialist claims necessarily conflict in every conceivable situation: it is perfectly conceivable that the adherence to a deontological ethic could be seen as also generating the best possible consequences. This is the perspective we find, for instance, in theories that rely on a form of indirect consequentialism. On an everyday basis, and institutionally, actions should be guided by a set of deontological principles, not by calculations aimed to maximize utility. Over time, according to this line of argument, this will serve to maximize overall utility, even if in the short run it may appear as if it will not. This claim is hard to maintain, however, once we relinquish or put into question the assumption of progress and harmony of moral goods that informs it. If one accepts – as it seems one would have to –

these two types of moral claims and principles we may also add what Charles Larmore refers to as claims issuing from the principle of partiality.⁸⁵ What this refers to are the claims of particularistic duties, be it to a friend or a particular community.

It is important to emphasize that the conflict does not merely occur within each of the four areas just discussed. These areas of conflict overlap and interact. A moral obligation of the kind just discussed might conflict not just with another, similar, obligation, but with ends, or goals, that are being pursued simultaneously. The priorities and goals that emerge from within a holistic belief system or worldview might conflict internally – no belief system presents a perfectly harmonious list of goals and priorities – and might also demand both deontological and consequentialist commitments. This needs to be kept in mind, for it underscores the importance of taking into consideration all four sources of moral conflict.

Value pluralism is not, we should also underscore, confined to the sphere of the good, on Berlin's interpretation. It applies equally, as John Gray has noted, to deontic principles of right.⁸⁶ Just as there is a plurality of incompatible ends, such as freedom and security, and a plurality of incompatible cultural, religious and moral beliefs, so there is a plurality of principles of justice and right that can claim justifiable allegiance. Value pluralism posits that there is a plurality of criteria that can legitimately ground conceptions of justice.⁸⁷ Indeed, as Amartya Sen has underscored in his discussion of the implications of value pluralism, distributive principles of justice can be anchored in

that a deontological ethic may generate less than optimal consequences, that a commitment to a deontological ethic might actually result in a genuine price having to be paid in terms of utility (or consequences), the reality of conflicting moral claims emerges.

⁸⁵ Larmore, *Patterns*, 132. See also Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 8-9.

⁸⁶ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 147.

⁸⁷ For neo-Kantian rights theorists like John Rawls and Robert Nozick, this is not the case. Notwithstanding the fact of pluralism, principles of justice are not conceived as incommensurable. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). The same is true from a utilitarian standpoint, though the criterion is different, of course. Indeed, Charles Larmore argues that what Rawls (and many other liberal theorists) mean by "the fact of pluralism" is not, in fact, value pluralism as Berlin understood it. Value pluralism, he notes, is a doctrine regarding the nature of the good. The pluralism Rawls refers to concerns the fact that there is *reasonable disagreement* about the nature of the good. Larmore, *Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 154.

Rawlsian, libertarian, Aristotelian or egalitarian assumptions and still meet the demands of impartiality – and these are by no means the *only* possible alternatives.⁸⁸

2.3 *The Claim of Incompatibility*

The source of moral conflict, for Berlin, is the incompatibility of compelling and defensible ends, beliefs, values and moral claims. Following Thomas Nagel, we can say that Berlin identifies two levels of incompatibility: (1) cases where one value limits, or reduces, another – as when the pursuit of greater equality leads to the curtailing of some freedoms; and (2) cases where one value outright condemns another – Machiavelli’s pagan values can only be embraced and realized by rejecting the Christian virtues.⁸⁹

There are a number of factors that generate this incompatibility. In part, it is because of the way the world is, for lack of a better word. To realize one value, it may be necessary – indeed inescapable – to pursue policies that undermine another. If a state decides it wants to increase the level of public security, it may be necessary to infringe on people’s privacy – by, for example, monitoring electronic communication; if it decides that equality in education is a goal that needs to be prioritized, it may need to limit the freedom of parents and families to choose where their children go to school.⁹⁰ These policy implications stem from the fact that the world, according to Berlin, naturally tends towards disharmony, and from the fact that the sources of value are fragmented and shifting.

But more importantly, value pluralism posits that values are often non-contingently, or formally, incompatible. That is, it is often (though not always) the very nature of the values that render them incompatible, not contingent factors such as lack of resources or time. Value pluralism, in other words, is a theory of moral abundance, not of

⁸⁸ Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 12-15.

⁸⁹ Nagel, “Pluralism and Coherence,” in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*.

⁹⁰ If, and if so to what extent, policies that promote equality can lead to gains (and not just the loss) of some freedoms is of course a point of contention, the answer to which will depend on how freedom and equality are conceptualized. On Berlin’s account, greater equality of resources and access to things like education would no doubt be integral to providing people with capacity to exercise their freedom (and thus making it meaningful). Yet it is not clear that he would concede that policies that aim to increase equality should ever be construed as increasing people’s freedom (except perhaps in cases where being granted equality before the law opens the door to freedoms not enjoyed previously).

scarcity.⁹¹ It is not simply the case that the world prevents us from achieving all the moral goods we value because there is insufficient time, or because we only have limited capacities to achieve our objectives. Even with unlimited resources, capacities and time, not all values could be realized. Many values are simply *constitutively* incompatible. The conscious self-understanding necessary for autonomous choice-making is not compatible with unreflective decency. The practices that are integral and give meaning to the life of a monk are constitutively incompatible with a life dedicated to family relationships and attachments.

This ought not be taken to imply that Berlin is insensitive to the fact that the context can play a large role in shaping whether value conflicts arise and the form that they take. To say that value conflicts would persist even under conditions of abundance is not to deny that many conflicts, particularly those that are linked in some way to acute scarcity or lack of opportunity, would disappear if the conditions that produce them change or disappear. It is also worth stressing that the fact that many of the situations of moral conflict we encounter in the world are shaped by, and perhaps even a product of, situational and contingent factors does not, in itself, pose a challenge to Berlin's thesis. For one thing, to claim that there are constitutively incompatible values is not to deny that moral conflicts can also arise between contingently incompatible moral goods. Second, the fact that value conflicts need not always conflict does not entail that they can never conflict, or that they will not conflict under certain circumstances. The conflict between rights and utility is a case in point here. In many situations, the two no doubt support each other, but under certain circumstances, we know from experience, the two may conflict. To this we might add that even if it were true that the *reason* we are faced with a moral dilemma where we are forced to choose between two different goods, or ends, is due to contingent factors, this does not alleviate or dilute the *reality* of the moral dilemma, nor would it remove the necessity of having to confront it.

It should also be stressed that the way in which value conflicts will manifest themselves, and to what extent they will be meaningful, is largely context dependent for Berlin. Berlin's contention is not that, for instance, freedom, always conflicts in the same way and to the same degree with, say, equality or social justice. Two things are

⁹¹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 44.

particularly useful to keep in mind here. First, to what extent a value conflict will be meaningful and a source of concern, Berlin would insist, will depend on local factors, not least because the extent of, say, my freedom will depend on contextual factors. Berlin writes in regards to negative liberty

‘Negative liberty’ is something the extent of which, in a given case, it is difficult to estimate ... The extent of my freedom seems to depend on a) how many possibilities are open to me (though the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic; possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples, which can be exhaustively enumerated); b) how easy or difficult each of these possibilities is to actualize; c) how important in my plan of life, given my character and circumstances, these possibilities are when compared with each other; d) how far they are closed and opened by deliberate human acts; e) what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives, puts on the various possibilities. All these magnitudes must be ‘integrated’, and a conclusion, necessarily never precise, or indisputable, drawn from this process. 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. (L, 177, fn. 1)

This suggests, and this is the second point that should be kept in mind, that there are a myriad of ways in which value conflicts can be negotiated. Berlin writes approvingly of the way in which the New Deal brought qualitative gains in equality and social justice without in any meaningful way curtailing freedoms.⁹² Although he insists value conflicts are inescapable, and though he insists that different values will often be constitutively incompatible – even within systems of morality – it is not his contention that values exist in some kind of abstract zero-sum game, where any meaningful gain must entail a meaningful loss.

2.4 The Claim of Incommensurability

One of the central claims of Berlin’s thought is that values are incommensurable.⁹³ Incommensurability has a significant impact on how we conceptualize the intractability of moral conflict, as it means that conflicts between different values or moral claims

⁹² Berlin, “A Conversation with Steven Lukes,” 81.

⁹³ For discussions of what incommensurability means, see Raz, *Morality as Freedom*, ch. 13; Nagel, “Fragmentation of Value”; Gray, Isaiah Berlin, ch. 2.

cannot be settled by appeals to reason or some similar faculty or method.

Incommensurability indicates that there is no common currency, no common measurement or standard, by which different moral beliefs, or ends or values can be comparatively ranked or weighed – meaning, moral values, principles and claims are irreducible to each other. Two alternatives are incommensurable if neither can be said to be higher or equal to the other.⁹⁴ When two alternatives are incommensurable in this sense, the choice between them cannot, therefore, be reduced to a question of rationality or calculation. In such cases we are forced to choose between “absolute claims” (L, 214), which means “no criterion of morality, no principle of justice, divine or human” can claim to settle the matter (FB, 39). As Berlin writes, “entire systems of value can come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration” (PSM, 320).

The idea that incommensurability, does not mean or entail equality (or rough equality) needs to be clarified; that is, it does not entail that the different values are of *equal* value – nor is it the same as indeterminacy. The claim of equality would require precisely what incommensurability denies, namely comparability – it would require the ability to establish the comparative values of the different goods. Indeterminacy is a misleading term for it suggests that the apparent incommensurability is the product of missing information or knowledge. But this is not what the claim of incommensurability amounts to: no amount of knowledge or information could make two incommensurable values commensurable. As Raz puts it, “where there is incommensurability it is the ultimate truth. There is nothing further behind it, nor is it a sign of imperfection.”⁹⁵ Incommensurability also needs to be distinguished from qualitative incomparability. Sometimes the term incommensurability is used to make a claim to the effect that the value x is ‘incommensurably higher’ than the value y. For instance, a Christian who claims his values to be incommensurable with pagan values is likely making this type of claim. The claim amounts to saying that the value of y – in this example, pagan values – is of such a lesser value than the value x – Christian values – that the very notion of comparing them is rendered absurd. This is not what Berlin means by incommensurability. For Berlin, incommensurability signals incomparability. A

⁹⁴ Raz, *Morality as Freedom*, ch. 13; Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 49-50.

⁹⁵ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, 327.

qualitative incomparability claim could only be made in light of a comparison whereby the value of x has been deemed qualitatively higher than y.⁹⁶

The claim of incommensurability stems from the irreducible nature of moral objectives, values, and claims. Absent a thick set of normative assumptions about the nature of man and morality, incommensurability emerges as something that is hard, if not impossible, to overcome. Berlin makes his claim, in other words, from a standpoint of epistemological modesty. We have no reason to hold that values are *not* incommensurable. There have of course been numerous attempts to ground various transcendent assumptions about human beings and morality, be they Kantian, Aristotelian, Hegelian, or utilitarian. And within these systems of thought, there is no incommensurability between moral ends and obligations. But the problem with these sorts of assumptions, of course, is that they cannot be grounded without reliance on assumptions not dictated by reason or evidence. And because they are irreducible to each other, conflicts between the moral principles and claims they ground cannot be resolved by appeals to some neutral or objective standard. This is what Berlin means when he writes that “reason and calculation can be applied only to means or subordinate ends, but never to ultimate ends” (PSM, 324).⁹⁷

Gray brings up a useful example from outside ethics to indicate how Berlin thinks about incommensurability. Shakespeare and Aeschylus are both exceptional tragic dramatists, but their works of drama are, arguably, incommensurable with each other. It would be false to claim that Aeschylus was a primitive Shakespeare, or that Shakespeare was a lesser dramatist than Aeschylus. Yet, this does not mean that we cannot claim that, for instance, “Euripides is a greater tragic dramatist than Aeschylus.” Incommensurability

⁹⁶ Incommensurability here should not be confused with the variety we find in thinkers like Richard Rorty or Jean-Francois Lyotard, which is grounded in the untranslatability of different languages, symbols and discourses. The problem is not one of understanding or information. See Lukes, “An Unfashionable Fox,” 113-4.

⁹⁷ In contrast, Henry Hardy, Berlin’s long-time editor, appears to hold that Berlin’s value pluralism is rooted in a much stronger, less epistemologically modest, claim to knowledge, as evidenced by Hardy’s argument that, since value pluralism, in his mind, is true, religious doctrines must be false (see “Taking Pluralism Seriously,” in *The One and the Many*). The claim that the truth of value pluralism is of such scope that it conflicts with the truth claims of religious doctrines – as if to the extent that we can demonstrate the validity of value pluralism, we demonstrate the falsehood of any religious doctrine – is clearly incompatible with Berlin’s epistemological assumptions. See William A. Galston, “Must Value Pluralism and Religious Belief Collide,” in *The One and the Many*, for a critical discussion of Hardy’s argument.

occurs whenever “comparability and thereby transitivity breaks down.”⁹⁸ While Shakespeare and Aeschylus’s work fall within a recognizable genre, “its content and structure, its styles and themes, the background of beliefs and conventions it presupposes, and the forms of life it depicts, are too different for them to be comparable in terms of value as exemplars of tragic drama.” The same cannot be said if we sought to compare Shakespeare with some of his own contemporaries.⁹⁹ It is when comparability breaks down that incommensurability enters the picture.

We can perhaps gain further clarification regarding Berlin’s views by considering the argument presented for incommensurability by Joseph Raz. The case for incommensurability is strengthened when we consider that some values are undermined, if not destroyed, if and when they are conceived as being commensurable with other values. Friendship is one example of a value that *needs* to be conceived as incommensurable. The moment a friendship is measured in a calculable unit, to be pursued or ended depending on, say, a calculation of what will serve maximize utility, it ceases to be friendship – what makes something a friendship is precisely its incommensurability.¹⁰⁰ Berlin does not make this point explicitly, but it is implicit in his antireductionism.¹⁰¹ If we try to reduce values to common or homogenous units, we do not merely render them into a different form, we distort and displace them. The process of reduction generates a loss, or distorts the object it is seeking to ‘reduce’. After which, the object no longer retains the same meaning: it has not merely been simplified, it has been turned into something else. It is true of course that not all values depend on their incommensurability in the same way that friendship does. But it is a point that is worth emphasizing nevertheless. In rendering values into a comparable unit, values are often turned into something else. The moment freedom, to use a different example, is

⁹⁸ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 51.

⁹⁹ As Gray emphasizes, it must not be inferred from this that incommensurability only arises between the best exemplars of a genre. It occurs whenever comparability breaks down (Isaiah Berlin, 51).

¹⁰⁰ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, 350.

¹⁰¹ Berlin’s antireductionism comes across, in particular, in his essays on Hamann and Maistre, but is also on display in some of his early more strictly philosophical essays. See “The Magnus of the North,” in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); this book title will hereafter be referred to as TCE; “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” in CTH; “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” in RT. For some of Berlin early more philosophical essays, see *Concepts and Categories* (New York: Viking Press, 1979). See also Jamie Reed, “From Logical Positivism,” for a discussion of Berlin’s views on reductionism.

conceived as merely an element of utility, the value that is attached to it has been distorted – it has ceased to be an end-in-itself.

Of course, it is often (though not always) possible to make comparisons between friendships. Many people have what they consider to be *best* friends after all. But comparability can quickly break down when one value is pitted against a different value. Should a friendship be sacrificed to avoid going to prison, for instance? Or should a friendship be sacrificed for the sake of a marriage?¹⁰² It is not clear these types of question can be solved through the application of reason or some other method. Their resolution requires that judgments be made, the justification of which will not decisively *outweigh* the arguments on the other side, strictly speaking. Note that this does not mean that the decision would necessarily be arbitrary. It can still be based on reasons. Incommensurability merely indicates that the reasons for one alternative are unable to outweigh the reasons for the other.¹⁰³ From a utilitarian or a Kantian perspective things would be different, of course. But whether or not to adopt and follow the dictates of a utilitarian or Kantian perspective is itself a question that is subject to a decision – it will not be decisively dictated by reason or evidence. Thus, the appeal to, or reliance on, a particular moral system for guidance does not overcome the problem of incommensurability. We are still forced to make judgments for which we will lack full justification when we are faced with moral dilemmas.

One could object to the claim of incommensurability, however, by saying that surely it is possible to make some kind of comparison, such that one could say that some

¹⁰² It could perhaps be objected that these types of examples, typical to abstract ethics, take the conflict as given, whereas the answer to this type of apparently tragic trade-off is to renegotiate the parameters of the dilemma. An apparent moral dilemma need not necessarily be tragic when understood differently, or perhaps properly. There is truth to this objection, in so far as any particular example of a moral dilemma is open to the criticism that it is needless, is formulated too abstractly, or depends on assumptions not everyone shares, etc. This objection need not be considered a challenge to Berlin's broader thesis that moral life has a tendency to present us with moral dilemmas, however, unless it were asserted that all moral dilemmas are illusory. And *that* objection would be very hard to sustain. It is true that from any one person's (or morality's) perspective, there might not be any moral dilemmas, but that is not enough to establish that there *are* no moral dilemmas. For one thing, even if a particular person (or moral perspective) does not recognize the moral relevance of the consequences of an action, that, in itself, does not deprive the consequences of their actual moral relevance. Indeed, tragedy, as the next chapter will demonstrate, arises from the third person perspective. In either case, the fact that a dilemma *could* be viewed differently is in some ways irrelevant. As Berlin writes, "Antigone is faced with a dilemma to which Sophocles implies one solution, Sartre offers the opposite, while Hegel proposes 'sublimation' on to some higher level – poor comfort to those who are agonised by dilemmas of this kind" (CTH, 13).

¹⁰³ Nagel, "Fragmentation of Value," 128-129; Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, 338.

outcomes are to be preferred over others, and that if we allow for this, then surely this means values are at least in some respects commensurable. Following Bernard Williams's exploration of this question, we can press the objection further and say that it is surely not the case that incommensurability applies *wherever* there is conflict, such that if for instance an extremely modest increase in equality could only be purchased at the expense of almost total liberty, there could be no rational grounds for saying that such a trade off would be absurd.¹⁰⁴ And if we can say that there are rational grounds for rejecting such a trade off, then we are admitting that values can be commensurable, or so the objection claims.

A number of points need to be made in answer to this objection. The first is that Berlin did not rule out that there could be contextual grounds for preferring one alternative over another. As he puts it, "in concrete situations not every claim is of equal force" (CTH, 17).¹⁰⁵ It is also conceivable that if a value conflict occurred between two actors with overlapping commitments that the conflict could be resolved through the appeal to some common – third – value they both share. This can be done without granting that the values were reducible to each other or some kind of homogenous unit. Berlin makes this point when he writes that "it is not a matter of purely subjective judgment: it is dictated by the forms of life of the society to which one belongs, a society among other societies, with values held in common" (CTH, 18). The second point that needs to be made is that Berlin did not claim that all value conflicts in all times and places are incommensurable. What he claimed was that value conflicts sometimes, but not always, involve incommensurability. For two people who have the same basic value hierarchy (assuming it is coherent, that any internal conflicts have been overcome) could clearly appeal to rationality in resolving the conflict, having compared the relative value both attach to the two values. But this is an unlikely event. More likely, people will have different value hierarchies, and will wish to pursue different objectives, the grounds for which are not reducible to questions of rationality. In the example given above, we can also see that even such a 'obvious' example of a case of value conflict that could be

¹⁰⁴ Bernard Williams, "Conflict of Values," in *The Idea of Freedom*, 227. Williams believes in Berlin's incommensurability thesis.

¹⁰⁵ See also Berlin, L, 47; PSM, 15.

rationally assessed, the case is only ‘obvious’ if we assume that all the parties involved in the conflict place at least some value on both liberty and equality. If they did not, it would not be obvious that the trade-off would be absurd. If we imagine a hypothetical person who was dedicated to only a single value – for example security – and who sought to consistently do everything possible to maximize that value, then no sacrifice (to other values) could be too great, even if it only increased the person’s security marginally.¹⁰⁶

In addition, it should be stressed that incommensurability does not mean that moral judgments involving incommensurable alternatives cannot be rationally based, nor does it in any way preclude reasoned debate and deliberation. It in no way contradicts the claim of incommensurability to accept that value conflicts can be resolved through reasoned debate, or that people can, through a process of reason-giving, come to agree to settle a particular value conflict in a particular way. But what it does mean is that reason cannot settle the matter, in the sense that, if all the relevant information is taken into account, one alternative will *outweigh* the other. When confronted with a moral conflict involving incommensurability, we are forced to make judgments. These can be based on reasons, but they involve decisions, choices, that are not reducible to questions of rationality. This should not be taken to mean that all solutions to a moral dilemma are somehow always necessarily equally reasonable (or unreasonable). Clearly, it is quite possible for decisions to be based on false information, mistaken judgments, prejudices, or other factors that would give grounds for concluding that the decision is in some sense irrational or incoherent; similarly, a proposed solution to a problem can be internally incoherent, or poorly thought out.

The claim that reason cannot resolve value conflicts that involve incommensurability does not imply that reason is silent on all the different levels and considerations that go into deciding how to resolve such a conflict. The claim is more

¹⁰⁶ This raises the question of whether we ought to distinguish incommensurability from incomparability. Charles Larmore argues, much like Berlin (though he wrongly interprets Berlin as denying this possibility), that we can judge one value to be more important in a particular situation without being able to reduce the two values to single standard. This implies, he suggests, that values can sometimes be comparable without being commensurable. By incommensurability, however, Berlin means something slightly broader than just being able to compare two or more values according to a single particular standard. It is closer to Nagel’s characterization when he speaks of a situation where neither of two claims, or values, can be said to outweigh the other. Thus in cases where we have grounds for saying that the claims of one value clearly outweigh the other, not merely as a matter of judgment but as a matter of justification, Berlin would suggest, the claims are not incommensurable.

limited: that when incommensurable moral claims conflict, there will be more than one fully defensible, rational, and justifiable way of resolving the dilemma, such that neither resolution can be said to be greater or equal to the other. As Raz has argued, reason may limit the choices that are conceived as eligible, but when two alternatives are incommensurable reason, or any additional information, will not be able to settle the matter.¹⁰⁷ We have to make decisions, choices. These are needed not because reason doesn't have anything to say about how to resolve moral conflicts, but because it has too much to say. In other words, we do not *discover* how to resolve value conflicts – be it through the use of abstract reason, the application of the scientific method or through deliberation – rather we come to a decision.

The argument that reason is incapable of settling moral conflicts involving incommensurability should not be taken, then, as “a plea for obscurantism, or reliance on immemorial wisdom or ancestral voices, or the inner light” (POI, 140). Judgement, Berlin insists, depends

upon empirical factors, such as experience, observation, above all on that ‘sense of reality’ which largely consists in semi-conscious integration of a large number of apparently trivial or unnoticeable elements in the situation that between them form some kind of pattern which of itself ‘suggests’ – ‘invites’ – the appropriate action. Such action is, no doubt, a form of improvisation, but flowers only upon the soil of rich experience and exceptional responsiveness to what is relevant in the situation (POI, 139-140).

It is, in other words, Berlin insists, a mistake to think that the capacity to make value judgements is dependent on the commensurability of values. It is also worth pointing out that in emphasizing the limits of reason, Berlin is not urging us to turn away from critical inquiry. Reason may be the best tool we have, in so far as it allows us to critically assess the world around us, evaluate and contrast different factors and examine the implications of different possibilities. Yet Berlin insists we should be equally clear about its limits.

¹⁰⁷ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, 342.

When we are confronted with genuine moral dilemmas, incommensurability means reason will not be able to settle the matter.¹⁰⁸

2.5 Value Pluralism and Relativism¹⁰⁹

At this stage, it is useful to begin asking in what ways value pluralism differs from various doctrines of relativism and subjectivism. Berlin explicitly argued that value pluralism was not a species of relativism or subjectivism, yet not all of his critics have found the distinctions he made convincing.¹¹⁰ The question of whether value pluralism should be considered a species of relativism or subjectivism really breaks down into two somewhat overlapping yet distinct issues. First, how does value pluralism compare to doctrines of relativism and subjectivism in its account of values and the sources of moral conflict? Second, can value pluralism ground a commitment to something akin to humanistic values? While I will give the latter question some consideration below, this section will primarily be concerned with identifying the ways in which value pluralism differs from various doctrines of relativism and subjectivism in its account of the nature of values and the sources of moral conflict. Berlin provides a number of arguments for why value pluralism is not akin to a theory of relativism or subjectivism. In what follows, I will focus on three of his arguments: (1) that values are objective; (2) that there is a human horizon to values that facilitates understanding and provides a moral minimum; and (3) while Berlin is insistent values should primarily be understood as particular, he does consider there to be universal values. Let us examine each argument in turn.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ For an exploration of the role and power of reason in Berlin's thought, see Jonathan Riley "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism." Riley argues persuasively that reason, on Berlin's account, is too weak to resolve conflicts involving incommensurability, but strong enough to discover certain basic liberal values (as well as other values, it should be added).

¹⁰⁹ For a discussion of how Berlin dealt with this issue, see Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 2, and Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, pp. 114-123.

¹¹⁰ See Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural" and "Must Pluralists be Relativists?" in *Liberals and Cannibals*; Michael Sandel, "Introduction," in *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Perry Anderson, "The Pluralism of Isaiah Berlin," in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992).

¹¹¹ It is worth noting that in some early essays on value pluralism – particularly in his early work on the German thinker J. G. Herder (in TCE, for example)– Berlin, by his own admission, leaves the door open to the charge of relativism. In later essays, however – and particularly his essay "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought" (CTH) – Berlin went to great lengths to show that value pluralism did not mean relativism.

2.5.1 Moral Realism

Berlin repeatedly claims that values are ‘objective’. He writes, for instance, “I think these values are objective – that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given” (POI, 12). Elsewhere he says, “There is a world of objective values. By this I mean those ends that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means” (CTH, 11). It is because it recognizes the objectivity of values, he argues, that “pluralism is not relativism – the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men’s subjective fancies” (POI, 12). At first glance, it is hard to square this notion that values are objective with Berlin’s endorsement of the Romantic Revolt’s critique of monism. Berlin writes, for instance, that the Romantic Movement had, to its credit, “permanently shaken the faith in universal, objective truth in matters of conduct”. He repeatedly argues that one of the central insights of the Romantic Movement was precisely that it realized that “ends are not, as had been thought for more than two millennia, objective values, discoverable within man or in a transcendent realm by some special faculty. Ends are not discovered at all, but made, not found but created” (CTH, 227). This was also the view that he, with admiration, attributed to one of his intellectual heroes, Alexander Herzen. “He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings” (PSM, 523).

There is an ambiguity in Berlin’s account here, not least because Berlin never adequately develops what he means by objectivity. But, as John Gray has suggested, there is a way to reconcile these seemingly conflicting strands in Berlin’s thought. Berlin’s conception of value pluralism, as Gray has shown persuasively, is rooted in a form of moral realism.¹¹² Values, ultimate ends, are objective – and we can have knowledge of what they are and how they relate to each other. Importantly, however, when Berlin speaks of values being “objective” he is not imagining that they exist in some impersonal metaphysical realm that we can gain knowledge of through the use of some special faculty or method – “to speak of our values as objective and universal is not to say that there exists some objective code, imposed on us from without, unbreakable by

¹¹² Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 49.

us because not made by us” (CTH, 202-204). Values are historical creations that are, or become, embodied in public practices. This makes them ‘objective.’ Values are products of the human mind, how we think about the world, our conceptual categories, and so forth. But as public practices, they take on an existence beyond the realm of discourse and/or mere imagination or thought. This is also what makes values something of which we can have genuine knowledge. Like the rules and grammar of a particular language, values are binding yet change and evolve with the passing of time, adjusting to new questions, new modes of life and practice.

One of the central distinctions between Berlin’s value pluralism and various doctrines of relativism, subjectivism, and skepticism, then, lies precisely in the claim to moral knowledge that it makes. The conclusion that there is a plurality of incompatible and incommensurable values is a product not of an inability to penetrate and understand the values of others, or an expression of different emotive preferences, but of the fact that there are genuine values of which we *can* have knowledge. This means that from the standpoint of value pluralism, it is possible to be wrong, or in error, about matters of value. A person who believes that the cruelty is a moral good would be wrong on Berlin’s account. They would be deluded, or in error of what the notion of a moral good means. Values such as freedom, equality, and justice have many genuine forms, but they are not simply whatever anyone thinks they are. If someone were to say that justice means to lie and steal, they would be wrong. This is not because there exists a Platonic form of justice, but because justice is a moral concept with a rich history, which men and women have interpreted and sought to actualize politically in a myriad of ways. It may have multiple meanings, but these are meanings that exist beyond the realm of subjective fancy and discourse. Reflection may show our moral beliefs and intuitions to be incoherent or grounded in blind prejudice. This is also what allows Berlin to claim, as he does on repeated occasions, that while there is a plurality of values, there are not infinitely many. Values, he insists, “must be within the human horizon” (CTH, 11). The number and kind of human values that “I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite” (POI, 12).

2.5.2 *Human Horizon*

Berlin further distinguished his conception of value pluralism from relativism by arguing that there was what he called a “human horizon” to values. This meant two things: (1) that there are boundaries to what can constitute a value, providing a moral minimum of sorts; and (2) that intercommunication and understanding between people holding different beliefs, or values, is possible. In other words, the fact that there is a human horizon to values meant, for Berlin, that both cognitive and ethical relativism were false.¹¹³ Different culturally grounded belief systems were not, Berlin insisted, ‘windowless boxes’ as is found in some modern theories of cultural pluralism. The notion that cultures are windowless boxes, beyond comprehension or judgment for those on the outside, he argued, was a recent invention. Berlin explains that this view was not shared by Vico, who “did not suppose that men are encapsulated within their own epoch or culture, insulated in a box without windows and consequently incapable of understanding other societies and periods whose values may be widely different from theirs and which they may find strange or repellent” (CTH, 60). We can understand even cultures and belief systems that were radically different from our own. Not completely, or perfectly, of course, but we can recognize them as human, as intelligible goals, purposes and moral concerns. We can do this because they arise from a common framework of moral concepts and categories. They are made by men and women and so can be understood by men and women. They are never completely other. “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” (CTH, 11). The characteristics, values and capacities we share by virtue of being human make communication and understanding possible.

The possibility of intercommunication and understanding is central to Berlin’s own conception of what distinguishes value pluralism from relativism. “‘I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.’ That is relativism,” Berlin writes.¹¹⁴ But that is not what is meant by pluralism. Pluralism is “the

¹¹³ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, Ch. 5.

¹¹⁴ Berlin appears to collapse the distinction between relativism and subjectivism in this quote – relativism being equated with the view that moral preferences are equivalent to a subjective (or emotive) preference, or simple matters of taste that have no obvious moral consequence.

conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other” (CTH, 11). But this does not mean that we cannot judge or criticize values that are different from our own. Berlin writes,

We are free to criticise 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 (CTH, 11)

Berlin liked to point out that though Vico believed in cultural pluralism, and saw different cultures as representing their own centers of gravity, he did not hesitate to pass judgment on them. “Vico experiences no intellectual discomfort – nor need he do so – when he damns in absolute terms the social injustice and brutality of Homeric society” (CTH, 86-87). Understanding need not involve the suspension of judgment. For instance, it is possible to understand, and even sympathize with, the values of unbridled creativity, spontaneity, and authenticity – the celebration of the Promethean man – that emerged from the Romantic Movement, and still judge them irresponsible, potentially cruel, and fundamentally unsuitable as ideals of political action. Berlin repeatedly stresses, “Relativism is not the only alternative to universalism” (CTH, 85).

Berlin also suggests that our human horizon provides a moral minimum of sorts. Certain values and practices are simply not compatible with what it means to be human. He writes that

if we meet someone who cannot see why (to take a famous example) he should not destroy the world in order to relieve the pain in his little finger, or someone who genuinely sees no harm in condemning innocent men, or betraying friends, or torturing children, then we find that we cannot argue with such people, not so much because we are horrified as because we think them in some way inhuman – we call them moral idiots. (CTH, 203)

The human horizon, Berlin suggests, means that it is not the case that ‘anything goes’. Certain practices are simply beyond the human horizon, and therefore beyond both

comprehension and reasonable sanction.¹¹⁵ This sentiment is echoed in the following passage, worth quoting at length:

What are these values? What is their status, and why should we accept them? May it not be true as some existentialist and nihilist extremists have maintained, that there are no human values, still less European values? Men simply commit themselves as they commit themselves, for no reason. I dedicate myself to being a poet, and you to being a hangman: this is my choice and that is yours, and there are no objective standards in terms of which these choices can be graded, whereby my morality is superior to yours. We choose as we choose, that is all that can be said; and if this leads to conflict and destruction, that is a fact about the world which must be accepted as gravitation is accepted, something which is inherent in the dissimilar natures of dissimilar men, or nations, or cultures. That this is not a valid diagnosis has been made clear if only by the great and widespread sense of horror which the excesses of totalitarianism have caused. For the fact of shock reveals that there does exist a scale of values by which the majority of mankind – and in particular of western Europeans – in fact live, live not merely mechanically and out of habit, but as part of what in their moments of self-awareness constitutes for them the essential nature of man. (CTH, 202-203)

There are numerous points that emerge from this quote that shed light on Berlin's conception of value pluralism. To begin with, we can see that although Berlin saw choices, decisions as essential to our moral predicament, it is not the act of choice that bestows value on an end, as some late Romantic thinkers imagined. Although values are creations, their moral value is not derived from acts of the will. The second point it is worth taking note of is that Berlin clearly rejects the view that there are no objective criteria in morality. We can distinguish between values that fall within the human horizon and those that are incompatible with it. This shows (again) that Berlin did not believe in the validity of cognitive relativism. Furthermore, he distinguished his value pluralism from both ethical relativism (in that he considered there to be objective standards of morality) and subjectivism (the moral value attached to an end is not a product of subjective preferences).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ “There is a limit beyond which we can no longer understand what a given creature is at; what kinds of rules it follows in its behaviour; what its gestures mean. In such situations, when the possibility of communication breaks down, we speak of derangement, of incomplete humanity.” (CTH, 80).

¹¹⁶ See Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 114-123.

Yet, there is no doubt that there is some ambiguity in Berlin's conception of the human horizon, and what precisely he sees it as entailing, particularly if and to what extent it was meant to provide some kind of moral minimum.¹¹⁷ Gray, I believe, is on the right track when he argues that for Berlin the notion of a human horizon refers to a "common framework of moral categories."¹¹⁸ As Gray points out, there is a hint of Kantianism as well as a hint of natural law in Berlin's conception of the human horizon. One way to think of it, perhaps, is that the human horizon functions like a kind of natural (and universal) moral grammar.¹¹⁹ It is something we all possess by virtue of being human beings. And it facilitates both the creation and the communication of different values and moral norms. Berlin insists that in addition to the physical and psychological properties which make us human, "there are also certain moral properties which enter equally deeply into what we conceive of as human nature" (CTH, 203). Values can only emerge, be conceived, conceptualized and understood against the background of our common framework of moral categories – our moral properties. Values and practices that are not rooted in, or compatible with, this common framework of moral categories, are incomprehensible for that very reason and go against our moral DNA.

Under no conditions could it be permissible to, he writes, "torture freely, or slaughter fellow men for pleasure" (CTH, 204). There is a hint of natural law in this, as Berlin admits. But, he insists, natural law in "empiricist dress – no longer necessarily based on theological or metaphysical foundations" (CTH, 204). "Hence," he writes,

to speak of our values as objective and universal is not to say that there exists some objective code, imposed on us from without, unbreakable by us because not made by us; it is to say that we cannot help accepting these basic principles because we are human, as we cannot help (if we are normal) seeking warmth rather than cold, truth rather than falsehood, to be recognized by others for what we are rather than to be ignored or misunderstood (CTH, 204).

There are numerous potential problems in Berlin's account of values here. It is not clear, to begin with, that it is possible to conceive of natural law in an "empiricist dress,"

¹¹⁷ Crowder has shed light on some of the inconsistencies in Berlin's use of the term, *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 64.

¹¹⁹ The concept of a moral grammar comes from Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

without metaphysical or theological assumptions. Any notion of natural law must certainly rely on some assumptions that are not dictated by empirical evidence. Observation *alone*, surely, cannot reveal natural laws. It is also far from clear that the notion of the “moral idiot” provides a compelling demarcation criterion between a genuine and a false value. It is hard to see how the category could be defined in a way that did not make it either far too broad, such that it would include the supposed values of large groups of people – thus replicating some of the problems Berlin associates with monism – or too narrowly, where it would only apply to the pursuits of a trivially small number of people – making it incapable of dealing adequately with the criticism that value pluralism entails a form of ethical relativism (since virtually every claimed value would need to be seen as falling within the human horizon). We have, in other words, good reason to question the cogency of Berlin’s philosophical argument here. With that said, Berlin’s claim that there exist a universal moral minimum is hardly controversial and there is little reason to question its essential validity, even if Berlin himself does not provide us with a well developed defense of his claim.¹²⁰

2.5.3 *Universal Values*

In addition to a moral minimum, Berlin also held that there were universal values. While Berlin argued that values should be conceived above all else as particular, he also considered there to be universal values. Berlin identifies a core set of values that he sees as universal: goods such as fairness and wellbeing, virtues such as courage and mercy. These values are natural to us for the same reason that we “seek warmth rather than cold” (CTH, 204). Most often when Berlin says that there are universal values he appears above all else to be making an empirical claim – there are certain values that observation reveals to have been present (in some form) in nearly every society. There is, however, I have already suggested, a hint of natural law theory in Berlin’s discussion of these basic universal values, so some ambiguity remains.

¹²⁰ For a more developed account of (something akin to) Berlin’s position, see H. L. A. Hart on the ‘minimum content of natural law’, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 189-195. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 64. For a more thorough and developed defense of the objectivity of values, although one that takes issue with the value pluralist thesis, see Dworkin’s *Justice for Hedgehogs*. See also Thomas Nagel, “The Limits of Objectivity,” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (delivered at Bresenose College, Oxford University, May 4, 11, and 18, 1979).

The ambiguity in Berlin's account of the human horizon and moral universals has given rise to a few different interpretations of the relationship between them. Henry Hardy insists value pluralism implies that there is a core of human values that all cultures share, but that cultures nevertheless possess a diverse array of different values.¹²¹ The human horizon is broad enough to encompass both the core and the diverse particulars. Crowder offers an alternative account, suggesting that what separates cultures is that they interpret a thin set of universal values in different – 'thick' –ways.¹²² On this interpretation, the core of moral universals constitutes, in effect, the human horizon. It is the fact that we share the same set of moral universals that allows us to understand cultures that differ from our own (since their values represent interpretations of a particular sub-set of moral universals. Neither interpretation is entirely satisfactory. It is not clear that every culture must share the full set of moral universals, as Hardy's interpretation suggests; nor does it seem consistent with Berlin's writings to propose that pluralism be understood as an expression of different (particular) interpretations of moral universals. The basic premise of value pluralism seems to be precisely the opposite: that the diversity of values is a reflection of the fact that people do not ask the same questions about the world, do not pursue the same ends albeit in different ways.¹²³ Crowder's theory becomes plausible if we interpret what he means by moral universals more loosely, as meaning not values strictly speaking, but as being compatible with what it means to be a human being, with what I have suggested we call a universal moral grammar.

It should be noted that the existence of universal values did not alleviate, for Berlin, mankind's tragic predicament. Even among universal values conflicts are "universal and endemic."¹²⁴ A commitment to fairness may be incompatible with the promotion of wellbeing; courage may under certain circumstances demand that we not be merciful. Any reference to these universal values, therefore, is unlikely to settle moral conflicts.

¹²¹ Henry Hardy and George Crowder, "Berlin's Universal Values: Core or Horizon?" *The One and the Many*.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ See for instance Berlin, AC, 6.

¹²⁴ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 64.

However, even though he held there were universal values, Berlin was insistent that values should be understood primarily as local and particular. There is an anti-reductionism running through Berlin's thought that shapes not only his antipathy towards social scientific theories of explanation but that is reflected in his understanding of values, their content.¹²⁵ Berlin distinguishes his conception of value pluralism from early theorists of pluralism, such as Montesquieu and Hume, who saw cultural diversity, and the plurality of values, as the expression of a common human nature, and a common set of universal values, having adapted to local and particular conditions.¹²⁶

As Gray notes, Berlin's conception of values pluralism has at its core an element of voluntarism.¹²⁷ There was much in the Romantic Movements conception of self-creation through acts of will that Berlin found objectionable – not least of which was the aesthetic conception of politics that it would come to underpin. And Berlin did not believe, as noted earlier, that mere subjective preference is sufficient to constitute something as a value. Yet, at the root of his conception of human nature and his understanding of values – their content and how they come to be constituted – is a conception of man as a creative, self-transforming creature. It is the human capacity for self-creation through choice making that gives rise to the plurality of irreducible values, forms of life and moral principles. Men do not ask the same questions of the world, or desire basically the same things – they ask different questions, pursue radically different, and indeed incompatible, ends. Different societies and cultures – in different times and places – thus represented their own centers of gravity. That is not to say that they do not have overlapping features, or that they did not stem from a common framework of moral categories, or that they are static and unchanging, but it does mean that different cultures and values are not reducible to each other. Cultural variation cannot be explained as, for instance, different means of attaining universal ends, as a utilitarian might imagine. Human ends, values, and moral principles thus emerge, change, and disappear over time – much like languages, they evolve and change as new generations reinterpret what is handed down to them and adapt to changing circumstances.

¹²⁵ See Jamie Reed, "From Logical Positivism".

¹²⁶ Berlin, AC, 6.

¹²⁷ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 71.

There is, thus, an element in Berlin's conception of value pluralism – derived from his engagement with the political thought of Vico and Herder – that sits uneasily with liberalism's claim to universality. If values are primarily particular, if different times and places represent their own valuational centers of gravity, liberalism would seem to emerge as only one option among many. It is this that has bothered even some of Berlin's sympathetic critics, such as Lukes and Crowder. Both, consequently, have sought to re-conceptualize value pluralism in a way that moderates its more radical implications.¹²⁸ And indeed it is true that value pluralism, as conceptualized by Berlin, undermines the effort to provide a robust, more or less timeless, philosophical justification for liberalism. For Berlin, of course, this was not a problem. As Berlin argued, quoting Schumpeter, "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions, said an admirable writer of our time, and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (L, 217). We do not need absolute justifications for our values in order to be able to stand for them unflinchingly. "Principles are no less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed" (L, 217).

It is important to emphasize here that the fact that he considered the search for absolute criteria in morality to be futile does not mean that there is nothing in Berlin's thought, or about the implications of value pluralism, that facilitates a defense of a basically liberal approach to political action. As I have already discussed, value pluralism provides ample avenues from which to engage in moral argument and from which to make moral choices. Berlin is a moral realist, not a moral skeptic.

It is also important to emphasize that value pluralism according to Berlin facilitates an understanding of moral conflict that is different in important respects from the way in which moral conflict is presented in various doctrines of relativism and subjectivism. Subjectivist doctrines are forced to deny that moral conflict can be rooted in incompatible reasons, attributing moral conflict instead to differing tastes, or emotive preferences. Meanwhile, relativistic accounts of moral conflict, in contrast to value pluralism, fail to make sense of conflicts that are internal to codes of morality or occur within a cultural belief system. By giving us what he saw as a more accurate understanding of moral conflict, Berlin's conception of value pluralism sheds light on the

¹²⁸ Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*, ch. 6-8; Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 6-7.

paradoxes, limits, possibilities and stakes of political action, giving us a sense of the proper means, and even ends, of political action. That said, in order to fully unpack Berlin's understanding of the moral conflict generated by value pluralism, we must first examine more closely what Berlin took to be perhaps the central implication of value pluralism: that conflict and indeed tragedy were inescapable facets of the human condition.

2.6 Summary

At this point, let me briefly summarize the central components of Berlin's conception of value pluralism. Human ends, moral principles, and values, Berlin argued, are not only plural, but often incompatible and incommensurable. Incommensurability signals that there is no common measurement or standard by which to compare two or more values and claims – they are irreducible to each other. Incommensurability is not a product of indeterminacy and does not signal qualitative incomparability. Value pluralism amounts to a denial of what is arguably one of the core animating beliefs in the Western philosophical tradition – the belief in moral monism. But unlike various doctrines of relativism, subjectivism and skepticism, Berlin's conception of value pluralism is rooted in a form of moral realism. Its claim is not merely that there is a diversity of moral opinion; it posits that there are a plurality of ends, or values, forms of human flourishing, and moral principles, which are non-contingently incompatible and incommensurable. These values are objective – meaning, they have become, or were, embodied in public practices; they do not merely exist in people's minds or through discourse. That is not to suggest, however, that they exist a priori, or in some metaphysical realm, unalterable by men because not made by men. On the contrary, value pluralism posits that values are creations. While there are some values that are universal – meaning, integral to what it means to be human – it holds that values should be primarily understood as historical and particular. The plurality of values is not a product of men pursuing the same ends under different circumstances; it is a product of men asking different questions, pursuing different ends – of man's self-creating, self-transforming nature interacting with a particular historical moment. The fact that values arise from the common stock of humanity's human horizon means that the plurality of values is not infinite. But that does

not mean the plurality of values that exist and have existed reveal every possible form of human flourishing. Values have changed and continue to change, and new values sometimes spring to life. This means moral conflict, dilemmas and indeed tragedy are inescapable features of humanity's political and moral predicament.

3. VALUE PLURALISM AND TRAGEDY

There is in Berlin's vision of the ends of life, as Roger Hausen notes,

a powerful element of tragedy; avenues to human realisation may intersect and block one another; things of inestimable intrinsic value and beauty around which an individual or a civilisation may seek to build and entire way of life can come into mortal conflict; and the outcome is eradication of one of the protagonists and an absolute unredeemable loss.¹²⁹

Tragedy was never far from political life Berlin insisted. Conflict and loss, sometimes irreparable, sometimes tragic, were inescapable facets of the human predicament. No political arrangement, no political solution, could overcome it. This is arguably the central thesis of Berlin's political thought. His efforts to demonstrate the truth of value pluralism are in some respects efforts to demonstrate this truth about political life. We would do well to keep this in mind, as it reminds us that Berlin was not merely interested in investigating the roots of moral conflict, or in understanding the nature of conflicting moral claims. When Berlin writes that moral conflicts involve incommensurability, he is trying to show that when values clash it is rarely possible to speak of what gets lost being compensated for by what is gained. When Berlin writes that genuine human values are incompatible, he is trying to show that we have little reason to be suspicious of political conflict, or to treat it as a function of imperfection. In other words, the fact that tragedy is never far from political life is meant to remind us not only of the potential costs of political choices, but also to underscore the limits of what political action can achieve.

To understand Berlin's political ethic, his critique of monism and relativism, and his own conception of the proper ends and means of political action, it is necessary to place tragedy at the center of our interpretation. By focusing on tragedy, we get a sense for how Berlin's conception of value pluralism, grounded in moral realism and informed by a particular conception of human agency, gave rise to a particular moral framework – one that had important implications for Berlin's own analysis of the moral and political predicament we face in the world: how we should understand it and how we should deal

¹²⁹ Roger Hausen, "Introduction," AC, liii.

with it. Focusing on tragedy also helps us locate the importance Berlin attached to the *recognition* of tragic conflict and tragic loss – a theme of Berlin’s thought that has yet to receive the attention it deserves. Both monism and relativism are grounded in assumptions about the political world that undermine, or work against, the ability to recognize the tragic dimension of politics. As I will explore below and in later chapters, this is in part what makes political doctrines grounded in monist and relativist assumptions potentially disastrous. Value pluralism illuminates rather than hides this tragic dimension, and as such facilitates a conception of politics more attuned to the character, stakes, and paradoxes of political conflict.

But before we can proceed to develop this interpretation more fully, we must begin by establishing what precisely Berlin meant by tragedy. What type of event did it signify? What was it that made something tragic on Berlin’s account? This is important not just for the sake of conceptual clarity, we must also inquire whether Berlin’s conception of value pluralism can be made to support the kind of tragic vision of political life that Berlin suggests it does. Ryszard Legutko has suggested that value pluralism is incompatible with tragedy; if value pluralism is true, he has suggested, moral conflicts would not be tragic. In this chapter I will aim to clarify what precisely Berlin meant by tragedy and demonstrate that the criticism of Legutko is grounded in a conflation of value pluralism with relativism.¹³⁰

3.1 The Meaning of Tragedy

Like any concept with a rich history, the meaning of tragedy is contested. The role of fate and necessity – the whims of the Gods – present in Aristotle’s conception of tragedy can scarcely be found in Hegel’s more modern conception, where conflict between mutually intelligible goods is what is at the root of the tragic. The absurd spectacle of the tragic in Nietzsche has little in common with the semi-religious conception of tragedy – conceived as being rooted in the continued frustration of the Good – found in Terry Eagleton, still

¹³⁰ Ryszard Legutko, “On Postmodern Liberal Conservatism,” *Critical Review*, 8:1 (Winter, 1994); Legutko’s criticism is presented and analyzed in detail by Beta Polanowska-Sygulska in “Pluralism and Tragedy,” in UD. The discussion in this chapter on the relationship between value pluralism and tragedy is indebted to Polanowska-Sygulska’s analysis.

less with those found in Aristotle and Hegel.¹³¹ The range of thinkers that have in some form dealt with the topic is immense, from Shakespeare, Schopenhauer and Hume, to Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Karl Jaspers.¹³² These thinkers have differed not only on what types of events or situations constitute the tragic, but on its roots and implications.

In its most essential respects, the way Berlin conceives of tragedy closely resembles the conception of tragedy found in Hegel, with the exception that Berlin eschews Hegel's expectation of ultimate moral harmony. Like Hegel, Berlin saw tragedy as a product of the conflict between one good and another. Tragedy was not the product of conflicts between good and evil. He writes, "If you have a collision between two morally acceptable claims, you have a tragic situation, and Hegel is right in saying that the essence of tragedy is the clash between right and right" (CL, 110). At the root of the tragic, then, as A. C. Bradley has observed in his influential study of Hegel's conception of tragedy, is "not suffering but its cause, the action or conflict."¹³³ Suffering, in-and-of-itself, is not tragic. What makes something tragic is the character, or nature, of the event that leads to loss and suffering. Berlin underscores this point when he writes, "Tragedy – as opposed to mere disaster – consists in the conflicts of human action, or characters, or values" (CTH, 185). A disaster may be horribly sad, unfortunate, heartbreaking, and may involve loss and suffering, but neither of those things make it tragic.

Tragedy, then, is a product of value incompatibility. In Hegel's conception, it was the "the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance" that was at the root of the tragic.¹³⁴ Yet this did not lead Hegel to conclude that tragedy was an inescapable facet of the human condition. Value incompatibility was a contingent feature of the moral universe. Tragedy was ultimately a product of the wrongful assertion of a right, of

¹³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967); Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy"; Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*.

¹³² William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (Indian Hills, Col: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958); David Hume, "Of Tragedy," *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Iron in the Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 2002); Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1992); Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1969).

¹³³ Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," 70.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 71

pushing the claim of a particular good too far, beyond its justifiable realm. What is denied, or lost, through tragic conflict is not, therefore, in Hegel, the good itself, but its “exclusive claim.”¹³⁵ As Bradley puts the point, “that which is denied is not the rightful powers with which the combatants have identified themselves. On the contrary, those powers, and with them the only thing for which the combatants care, are affirmed. What is denied is the exclusive and therefore wrongful assertion of their right.”¹³⁶ Values were not constitutively incompatible, on Hegel’s account. Tragedy was not inescapable. It is when a right is wrongfully asserted, or a good is asserted exclusively, that tragedy results. The fact that the world of values was not, in Hegel’s mind, made up of *constitutively* antagonistic forces meant that tragedy was a feature of the world that could, at least in principle, be overcome.

With this, as we know, Berlin would disagree. There are values that are *constitutively* incompatible. This is what makes tragedy a feature of the world that can never be fully eradicated. Berlin’s diagnosis of the human predicament is thus ultimately closer to Weber’s than Hegel’s. Berlin says, “If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are *in principle* compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social” (L, 214, my emphasis). But, importantly, it is not merely the incompatibility of values that makes tragedy a facet of human life that can never be wholly eliminated for Berlin. Tragedy emerged from the fact that values are sometimes not just incompatible but incommensurable. We can see this clearly in the following passage, which is worth quoting at length, where Berlin criticizes the perspective on values and tragedy found in Rousseau:

Rousseau knows that, since nature is a harmony (and this is the great premiss, the great and dubious premiss of almost all of eighteenth-century thought), it follows that what I truly want cannot collide with what somebody else truly wants. For the good is what will truly satisfy anyone’s rational demands; and if it were the case that what I truly want does not tally with what somebody else truly, in other words rationally, wants, then two true answers to two genuine questions will be incompatible with each other; and that is logically

¹³⁵ Ibid, 72.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 73

impossible. For that would mean that nature is not a harmony, that tragedy is inevitable, that conflict cannot be avoided, that somewhere in the heart of things there is something irrational, that do what I may, be I never so wise, whatever weapon of reason I employ, however good I am, however upright, however clear-headed and reasonable and profound and wise, I may yet want something when an equally wise, equally good and virtuous man may wish the opposite of it. There will be nothing to choose between us: no criterion of morality, no principle of justice, divine or human. Therefore tragedy will turn out, after all, to be due not to human error, human stupidity and human mistakes, but to a flaw in the universe. (FB, 38-9)

If moral questions admit of truth, the conclusion would have to be that “conflict and tragedy arose only from ignorance of fact, inadequacies of method, the incompetence or ill will of rulers and the benighted condition of their subjects”, that “all conflict, and consequently all tragedy, is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational or the insufficiently rational” (L, 200). In other words, if we imagine that moral questions can have but one true answer and one only, if we imagine that moral dilemmas can only ever be apparent but never real, tragedy must be due to something akin to ignorance, irrationality or ill will, Berlin suggests.

If this is the case, then, “conflict and tragedy are not intrinsic to human life” (CTH, 185). It would follow that

the tragic element in life is therefore always due to avoidable human mistakes: perfect beings would not know it; there can be no incongruity, and therefore neither comedy nor tragedy, in a world of saints and angels (CTH, 185).

Because of his conception of value pluralism, the persistence of tragedy is not necessarily, for Berlin, a sign that something is amiss in the political universe. Even angels would know it. Since values are constitutively incompatible as well as incommensurable, and since moral questions can admit incompatible yet valid answers conflict and tragedy need not, for Berlin, be a reflection of human imperfection.

The incommensurability of values also ensures that loss will be experienced as particularly poignant. Incommensurability, as I noted earlier, indicates that there is no common measurement or standard by which we can compare two alternatives. Two alternatives are incommensurable if neither can be said to be greater or equal to the other.

When values are incommensurable, therefore, as Berlin makes clear, it becomes impossible to speak of one value compensating for the loss of another, in the strict sense of the term. Victory in war – even if it results in genuinely positive developments – does not compensate for the loss of life that it took to achieve it. The benefits of economic modernization, even when it leads to qualitative improvements in living standards, do not compensate (again, in the strict sense of the term) for the loss of particular, more traditional, incompatible forms of life. Or conversely, if we choose to resist economic modernization to protect and preserve a particular form of life, we sacrifice the values and benefits that would have accrued if we had chosen differently.

If we had a standard by which to compare values, a hierarchy or an overriding value, these types of trade-offs would not need to be conceived as tragic, except if we by some error made the wrong choice. For instance, if we could calculate the utility score of every value, or action, such that we knew that the benefits of economic development came with a utility score of 50 and the protection of our particular form of life came with a utility score of 15, there would be little reason to mourn the loss of the latter. It may be a cause of regret that one could only be purchased at the expense of the other, but there would be no grounds for genuine sorrow since what has been gained more than compensates for what has been lost. Nor would we have reason to consider those who preferred the latter particularly rational. But when values are incommensurable, when each represents a moral claim that is absolute and fully justifiable, and that cannot be measured or ranked according to some common criteria, there can be no talk of what is gained compensating for what is lost.¹³⁷ This does not mean that we never have good reason to justify acting so as to favour one value and not the other. Incommensurability does not mean non-additivity, it does not mean that values ought to be construed sacred, or qualitatively higher. But what it does mean is that even if we choose well, there will often be an element of tragedy.

Not all conflict and loss need be tragic, of course. In order for one to be able to speak of something being tragic, the loss or suffering not only has to be irreparable, it has to mean what is lost is something that is truly mourned. We may be able to speak of the conflict between protecting a beautiful stretch of land and developing it as involving

¹³⁷ Berlin, TCE, 237

values that are incommensurable, and if the choice would be to develop the land, the loss would perhaps be irreparable. But that does not mean that such a conflict and loss would *necessarily* be tragic. For it to be tragic there would conceivably have to be something that made the consequences, the loss, particularly meaningful, or particularly severe to the people affected by the decision. Berlin does not offer anything resembling a clear definition of what level of loss or suffering would have to be felt in order for one to be able speak of something as tragic. Nor, it should be added, does most of the literature on tragedy. But he comes close to establishing a demarcation line when he suggests that when irreconcilable values clash, tragedy results “unless you can find a compromise which is not a complete satisfaction of your desires, but prevents acute pain, in short prevents tragedy.” He adds, “That is the value of compromise” (UD, 271). Losses that involve acute pain are tragic. Losses that accompany acceptable compromises need not be – though they may still involve uncompensated loss.

Understood this way, Berlin subscribed to a conception of what constitutes tragedy that is widely recognized, though not uncontested – one that shares a great deal with the understanding of tragedy conceptualized by Hegel. In everyday usage, of course, it is not unusual to hear tragedy being used to describe the consequences of earthquakes and other natural phenomena. Sometimes it is also used to refer to consequences that are the product, of say, random acts of violence, such as a shooting and the like. When tragedy is used in this way, the concept is usually used as an indicator of what Martha Nussbaum has referred to as ‘the fragility of the good’.¹³⁸ Even in its everyday use, tragedy is generally used only to denote situations where something or someone good or innocent has been made to suffer. The suffering of a Hitler or Stalin would never be referred to as tragic. When someone good or innocent is made to suffer – often seemingly needlessly – this gets referred to as tragic. In some respects, this would seem to indicate a close resemblance between the meaning attached to tragedy in everyday jargon and the understanding of tragedy found in ancient thought, where fortune or fate (the gods) played a much greater role. Yet this would be misleading. Even in ancient tragedy, as Kierkegaard has shown, the downfall of the good is always at least partly caused by a

¹³⁸ Nussbaum, *Fragility*.

characteristic of the action that was internal to the good.¹³⁹ In both the Aristotelian and Hegelian conceptions of tragedy, it is when the claim of a particular good is pushed too far, or when it is embraced without moderation, that tragedies occur. The tragic can never be a product of *pure* necessity – it has to be a product of an element of freedom. Otherwise tragedies would be little different from disasters. Berlin, for one, did not see a great chasm between the ancient conception of tragedy (where fate, and the role of necessity played a large role) and more modern conceptions of tragedy. He writes, “The great tragedies – those written by the Greek dramatists as well as those of more modern days – are largely concerned with the fatal collision of values which cannot be reconciled” (FB, 23).

3.2 Can a Value Pluralist Universe Contain Tragedy?

So far, then, Berlin’s conception of tragedy seems to be consistent with a well recognized, if not uncontested, account of tragedy. But the question we must ask is whether he could subscribe to it without inconsistency. Ryszard Legutko poses an important challenge to Berlin’s view, suggesting that value pluralism is actually incompatible with tragedy. Legutko identifies two specific problems with Berlin’s view. First, he argues that it ignores the religious dimension of the ultimate. Second, Legutko contends that Berlin’s account of value pluralism lacks two ingredients that are necessary features of the tragic: (1) a notion of unity of morality and (2) a notion of necessity – of fate or a higher moral imperative.¹⁴⁰

The first contention – that tragedy requires a religious dimension of the ultimate – rests on the misconception that only a religiously grounded morality can be the source of binding moral imperatives. However, Legutko’s criticism raises an important point about tragedy, which is that tragedy requires moral objects to be part of the (real) furniture of the world. A world without values could not, indeed, know tragedy. This is not, however, a point that undermines the connection between value pluralism and tragedy, since

¹³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 139-161.

¹⁴⁰ Legutko, “Postmodern”; Polanowska-Sygułska, UD, 269-278. Legutko’s critique is presented in part in the article published in *Critical Review* and in part in a text he published in Polish in response to Berlin’s response to his first article. The main contentions of the latter texts are reproduced and discussed in UD.

Berlin's value pluralism is grounded in a form of moral realism. When values clash, the conflict is between objective goods, or values. They may be man-made, but they are genuine, part of the furniture of the world.

The second contention, that value pluralism lacks the necessary unity of morality deserves more careful scrutiny. In Hegel, as A. C. Bradley has argued, it was the "the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance" that was at the root of the tragic.¹⁴¹ This is consistent with the conception of tragedy we find in Aristotle. It is when the moral order turns on itself, when the pursuit of a good leads to suffering that tragedy emerges. An important component of what makes the tragic possible for both Hegel and Aristotle, then, is the underlying unity of the world of values. It is when what could – and should – be at peace turns on itself that tragedy emerges. Because Berlin's moral universe lacks a "unity of values" it cannot give rise to tragedy. It is only against the backdrop of a unified moral order that there can be 'intestinal warfare' or 'self-division' within the 'ethical substance'.

The problem with value pluralism, according to Legutko, is that by denying the presence of a unified, religiously grounded, moral order, human choices become trivialized. This is because absent these features, the moral universe will lack any overriding moral imperatives – that is, an element of necessity, an element of 'this is what must be done, come what may'. If I am presented with a choice between two incommensurable pursuits, being a priest and a soldier, there is nothing particularly tragic about this situation, Legutko suggests. It is little different from the choice of whether to go on vacation or stay at home during the summer. The situation may indeed be the source of some indecision, and I may indeed come to regret my decision; but because there is no overriding moral imperative there is no tragic agony in the choice itself, and therefore no real loss or sacrifice. In ancient thought, what was at the root of the tragic, Legutko argues, was the notion of the "necessity of an uncompromising pursuit ... quite apart from our own preferences, even at the cost of suffering and ultimate sacrifice."¹⁴² This echoes the argument that absent something akin to the moral order found in ancient political thought, tragedy ceases to be a possibility. If true, this represents a direct

¹⁴¹ Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," 71.

¹⁴² Legutko, quoted in UD, 270.

challenge to Berlin's critique of monism. If Legutko is correct, monism is in fact a necessary component of tragedy – and it is value pluralism that must lead to a denial of the tragic dimension of life.

Confronted by Beta Polanowska-Sygulska with Legutko's criticism, Berlin replied as follows,

It is very well for him [Legutko] to say that a man can choose to be priest or a soldier, and if he chooses one he doesn't regret the other – of course, there is no agony here – as he says, I go for a walk or not. The agony comes in, and with it the tragedy (for this is what tragedy is about) when both values pull strongly at you; you are deeply committed to both, you want to realise them both, they are both values under which your life is lived; and when they clash you have to sacrifice one to the other. (UD, 271)

He further clarified,

The tragedy is for the Athenian audience, who presumably believe in both sets of values, both the unwritten laws, the eternal code which Antigone obeys, and Creon's belief that the State is the ultimate source of authority, ... Whichever side wins, the loss of the other side is a source of pain to the audience, which believes in both these irreconcilables. This is tragic. (UD, 271).

While not quite as clear and extensive as one could hope, Berlin's reply nevertheless conveys a number of useful points. To begin with, we can see that Berlin does not attack Legutko's basic understanding of what is necessary for tragedy to occur. Unless values are seen as in some sense binding, as claiming what A. C. Bradley has referred to as "justifiable allegiance," there can be no tragedy – on Berlin's account, as well as Legutko's. Where Legutko is wrong is in imagining that value pluralism denies the existence of genuinely binding, inter-subjectively intelligible, moral goods and values. As we have seen, since value pluralism is rooted in a form of moral realism, this means that, on Berlin's account, values are part of the furniture of the world. Values may be creations, but as public practices they take on a form of objectivity. That means that even though values may not exist in a kind of Platonic, impersonal, Form, and even though they may "[change] with the generations of men," they are, as Berlin puts it in a

discussion of Herzen's understanding of values, "*nonetheless binding upon those who lived in their light*" (PSM, 523 – emphasis added). It is not the case, for Berlin, that the world is a mere smorgasbord of moral options and we simply choose as we choose. Tragic moral dilemmas occur precisely because we are morally compelled, if not obligated, to act in incompatible ways.

A second point Berlin emphasizes is that tragedy arises from the third person perspective, the perspective of the audience. The fact that individuals (or groups) may feel no sense of regret or agony, being unflinchingly committed to a goal or a cause, does not eliminate the tragedy of the situation. On the contrary, unflinching commitment, an almost blind adherence to a set of values or goods, will often be precisely what is at the root of tragic conflicts. It is not the participants, so to speak, but the audience who bears witness to the tragedy of the situation.

To this Legutko would likely object and say that, in either case, value pluralism is incompatible with tragedy because by denying the presence of a unified moral order, it ensures that the audience will not be able to see both sides of a tragic conflict as adhering to values that can claim "justifiable allegiance". At first glance, this might seem like a reasonable objection. But it rests on a conflation of value pluralism with cognitive relativism. Since, for Berlin, values stem from a shared human horizon, it *is* possible to conceive of a plurality of incompatible and incommensurable values as claiming justifiable human allegiance – even values one does not share. Legutko's criticism would be valid as a criticism of conceptions of tragedy that are grounded in a form of cognitive relativism. But it does not apply to Berlin's value pluralism.

The same can be said of the contention that value pluralism trivializes human choices by denying the presence of an overriding moral imperative.¹⁴³ Legutko is right that a choice between goods that are deemed to be of equal value may indeed be trivial, a matter of indifference not tragedy. But incommensurability does not entail equality. When two alternatives are incommensurable, we have no basis for saying that either is greater or equal to the other – it is a choice between 'absolute claims'. This means that when we are confronted with moral alternatives that are incommensurable we are closer to what Nagel describes as a genuine moral dilemma. That is, situations

¹⁴³ Polanowska-Sygulska, UD, 276-7

where there is decisive support for two or more incompatible courses of action or inaction. In that case a decision will still be necessary, but it will seem necessarily arbitrary. When two choices are very evenly balanced, it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem. But when each seems right for reasons that appear decisive and sufficient, arbitrariness means lack of reasons where reasons are needed, since either choice will mean acting against some reasons without being able to claim that they are *outweighed*.¹⁴⁴

It is when it is denied that moral goods can be incommensurable that moral dilemmas of the type Nagel outlines cease being possible. It may be hard to know, or predict, which alternative is the right one, and tragedy may indeed occur due to lack of moderation, or ignorance of the proper path, but the dilemma will lack any *necessary* tragic component, as moral conflict is ultimately a product of ignorance.

This brings us to the second facet of Legutko's criticism: the contention that value pluralism lacks an element of necessity. At first glance, this criticism too seems well founded. In the ancient conception of tragedy, fate and the whims of the gods play a central role. The inability of people to shape the world around them, the continued frustration of the good in the face of larger historical forces, as I have already mentioned, plays a central role not just in the conception of tragedy we find in Christian thought, but also in its Hegelian and Marxist variants. Kierkegaard too has explored how tragedy withers in a world without necessity. Kierkegaard maintained that conflict, loss and suffering that is product of pure freedom (in the absence of necessity), could not be conceived as tragic. Because the exclusive element would then be guilt, the conflict or suffering could not properly be referred to as tragic.¹⁴⁵ This is because, Kierkegaard argued, implicit in the concept of tragedy is a forgiving or soothing element, an element of innocence – one mourns tragedy, one does not avenge it. This forgiving element cannot be there if there is no element of necessity.

On the face of it, it might appear as if Berlin's conception of tragedy would be vulnerable to this criticism. But when we examine Berlin's thought more closely, the

¹⁴⁴ Nagel, "Fragmentation of Value," 128-129. The emphasis is Nagel's.

¹⁴⁵ Tragedy is never completely divorced from guilt; but it is a guilt mixed with innocence. See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 143.

assumptions that inform his conception of the tragic dimension of moral life, we discover that it is not true that there is no necessity in Berlin's moral universe. According to Berlin, conflicts between different ultimate ends, or values, are an *inescapable* feature of the human predicament according to Berlin. We might be free in *what* we choose, but we do not have a choice *of whether or not to choose*. The necessity of having to choose, of being forced to confront moral dilemmas where, no matter what choice is made, irreparable loss is likely to follow, lies at the heart of Berlin's description of the human predicament. The world ties itself in what Max Scheler has referred to as "tragic knots", and confronts us with situations where tragic conflict and loss are inevitable.¹⁴⁶ Berlin's conception of tragedy thus incorporates the elements of both necessity and of freedom that are necessary to be able to distinguish the tragic from the unfortunate and the criminal – introducing the necessary elements of both innocence and guilt.

The clash between free will and the larger historical forces that limit and humble human efforts that Berlin identifies as having been at the root of Schopenhauer and Tolstoy's conceptions of tragedy thus finds an equivalent in Berlin.¹⁴⁷ For those who harbour monist assumptions, or who are unable, like Tolstoy, to completely shake their desire for there to be a moral order to the world, tragedy emerges from the confrontation with a world that refuses to obey neat patterns, that continuously frustrates human efforts. For Tolstoy, tragedy thus comes across as a product of pure necessity – the fact that our free will is severely circumscribed. In the picture Berlin paints of Tolstoy and his understanding of this, the "central tragedy of human life" (RT, 62-3), there is a thus a sense that at the root of the conceptions of tragedy that we find in thinkers like Aristotle and Tolstoy, there is a misunderstanding. Confronted with a world that is made up of antagonistic forces, incompatible values, thinkers like Tolstoy preserve their monist assumptions by attributing the impossibility of eliminating conflict from human life to larger historical forces – fate, necessity. Berlin's conception of tragedy, because it is grounded in an *awareness* of value pluralism, is able to distinguish the elements of necessity and freedom. The world is disharmonious, and ties itself in tragic knots, but in

¹⁴⁶ See Polanowska-Sygulska, UD, 272-3.

¹⁴⁷ Berlin discusses their conceptions of tragedy in RT, 62-63.

being able to choose how we resolve these tragic knots, we are not without an element of freedom. We must therefore carry the burden of responsibility, Berlin suggests.

Berlin's concept of tragedy thus incorporates the elements forgiveness and guilt, of freedom and necessity, necessary for the tragic. If we choose peace at the expense of justice, in a situation where we are forced to choose one or the other, our hands will indeed be dirty. Yet the element of necessity that compelled the choice absolves some of the guilt.

3.3 Tentative Implications

Through his conception of value pluralism Berlin paints a picture of the moral dimension of political life, the tragic character of moral conflict. But it would be a mistake to confuse Berlin's contention that conflict and, indeed, tragedy are permanent features of the political landscape with a celebration of the antagonistic character of politics. Nor should we interpret Berlin as an advocate of quiet resignation in the face of conflict and loss. He rejects as false the view that says that "we choose as we choose, that is all that can be said; and if this leads to conflict and destruction, that is a fact about the world which must be accepted as gravitation is accepted, something which is inherent in the dissimilar natures of dissimilar men, or nations, or cultures" (CTH, 202-203). What Berlin is trying to convey, rather, is the nature of the questions we face in the political world, the paradoxes, limits and possibilities that surround political action, and the moral consequences of political decisions.

The political world, Berlin suggests, is not primarily a battlefield between truth and error or between the public interest and private interests; it is rather best understood as an arena of conflict between a plurality of incommensurable, yet equally genuine, fully justifiable goods, values, moral claims and principles. This means, to begin with, that entrenched conflict is not necessarily a sign that something is amiss – even in ideal conditions, consensus would remain elusive. It also means that political decisions, public policies, rarely come without genuine costs and losses. There is no such thing as public policy without – sometimes irreparable – moral costs. As I will explore in chapter five, this did not entail for Berlin that there were never clearly preferable solutions to moral

dilemmas, but what it should do is to introduce a measure of caution, or at least attentiveness, to the losing side of a moral conflict, into the political sphere.

In painting a picture of the political world as containing an inescapable tragic dimension, in other words, Berlin offers a way of understanding moral conflict and its implications. We should look with forgiving eyes, he suggests, at the sight of entrenched conflict, for we cannot help that the world ties itself in tragic knots. Yet this does not mean that politics is a realm of innocence, derived of the burden of responsibility; on the contrary, the tragic dimension of politics confronts us with the burden of knowing that political decisions rarely come without genuine costs, and that it is often impossible to speak of such costs having been compensated. The tragic dimension of politics, in other words, helps paint picture of the political world that is not so much black and white as ambiguous and paradoxical. This understanding of the political world and the nature of moral conflict, Berlin suggests, is essential to a sound approach to political action. For if it is one thing that the reality of tragedy conveys it is that values and the goods that we cherish are fragile, and liable to be lost irreparably. An awareness of the tragic dimension of politics was thus for Berlin central to sound political judgment. If we are prevented by our assumptions about the moral universe from being cognizant of our tragic predicament, we are liable to approach the problems and dilemmas political life confronts us with in misguided, if not disastrous, ways.

4. WHAT'S WRONG WITH HEDGEHOGS?

‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.’ ... taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent, articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. These last lead lives, perform act and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffuse, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes.

~ Isaiah Berlin (RT, 24-25)

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideas [...] 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 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.

~ Isaiah Berlin (L, 212)

Perhaps the central thesis of Berlin’s work is that how we make sense of moral conflict matters. It affects how we understand and approach politics and how we view protracted opposition and dissent. Indeed it affects our very understanding of the normative dimension of political life, how we make sense of the moral and ethical dilemmas with which political life confronts us – and therefore also how we respond to these. This chapter examines Berlin’s critique of two particular ways of understanding moral conflict, namely monism and what we might characterize as relativism. It has two aims: first, to offer an interpretation of Berlin that helps make sense of his claims and resolves

some of the problems interpreters of Berlin have identified; second, to identify the more mundane, less extreme, less totalitarian – though still problematic – issues that arise from the type of misconceptions of moral conflict monism and relativism epitomized on Berlin’s account.

Berlin, as I have already noted, was a fierce critic of monism. His basic concern was that if we are possessed with a vision of the world free of conflict and suffering the ends can easily come to justify the means. Yet while his critique is intuitively appealing and plausible, his critics have found it easy to poke holes in his argument. Berlin’s critics have pointed out that monism need not logically entail any kind of fanaticism or hostility to basically liberal values; pluralism, they have further noted, is just as capable of underpinning morally disastrous justifications and practices – indeed fascism owed its philosophical underpinnings to the counter-enlightenment, not the monism of the French Enlightenment.¹⁴⁸ When we consider that such staunch defenders of liberty and pluralism as J.S. Mill and Immanuel Kant were both – on Berlin account – monists, it becomes hard to see just why hedgehogs should be so prone to fanaticism. Indeed, it appears that it was precisely the fact that Mill and Kant believed in the ultimate compatibility of values that allowed them to argue that we should never treat other people as means to our own ends. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, there is more to Berlin’s argument than it may appear at first glance. Berlin’s argument is not that monism logically entails some kind of fanaticism; nor is the connection, as George Crowder has suggested, psychological.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Berlin was neither the unflinching enemy of monism and positive liberty that he is sometimes made out to be; nor was he the champion of the counter-enlightenment we find in John Gray’s influential interpretation.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ See in particular Steven Lukes, “The Singular and the Plural”; Lukes, “An Unfashionable Fox”; Mark Lilla, “Wolves and Lambs,” in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*. See also the section “Discussion” in Part I of *The Legacy*, where Lukes, Lilla and Thomas Nagel point out what they see as substantial holes in Berlin’s indictment of monism, while Richard Bernstein offers a partial defense of Berlin’s thesis. In the same section, Aileen Kelly makes a point of saying that Berlin was not the enemy of the Enlightenment and friend of the Counter-Enlightenment that he is sometimes made out to be – a point I will echo in this paper. See also Aileen Kelly, “A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism,” in *The Legacy*.

¹⁴⁹ George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 126-32. Graeme Garrard echoes this interpretation; see Garrard, “Strange Reversals,” *The One and the Many*. See also Henry Hardy, “Taking Pluralism Seriously,” in *The One and the Many*.

¹⁵⁰ See in particular John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*.

Like many European thinkers who came of age during the interwar years, Berlin sought to understand the roots of the violent political movements that left such a bloody stain on the twentieth century. It helps to be reminded that when Berlin was eight years old, he witnessed first-hand some of the fragments of the chaos and violence that the Russian revolution wrought. He was twenty-four when Hitler came to power, thirty when World War Two broke out. The Nazis killed both his grandfathers and several other family members, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.¹⁵¹ His early forties witnessed show trials, mass arrests and purges across much of Eastern Europe, as well as ideological mobilization along Cold War lines. For a Jewish man born in Riga in 1909 his own personal life was spent in remarkable tranquility. He left for England with his family shortly after the Russian revolution and was appointed to All Souls in 1932. He spent much of World War II serving the British Information Services, reporting on the American political scene from New York and Washington. The contrast between the relative tranquility of his own life and the violence that engulfed so much of the world during those years was not lost on Berlin. As he noted as the century was drawing to a close, “I have lived through most of the twentieth century without, I must add, suffering personal hardship. I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history.”¹⁵²

But how was one to make sense of this most terrible century? For Berlin, it was clear that if “we are to hope to understand the often violent world in which we live ... we cannot confine our attention to the great impersonal forces, natural and man-made, which act upon us. The goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all that we know and understand” (CTH, 2). These “great movements began with ideas in people’s heads: ideas about what relations between men have been, are, might be, and should be” (CTH, 2). It is an attempt to understand these ideas and how they can come to underpin and give justification to violence and oppression that is the source of much of Berlin’s writings. It is with this in mind that we must consider Berlin’s critique of monism and his attack on certain conceptions of positive liberty, as well as his writings

¹⁵¹ Gray, “The Case for Decency.”

¹⁵² Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), 1. For Berlin’s biographical details, the best source remains Michael Ignatieff’s *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Toronto: Viking, 1998).

on the roots of fascism and violent nationalism. Berlin published “Two Concepts of Liberty” in 1958, with the expressed purpose of illustrating the flaws and the dangers of the Marxist conception of freedom.¹⁵³ This gave his essay a one-sidedness that he later regretted, but the problem he was addressing was real. Prominent intellectuals *were* willing to justify even Stalinist levels of violence and repression in the name of a ‘higher freedom’ and a more prosperous tomorrow. This was not, as the historian Tony Judt has observed, despite the violence but many times precisely because of what the violence signified.¹⁵⁴ But if the problem he was addressing was real, it is less immediately clear that his criticism is on target.

For Berlin, the central villain was utopian monism. John Gray and others have interpreted this aspect of Berlin’s thought as primarily an attack on a central feature of the enlightenment, and in important respects it is. Yet this interpretation still betrays a misunderstanding. For Gray the fact that “[i]t was not faith in human harmony that fuelled Nazi ideology” means Berlin’s critique of monism can only capture what took place in the communist countries.¹⁵⁵ Gray here makes the mistake of equating monism with the belief in the possibility of a final harmony. As I discussed in chapter two, this interpretation does not capture the precise meaning of what Berlin understood by monism. More significantly for our purposes here, monism, for Berlin, represents one particular way of misinterpreting the nature of the moral questions we face in the world. In its implications for political action and judgment, as I will show in this chapter, the account of moral conflict that emerged from certain strands of the counter-enlightenment was remarkably similar, and for that reason equally problematic. In its approach to political action and in its understanding of the basic moral dilemmas of political life Nazi ideology represented a form of monism, even if it was not fueled by any faith in human harmony. Both perspectives, on Berlin’s account, blur from view the moral dilemmas with which political life confronts us, deny the moral costs of the choices we make, and introduce a corrosive perspective on political opposition and dissent.

¹⁵³ Berlin, CL, 92.

¹⁵⁴ Tony Judt, *Postwar* (New York: Pimlico, 2007), ch. 7.

¹⁵⁵ John Gray, “The Case for Decency.”

4.1 *The Critique of Monism*

Let us begin by considering Berlin's critique of monism. The central component of Berlin's critique of monism was that it could give rise to a mindset where the ends were seen as justifying the means. Berlin writes,

Some armed prophets seek to save mankind, and some only their own race because of its superior attributes, but whichever the motive, the millions slaughtered in the wars of revolution – gas chambers, gulag, genocide, all the monstrosities for which our century will be remembered – are the price men must pay for the felicity of future generations. If your desire to save mankind is serious, you must harden your heart, and not reckon the cost. (CTH, 15-16)¹⁵⁶

If one believes that “the rational reorganisation of society [could] put an end to spiritual and intellectual confusion, the reign of prejudice and superstition, blind obedience to unexamined dogmas, and the stupidities and cruelties of oppressive regimes which such intellectual darkness bred and prompted” (CTH, 5), then what price could be too great to pay? “If your desire to save mankind is serious, you must harden your heart, and not reckon the cost”

Berlin's argument, at first glance, appears to be quite simple: monism creates the illusion that there is a final, or ultimate, solution to the problems that plague the world; given this potential, no immediate cost or moral consideration will appear sufficient to justify moderation; the ends will be seen as justifying the means. The argument here explicitly links political fanaticism with utopian visions of human potential. Berlin's argument here has some obvious force. It is not hard to find examples of political leaders, revolutionaries and movements that have drawn on a vision of future society, free from conflict, in harmony with man's true needs and interests, to justify trampling on people's rights. But while monism may be a necessary condition for this type of mindset, it is hardly a sufficient condition. This has led a number of critics of Berlin to argue that his contention that monism “is at the root of every extremism” (POI, 14) is incoherent, or at

¹⁵⁶ Note that in the quoted passage Berlin appears to attribute to Nazi ideology what we might term the monist fallacy.

the very least not supported by evidence.¹⁵⁷ These critics have pointed out that not all monists have been fanatics. Early utilitarians, Lukes has argued, were primarily concerned with reducing scarcity and suffering.¹⁵⁸ Thinkers like Kant and J. S. Mill disdained political fanaticism and sought to provide philosophical justifications for safeguarding individual liberties and human dignity, while drawing on monist assumptions.¹⁵⁹ And this to give just a few examples. When one considers that the Romantic Movement that Berlin often celebrates paved the way for fascism and violent nationalism, the case for monism being at the root of every extremism seems even less persuasive.¹⁶⁰

While these criticisms are warranted, it should be pointed out that Berlin did not argue that monism necessarily or always entailed political fanaticism. Indeed, as George Crowder and Graeme Garrard point out, Berlin's argument is *not* that monism *logically* entails fanaticism – the connection, they argue, is psychological (though this too, I want to suggest, is somewhat off the mark).¹⁶¹ Indeed, Berlin did not hesitate to point out that some of the thinkers he most admired – including Kant and J. S. Mill – held monist assumptions about the moral universe. Berlin also emphasized that not all monists believed that it was actually possible – through human effort – to usher in a new and better society. “It may be that mortal men cannot attain to such knowledge.” Our “minds may be too weak, or the obstacles offered by intractable nature may be too great” (CTH, 25). Conceivably, in order for monism to lead to fanaticism one would need to hold not only that the ideal society could exist in theory, one would have to think that the ideal society could be brought into existence through human effort, or by adhering to the ‘laws

¹⁵⁷ See the essays and discussion found in Part 1 of *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*.

¹⁵⁸ Lukes, “The Singular and the Plural,” 93.

¹⁵⁹ Whether or not J. S. Mill is most accurately interpreted as a monist or as something closer to a value pluralist I leave for the reader to decide. For present purposes, it should be noted that Berlin interpreted Mill as a monist on account of his utilitarianism, while suggesting that much in Mill's thought actually goes against any monist conception of value. To the extent that Mill is considered a monist, it is worth noting that he is a monist of a particular kind. He is a monist about happiness being the ultimate end of human action, but he is a pluralist, and explicitly so, about the myriad of means by which different people will achieve happiness. See Bruce Baum, *Rereading Power and Freedom in J. S. Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), ch. 5.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of Berlin's relationship to the darker side of the Counter-Enlightenment, its link to Fascism, see Michael Ignatieff, “Understanding Fascism,” in Edna and Avishai Margalit, eds, *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (London: Hogarth, 1991).

¹⁶¹ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 126-32. Graeme Garrard, “Strange Reversals.”

of history', or following the dictates of God, or some similar method. It is also worth noting that Berlin was no uncritical champion of the counter-enlightenment. He traced the roots of fascism and violent nationalism to ideas and assumptions that emerged from the counter-enlightenment. He was a fierce critic of the conception of freedom to emerge from Fichte's thought, and saw in the irrationalism of de Maistre the roots of a deeply violent and troubling conception of politics.¹⁶²

A bigger problem for Berlin's critique of monism, at first glance, is that it comes across as either trivial or absurd. If what is meant is merely that most fanatical religious and political movements drew on a set of assumptions that allowed them to think they could make the world a much better place, the point seems trivial. It is probably true that most fanatical religious and political movements shared the assumption that all the things that they valued (and which they imagined everyone should value) could be realized simultaneously; and it is probably true that they imagined they knew how to solve the problems of the world. But so did the adherents of a great number of humane, non-violent, political and religious movements – e.g. Gandhi's mobilization against British colonial rule in India, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., to give just two examples. If the contention is merely that fanatics tend to be monists, the observation is trivial. If, however, the contention is that monism, its assumptions, is what gives rise to the violent nature of (most of) these movements the argument becomes absurd. Most monists, after all, have not been fanatics. In Berlin's defense, one could say that he was not trying to establish causality, that he was trying to understand what kind of assumptions prepare people to accept the claims of certain ideologies, and the way in which these assumptions might create dangerous incentives and lend legitimacy to violent political solutions. Yet even with this in mind, it is not clear that Berlin's critique is on target.¹⁶³ Problematically, for Berlin, some monists – J.S. Mill for instance – were able to reject trampling on people's rights and freedoms, even though they believed a more perfect society could be realized through human effort, precisely *because* they believed that there was no conflict

¹⁶² Both Fichte and de Maistre are afforded their own chapters in Berlin's *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). This book title will hereafter be referred to as FB.

¹⁶³ As Garrard points out, if the argument is that monism makes fanaticism more likely, that is an empirical question, and one that is difficult to definitely answer. See "Strange Reversals."

between rights and utility, in other words, precisely because they held monist assumptions. It is not clear, at first glance, that Berlin is able to deal with these objections.

4.1.1 Monism and Political Action

However, Berlin's indictment of monism rests on a number of further claims regarding the political and moral implications of political action that is guided by a monist conception of politics. We begin to see why when we consider the following statement by Berlin: "Utopias have their value – nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities – but as a guide to conduct they can prove literally fatal" (CTH, 15). Notice that in this passage, Berlin is not suggesting that someone who believes an ideal society to be possible is necessarily a fanatic; what he is suggesting is that utopias provide fatally flawed guides to "conduct," or political action.

But what is it that makes utopias fatally flawed guides to conduct? To answer this question, it is useful to remember that, for Berlin, utopias were not merely practically unattainable, they were conceptually incoherent. "If some ends recognized as fully human are at the same time ultimate and mutually incompatible, then the idea of a golden age, a perfect society compounded of a synthesis of all the correct solutions to all the central problems of human life, is shown to be *incoherent in principle*" (CTH, 237 – emphasis added). Not surprisingly, to use a vision of the world that is internally self-contradictory – as utopias are on Berlin's account – as a guide to political action is likely to lead to problematic if not disastrous consequences.

There are several specific problems Berlin identifies as a potential by-product of basing political action on monist assumptions. The first is that politics becomes conceived as a battle between truth and error. Berlin detected in various (though not all) monist ideologies a deep aversion to the messy reality of politics. To many monists, conflict was a sign that something was wrong in the body politic. A healthy polity would not be caught up in political bickering, with its attendant compromises and half-solutions. Rather than being a domain where conflicts and disagreements could be mediated, the proper role of politics was to serve as a vehicle for emancipation, or for the realization of the proper socio-political order. This turned politics, Berlin suggested, away from being a

realm of mediated choice-making and compromises, where choices are made and re-made between competing political ends and priorities, into a realm where politics was about making the *right* choice.

Instead of being about moral ends and objectives, politics becomes about means. From a monist standpoint, “all that would matter would be to find the right roads to the attainment of the universally accepted end” (PSM, 66-67). This is problematic, if not dangerous, since, as Berlin writes, “To find roads is the business of experts. It is therefore reasonable for such a society to put itself into the hands of specialists of tested experience, knowledge, gifts and probity” (PSM, 68). “Where ends are agreed,” Berlin argued, “the only questions left are those of means, and these are not political but technical, that is to say, capable of being settled by experts or machines, like arguments between engineers or doctors” (L, 166). Who counts as an expert may depend on a variety of factors. It may be that wisdom resides in ancient wise men, the uncorrupted peasant, the proletariat, the philosopher kings, or the social scientist. But in any case, politics is not about making choices – it is about implementation. This is problematic for two reasons. If politics is about crafting and maintaining the proper socio-economic conditions, then conceivably the key criteria that should decide who governs should be who governs best, who can most effectively achieve the desired outcome.¹⁶⁴ Institutions that are designed to mediate conflict and balance conflicting claims are thereby left open to the charge that they are too inefficient. A second problem is that it can undermine the assumption of a rational dispute. If politics is conceived as a realm of absolute truths, opposition may come to be viewed as a product of irrationality or malice.

It is possible, it should be pointed out, to conceive of politics as a battle between truth and error and still support democratic institutions and individual liberties. Democratic norms and institutions may be seen as providing the best and most reliable means to the discovery and implementation of the ‘Right’ policies/social order, particularly over time. Through its mechanisms of accountability, expression, criticism and deliberation, liberal democratic institutions – as an array of thinkers have argued –

¹⁶⁴ The problem with approaching politics in this technocratic sense is illustrated by the myriad of possibilities the term ‘proper socio-economic conditions’ could plausibly be interpreted to mean: does it mean, for instance, maximizing economic growth, maintaining sustainable/ecological growth, facilitating a fairly egalitarian distribution of resources, or something else?

contribute to sound and efficient policy making over time.¹⁶⁵ Political, social and economic problems are brought to light through freedom of expression, and open and contested elections create incentives for rulers to rule well, in a way that furthers the interests and ends of people in the society. In addition, a large number of people, as Aristotle recognized, are in a better place to overcome the problem of limited knowledge and perspective that any one expert, or even group of experts, would have.¹⁶⁶ It is quite possible, in other words, to make a very strong case for democratic institutions, while still conceiving the purpose of political action in monist terms. The problem with relying on such justifications for democracy, however, is that it is a justification that is necessarily contingent and fragile. After all, should a different system of government – one that is not democratic – prove to be more efficient at implementing the correct social and political policies the case for democratic institutions would wither.¹⁶⁷

And this, in the end, is a problem for Berlin. August Comte, Berlin writes, “put bluntly what had been implicit in the rationalist theory of politics from its ancient Greek beginnings” when he asked “why, if we do not allow free thinking in chemistry or biology, we should allow it in morals or politics”. Starting from monist assumptions, Berlin continues, one may ask:

Why indeed? If it makes sense to speak of political truths – assertions of social ends which all men, because they are men, must, once they are discovered, agree to be such; and if, as Comte believed, scientific method will in due course reveal them; then what case is there for freedom of opinion or action – at least as an end in itself, and not merely as a stimulating intellectual climate – either for individuals or for groups? Why should any conduct be tolerated that is not authorised by appropriate experts? (L, 197)

It is not that there cannot be any justification for democratic forms of government if one begins with something akin to Comte’s monist assumptions. In fact, Berlin clearly

¹⁶⁵ This line of argument is on display in John Stuart Mill’s defense of freedom of speech – see *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20-62. For another example, see Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003).

¹⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

¹⁶⁷ For the sake of clarity, it should be pointed out that the point here is *not* that facts and expert knowledge have *no* place in political decision-making. Clearly, good policy decisions will generally require knowledge of what the relevant facts are and other expertise – what is the cause of our economic and social problems, what effect are different policy prescriptions likely to have, for instance.

anticipates justifications that draw on the *practical* benefits of freedom of opinion and action, as a means-to-an-end. The point is that the grounds on which we justify freedom of opinion and action will be weakened if they are conceived as valuable as means rather than ends-in-themselves.

4.1.2 *Tragedy and Loss*

A second facet of Berlin's critique is that monism blinds its adherents to the true moral cost of their actions. All political choices involve loss, on Berlin's account. No society can realize or embody all genuine values and goods. To choose freedom and equality may mean sacrificing the stability and order that characterize more hierarchical societies; a society that privileges rights may sacrifice the goods that flow from strong communal bonds. Monists, Berlin argues, are incapable of recognizing this loss. And it is this failure to recognize the moral consequences of their moral choices (for they are choices, even if they are not recognized as such) that is problematic, on Berlin's account. This facet of Berlin's critique refers to values that are external to a moral ideal being implemented, that do not overlap or form some part of the values embodied in the monist ideal.

If the values in question – as would likely be the case – were not merely incompatible but incommensurable, Berlin would insist, there could be no grounds for saying that what had been gained compensated for what had been lost. Now, to be clear, tragic loss is an inescapable by-product of political action, monist or not, on Berlin's account, so this is not in itself an indictment of monist directed political action. What Berlin sees as dangerous in such cases is what can happen if we forget, or fail to pay attention to, the genuine and sometimes tragic costs that accompany political action – even when it produces outcomes that are clearly preferable. During a discussion of the German thinker Georg Hamann, Berlin makes this point in a way that is worth quoting at length.

Those who put an end to suttee, or cleared slums, or created tolerable conditions of life in the place of some crushing, poverty-stricken patriarchalism have rightly not been condemned by the majority of mankind. Hamann speaks for those who hear the cry of the toad beneath the harrow, even when it may be right to plough over him: since if men do not hear this cry, if they are deaf, if the toad is written off because he has been

‘condemned by history’ – if the defeated are never worth attending to because history is the history of the victorious – then such victories will prove their own undoing, for they will tend to destroy the very values in the name of which the battle was undertaken. (TCE, 350)

Berlin’s point here, if we relate it to his indictment of political action guided by a monist ideal, is that if one misunderstands the nature of moral conflict, if one believes – as one would conceivably have to believe if one were a monist – that all genuinely good things are compatible, or at least commensurable – then one is liable to be insensitive to the irreparable losses, to values and forms of life, that accompany social and political changes. Monist assumptions, Berlin is suggesting, introduce an element of insensitivity to the ‘cries of the vanquished’, which can breed justifications for ignoring their plight. For example, if the protests of peasants mourning the loss of their particular way of life under the weight of modernization are dismissed as nonsensical because the form of life that it represents is not seen as distinctive, or genuine, or as being just a means to a happiness they could just as well find in the city, it is unlikely the claims of the peasants will receive a fair hearing. This is problematic, particularly if the reason industrial modernization is being encouraged or facilitated is to ease suffering and make life more tolerable for people. The same problem occurs if all the benefits of modernization can be dismissed as mere diversions from an ideal, the simple life of the uncorrupted peasant. Monism prevents, in other words, a thorough understanding of the moral dilemmas political life confronts us with.

Berlin attributes this potential blindness or insensitivity to the fact that monists are liable to consider moral conflict a product of error, ignorance or some other similar factor. This is not necessarily an issue for all doctrines grounded in monist assumptions. One can be a monist and hold that due to the epistemological limitations of the human mind, we are all ignorant and no one can claim to know the Truth. Or one can be a monist and hold that all opinions represent a partial truth, such that we should always be attentive and listen even to those with whom we disagree – perhaps especially to those with whom we disagree.¹⁶⁸ But where there is a belief that not only is the ideal society possible in principle, but that the party, the church, ancient wise men, the majority, the

¹⁶⁸ J. S. Mill is a good example of a thinker who took this to be true. See *On Liberty*, ch. 2.

proletariat, or some other body, can have knowledge of ‘what the ideal society should look like,’ or how a particular moral dilemma should be resolved, where there is a belief that moral questions have one correct answer and one answer only, opposition is likely to be viewed with contempt.

Berlin also insists that should utopian ideals serve as a guide to political action, then at least in some cases the actions taken are likely to produce unintended consequences of a further kind. Among the utopian visions that aim to realize in their highest form a range of different values – rather than just one, or a few, such as anarchist or libertarian forms of monism – it is likely that the ideals that the utopian vision wishes to promote are incompatible. In promoting one value, the realization of another will be undermined. Here, Berlin is referring to the potential consequences of being blind to value conflicts that are *internal* to the monist value system. This, Berlin argues, is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, it may serve to justify the silent suppression of important values. In his critique of certain conceptions of positive liberty, this concern plays a prominent role. If we imagine that freedom is inseparable from (and cannot be realized without) equality, fairness, or virtue – to give just a few examples – then we risk blinding ourselves to the consequences of political action aimed to further equality, fairness or virtue. This is why Berlin insists that “liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience” (L, 172). It is not the consequences themselves that are necessarily problematic for Berlin. Liberty must be limited, Berlin insists, to make room for values such as equality, fairness and social justice. What is problematic is the blinders that monism provides. Unless these values are seen as separate and incompatible to some degree, we will not be in a position to engage in political action that is sensitive to all the relevant values. We risk producing unintended negative consequences.¹⁶⁹

This criticism of the way in which monism may interfere with sound political action comes in two shades. In its more benign form, it serves primarily as a vehicle for confusion, unintended consequences and empty rhetoric. But Berlin identifies a more

¹⁶⁹ Berlin’s argument here is open to the criticism that by blinding us to the cases where values are mutually reinforcing, or where each facilitates a richer realization of the other, it is Berlin’s conception of value pluralism that risks hiding from view the true consequences of our moral choices. While an important point, it does not challenge Berlin’s critique of monism.

sinister form in thinkers like Rousseau, Fichte and Hegel, where – on Berlin’s interpretation – the central value to which all three thinkers claim allegiance – liberty – is not only diluted but inverted, turned into its opposite.¹⁷⁰ The logical steps whereby an absolute commitment to liberty is turned into something that more closely resembles its opposite is made possible, Berlin suggests, by the belief that ultimately all good things must be compatible, when conceived in their true form. On Berlin’s reading, for Rousseau liberty is regarded “as the most sacred of human attributes – indeed not as an attribute at all, but as the essence of what being a man is” (FB, 33). Yet human beings live in societies. So the question for Rousseau is, Berlin writes, “how is a human being to remain absolutely free (for if he is not free, he is not human), and yet not be allowed to do absolutely everything he wants? Yet if he is stopped, how can he be free? For what is freedom if it is not doing what he wants, and not being stopped from it?” (FB, 34).¹⁷¹ Because he assumes that the interests of the community, the interests of the individual and virtue to all be compatible, Rousseau is able to resolve this problem, Berlin suggests, by equating liberty with obedience to the general will. “Rousseau knows that, since nature is in harmony ... it follows that I truly want cannot collide with what somebody else truly wants”. Being free means doing what I truly want – which is to say, doing that which is right for me and for society. My true ‘Will’ is the General Will. Obedience to the general will must thus not be considered an infringement on mine or anybody’s freedom. It is therefore indeed possible to force somebody to be free.¹⁷²

This is what is at the heart of Berlin’s critique of conceptions of freedom that rely on a divided conception of the self. The “inversion” of liberty is one instance of the broader problem of conflating distinct values, imagining that they are elements of the same thing or that they entail one another. This problem stems from the erroneous set of assumptions about human values that monism represents.¹⁷³ For Berlin, it is particularly problematic when freedom, knowledge and virtue are seen as incapable of coming into

¹⁷⁰ Crowder calls this aspect of Berlin’s critique of certain conceptions of positive liberty the “inversion thesis.” See *Isaiah Berlin*, 68-71.

¹⁷¹ Berlin here is attempting to channel Rousseau’s train of thought. This should not be read as an indication of how Berlin understands the essential nature of freedom.

¹⁷² Berlin’s interpretation of Rousseau is contestable, but for present purposes the merits of Berlin’s interpretations of Rousseau and the other thinkers under discussion are not directly relevant.

¹⁷³ Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, 68-76

conflict. What is dangerous about certain conceptions of positive liberty, Berlin insists, is precisely that they conflate these values, imagining them being incapable of coming into conflict. If one begins with the assumption that to be free is to act according to reason (in contrast to being driven by emotions, or other forces of which one is not in control) while clinging to the ancient belief that “virtue is knowledge,” the notion of forcing someone to be free is no longer a logical absurdity. As Berlin explains, “‘Virtue is knowledge’ means that if you know the good for man, you cannot, if you are a rational being, live in any way other than that whereby fulfillment is that towards which all desires, hopes, prayers, aspirations are directed” (CTH, 29). Conduct that is deemed to not be virtuous, to not abide by some conception of what is good for man (and perhaps society) would in effect constitute evidence that the person is not a free agent, that the person is not being governed by reason. Forcing someone to act in accordance with reason – that is to say, in a virtuous manner – would be an act of liberation, enabling the person to escape from the domination of forces or emotions beyond his or her control.¹⁷⁴ In actual fact our liberty would have been sacrificed, Berlin would insist. But the follower of Rousseau would not have noticed.

4.1.3 Adaptation and Judgment

In one respect, Berlin’s argument here is about the slippery slope of how authoritarian and tyrannical forms of political action are justified. Still, there is a more subtle point that Berlin does not explicitly spell out in his writings but that nevertheless is central to understanding his critique of monism. The issue is here is how our assumptions about the building blocks of our political universe shape our ability to respond to political problems, as we are confronted by its inescapable paradoxes and ambiguities. Much in the same way that Karl Popper suggested that misconceived assumptions about our

¹⁷⁴ It should be pointed out here that it was *not* Berlin’s contention that *all* conceptions of positive liberty were equally susceptible to this slippery slope of justification. Some, like the conception of freedom we get from the Stoics, was clearly not. Nor was it Berlin’s contention that conceptions of positive liberty *necessarily* conflate distinct values. Berlin made clear that he considered positive liberty “a valid and universal goal” (L, 39). However, he did see positive liberty as being more susceptible to the ‘conflation problem’. See Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 1 and Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 3-4. It should also be added that Berlin’s point here is not that all laws and regulations that aim to compel, or create incentives for, reasonable (or virtuous) conduct necessarily diminishes the freedom of individuals or society as a whole in any meaningful way. If they do, and if so to what extent, are questions that can only be answered in light of a particular social context. See L, 177, fn. 1.

ability to understand the world can produce disastrous approaches to social engineering – by deceiving us as to the root causes of our failure to mold the world according to our ideas – so Berlin suggests that monism can hamper our ability to correctly diagnose and understand political realities on the ground.¹⁷⁵

Berlin sees dangers in the assumption that “all human ends are, in principle, harmonisable and capable of satisfaction; that men are, or can be and will be, such that the satisfaction of one man’s ‘natural’ ends will one day not frustrate the quest for similar satisfaction by his brothers” (SR, 120). Consider, for example, the vision Berlin suggests Marx held, that under the right conditions, political action can achieve a rationally, centrally planned, economy as well as autonomy and democracy for workers in factories, the full realization of the highest aspirations of the individual as well as the community, achieve full equality and full liberty.¹⁷⁶ Berlin believed that such a belief would be likely to hamper our ability to respond to the unintended consequences that would inevitably result from a set of policies that sought to achieve all these things simultaneously. Conceivably, the monist is forced to choose, either she has to hold that the imperfect realization – if not outright degradation – of the values she cherishes is an illusion, that they have now been realized in their highest form, thus preserving the integrity of the ideology, or she has to find some external cause (in reality unrelated) to blame for the apparent shortcoming of the policies promoted. In either case, little is likely to be done to adequately deal with the situation.

Whether the standard of judgment derives from the vision of some future perfection, as in the minds of the *philosophes* in the eighteenth century and their technocratic successors in our own day, or is rooted in the past – *la terre et les morts* – as maintained by German historicists or French theocrats, or as neo-Conservatives in English speaking countries, it is bound, provided it is inflexible enough, to encounter some unforeseen and unforeseeable human development, which it will not fit, and will then be used to justify the a priori barbarities of Procrustes – the vivisection of actual human societies into some fixed pattern dictated by our fallible understanding of a largely imaginary past or a wholly imaginary future. (L, 216)

¹⁷⁵ Indeed Berlin admits to having been influenced by Popper’s thesis in *The Open Society*, even if he did not fully agree with Popper’s claims. See CL, 98.

¹⁷⁶ See Berlin, “Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996).

At the root of the problems Berlin associates with monist based political action, then, is an inability to confront and make sense of the world as it is. Monist assumptions, to Berlin, represent a form of self-deception, it distorts the reality with which we are confronted, causing us to misunderstand not only the sources and nature of moral conflict, but the value related costs and consequences of political action. Monism, therefore, is detrimental to sound policy making and political action. This is particularly the case as it renders the use of judgment, grounded in reasonable assessment of the reality of the situation being confronted, more difficult.

It is worth taking some time to elaborate this point. To Berlin, sound political action is a product of political judgment grounded in a “sense of reality”. Political action that seeks to rely exclusively on abstract principles, or generally formula, not to mention blind adherence to tradition or some other source of supposedly uncorrupted knowledge, was likely to be poorly suited to needs, imperatives and moral dilemmas being confronted at that time. This was not, Berlin insisted, a plea for obscurantism, or for some arcane faith in common sense, or one’s inner light.¹⁷⁷ Rather, Berlin wrote,

Judgement, skill, sense of timing, grasp of the relation of means to results depend upon empirical factors, such as experience, observation, above all on that ‘sense of reality’ which largely consists in semi-conscious integration of a large number of apparently trivial or unnoticeable elements in the situation that between them form some kind of pattern which of itself ‘suggests’ – ‘invites’ – the appropriate action. Such action is, no doubt, a form of improvisation, but flowers only upon the soil of rich experience and exceptional responsiveness to what is relevant in the situation – a gift without which neither artists nor scientists are able to achieve original results. This gift seems to be wholly incompatible with faith in the supremacy of some idealised model, which, in the case of fanatical ideologies, takes the place of genuine capacity for responding to impressions.” (POI, 139-140)

¹⁷⁷ Nor, it should be added, is Berlin suggesting here that facts speak for themselves. He considered the “notion of bare facts – facts which are nothing but facts, hard, inescapable, untainted by interpretation or arrangement in man-made patterns – [to be] equally mythological [to laws in the Hegelian sense]. To comprehend and contrast and classify and arrange, to see in patterns of lesser or greater complexity, is not a peculiar kind of thinking, it is thinking itself” (L, 56).

In other words, sound judgment for Berlin relies on an *openness* to impressions, ideas, movements, facts, dilemmas, imperatives, and above all nuances, complexities, paradoxes. Like Aristotle, Berlin insists that judgment has to be guided by particulars. General formulae and abstract principles are likely to be poorly suited to take account of particulars. It is our capacity for judgment grounded in a “sense of reality” that is lost when political action is based on poor assumptions about the basic building blocks of our moral and political universe.¹⁷⁸ Monists (and as we shall see, certain kinds of pluralists) deceive themselves about these basic building blocks and therefore approach the political problems that they confront from the wrong angle. For Berlin, then, the key to sound political action – political action that does not violate moral minimums and avoids extremes of suffering, or too difficult trade-offs – is to be found in the concrete situation, in addressing the specific problems, imperatives and dilemmas it raises. In contrast, political action that is grounded in monist (or, as we shall see, extreme pluralist or relativist) assumptions is likely to view the problem differently, as being related to some broader, unanswerable question, of what the ideal society for man is, or what is most important liberty or justice.¹⁷⁹ As a result, how they attempt to deal with the problem is likely to be poorly suited to what is *actually* going on, what the actual problems and dilemmas being addressed call for.¹⁸⁰

This facet of Berlin’s argument comes across particularly in his essays on Alexander Herzen. One of the most admirable qualities Berlin detected in Herzen was his ability to distinguish “between words that are about words, and words that are about persons or things in the real world” (RT, 209). Utopians and fanatics, Herzen argued, were caught up in abstractions, in words about words. As a result the actions they were proposing were either incoherent or outright dangerous. Exhibit A for Herzen – and for Berlin – was Bakunin. Bakunin was a thinker who had insightfully exposed the dangers and fallacies of ‘the great system builders,’ Berlin argued, and he was a tireless advocate

¹⁷⁸ It should be remembered here that monist accounts of value are, on Berlin’s account, reductionist.

¹⁷⁹ See CTH, 17-18

¹⁸⁰ Berlin’s argument here shares important similarities with Max Weber’s critique of the ethic of conviction (or ultimate ends). Indeed, Berlin notes that the “classical – and still, it seems to me, the best – exposition of this state of mind is to be found in Max Weber’s distinction between the ethics of [conviction] and the ethic of responsibility” (L, 48n). It is the inability to make sense of and deal with the ethical paradoxes with which the world confronts us that makes the ethic of ultimate ends so problematic and dangerous.

of individual liberty and human equality.¹⁸¹ But Bakunin's conception of these ideals was so divorced from the genuine needs – the genuine, concrete, problems and struggles of the people for whom he was supposedly advocating: the destitute and oppressed Russian masses – that the political actions he was advocating was likely to produce little except added misery. Unable to grasp the nuances and particulars of the situation in Russia, what freedom meant on the ground level, what it entailed, Bakunin was unable to offer little but empty rhetoric, Berlin suggests.

In contrast, Herzen “saw danger in the great magnificent abstractions” (PSM, 507). When divorced from the concrete problems and needs on the ground and turned into abstractions, ideals such as liberty and equality risk becoming “new idols [...] on whose altars human blood was to be shed tomorrow as irrationally and uselessly as the blood of the victims of yesterday or the day before, sacrificed in honour of older divinities – church or monarchy or the feudal order or the sacred customs of the tribe, that were now discredited as obstacles to the progress of mankind” (PSM, 507). This notion that ideals, however noble, can be turned into idols in whose name great sacrifices need to be made is one that lies at the heart of Berlin's critique of monism and the extreme pluralism of the Romantics. One of the enduring insights of Romantic humanism, according to Berlin, was the Kantian notion that “the maker of values is man himself” and that therefore he may “not be slaughtered in the name of anything higher than himself, for there is nothing higher” (CTH, 199). Yet it was an insight that remained forever fragile, constantly at risk of being forgotten or ignored. It is when our ideals are no longer grounded in the concrete, Berlin is suggesting, that this insight is at particular risk of being forgotten. “General and abstract terms like ‘liberty’ or ‘equality’, unless they [are] translated into specific terms applicable to actual situations, [are] likely, at best merely to stir the poetical imagination and inspire men with generous sentiments, at worst to justify stupidities or crimes” (RT, 127).

¹⁸¹ See “Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty,” in *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin Books, [1978] 2008). This book title will hereafter be referred to as RT.

4.2 The Critique of Romanticism and the Counter-Enlightenment

However, it was not merely monist assumptions that could prove a poor guide to political action and impede our ability to make sound political judgments on Berlin's account. At the root of much that went wrong in the twentieth century was a different set of assumptions – assumptions that arose in part as a reaction against the claims of monism.¹⁸²

The counter-enlightenment challenged some of the central assumptions of Western thought. Most importantly, Berlin argues, it facilitated the widespread realization that the ends of men were many, irreducible to each other, and that ends, equally ultimate, could be incompatible – in short, value pluralism. Values, the Romantics stipulated, were not objective, discoverable within some metaphysical realm, they were created. Human beings were not static, endowed with similar needs, which if fulfilled would satisfy them – they were creative, self-creating, self-generating creatures. Values are not discovered. They are created. Diversity, plurality, non-conformity, therefore, were not due to the ignorance of man, differing climates, or the corrupting effects of social or political institutions – as had been believed for millennia; they were the inescapable by-product of human freedom and creativity. To universalize, to abstract, to simplify, was to destroy, or subvert what men truly were and the complex and mysterious world they inhabit. By undermining the central assumptions of Western thought up until that point, “the romantics,” Berlin argued, “dealt a fatal blow to the proposition that, all appearances to the contrary, a definite solution to the jigsaw puzzle is, at least in principle, possible, that power in the service of reason can achieve it, that rational organization can bring about the perfect union of such values and counter-values as individual liberty and social equality, spontaneous self-expression and organized, socially directed efficiency, perfect knowledge and perfect happiness, the claims of personal life and the claims of parties, classes, nations, the public interest” (CTH, 236-237). The Romantic revolt, in other words, challenged the monist faith in final solutions and the emancipating potential of reason and the rational (re)organization of society.

¹⁸² It should be noted here that the counter-enlightenment and the Romantic Movement ought not be considered one and the same (nor does Berlin say they are). There were many divergent and indeed incompatible currents of the counter-enlightenment, Romantic Movement representing one of these currents.

Yet, the assumptions and ideas that were central to the counter-enlightenment and that underpin, in a moderate form, Berlin's conception of value pluralism – that values were created, not discovered, particular, not universal; that science and reason were incapable of grasping the world in all its complexity; that the will, not reason, is the creative function of man – also came to be at the root of the nationalism, populism, and fascism that came to wreak such destructive force on the twentieth century. As I have already indicated, Berlin attributed the excesses and fanaticism of the Romantics to a similar type of mindset that he attributed to the fanaticism of doctrines grounded in monism. This is worth keeping in mind, as it should remind us that Berlin was not the uncritical champion of the counter-enlightenment that he is sometimes made out to be. The excesses of the Enlightenment brought out the excesses of the counter-enlightenment.

4.2.1 The Death of the Tragic Dilemma

In its “fullest, most fanatical form,” Berlin wrote, the Romantic ideal came to entail the view that “all ends are equal; ends are what they are, men pursue what they pursue, and there is no way of establishing objective hierarchies valid for all men and all cultures. The only principle which must be sacredly observed is that each man shall be true to his own goals, even at the cost of destruction, havoc, death” (CTH, 192). All moral questions have thereby been reduced to a single principle. The only thing that matters is fidelity to one's own values – even if it means violent conflict and confrontation. “We choose as we choose, that is all that can be said; and if this leads to conflict and destruction, that is a fact about the world which must be accepted as gravitation is accepted, something which is inherent in the dissimilar natures of dissimilar men, or nations, or cultures.” But if the highest priority should always be my own ideals, then moral conflict and moral dilemmas cease being a problem that needs to be taken seriously – tragedy, conflict and loss cease to be objects of moral concern. Moral conflict is no longer a problem that needed to be confronted and negotiated – all that matters is one's own values, the realization of one's own will. Like the monists they had so fiercely criticized, the more extreme of the Romantics, thinkers like Fichte and some of his German followers, came to believe that every moral question, every moral dilemma, could be addressed using a single principle –

that one should be faithful to one's own ends, one's own will.¹⁸³ This was the paradoxical position of the more extreme figures in the counter-enlightenment.

In its most fanatical form, Berlin argues, the counter-enlightenment came to reject the moral horizon – and moral realism – that was central to his own conception of value pluralism.¹⁸⁴ It rejected the notion that there are universal values and something akin to a moral minimum – the notion of natural law in an “empiricist dress” to which Berlin refers.¹⁸⁵ This becomes particularly problematic when the ideals of the actualization of will, of creation and authenticity, are made to be paramount, since conflict then moves from being a tragic component in life to its most heroic, most essential component.¹⁸⁶ Defiance, resistance, consistent fidelity to one's own values, becomes all that matters. Berlin is scathing in his critique of the implications of this attitude. “To the extent to which there are common values, it is impossible to say that everything must be created by me; that if I find something given, I must smash it; that if I find something structured, I must destroy it in order to give free play to my unbridled imagination. To this extent, romanticism, if it is driven to its logical conclusion, does end in some kind of lunacy” (RR, 145).¹⁸⁷

The celebration of the will was problematic, not least because ‘the Will’ could be made to apply to nations and peoples as well as individuals. This is what is at the root of Berlin's critique of the conceptions of positive freedom he found in Fichte and Hegel. Freedom becomes conceived as self-mastery, or self-direction, but the politically relevant self is not the individual human being, but some transcendent conception of man, the nation, the people, or some similar entity. Thus the state – the representative of the people, the nation, etc. – is justified in forcing its citizens to comply with its will. Doing so not only does not limit the freedom of its citizens, it represents the realization of their

¹⁸³ See Isaiah Berlin, FB, chapter on Fichte.

¹⁸⁴ See CTH 202-204, where Berlin makes this point explicitly. See also chapter 2, pp. 55-57, for a discussion of Berlin's moral realism.

¹⁸⁵ CTH, 204.

¹⁸⁶ Interestingly, this is a notion, as Berlin argues, that the Romantics picked up from Kant. Even though Kant would have emphatically disagreed with their conclusions, it was the notion of freedom as self-legislation, as being radically opposed to determinism, to following the passions and influences that act upon us – which was a centerpiece of Kant's philosophy – that formed the basis for the Romantic ideals conception of freedom as the expression of the creative will.

¹⁸⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). This book title will hereafter be referred to as RR.

freedom. It was the celebration of the creative will, Berlin argued, that paved the way for the “monstrous fallacy [...] that the aesthetic model applies to politics, that the political leader is, at his highest, a sublime artist who shapes men according to his creative design” (CTH, 237).

Berlin’s writings on nationalism paint a similar picture of the dangers of elevating single principle or goal above all others. Berlin was far from dismissive of nationalism. Communal attachments, the sense of recognition, acceptance and understanding that can come from a shared sense of national identity were all genuine moral attachments and values. Yet under certain circumstances, nationalism could be disastrous. Like a “bent twig,” nationalism can emerge as a dangerous force, particularly when groups feel they have been mistreated, or deprived of their dignity. “The demand to be treated as human and as equal is at the base of both social and national revolutions of our time: it represents the modern form of the cry for recognition – violent, dangerous, but valuable and just” (SR, 252). The problem, for Berlin, is not with the demand for recognition or with the sense of community – it is not with the values themselves; it is with what happens when political action becomes consumed with an overarching goal, extinguishing all other moral considerations. He writes, “No doubt to do entirely as one likes could destroy not only one’s neighbours but oneself. Freedom is only one value among others, and cannot be realised without rules and limits. But in the hour of revolt this is inevitably forgotten” (CTH, 259). Under these circumstances, national self-determination risks being conflated with a host of different values. Collective freedom may end up being seen as incapable of conflicting with individual liberties; and values both external and internal to the moral system in question risk being lost.

But even in a moderate form, the kind of relativist interpretation of moral conflict that romanticism underpins is detrimental to sound political judgment, Berlin argues. As with monism, relativism suffers from the inability to make sense of and take seriously moral conflict. As a result of this inability, tragedy, conflict and loss cease being objects that require negotiation and compromise – for the monist, conflict and tragedy are needless and can be overcome; for the relativist, conflict and tragedy are simply part of the landscape, something to be celebrated or ignored. Lacking a sense that tragedy and conflict produce genuine moral dilemmas, dilemmas that require the exercise of

judgment, both monism and relativism, Berlin suggests, provide poor guides to political action.

A similarly corrosive perspective on politics risks being introduced if moral values are conceived as little more than a reflection of our class, identity, or some other variable over which we have little control. The belief that our moral values are a function of class, identity or the like constitutes a form of relativism on Berlin's account.¹⁸⁸ Marx's moral utopianism notwithstanding, his account of moral conflict, Berlin argued, "undermines the basic assumption of rational dispute, of the possibility of uncoerced consensus which alone justifies democratic government" (SR, 136), by holding moral beliefs to be a reflection of class. Berlin saw in Marx traces of the irrationalism that was a prominent current of the Romantic counter-Enlightenment, and attributed the violent conceptions of politics to which they gave rise to similar factors. The irrationalism found in fascist political thought lent legitimacy to the notion that politics was a field of battle where force, ultimately, was the only tool that could be counted on to be effective. Moral claims and principles could be dismissed as illusions designed to mask and perpetuate the reign of the corrupt and unjust. The slate could be wiped clean without loss or tragedy. This particular form of relativism, in other words, served to remove the constraints of contrary moral principles and considerations – and with it any moral qualms and dilemmas.¹⁸⁹

4.3 Negative Capability and Judgment

Much of Berlin's political thought, I suggested in chapter one, is perhaps best understood as a defence of, and a plea for, the importance of inhabiting the space of paradox and tension with which the world confronts us, and the danger of reaching for more solid ground. It is when we reach for more solid ground, when we swear fidelity to a single set of principles or values in an effort to solve the apparently intractable problems and paradoxes with which the world confronts us, that we risk justifying disastrous, if not

¹⁸⁸ Berlin writes in "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought": "At the heart of the best-known type of modern historical relativism lies the conception of men wholly bound by tradition or culture or class or generation to particular attitudes or scales of value which cause other outlooks and ideals to seem strange and, at times, even unintelligible" (CTH, 82).

¹⁸⁹ See Lukes, "Marxism and the Problem of Dirty Hands," in *Moral Conflict*.

murderous, political solutions. If for Berlin faith in the powers of reason and the forces of progress led thinkers like Condorcet, Helvetius, and Saint-Simon to be insensitive to the “cries of the vanquished,” the equally vehement rejection of the enlightenment by Hamann meant that the latter “was unaffected” by “the fact that an equal, if not greater, degree of inhumanity was practised by those who rejected science and allowed men to live in remediable poverty, ignorance and oppression” (TCE, 353). Similarly, part of the danger with a belief in historical determinism, Berlin argued, was precisely that it relegated our judgment to a secondary role. There were no choices, no genuine dilemmas. Political action had no choice but to abide by the forces of necessity.

Political judgment, of course, cannot operate without crutches. It is not self-sufficient. It needs help from reason, from the ‘gathered wisdom of tradition,’ from empirical observation, intuition, our emotions, from past and present moral judgments, norms and principles, and the sentiments, will and judgments of other people. Berlin’s point is not that it is wrong to draw on any of these; he would insist that we have to do so. What Berlin warns against is the exclusive reliance on any one principle, or value – on any one crutch. This is why we should refrain from the temptation to interpret Berlin as a modern day Humean, along the lines suggested by Stuart Hampshire. According to Hampshire, for Hume as for Berlin,

We ought to follow Nature’s guidance, and we make a serious mistake if we try to act against the natural and normal sentiments implanted in us. That is the way that leads to fanaticism, to false feeling and to dissimulation, and to a loss of self-assurance and of a clear sense of identity. So Hume, and after him, Berlin.¹⁹⁰

It is true that Berlin saw it as problematic when political ideals lead us away from the concrete problems, concerns and realities on the ground – including the sentiments and wishes of real, actually existing, human beings. Like Burke and Hume, Berlin saw something problematic, if not outright dangerous, about political action guided by abstract ideals. Yet, Berlin would have considered the exclusive reliance on “sentiments implanted in us” as a potentially equally disastrous guide to political conduct. Berlin was

¹⁹⁰ Stuart Hampshire, “Nationalism,” in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*. Quoted in Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 81

a critic of untempered faith in the powers reason; he did not reject reason. He was, as has already been pointed out, a critic of both Hamann *and* Condorcet.

These distinctions become clearer when we consider Berlin's view of Joseph de Maistre, who went further than most in his radical rejection of uncertainty, paradox, and tension. The problem was not that he did not think of the world, of what occurs, "as a thick, opaque, inextricably complex web of events, objects, characteristics, connected and divided by literally innumerable unidentifiable links – and gaps and sudden discontinuities too, visible and invisible." The world was full of paradox, tension, mystery. Maistre held, as Berlin writes, "a view of reality which makes all clear, logical and scientific constructions – the well-defined, symmetrical patterns of human reason – seem smooth, thin, empty, 'abstract' and totally ineffective as means either of description or of analysis of anything that lives or has ever lived" (RT, 77). Yet although Maistre was part of the counter-enlightenment, he was not a Romantic. He was rather, as Ian Buruma has observed, a "radical pessimist". The enlightenment "would not bring progress, liberty, or greater knowledge, but chaos, violence, and depravity."¹⁹¹

Reason, Maistre maintained, was weak. It could not be made to sustain anything. Nothing could be founded on reason. What reason could build, reason could destroy. And the world needs stability, order at any cost. And on what could this order, this stability, be founded? Only on that which is beyond the corrupting reach of reason – only that which is irrational can provide the foundation for anything stable. "Men could only be saved by being hemmed in by the terror of authority" (CTH, 118), as Berlin characterizes Maistre's terrifying conclusions. The central figure for Maistre, the keystone of the social order, therefore, was the executioner, the hangman:

All greatness, all power, the hierarchy as a whole rest upon the hangman: he is the terror and mainstay of human society. Remove this misconstrued factor from the world and instantly order will yield to chaos, thrones will shake, and society perish. God, who created authority, also created punishment.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Ian Buruma, *Taming the Gods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 34.

¹⁹² Joseph de Maistre, quoted in Leszek Kolakowski "In Praise of Inconsistency," 231-2.

Order and stability had to be maintained at any cost. Since God created authority, it follows that he also created punishment. Spiritual crimes, therefore, must be punished. The tribunal that found Galileo guilty was to be lauded. No contradictory values, goals, principles or obligations must be allowed to detract from or compromise the order and stability of the state. If the revolutionaries wished to build society anew, from scratch, Maistre, Buruma notes, “was the polar opposite of this. He attacked eighteenth-century rationalism with the intolerance and the passion, the power and the gusto, of the great revolutionaries themselves.”¹⁹³ For Maistre, there were no moral dilemmas. Political action need only swear fidelity to a single principle – the preservation of stability and order.

Maistre’s rejection of the disorder and instability that free human activity can bring made him an “enemy of liberty”, on Berlin’s account. Berlin was fiercely critical of Maistre and saw in his thought the roots of modern fascism. Yet Berlin was also attracted to Maistre’s penetrating insights, his critique of the enlightenment and its faith in the powers of reason. By revealing that the world is infinitely more complex, paradoxical and mysterious than the feeble tools of scientific inquiry can capture, Maistre’s thought should undermine our faith in scientific formulas and neat political solutions. Maistre, in other words, was to Berlin a thinker whose thought should open up that space of paradox and tension, uncertainty and doubt that we must inhabit if we are to make sound political judgments. But his unwillingness to let politics exist in this space of paradox and tension, his belief that there was a proper order to society, as revealed by God, and that everything must be done to protect it, infused his political thought with a form of extremism that would later come to inhabit doctrines of fascism. The more far-reaching claims of the Enlightenment were matched in Maistre’s thought by the more far-reaching claims of the counter-Enlightenment. Neither was willing to let politics exist in a state of suspended tension.

The problem with hedgehogs, for Berlin, in the final analysis, is that they are prevented by their assumptions about the moral dimension of political life from comprehending the ethical paradoxes with which political actors and leaders are inevitably confronted. This undermines their capacity to deal adequately with the

¹⁹³ Buruma, *Taming the Gods*, 35.

problems and dilemmas that are part of political life. So Machiavelli and Weber insisted, so Berlin argued. Hedgehogs have their place, in other words, but the art of statecraft is better left to foxes.

5. AN ETHIC OF TRAGEDY

The end of political action is not some strategic perfection, but the adjustment of interests and activities as they arise, when they arise; since ... it is natural to men to pursue different and, at times, incompatible ends; nor is this an evil, for diversity is the price – and perhaps the essence – of free activity. Hence all that political action can achieve is the creation of machinery for the prevention of too much friction, the suffering caused by too many conflicts and collisions, without attempting to suppress them wholly.

~ Isaiah Berlin (SR, 121)

My praise of inconsistency ... posits that contradictions in values do not stem from their abuse and therefore are not merely appearances that can be overcome by intelligent moderation. These contradictions inhere in the world of values and cannot be reconciled in any synthesis. Reasonable inconsistency does not seek to forge a synthesis between extremes, knowing it does not exist, since values as such exclude each other integrally. The real world of values is inconsistent; that is to say, it is made up of antagonistic elements. To grant them full recognition simultaneously is impossible, yet each demands total acceptance. This is not a matter of logical contradictions, because values are not theoretical theses. It is a contradiction which lies at the heart of human behaviour.

~ Leszek Kolakowski¹⁹⁴

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson¹⁹⁵

It was important to be cognizant of the inescapable tragic dimension of political life, Berlin insisted. If ignored or downplayed, it undermines the capacity for political judgment and introduces problematic incentives for political action. Yet to accept that conflict and tragedy cannot be eliminated from political life does not imply, Berlin maintained, that nothing can be done to reduce or minimize it, or that all ways of dealing with it are equally sound. Just as it is foolish to imagine that moral conflict can be solved by a change in socio-economic relations, or by the introduction of more rationally grounded political institutions, it is equally foolish to suppose that there is nothing that can or, more importantly, *should* be done about it. Berlin argued that the notion that “We

¹⁹⁴ Kolakowski, “Inconsistency,” 236.

¹⁹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essay on Self-Reliance* (East Aurora, N.Y.: The Roycroft Shop, 1905), 15.

choose as we choose, that is all that can be said; and if this leads to conflict and destruction, that is a fact about the world which must be accepted as gravitation is accepted, something which is inherent in the dissimilar natures of dissimilar men, or nations, or cultures” (CTH, 202-3), was not grounded a “valid diagnosis” of our moral predicament. We have a moral obligation, in other words, to lessen the impact of moral conflict and to minimize tragic loss and suffering.

In this chapter, I will argue that Berlin’s writings provide us with a framework from which to ground and evaluate political action. I have chosen to call this framework a political ethic, but it would be wrong to expect a clear set of regulative principles or anything akin to a fully theorized political morality. Berlin’s ethic is not intended to provide a kind of regulative ideal, or principle, in the manner of the ‘principle of affected interest’ or Rawls’ ‘difference principle’. It speaks, rather, to what we might call the art of statecraft. It describes the qualities that are necessary for sound political judgment, examines the virtue of compromise and suggests a set of goals, or ends, that political action ought to be aimed at, given the plurality of values and interests.

There are two related yet distinct strands that constitute Berlin’s ethic. The first is practical; it is concerned with how we understand and approach the problems with which politics confronts us so as to make room for the exercise of political judgment. In light of what he sees as the reality of moral conflict, Berlin advocates an approach to politics characterized by a principle I will call *moderation in consistency*. This aspect of Berlin’s ethic is above all concerned with how we avoid intolerable outcomes and tragic, misguided or disastrous political action. It is not, it should be clear from the start, a moral principle. Rather, it speaks to how we ought to approach political action in light of the reality of value pluralism. It entails placing a virtue on compromise, pragmatism, and the willingness to be inconsistent. The second aspect of Berlin’s ethic provides what we might call its moral compass. While not intended as a fixed hierarchy of values, or a strict moral foundation, it nevertheless suggests a hierarchy of moral priorities. If the first strand gives character to a kind of Weberian “ethic of responsibility,” the latter gives content to the equally necessary “ethic of conviction”.

A few words of caution are necessary before we proceed. My aim in this chapter is to paint a picture of the central currents of Berlin’s political ethic. Reflecting Berlin’s

thought, the picture that will emerge is somewhat muddled. Loose ends are left hanging, questions remain unanswered, possible inconsistencies are left unresolved. I will acknowledge and point to some of these in this chapter, but my main aim here will be to paint a picture that is faithful to Berlin's thought. The next chapter will take up some of the questions that Berlin's ethic raises and examine its strengths and weaknesses with a more critical eye.

5.1 A Political Ethic?

Any attempt to piece together a coherent political ethic from Berlin's writings is fraught with difficulties. On the one side, Berlin's political views are deceptively straight forward. He was a socially progressive liberal, favouring a mix of negative and positive liberties, social welfare programs, and measures to fight inequality and bring about advances in social justice.¹⁹⁶ He was an admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, which he saw as having brought qualitative improvements in social equality and justice without leading to any meaningful reductions in negative liberty. He was, as is well known, a firm defender of the importance of negative liberty. Without some modicum of negative liberty, he believed, it was scarcely possible to give expression to the essential human capacity for choice making and self-creation. Indeed, for Berlin, "the glory and dignity of man consists in the fact that it is he who chooses, and is not chosen for, that he can be his own master (even if at times this fills him with fear and a sense of solitude)" (CTH, 202).

Yet on closer inspection, Berlin's views begin to appear more complex. One might ask, for instance: should negative liberty be conceived as some kind of meta-value, trumping, in the last resort, other values? Or is negative liberty just one value among many, as long as there is at least some of it (how much?) to be had? And is negative liberty a value that is equally essential to all human beings, regardless of culture or political heritage? Things get even more complicated when we consider Berlin's doctrine of value pluralism. The liberal values Berlin favoured, his value pluralism would seem to

¹⁹⁶ What precisely Berlin understood social justice to mean is left ambiguous. But his admiration for Roosevelt's New Deal (which he saw as having brought substantive gains in social justice), gives us a decent indication of what progress in social justice would have entailed for Berlin.

suggest, would be just one combination of many possible varieties. And given Berlin's account of the way in which values are expressed and embodied in culturally particular practices and beliefs, it is not clear that Berlin's thought can give us grounds for preferring any one particular value hierarchy, or at least so it appears. To be sure, Berlin's thought should not be confused with a species of relativism. But it is not clear it can give us grounds for endorsing the kind of liberal politics Berlin himself championed.

To frame things a little differently, there are, on the face of it, a number of tensions running through Berlin's ethic concerning its philosophical and moral foundations as well as its implications. On the one hand, Berlin appears to harbour a cold, determined, commitment to certain liberal values, particularly negative liberty. When he writes of those who hold that the "sacredness of the act of choice on the part of the individual human being, and the notion of liberty as an end of itself, whatever its consequences" (PIRA, 3),¹⁹⁷ one gets the sense that it is a perspective he shares: freedom is a cold value; it demands sacrifices; yet these are sacrifices we should be willing to bear. His famously staunch defense of negative liberty in "Two Concepts" adds to this impression.¹⁹⁸ On the other, Berlin seems to favour a moderate, almost utilitarian, consequentialist willingness to sacrifice and trade away various values, if it seems appropriate. He argues in "The Pursuit of the Ideal" that "[u]tilitarian solutions are sometimes wrong, but, I suspect, more often beneficent" (CTH,17). In other words, at times Berlin seems to embrace something of a deontological ethic; at others, more of a consequentialist ethic. At times he appears to suggest that negative liberty is *the* value around which societies should structure their institutions; at others, he appears to suggest it is just one value among many, no more important than equality, social justice, or community.

We also find Berlin arguing that monism is responsible for more atrocities in history than any other idea, or assumption, and making a sustained argument that it is important to recognize the truth of value pluralism. In places Berlin seems to suggest that

¹⁹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, PIRA.

¹⁹⁸ It is not my contention that Berlin anywhere actually argues that no price is too high to pay for liberty, or that liberty should not under any circumstances be limited to allow for the realisation of other values. Some critics of his work have of course interpreted Berlin this way. But I do not believe that there is any merit to that interpretation.

an awareness of value pluralism should lead to a more moderate, pragmatic approach to politics. Monism is portrayed as a dangerous poison – something that can easily lead to blind fanaticism – and value pluralism as the antidote, something that undermines that unflinching commitment to a central vision of what the world should be to which the monists are drawn. These views appear to suggest that Berlin is, in the last resort, committed to a kind of cosmopolitan ethic, hostile to any form of moral perfectionism – whether rooted in cultural particularism or an all-embracing universal system of morality. Yet, Berlin also expressed great reservations about cosmopolitanism and celebrated and defended the role and value of particularistic communal identities, attachments and norms.

The question of how to resolve these apparent tensions in Berlin’s thought have been at the root of many of the interpretative controversies that have surrounded his thought, as well as some common misconceptions. Chief among these is the misconception that Berlin was a proponent of maximizing negative liberty, regardless of the cost to other values, such as equality, justice or fairness.¹⁹⁹ But it has also, interestingly, given rise to the misconception that Berlin was a relativist. The common interpretative strategy has been to argue that Berlin failed to consider the full implications of his commitments and ideas, and that as a result Berlin remained stuck in an unsustainable equilibrium. Taking the content of Berlin’s thought seriously, the common belief has been, requires ‘pushing’ Berlin to one side of the divide that is at the root of the tensions running through his thought.

Consider the diverging interpretations of George Crowder and Alex Zakaras on the one side and John Gray on the other. Crowder and Zakaras interpret Berlin as being, in the last resort, committed to a kind of cosmopolitan liberalism. On their interpretation Berlin “is no defender of cultural particularism.”²⁰⁰ Political action should aim to foster agents that are capable of autonomous choice making. In contrast, Gray argues that Berlin’s thought fundamentally challenges liberalism’s claim to universality. Berlin’s thought gives us ground, Gray argues, for not only tolerating views and beliefs that we

¹⁹⁹ See Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 4; Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 1.

²⁰⁰ Zakaras, “Cosmopolitan Ethic,” 497.

find disagreeable but for nourishing cultural pluralism as an end-in-itself.²⁰¹ The task of politics ought to be to facilitate ad-hoc, negotiated, temporary settlements between different moral claims and cultural beliefs. It ought *not* to be to institute a kind of liberal cosmopolitan political and social order. There is something dissatisfying about both of these strands of interpretation, however. The picture of Berlin as a proponent of a cosmopolitan ethic bears little resemblance to the Berlin who writes so movingly about the need for community and who embraces the central features of Herder's expressivist account of cultural pluralism. A cosmopolitan ethic is not compatible with the kind of particularistic (and deep) values and attachments that Berlin, in many places, describes as central to at least some genuine forms of human flourishing. He even stated explicitly: "I regard cosmopolitanism as empty. People can't develop unless they belong to a culture" (CN).²⁰²

But the deeper problem with the attempt to interpret Berlin as, in the last resort, being committed to a kind of liberal universalism is that it conflates Berlin's conception of the role and meaning of politics and political action with his moral beliefs. Politics is not, for Berlin, divorced from morality. But the function of politics is not to facilitate a particular way of life or to realize a particular political morality. The central question of political life, for Berlin, is about how to manage and deal with moral conflict and the paradoxes and complexities of an ever-changing social and political world. It is about when to compromise and when to hold your ground; about when to push for change and when to resist it; it is, in other words, about making judgments: judgments regarding which value to favour and which value to sacrifice and knowing what is the lesser evil. A sound political ethic is not, therefore, concerned mainly with our first priorities, our ideals, or conceptions of justice; it is concerned with the principles we use to navigate and manage a non-ideal environment. Gray's interpretation is sensitive to this aspect of Berlin's thought, yet is unable to come to grips with Berlin's liberal preferences and sensibilities.

²⁰¹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*,

²⁰² Nathan Gardels, "Two Concepts of Nationalism: An Interview with Isaiah Berlin," *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 21 (1991). Hereafter CN. I leave aside here the question of whether there are conceptions of cosmopolitanism that are reasonably accommodating towards deep and particular cultural attachments. For Zakaras – as for Berlin – cosmopolitanism is not compatible with cultural particularism.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that rather than revealing a basic incoherence that needs to be resolved by pushing Berlin's views to one side of the divide, the tensions running through Berlin's political preferences and morality reflect the expression of the core principles of a coherent political ethic. We unpack this ethic when we place Berlin's conception of the tragic dimension of politics at the center of our interpretation, and begin to explore the ways in which Berlin saw our assumptions about the moral dimension of political life shaping how we understand and approach political action. Berlin's political ethic makes him a particular kind of liberal, but not of the cosmopolitan variety.

5.2 The Liberal Ethos

To tease out Berlin's political ethic, let us begin by briefly examining his interpretation of the political ethic of the two writers who were arguably closest to his heart – Ivan Turgenev and Alexander Herzen.²⁰³ Each captures a distinct component of Berlin's ethic: the compromising moderate and the “revolutionary without fanaticism.” In some respects the two components are incompatible. Yet the key to the liberal ethic, on Berlin's interpretation, lies in combining them.²⁰⁴

Turgenev exemplified what Berlin refers to as the “liberal predicament”. While being committed to many of the same ideals as the radicals – freedom, equality, and social justice – the liberal, on this reading, is committed to treading carefully, to not taking radical steps to force his or her ideals on the world (thereby earning the scorn of both the conservatives and the radicals). In “Fathers and Children,” Berlin examines Turgenev's response to the central moral dilemma facing Russian liberals and progressives in the 19th century. Amid a brooding atmosphere of impending social turmoil, with radicals fighting to break the grip on power of what is perceived to be a dying socio-political order, amid great social misery and political repression, the question

²⁰³ See particularly “Fathers and Children: Ivan Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament,” “Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty” and “Alexander Herzen,” in RT; as well as “Herzen and his Memoirs,” in PSM. For a discussion of Berlin's affinity for Herzen, see Aileen Kelly's “A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism”; for a discussion of his affinity for Turgenev, see Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 71.

²⁰⁴ According to Berlin's biographer, Michael Ignatieff, Turgenev is the thinker Berlin felt closest too, whereas for Aileen Kelly, it is Herzen's thought that provides us with the model for understanding Berlin's thought. They are perhaps both right.

of what to do, and particularly whether to support the radicals, was foremost on the mind of Turgenev.

Berlin paints a picture of Turgenev as torn between his own sympathy for the demands of the radicals, about the need for social justice, and his sense that radical change – even change that was justified – was fraught with uncertainty and bound to generate inestimable costs. Discussing the predicament of the Russian liberals, whose fate Turgenev exemplified, Berlin writes:

The dilemma of the liberals became insoluble. They wished to destroy the regime which seemed to them wholly evil. They believed in reason, secularism, the rights of the individual, freedom of speech, of association, of opinion, the liberty of groups and races and, nations, greater social and economic equality, above all in the rule of justice. They admired the selfless dedication, the purity of motive, the martyrdom of those, no matter how extremist, who offered their lives for the violent overthrow of the status quo. But they feared that the losses entailed by terrorists or Jacobin methods might be irreparable, and greater than any possible gains; they were horrified by the fanaticism and barbarism of the extreme left, by their contempt for the only culture they knew (RT, 344)

Turgenev's reservations are partly grounded in an awareness of the difficulties involved in achieving political objectives, particularly if they involve large-scale changes to the status quo. Because our knowledge of the social world is limited, large-scale social engineering is likely to produce unintended consequences. Yet, more importantly, Berlin suggests, it is due to the fact that the liberal acknowledges, in a way that the radical does not, that there is a genuine *moral* cost to any political action, even one that would seem to make the world a better place. Turgenev recognized, on Berlin's interpretation, that since values conflict and are incommensurable, even the realization of a more free, just and equal society will involve the loss of certain incommensurable values. In other words, even when we do what we have good reason to believe to be morally right, there will be moral loss – our hands may nevertheless be dirty.

Whereas the radicals and the conservatives in Russia at the time both saw the social and political conflicts plaguing society as conflicts between right and wrong, between justice and injustice, Turgenev, on Berlin's interpretation, saw the situation as inherently tragic, pitting incompatible goods against each other. This did not prevent

Turgenev from being committed to the ideals of the radicals. It did not make him a neutral bystander to the conflict – he had no qualms about making judgments about what was good or bad, better or worse. But it did mean that he wished to proceed with caution. It would have been wrong to simply dismiss or wipe away completely the existing social order, with its values and ways of life, Turgenev felt. As a result of this, Turgenev appeared in the eyes of many as timid and without genuine moral conviction. But this is to misunderstand Turgenev, Berlin insists. Turgenev does exhibit inconsistency and a kind of hesitancy in his behavior, but this is a *product* of his moral convictions, not the absence of such convictions.

It is important to note, then, that it is not moral *skepticism* that grounds Turgenev's liberal approach to political action. In fact, Berlin sees Turgenev as a thinker who dared to stand up for his ideals and beliefs, even in the face of criticism and scorn. The liberal ethic is not, on Berlin's interpretation, grounded in the kind belief in the need for neutrality between rival moral claims that one sometimes finds in liberal democratic theory. What grounds Turgenev's liberal approach to political action, rather, is his sense for the antagonistic structure of the realm of values. Because he saw the situation in Russia as presenting a tragic dilemma, where real loss was in some measure inescapable rather than a situation where right was only on one side, Turgenev became committed to treading carefully, to an ethic of moderation, compromise and pragmatism. Loss may be unavoidable, but tragedy, he felt, could perhaps be minimized.

This did not mean, as I have already indicated, that Turgenev felt any qualms about making a judgment as to which side of the political divide he was on. We have to choose, after all. But the fact that Turgenev felt justified in making the value judgments he made did not mean that he saw the other side as irrational or necessarily wrong. Turgenev recognized the 'relative validity of his convictions,' one could say, yet 'stood for them unflinchingly.' And because he saw political life as tragic, he recognized that political action may involve taking steps that are *simultaneously* morally right *and* morally wrong. Turgenev believed the ideals of freedom, equality and social justice held a promise the older, more traditional, Russian ways of life could not trump. But this did not alleviate the tragedy of the situation. The complete destruction of the traditional Russian values and ways of life would be tragic. The fact that he saw his own ideals as

real and true did not entail, for him, that the ideals of the conservatives and reactionaries were necessarily false – though he considered the socio-political order on which they relied to be terribly unjust and in need of reform.²⁰⁵ But while tragedy could not be avoided completely – the conflict involved, after all, *constitutively incompatible* values – tragedy could be minimized though a more pragmatic and less one-sided approach to political action. This was particularly the case since Turgenev suspected that if political action did not proceed with caution, it risked undermining not just the values of older society, but the values of freedom, justice and equality as well.

The liberal, on Berlin's interpretation, then, is committed to treading carefully, to an ethic of moderation and pragmatism.²⁰⁶ Value pluralism does not, strictly speaking, entail liberalism for Berlin, on this interpretation. But by making the political actor aware of the true and full cost of his or her actions, and by undermining the notion that perfect or final solutions exist, it provides reasons for proceeding more cautiously and for focusing on concrete, tangible, problems. The liberal may be committed to many of the same ideals as the radicals – freedom, equality, justice, and so forth – but sees virtue in the compromises and half-solutions that characterize political life. Compromises and half-solutions are not mere diversions from an ideal; they serve an important purpose, helping to minimize tragedy and preserve peace, and are in that sense essential to a decent society.²⁰⁷

The role this awareness of the true and full moral cost of political action was rooted, Berlin suggests, in Turgenev's 'sense of reality'. He shared with the radicals, Berlin writes,

²⁰⁵ Note that for Berlin a value can be true and genuine and still terribly cruel and unjust. Indeed, the Homeric values expressed in the Iliad are precisely that, for Berlin as for Vico. See CTH, 86-87.

²⁰⁶ By pragmatism I mean something akin to a politics of the possible, not philosophical pragmatism.

²⁰⁷ To clarify, Berlin's liberalism here concerns conduct in respect to the ends we pursue and the moral choices we make. Liberalism, on this interpretation, is not about rights and principles of justice. It is a practical ethic, a way of approaching and navigating the moral choices with which political life confronts us. The moral considerations that rights and principles of justice carry would have real weight, but Berlin's liberal ethic does not entail a commitment to consistently letting those considerations trump competing claims. In some respects this no doubt robs Berlin's liberalism of a specific content. However, as I will show later in this chapter, the emphasis on flexibility and pragmatism is coupled with – and indeed constrained by – a specific moral foundation, which does give it a richer moral content.

their hatred of every form of enslavement, injustice and brutality, but unlike some among them he could not rest comfortably in any doctrine or ideological system. All that was general, abstract, absolute, repelled him: his vision remained delicate, sharp, concrete and incurably realistic. Hegelianism, right-wing and left-wing, which he had imbibed as a student in Berlin, materialism, socialism, positivism, about which his friends ceaselessly argued, populism, collectivism, the Russian village commune idealised by those Russian socialists whom the ignominious collapse of the left in Europe in 1848 had bitterly disappointed and disillusioned – these came to seem mere abstractions to him, substitutes for reality, in which many believed, and a few even tried to live, doctrines which life, with its uneven surface and irregular shapes of real human character and activity, would surely resist and shatter if ever a serious effort were made to translate them into practice. (RT, 308)

This sense of reality was also prominent, on Berlin's interpretation, in the political thought of another thinker he greatly admired, Alexander Herzen. In particular he admired Herzen's capacity to combine an unflinching commitment to a concrete set of values with an anti-doctrinaire scepticism. Herzen – at least on Berlin's reading – epitomized negative capability, this ability to live in state of paradox and tension without reaching for more solid ground. Herzen was not a liberal gradualist in the mould of Turgenev. As Berlin writes, "despite his distrust of political fanaticism, whether on the right or on the left, [he did not] turn into a cautious, reformist liberal constitutionalist. Even in his gradualist phase he remained an agitator, an egalitarian and a socialist to the end" (PSM, 522). The political goals and methods he advocated were revolutionary. Yet he was a "revolutionary without fanaticism" – much like, as Aileen Kelly has insightfully argued, Berlin. That is, he held an unflinching commitment to his ideals and did not hesitate to urge their realization in the world.²⁰⁸ It was this quality that Berlin admired, and which we must seek to understand if we are to make sense of Berlin's ethic. If Turgenev provides a window into the aspect of Berlin's ethic that is concerned with the virtue of compromise and of treading carefully, Herzen provides a window into how Berlin envisions a capacity for unflinching commitment can be combined with an anti-utopian pragmatism.

²⁰⁸ Nikolas Kristof makes a similar point in "On Isaiah Berlin: Explorer," *The New York Review of Books*, Feb 25 (2010), when he argues that Berlin avoids (what Kristof sees as) the dreary relativism of those who argue that we should never push our ideals on others, never pass judgment. The relative validity of our values does not render them less sacred, for Berlin; we can recognize their relative validity and still remain unflinchingly committed to our ideals – indeed, even fight for their realization in the world.

It is worth quoting Berlin's summary of Herzen's thought at length (already quoted at the start of this dissertation), as it displays a remarkable similarity to what we know Berlin's mature political views to be.

He believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present, or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were nonetheless binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulae, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies. (PSM, 523)

Notice how Berlin describes Herzen's conception of values. Values are creations; they do not exist in some kind of Platonic realm, waiting to be discovered. Yet this does not make them any less binding. There is also a firm sense here that what gives value and purpose to human life is to be found in the concrete, in the particular. Values and ultimate ends do not derive their force from reason or some metaphysical abstraction – they are born out of, and are given meaning through, particular practices, moments, perspectives and ways of life.

Like Turgenev, Herzen was confronted by the moral and political dilemmas facing Russian intellectuals during the 19th century. The tsarist institutions he saw a relic from a past age, cruel and unjust. More than anything, Herzen was dedicated to the concrete freedom – social and political – of the individual. But while he idealized peasant society, he rejected virtually every creed of the radicals, every utopian blueprint. What mattered for Herzen was the here and now, the concrete freedoms of concrete individuals. Like many thinkers of the 19th century, Herzen sensed that a new social and political order was going to sweep away the old. And he saw great justice in this; the social misery of the poor and landless was truly dreadful and justice would be done when the old elites were

overthrown and the poor and destitute finally got the freedom they had so far been denied. In many respects, therefore, Herzen shared the ideals of the radicals. He wanted emancipation; he wanted to abolish the inequalities and injustices that served to stymie the concrete freedoms of actual men and women, keep them in a state of servitude.²⁰⁹ And yet, he fiercely attacked Bakunin and other 19th century radicals for constructing new idols that would only serve to keep men in chains. He ridiculed the folly justifying great sacrifices in the present in the name of a better, more just, more free tomorrow. “If progress is the goal, for whom are we working? Who is this Moloch who, as the toilers approach him, instead of rewarding them, draws back; and as a consolation to the exhausted and doomed multitudes, shouting ‘morituri te salutant’, can only give the . . . mocking answer that after their death all will be beautiful on earth.”²¹⁰

Herzen did not only detect in the radicals a complete disregard for the concrete lives and freedoms of the people in whose name they were fighting, he also sensed that the radicals risked destroying more than they could create. As Berlin writes, “Herzen saw danger in the great magnificent abstractions” – progress, liberty, equality, national unity, historic rights, human solidarity – “the mere sound of which precipitated men into violent and meaningless slaughter” (PSM, 507). Herzen sensed that the new order that would be ushered in after the old despotic regime had finally fallen would have no place for the more aristocratic values that were a part of the Russia in which Herzen had come of age. And why should they? The radicals were justified in despising everything Herzen cherished about the old regime. These values would no doubt need to be swept aside, but it would represent a tragic loss – “he believed to the end of his life in the moral and social need and the inevitability, sooner or later, of a revolution in Russia,” but he “did not close his eyes to the possibility, even the probability, that the great rebellion would extinguish values to which he was himself dedicated – in particular, the freedoms without which he and others like him could not breathe.” As well as the humanistic values of the civilised elite of which Herzen was a part. The radicals seemed to Herzen to want to destroy not merely the vices of the old regime but its virtues. It was, Berlin writes, “his moral tastes,

²⁰⁹ He wanted, it seems, not merely negative liberties for the peasants, but to create conditions where the peasants could genuinely exercise greater control over their lives – i.e. some measure of positive liberty as well.

²¹⁰ Quoted by Berlin in CTH, 16.

his respect for human values, his entire style of life” that “divided him from the tough-minded younger radicals of the 1860s” (PSM, 522).

Of Herzen’s famous utopian belief in the peasant commune, Berlin writes that for Herzen “this Rousseau-inspired faith, as he grows older, grows less secure. His sense of reality is too strong. For all his efforts, and the efforts of his socialist friends, he cannot deceive himself entirely”(PSM, 519). It was precisely because his “sense of reality was too strong,” because of his awareness of the complex and tragic nature of the predicament Russia faced, that Herzen remained committed to concrete goals rather than abstract ideals, or utopian promises. The aim should not be a perfectly just society – for such ideals are a chimera – but a less unjust, more decent, one.²¹¹

Underlying the political ethic Berlin sees and develops in his essays on Turgenev and Herzen are two contentions, each of which deserves more careful attention. First, given the reality of moral conflict – i.e., for Berlin, the reality of value pluralism – values, or moral goods, are best conceived as fragile. This should limit and guide both the ends and means of political action. In particular, it signals that compromise is vital component of political life. Second, sound political judgment is a function of ‘negative capability’ – the ability to inhabit and act in a world of paradox and tension without reaching for more solid ground. This translates, in Berlin’s thought, to the principle that there is a virtue in a kind of moderate inconsistency. Sound political action allows for inconsistency.

5.3 Fragility and the Need for Compromise

The first of these, the notion that values, or moral goods, are inherently fragile is a reflection of Berlin’s tragic conception of the moral universe.²¹² There is, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, a sense running through Berlin’s thought that values are easily undermined, both by neglect and ambition. Tragedy and loss is never far away. Values conflict and, as a result, the moral choices we make will often entail irreparable

²¹¹ Like Amartya Sen and Avishai Margalit, Berlin does not believe that we need knowledge of what perfectly just society looks like (indeed, for Berlin, a *perfectly* just society is incoherent even in principle) in order to be able to identify injustices in the world. See Sen, *Idea of Justice*; Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²¹² This notion of fragility, and how it relates to tragedy, owes a great deal to the work of Martha Nussbaum, in *The Fragility of Goodness*.

loss and tragedy. The notion that tragedy serves as a reminder of the ‘fragility of the good’ goes back to ancient Greek drama. Ancient Greek tragedies were moral tales meant to impart lessons in the need for moderation and humility by reminding us of our fragile predicament.

Fragility is a persistent theme in Berlin’s writing on the ends of political action. When dealing with the problem of conflicting incommensurable ends, Berlin writes, “perhaps the best one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, *necessarily unstable*, between the different aspirations of different groups of human beings” (CTH, 47 – my emphasis). The fragility, he seems to suggest, should act as a check on our ambitions. “The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices” (CTH, 17-18). Similarly, the task of creating and maintaining conditions of relative flourishing is “dependent on the maintenance of what is bound to be an unstable equilibrium in need of constant attention and repair”. Notice the repeated references to the “necessarily unstable” “precarious,” nature of equilibriums. A society that tolerates diversity, like liberal societies, will therefore be “an order that is always in a condition of imperfect equilibrium, which is required to be maintained by conscious effort” (SR, 121). Since the moral universe does not *naturally* tend toward some kind of harmony, or even equilibrium, political action emerges as an essential tool for the realization and preservation of values and moral goods.

About the need to limit freedom, Berlin writes. “The dilemma is logically insoluble: we cannot sacrifice either freedom or the organisation needed for its defence, or a minimum standard of welfare” and that what is therefore needed is “some logically untidy, flexible and even ambiguous compromise” (L, 92). Again, notice the terminology Berlin uses to describe the kind of compromise that is needed to resolve this type of conflict: “logically untidy,” “flexible,” and “ambiguous”. This shows that Berlin is not imagining a solution that has been *dictated* by reason, deliberation, or some other faculty (though conceivably it has been *informed* by these) – for then it would certainly not be characterized ‘logically untidy,’ or ‘ambiguous’. And in characterizing the compromise as needing to be flexible we can also see that for Berlin the goal of the compromise is not to maximize both values, or to preserve what is best in each and shed what is harmful – in

the spirit of an Aristotelian mean. What Berlin has in mind is more akin to what Stanley Fish has referred to as “inspired adhocery” – a provincial compromise, rooted in the particular needs, claims, and values relevant to the particular moral dilemma being confronted – the goal being not to create some ‘strategic perfection’ but to preserve that ‘precarious equilibrium’.²¹³

It is worth noting the role Berlin’s tragic account of moral conflict plays here, and particularly the work incommensurability is doing in his theory. It is because values are incommensurable (in addition to being incompatible) that we have to look for solutions that are logically untidy, for provincial compromises rather than some type of ideal solution (maximizing utility, or meeting a criteria of universalizability, let us say). And it is because there is no common currency between incommensurable values that it becomes impossible to speak of one value or good compensating for the loss of another in any strict sense of the term. When we sacrifice one incommensurable value for another, there is moral loss. This loss may or may not rise to the level of tragedy; but it is real in either case.²¹⁴ Faced with a choice between incommensurable alternatives, there can be no “strategic perfection.”

Importantly, compromises are needed not just because the losing side of a political conflict will experience a tragic loss if some kind of compromise is not negotiated – though that is one reason why a compromise may be desirable. Berlin also makes the point that unless we listen to the ‘cries of the vanquished’ – even when we are in the right – we are liable to lose the values that *we* cherish and have fought for. Berlin makes this point poignantly in a passage (which I quoted in the previous chapter) discussing the German anti-Enlightenment thinker Georg Hamann.

Those who put an end to suttee, or cleared slums, or created tolerable conditions of life in the place of some crushing, poverty-stricken patriarchalism have rightly not been condemned by the majority of mankind. Hamann speaks for those who hear the cry of the toad beneath the harrow, even when it may be right to plough over him: since if men do not hear this cry, if they are deaf, if the toad is written off because he has been

²¹³ This is a term Fish borrows from Charles Taylor. See Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 63.

²¹⁴ This argument regarding incommensurability and compromise raises a number of questions that I explore further in chapter 6.

‘condemned by history’ – if the defeated are never worth attending to because history is the history of the victorious – then such victories will prove their own undoing, for they will tend to destroy the very values in the name of which the battle was undertaken. (TCE, 350)

There is a real sense here that ambition, or at least a lack of humility, invites tragedy. To avoid tragedy, to the extent that it is possible, we need to temper our ambitions. Tread carefully, focus on piece-meal, small scale, reform – compromise.

Part of the point that Berlin is getting at here is that political action that aims primarily to realize one particular moral ideal – and in that sense tries to mold the world in the image of an ideal – is not going to be well suited to the complexities of political life. The pursuit of justice, emancipation, the maximization of utility, or some other ultimate end – if seen as the ultimate (and only) imperative of political action – is likely to produce unintended consequences and needless value loss and tragedy. That is not to say that ideals, or conceptions of the good, have no role to play in political life on Berlin’s account, or that they ought never to guide political action. For Berlin, they can and ought to – but we ought not, he insists, pursue the same ends consistently. Nor ought we use only a single moral criterion in evaluating the normative dimension of political action. Maximizing utility may be an appropriate goal of political action in some cases, but not necessarily when doing so would mean trampling on people’s rights. Justice may be an appropriate goal, but the pursuit of justice may conflict with the pursuit of peace, and it is not clear that justice (or peace for that matter) should always be given priority.²¹⁵ Politics, for Berlin, is less about realizing our first priorities and more about coping with the conflicting and often paradoxical dilemmas we face in the political world. It is more about our second priorities, about choosing the lesser evil and reaching compromises.

The political theorist Avishai Margalit has suggested that we ought to be judged more by our compromises than by our ideals and norms. With this, I suspect, Berlin would agree. “Ideals may tell us something important about what we would like to be,” Margalit suggests, “but compromises tell us who we are.”²¹⁶ Compromise, for Berlin, is a means of coping with the plurality of values. When values clash, “you have to sacrifice

²¹⁵ See Margalit, *On Compromise*.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

one to the other, unless you can find a compromise which is not a complete satisfaction of your desires, but prevents acute pain, in short prevents tragedy.” That, Berlin writes, “is the value of compromise” (UD, 271). Of course sometimes there is no room for compromise. Moral conflicts may admit only either/or, in which case no compromise is possible. But as a general rule, untidy, flexible and ambiguous compromises are central to political action that tries to avoid tragic outcomes. Compromise does not eliminate loss, but it helps avoid, when possible, loss that is intolerable.

The focus on ambiguous and logically untidy compromises raises the question, however, of what role truth and reason have to play navigating moral dilemmas and value conflict. It should be clear from our discussion so far that Berlin does not believe that reason can discover or ground the answer to moral dilemmas, particularly when we are faced with two incommensurable alternatives. “Reason and calculation” he writes, “can be applied only to means or subordinate ends, but never to ultimate ends” (PSM, 324). But the point is not that reason and/or deliberation has no role to play in informing the decisions, compromises and choices that political life entails. Berlin is committed to reason as a tool of critical inquiry. But he does not believe that reason and/or deliberation can reveal moral truths or that it can, or ought to, provide a kind of litmus test for whether a political compromise or decision is appropriate. There are several reasons for this. First, reason (like deliberation) may reveal a plurality of choices to be morally defensible. Because moral reasoning can draw on a plurality of criteria and can be derived from incompatible conceptions of the good, reason alone is unlikely to reveal what ought to be done. Second, because there is a plurality of criteria that provide moral validity, there is nothing that says that only that which meets the demands of reason and/or deliberation ought to be acceptable. Deferring to religiously or culturally grounded claims that lack rational justification may be perfectly appropriate, just as something can be inappropriate even though it is reasonable or has emerged from a process of deliberation. Because there is no single criteria that can tell us whether what we are doing is appropriate or not, making choices even in the absence of certainty and absolute criteria is one of the defining features of political life – a feature of political life that we need to confront and be aware of, Berlin insists.

Berlin's defense of compromise should not be taken to imply, however, that Berlin saw compromises as somehow always morally justifiable. One of the dominant memories for the men and women of Berlin's generation, it should be remembered, was Chamberlain's capitulation to Hitler's demands on the Sudetenland in 1938. As Margalit – who knew Berlin – attests, Berlin feared that his insistence on the need for compromise made him appear weak and un-heroic; much like Turgenev appeared to his contemporaries.²¹⁷ We must be careful, therefore, not to interpret Berlin as someone who is uncomfortable with an unflinching commitment to principle. The fact that values and ways of life are sometimes constitutively incompatible means that “We must choose, and in choosing one thing lose another, irretrievably perhaps” (CTH, 201). Not all conflicts can be reconciled. Tragedy cannot always be avoided. But perhaps more importantly, the choices political life confronts us with are not always between one good and another. There are times when to compromise would be to surrender our commitment to basic human values, like dignity and respect.²¹⁸ A compromise that would have preserved Hitler's Nazi regime – struck in order to put an end to the war, let us say – would arguably have represented such a compromise, as Margalit has argued. An ethic of responsibility – focused on pragmatism, flexibility and the capacity for compromise – must be accompanied by an ethic of conviction.²¹⁹ In a letter to Philip Toynbee, written in 1958, Berlin makes this point emphatically: “Unless there is some point at which you are prepared to fight against whatever odds, and whatever the threat may be, not merely to yourself, but to anybody, all principles become flexible, all codes melt, and all ends-in-themselves for which we live disappear” (EL, 608).²²⁰

If there is a lingering ambiguity in Berlin's account of the role of compromise and unflinching commitment in political life, it is because Berlin insisted that there are no universal criteria for how to judge what the right thing to do is in any particular situation. Berlin does not attempt to articulate, therefore, a clear set of criteria for when to compromise, or how to set priorities. Instead he insists that such decisions must be the

²¹⁷ Margalit, *On Compromise*, 10-12.

²¹⁸ That, indeed, is what characterizes a “rotten compromise” on Margalit's account. See *On Compromise*, ch. 1.

²¹⁹ Weber, “Vocation.”

²²⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946-1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009). This book title will hereafter be referred to as EL.

product of a judgment that is sensitive to the context of the situation being confronted. Like Aristotle, he insists that practical judgment must be grounded in particulars. Abstract principles and general moral rules are often insensitive to the complexities on the ground. Responsible moral and political decisions must be guided by the context, by the particulars and ambiguities the real world confronts us with. Ideals are necessary, but they can rarely tell us what to do in particular cases.²²¹

The focus on fragility and compromise illustrates that there is a sort of Burkian gradualism to Berlin's political ethic.²²² The emphasis on not rocking the boat, on treading carefully, also has a number of affinities with the political thought of Michael Oakeshott.²²³ In so far as these thinkers share an anti-utopian skepticism regarding radical social engineering and the claims of reason, there are some real similarities. Yet it would be a mistake to see Berlin as a thinker who fits neatly in the conservative tradition. In Burke and Oakeshott, there is a faith in the gathered wisdom of tradition that is not found in Berlin's thought. To be sure, Berlin was highly skeptical of the ability of the human mind to comprehend the complexity of the social world, but this did not translate into a deference to tradition. Indeed, Berlin approvingly references Thomas Paine's critique of Burke, of "admiring the plumage while ignoring the dying bird" (TCE, 350). To defer so completely to 'gathered wisdom of tradition' would be tantamount to abdicating judgment; it would be a way of avoiding confronting moral questions and dilemmas in all their paradoxical complexity. It would be tantamount to removing oneself from that space of paradox and tension – the space of negative capability – to reach for more solid ground. Reason alone may not be able to solve the moral dilemmas we face, but there is nothing to guarantee that traditions or mores are any wiser.

²²¹ It is perhaps worth noting here that Berlin's account of judgment gives us a good indication of how he envisions conflicts between values might be settled, without mere appeals to subjective preferences or irrational, or groundless, choices. Value incommensurability might mean that there is no way to establish a fixed hierarchy of values, but this does not mean that the choice between one value and another is necessarily subjective or arbitrary. The concrete situation, for Berlin, is everything. And in the concrete situation, our capacity for judgment can enable us to make well-grounded choices, even if it will be impossible to conclude that one alternative clearly outweighed the other.

²²² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²²³ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

5.4 Negative Capability and the Virtue of Inconsistency

A central aspect to Berlin's political ethic – central to both judgment and conduct – I want to suggest, lies in a principle that we might call, following Leszek Kolakowski, moderation in consistency.²²⁴ This is admittedly an ambiguous sounding concept, but it captures a central feature of Berlin's thought and ethic. In order to understand the peculiar and paradoxical quality of Berlin's ethic, it is imperative to understand this animating principle. In a broad sense, the principle of moderation in consistency refers to the refusal to relate everything to a single principle, or vision, or to order conduct so as to make conform to a principle, pattern, or value. Put another way, a willingness to be inconsistent is what facilitates 'negative capability' – the ability to inhabit that realm of paradox and tension without reaching for more solid ground – essential to sound political conduct. The apparent tension between Berlin's 'cold,' unflinching commitment to certain liberal values (freedom above all else), and his moderation and willingness to limit and trade away some of these values, should not, therefore, be seen as expressions of conflicting political maxims. Rather, they express the paradoxical quality of the ethic of tragedy. Margalit captures this sensibility in Berlin's thought when he writes: "Berlin rejoiced in the clash of values as an expression of human variety, even when he saw the tragic side of such clashes. I can almost hear him say, with Walt Whitman-like exuberance, 'In holding the values we do, we do contradict ourselves. Very well then, we contradict ourselves. But then we are large and contain multitudes.'"²²⁵

While this is not a point that Berlin makes explicitly in his writing, there is evidence to suggest that inconsistency plays a role in coping with and embracing a value pluralist universe. The world of values is disharmonious, so why should our actions, theories about the world or judgment conform to a consistent pattern? Berlin draws a distinction between those,

on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent, articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many

²²⁴ Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, vii.

²²⁵ Margalit, *On Compromise*, 12.

ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. These last lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffuse, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision (RT, 24-25)

The value pluralist does not organize his or her behavior so as to conform to, or best maximize, a particular value hierarchy, or so as to further a particular, coherent, set of ends. He or she remains wedded in the concrete rather than the abstract, and so is willing to embrace and pursue a wide array of values – even if they are contradictory.

This is a result of the paradoxical position the world of values confronts us with. Kolakowski pinpoints the nature of this paradoxical predicament when he writes “The real world of values is inconsistent; that is to say, it is made up of antagonistic elements. To grant them full recognition simultaneously is impossible, yet each demands total acceptance.”²²⁶ To ask whether Berlin’s commitment to negative liberty is absolute or whether he saw it as just another value is thus to miss the point. Berlin *is* unflinchingly committed to negative liberty, but he is also unflinchingly committed to values such as equality and social justice. He is committed to at least a minimum of negative liberty; but he is not committed to maximizing it. That he doesn’t favour negative liberty in every instance, that he is willing to sacrifice negative liberty to make room for other values, is not evidence of a contradiction or a less than absolute commitment to negative liberty as an end-in-itself. Nor does it reflect a belief that we can find a mean that would optimally balance different values. It is, rather, a reflection of the paradoxical situation with which the world of values confronts us.²²⁷

Importantly, of course, inconsistency does not for Berlin eliminate the possibility or reality of loss. When we limit freedom in the name of preserving some other value, or even to facilitate the realization of the freedoms that we cherish (for one freedom may

²²⁶ Kolakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency,” 236.

²²⁷ There are some intriguing similarities between Kolakowski and Berlin, though to my knowledge neither Berlin nor Kolakowski wrote or commented on each other’s work.

conflict with another), we do lose some freedom, he would insist.²²⁸ It is not the case – as Aristotle or Hegel would have it – that we can simply preserve what is valuable and reject only that which is detrimental. Berlin’s ethic is not, then, and should not be confused with, an ethic of moderation along the lines of an Aristotelian ethic of the mean. This is because, as Kolakowski has noted, “the main current of the Aristotelian ethic is a longing for synthesis and a belief that between any two extremes one can find a mean that will preserve the best of each and reject what is harmful”. This is the “exact opposite” of what an ethic that embraces inconsistency holds to be true.²²⁹ Because loss is inescapable and we lack the means by which to compare different alternatives according to a single scale, there can be no optimal synthesis. It is precisely for this reason that inconsistency emerges as a reasonable response to the antinomies we are confronted with in the realm of values. The notion that we should be willing to be moderate in our consistency, then, should not be confused with the maxim that we should be consistently moderate.²³⁰

One could argue that it is not valid to say that there can be no optimal synthesis, that compromises – in so far as they represent solutions that are acceptable to the relevant parties – represent a kind of temporary ‘optimal’ synthesis, judged by the context. While there is room in Berlin’s thought for making judgments as to what is better or worse (and as I will discuss later in this chapter, Berlin’s thought does provide a moral compass of sorts), his insistence that values are incommensurable makes it very hard to compare alternatives in the way that would be necessary for one to be able to speak of a particular compromise as being optimal (this would only apply to cases that actually involved incommensurable claims, of course; it would not apply to all normative disputes). Value pluralism implies, for instance, that even the criterion of consent (as a criterion of the moral validity of an agreement) cannot be said to represent some kind of ultimate litmus test. There are other, equally valid, criteria we could (and some people do) use to judge the moral merits of an agreement. Aristotelians would not accept the idea – and perhaps

²²⁸ This should not be taken to suggest, however, that Berlin did not recognize that there might be good reason to make qualitative distinctions between the kind of freedoms gained and the kind of freedoms lost. Not all trade-offs are necessarily between qualitatively similar goods. But given the antagonistic structure of the realm of values, qualitative trade-offs could never be completely avoided. For a discussion of these points, see Chapter 2.

²²⁹ Kolakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency,” 235.

²³⁰ For a contrasting interpretation of Berlin’s ethos, see Christopher Hitchens, “Moderation or Death,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 20, No. 23 (Nov 1998).

for good reason – that consent ought to carry the kind of moral force attributed to it by social contract theorists. Other considerations, they would insist, ought to determine our moral judgment. Simply put, value pluralism, Berlin would insist, deprives us of the ability to look for optimal solutions.

The fact that the world confronts us with moral dilemmas, ties itself in tragic knots, means that, for Berlin, a commitment to consistency would be tantamount to abdicating responsibility and judgment. Political judgment, Berlin insisted, must always be grounded in an awareness of the particulars of the situation. Consider again a key passage I have discussed earlier,

Judgment, skill, sense of timing, grasp of the relation of means to results depend upon empirical factors, such as experience, observation, above all on that ‘sense of reality’ which largely consists in semi-conscious integration of a large number of apparently trivial or unnoticeable elements in the situation that between them form some kind of pattern which of itself ‘suggests’ – ‘invites’ – the appropriate action. Such action is, no doubt, a form of improvisation, but flowers only upon the soil of rich experience and exceptional responsiveness to what is relevant in the situation – a gift without which neither artists nor scientists are able to achieve original results. This gift seems to be wholly incompatible with faith in the supremacy of some idealised model, which, in the case of fanatical ideologies, takes the place of genuine capacity for responding to impressions (POI, 139-140).

We can see clearly in this quote how, for Berlin, ideologies are dangerous precisely because they cloud our judgment, blind us to the reality of the situations we confront in the political world.²³¹ They make us see the world through the lens of abstractions, rather than confront the world as it is. Sound political judgment relies on the capacity of responding to impressions, of being able to understand the dilemmas we face in the world, the costs, consequences, possibilities, limits and paradoxes inherent in the situation. A commitment to consistency would undermine this capacity – to be genuinely open and flexible, we must not be afraid of a little inconsistency.

Importantly, Berlin’s point here is not merely that sound political action is rooted in a kind of ‘politics of the possible’. Inconsistency is not merely a reflection of having to capitulate to the messy reality of politics – unfortunate, but necessary. Nor is it merely a

²³¹ Michael Oakeshott makes a similar point in *Rationalism in Politics*.

reflection of the need to be flexible in the means we use to achieve our ends – in the manner advocated by Aristotle. Inconsistency, of course, is not an end-in-itself for Berlin. The point is not that we ought to try to be inconsistent. Rather, it is something we benefit from allowing ourselves to be. Like Kolakowski, who argued that “total consistency is tantamount in practice to fanaticism, while inconsistency is the source of tolerance,”²³² Berlin sees something dangerous in absolute consistency. In the paradoxical and fragile moral universe in which we live, consistency seems to invite tragedy and misfortune. It is worth noting, therefore, that Berlin’s point here applies in both an empirical and a normative sense. It is not merely that we *ought to* be willing to be inconsistent; sound political action *is* rooted in a kind of inconsistency – even if it has not been consciously embraced. The traffic cop who does not punish every infraction, or the bus driver who let a few forgetful customers ride for free when the weather is bad, are able to make those kinds of sound and laudable judgments because they hold, or have tacitly embraced, values that are at least in some respects contradictory. The traffic cop, conceivably, is balancing her commitment to being fair and applying the rules consistently, her commitment to her job, and the goals and purposes it is intended to serve, as well as, perhaps, a desire to be lenient and merciful, or to not cause undue burdens or hardship. It is because she feels drawn in different directions by this moral complexity that she is put in a position where she needs to think not merely about the means but what ends, or priorities, are appropriate to favour in a particular situation.

On the surface at least, there may appear to be something counterintuitive about this, if not implausible. Principled conduct, after all, is generally conceived as being virtually synonymous with consistency. The principled politician stands by his convictions, doesn’t sacrifice them for anything. Inconsistency is equated with lack of principles, even a lack of moral spine. Not to mention, inconsistency seems to imply the worst kind of moral reasoning – or perhaps more accurately the abdication of it. It is important to clarify that when Berlin suggests that there is virtue in being inconsistent he is not suggesting that this applies to every type of situation. Kolakowski draws a distinction that I believe Berlin would have endorsed. “The need for (and justification for praising) inconsistency arises only in the realm of human experience that is characterized

²³² Kolakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency,” 233.

by antinomies of values. Inconsistency in this realm does not present a problem, since *the world of values is not logically dualistic*, as opposed to the world of theoretical thought. In other words, there are values that exclude each other without ceasing to be values (although there are no mutually exclusive truths that still remain truths).²³³ Inconsistency does not apply to what Kolakowski calls “elementary situations.” Kolakowski’s distinction is worth quoting at length:

Elementary situations are those in which tactics perish; that is, those human situations in which our moral attitude is unchanged regardless of the way in which these situations arrive at their culmination. If a man is dying of hunger and I can feed him, then there is no confluence of circumstances in which it would be right to say “It is nevertheless tactically better to let him die”; or, if I cannot help him, to say “Tactically it is better to hush up the fact that he died of hunger.” Open aggression, genocide, torture, mistreatment of the defenceless – all these are elementary situations. In such situations the value of inconsistency cease to play a role, and here we suddenly confront a dual-valued world.²³⁴

In Berlin’s terminology, we can think of elementary situations as situations that either pit one objective value against something that is not a genuine value, perhaps a value that falls outside the human horizon, or that falls below the moral minimum that Berlin identifies. It only applies to the realm of values that is not logically dualistic.²³⁵ This leaves room for an awful lot of ambiguity, it might reasonably be objected, particularly since Berlin’s account of the “human horizon” to values is itself ambiguous. Yet it should underscore Berlin’s broader thesis that while compromises are morally justifiable in a great many circumstances, there are cases where to compromise, to not give priority to a particular value, is unconditionally wrong.

²³³ Kolakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency,” 234.

²³⁴ Kolakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency,” 239-240. It is not clear that Kolakowski’s examples are all that helpful. After all, is it really never morally justifiable to not feed the hungry? Are there no moral considerations that can override the obligation to feed the hungry? I doubt very much Kolakowski would insist there are not. Indeed, his insistence that values sometimes exclude each other suggests as much.

²³⁵ Margalit gives the hypothetical example of a compromise that would have under no conditions been justifiable the case of a compromise with Hitler’s Third Reich in the midst of World War II – bringing the war to an end but allowing Hitler’s regime to maintain its grip on the parts of Europe it had conquered. See *On Compromise*, 175-197.

In this respect, Berlin's praise for Franklin D. Roosevelt is instructive. Berlin described Roosevelt as someone who practiced a kind of "pragmatic idealism" (CL, 81). Someone who "believed in flexibility, improvisation" (PSM, 625), who was equipped with "numberless sensitive antennae which communicate the smallest oscillations of the outer world in all its unstable variety" (PSM, 616). Perhaps because of this, he "seemed to delight in pursuing two or more totally incompatible policies" (PSM, 617), demonstrating, in a way many of the far right and left at the time did not think possible, "that the promotion of social justice and individual liberty does not necessarily mean the end of all efficient government; that power and order are not identical with a straight-jacket of doctrine, whether economic or political; that it is possible to reconcile individual liberty – the loose texture of society – with the indispensable minimum of organising and authority" (PSM, 636-7).

Roosevelt, in other words, displayed a remarkable capability to inhabit a space of paradox and tension without reaching for more solid ground – grounding his judgment in the concrete particulars of the problems of his time. While he had a firm, unflinching moral vision, he was not guided by the straight-jacket of a doctrine – in contrast to, Berlin suggests, among others, Woodrow Wilson, who showed a doctrinaire commitment to the principle of national self-determination in the wake of the First World War. For Berlin, Wilson and Roosevelt represented two contrasting types of statesmen. The former are men of "a single principle and fanatical vision," who "possessed by his own bright, coherent dream, he usually understands neither people nor events" and is therefore capable of great good as well as great evil (PSM, 632).²³⁶ The latter are attuned to the complexities and ever-changing nuances of the world around them, and seek to realize ends "which themselves are usually not born within some private world of inner thought, or introverted feeling, but are the crystallization, the raising to great intensity and clarity, of what a large number of their fellow citizens are thinking and feeling in some dim,

²³⁶ This point, that ideologues are capable of great good as well as great evil, deserves to be emphasized. Ideologues may be blind, in a manner of speaking, on Berlin's account. But knowledge is not always beneficial. There are times when not recognizing the risk, or the potential consequences, of one's action may work to one's advantage – just as false overconfidence can propel people to succeed where others would not even try. There are times when not recognizing our weaknesses or the hopelessness of a situation, can be a great benefit.

inarticulate, but nevertheless persistent fashion” (PSM, 632-3). Their judgment is open to the centrifugal forces of the world around them.

Sound political action is thus sensitive to context. It does not lack priorities, but it lets the context guide and gives weight to the various moral values and considerations being confronted. In a passage that echoes Burke’s contention that it is, in the last resort, circumstances that “give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect,”²³⁷ Berlin writes

How do we choose between possibilities? What and how much must we sacrifice to what? There is, it seems to me, no clear reply. But the collisions, even if they cannot be avoided, can be softened. Claims can be balanced, compromises can be reached: in concrete situations not every claim is of equal force – so much liberty and so much equality; so much for sharp moral condemnation, and so much for understanding a given human situation; so much for the full force of the law, and so much for the prerogative of mercy; for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless. Priorities, never final and absolute, must be established (CTH, 17).

Notice the fine balance Berlin seeks to strike between the need to make choices, establish priorities, and the need for compromise. The world ties itself in tragic knots. So we have to make choices, and in choosing one thing sacrifice another. But while collisions cannot be avoided, they “can be softened”, moral claims “can be balanced.” The key to balancing these conflicting imperatives in a sound way is to be sensitive and open to the context and the particulars of the situation being faced. And for this to happen, given the antagonistic structure of the realm of values, Berlin’s insists, we have to willing to be inconsistent.

Another way to frame this is to say that Berlin embraces something akin to a form of moral particularism.²³⁸ He rejects the idea that sound moral judgment consists in the proper application of moral principles - what Jonathan Dancy calls "ethical generalism."²³⁹ The problem is not that such an approach to moral judgment is simply insensitive to context. Careful judgment is needed to accurately assess whether, and if so

²³⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, 8.

²³⁸ Jonathan Dancy, "Moral Particularism."

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

in what way, a moral principle is relevant to the case in question, as well as to determine what the principle requires and how it is best applied. All these things require sensitivity to the relevant context. The problem, one might say, is that this type of sensitivity does not go far enough. For Berlin, the meaning, relevance and weight that ought to be given to pertinent factors and moral reasons vary depending on the particulars of the case in question.²⁴⁰ The answer to the question of 'what the right thing to do is', therefore, will be a function of the particular case at hand. With the further complication that in many cases Berlin would insist that there is more than one course of action that ought to be considered fully justifiable.

5.5 Judgment, Responsibility and The Problem of Dirty Hands – An Illustration

To further clarify Berlin's insistence on the importance of conceiving moral conflict as tragic in nature – as pitting one good against another – let us consider the problem of dirty hands. The problem of dirty hands refers to the necessity, or at least the perceived necessity, of breaking conventional moral norms in order to govern well. In Sartre's famous elaboration of the problem of dirty hands, Hoederer, a communist Party Secretary admonishes his young comrade Hugo,

All means are good when they are effective ... How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?²⁴¹

Or, in Machiavelli's terms, in order to *do* good it is necessary to "learn how not to be good."²⁴² Not everybody recognizes or acknowledges the problem of dirty hands, of course. It is not enough to note that politics and violence, coercion and deceit have often

²⁴⁰ Ibid. Dancy argues that "variable relevance" is a key feature of what distinguishes moral 'particularism' from 'generalism'. He does not discuss Berlin.

²⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Dirty Hands," *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, transl. Lionel Abel (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 224.

²⁴² Machiavelli, "The Prince," 48.

mingled. Nor is it sufficient to note, as Machiavelli did, that it has often been the armed prophets that have carried the day. The question of whether or not politics necessarily involves dirty hands hinges on the question of how one understands, or has made sense of, the moral dimension of political life. There are many ways of responding to the problem of dirty hands, several of which have the effect not so much of confronting the problem as dismissing or diluting it.

From a strictly consequentialist perspective, the need to lie, steal or murder would be morally inconsequential provided the good sought is attained. As Steven Lukes writes, “On this view, there is essentially no problem of dirty hands, provided overall good is attained, *dirty hands are really clean*.”²⁴³ Or, as Kai Nielsen has argued, while we may *feel* morally guilty about having dirtied our hands in the pursuit of the morally right course of action, that does not mean that we *are* morally guilty.²⁴⁴ The fact that violence, deceit and cruelty may sometimes be necessary in the pursuit of the good may be regrettable, but it is not a problem, it does not present us with a moral dilemma. Judgment is needed only in so far as it helps us assess which actions are likely to produce the best consequences. The moral question is already settled.

From a strictly deontological perspective, the same basic logic applies. But on this perspective, consequences are morally irrelevant. What matters is that we do the right thing, follow the Moral Law, for the right reasons, irrespective of the consequences. The central principle of this perspective, as Lukes puts it, is that “politicians should always have clean hands.”²⁴⁵ Some adherents to this perspective no doubt imagine that by always adhering to the Moral Law, the best consequences will also attain, whereas for others there is perhaps a greater recognition that in adhering to strict deontological categories of right and wrong we may invite disaster and even death. In the famous words of Ferdinand I: “Let justice be done, though the world perish”.²⁴⁶ As the quote makes remarkably clear,

²⁴³ Lukes, “Marxism and Dirty Hands,” in *Moral Conflict*, 194. Lukes is speaking about what he terms “the ideological response,” of which consequentialism is one form.

²⁴⁴ Kai Nielsen, “There is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands,” in *Cruelty and Deception: The Controversy Over Dirty Hands in Politics*, ed. Paul Rynard and David P. Shugarman (Peterborough, Ont: Boadview Press, 2000), 139-140.

²⁴⁵ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 195. Lukes is referring to what he calls “moralistic response,” of which what he terms the “liberal,” or what, for present purposes, I call a deontological perspective, to be one form.

²⁴⁶ Quoted in Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 21.

it is a perspective that dissolves the problem of dirty hands. There is no dilemma, no need to weigh different factors, or make judgments.

Interestingly, the problem of dirty hands is equally diluted if one adopts the perspective of the cynic. Lukes describes this perspective in the following terms: “This is low- rather than high-minded, and it usually relies upon a sharp dichotomy between public (or political) and everyday (or private) life. On this view, *everyone in politics has dirty hands*.”²⁴⁷ While a perspective not without some intuitive appeal, it dispels the problem of dirty hands by suggesting that the prevalence of dirty hands in politics is a product of immorality (or perhaps amorality is a better word) – of the exclusion of moral considerations from political life and decision-making. From the perspective of the cynic, the problem of dirty hands cannot be said, therefore, to represent a *moral* dilemma. Moral rules do not belong in political life.²⁴⁸

All three perspectives, as we can see, are unable to take the problem of dirty hands seriously – as a direct product of their account of the moral dimension of political life. As forms of monism, strict consequentialist and deontological perspectives dilute or remove the need for serious deliberation and judgment. Even more problematically, both serve to absolve guilt. When we do what is right – from either a consequentialist or a deontological perspective – our hands are clean. In doing what we consider morally right, we can feel safe in knowing that we have not committed a moral wrong.

From the tragic perspective of Berlin, the problem of dirty hands represents a conflict between one good and another. Both the consequentialist and the deontological perspectives carry moral force on Berlin’s account.²⁴⁹ This is important for it means that when we, for instance, violate moral prohibitions against lying in order to secure what we have reason to believe will be a greater good, we should consider our hands dirty. It means that we have in fact committed a moral wrong in doing so – even if it was the right thing to do from a consequentialist perspective. Michael Walzer echoes this point when

²⁴⁷ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 196.

²⁴⁸ As Lukes points out, this is a perspective that is often wrongly attributed to Machiavelli – as Berlin’s influential essay on Machiavelli argues persuasively. See Berlin, “Originality of Machiavelli” in PSM.

²⁴⁹ It is important to remember Berlin’s moral realism here. Value pluralism does not entail a kind of relativism, whereby utilitarianism would be true for utilitarians and Kantianism for Kantians. Both consequentialist and deontological moral considerations carry moral force and entail obligations even for those who do not acknowledge their validity.

he writes, in his influential essay on the problem of dirty hands: “When rules are overridden, we do not talk or act as if they had been set aside, cancelled, or annulled. They still stand and have this much effect at least: that we know we have done something wrong even if what we have done was also the best thing to do on the whole in the circumstances.”²⁵⁰

This tragic guilt is important in two ways, Berlin’s argument suggests: It ought to introduce a sense of responsibility by depriving us of an inflated sense of our moral righteousness. And, it ought to introduce a forgiving element into our assessment of political actors that arrive at different moral judgments than we ourselves would have reached. The politician that violates deontological moral rules in pursuit of the good is not necessarily behaving immorally (though he or she may be, of course). Lastly, by forcing us to confront the problem of dirty hands as a genuine moral dilemma, it forces us to consider the particulars of the case in question. The answer to the question of what ought to be done – morally speaking, in terms of what end ought to guide our conduct – will not have been provided in advance. Berlin’s tragic vision is thus central to, and underpins, the situational character of his ethic.²⁵¹

5.6 Moral Foundation

There are a number of objections that could legitimately be leveled at Berlin’s ethic as it has been presented so far. To begin with, it might be argued that the guiding principles of ‘moderation in consistency’, pragmatism, the need for judgment and an awareness of the fragility of values are purely formal. A person committed to liberty, equality and justice could embrace these principles as a means of furthering his or her ends, but so could a person committed to domination, violence and exploitation. It would be a mistake,

²⁵⁰ Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter, 1973), 171.

²⁵¹ We can see here why the attribution to Berlin of something akin to the ‘decisionism’ of Carl Schmitt is misplaced. As Rune Slagstad has noted, for Schmitt “the validity of a political decision is established ‘irrespective of its content’” (Slagstad, “Liberal Constitutionalism and Its Critics,” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 117). A central feature of this type of decision-making is that it is “freed from all normative bonds” (Schmitt, quoted in Slagstad, “Constitutionalism,” 114). For Berlin, as I have made clear, this is precisely what is *not* the case – the tragedy of political life is a product of the fact that we *are* bound by a plurality of norms, such that no matter what we choose, there is loss, our hands become dirty.

therefore, to see these guiding principles as in any way sufficient for a political ethic. Clearly, they only serve a positive purpose if the values that the principles are used to further are morally defensible. As I have already indicated, Berlin is clear that an ethic of responsibility must be combined with an ethic of conviction – one without the other is insufficient. This section examines the moral foundations of Berlin’s ethic more closely.

As is well known, Berlin’s own moral beliefs were largely liberal – favouring a combination of liberties, forms of equality and social justice. He praised the New Deal for bringing qualitative improvements to equality and social justice, without leading to qualitative reductions in the sphere of negative liberty. He was clearly concerned with minimizing suffering and tragic loss. In many respects he seems to have shared the Enlightenment belief that through education and development, many of the ills of the past could be overcome. There is also a strong current of anti-paternalism running through his thought, linking self-determination to dignity.²⁵²

This last point is often made to underscore the importance Berlin attached to negative liberty – and with good reason. The freedom to make choices, to try different avenues in life, to have the freedom to fail and make mistakes, to choose what to believe, to think and to reject was, for Berlin, intimately bound up with what it meant to be human. All human beings, no matter who they are or where they live or grow up, Berlin insisted, are confronted with incompatible duties, responsibilities, values and possible ways of life. We are who we are, one could say, in virtue of the choices we have made (and continue to make). Without some modicum of negative liberty, therefore, “there is no choice and therefore no possibility of remaining human as we understand the word” (CTH, 12-13). To completely deny people the liberty to make choices is to deprive them of their humanity, to treat them without regard for their dignity – to treat them solely as means rather than ends-in-themselves. In a revealing passage, Berlin writes:

there is a central insight given us by romantic humanism [...] Firstly that the maker of values is man himself, and may therefore not be slaughtered in the name of anything higher than himself, for there is nothing higher [...]

²⁵² In an already quoted passage, Berlin writes: “the glory and dignity of man consists in the fact that it is he who chooses, and is not chosen for, that he can be his own master (even if at times this fills him with fear and a sense of solitude)” (CTH, 202).

Secondly, that institutions are made not only by, but also for, men, and when they do no longer serve him they must go. Thirdly that men may not be slaughtered, either in the name of abstract ideas, however lofty, such as progress or freedom or humanity, or of institutions, for none of these have any absolute value in themselves, inasmuch as all that they have has been conferred upon them by men, who alone can make things valuable or sacred; hence attempts to resist or change them are never a rebellion against divine commands to be punished by destruction. Fourthly – and this follows from the rest – that the worst of all sins is to degrade or humiliate human beings for the sake of some Procrustean pattern into which they are to be forced against their wills, a pattern that has some objective authority irrespective of human aspirations.” (CTH, 199)

It is a passage that speaks forcefully for the principle that the individual needs to be treated as sovereign. To demand sacrifices, or make people suffer, in the name of ideological abstractions is never justifiable. To ignore the real aspirations, the real voices of men and women is to treat them without a proper regard for their dignity, their humanity. Yet one must be careful not to infer too many practical political implications from this view. As the quote indicates, freedom too can be invoked as an abstraction to justify suffering and abuse – negative liberty as well as positive liberty. It is also important to read the above passage in the context of the ideological battles of the immediate post-war period. Its primary aim was to discredit and refute the totalitarian ideologies that did not offer any modicum of negative liberty. Berlin’s other writings make it quite clear that in the realm of ordinary politics, we are left with no clear or unequivocal guidelines.²⁵³

Consider the following passage, where Berlin makes it clear that it is not only liberty that is essential to human beings.

The extent of a man’s, or a people’s, liberty to choose to live as he or they desire must be weighed against the claims of many other values, of which equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order are perhaps the most obvious examples. For this reason, it cannot be unlimited. We are rightly reminded by R. H. Tawney that the liberty of the strong, whether their strength is physical or economic, must be restrained. This maxim claims

²⁵³ There is no doubt some ambiguity in how much negative liberty would be necessary. My point here is merely that in the contemporary context, when totalitarian ideologies are effectively dead, this emphasis on the importance of negative liberty is not decisive. It cannot answer whether or not some negative liberties ought to be sacrificed to make room for social justice, equality or some other values.

respect, not as a consequence of some a priori rule, whereby the respect for the liberty of one man logically entails respect for the liberty of others like him; but simply because respect for the principles of justice, or shame at gross inequality of treatment, is as basic in men as the desire for liberty. That we cannot have everything is a necessary, not a contingent, truth. (L, 214-215)

Berlin is not, as we can see, a proponent of maximizing negative liberty, or giving it consistent priority over conflicting moral values and considerations.

Yet for all his ambiguity, there is a hierarchy of priorities that grounds and informs Berlin's political ethic. It does not resolve or remove the reality of moral dilemmas. It cannot consistently anchor our political or moral judgment. But it does represent something akin to a compass. But what is this hierarchy? Berlin is explicit that "The *first* public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering" (CTH, 17 – my emphasis). This coheres with his repeated emphasis on being cognizant of the ever-present possibility of tragic loss, and the need to tread carefully in political affairs. Another way to put this is to say that Berlin placed defensive, protective, concerns above maximization concerns. If a community made up largely of Christians wished to further entrench their values, enable them to be expressed more fully in public life, but could only achieve this by taking actions that would virtually destroy the ability of a minority of Muslims in the community from practicing their religion, Berlin's ethic would – as a general rule, though perhaps not in every conceivable case – side with the minority. Avoiding a tragic outcome is more important than maximizing the realization of another value. To be sure, it is not always possible to avoid tragic outcomes, but where possible they should be avoided.

Similarly, political action that aims to qualitatively realize a larger number of values will – as a general rule, but not necessarily always – be preferable to political action that seeks to maximize a smaller number. The New Deal brought qualitative gains in equality and social justice without qualitatively reducing liberty, on Berlin's account. Political action that would have sought to maximize negative liberty at the expense of equality and social justice would have been a worse political solution to the problems America was facing at the time. Political action that seeks to maximize specific values at the expense of others is associated for Berlin with all the hazards of political action

grounded in monist and relativist assumptions. To be sure, to try to realize a large array of values at the same time will sometimes be impossible, as values are often incompatible. However, while “Utilitarian solutions are sometimes wrong,” Berlin writes, “I suspect [they are] more often beneficent” (CTH, 17). The point being not that we should approach political problems with the aim to maximize utility, but rather that political solutions that avoid tragedy, that are acceptable to a larger number of people, will often (though not always, or necessarily) be preferable.²⁵⁴ For, as Berlin writes,

it is natural to men to pursue different and, at times, incompatible ends; nor is this an evil, for diversity is the price – and perhaps the essence – of free activity. Hence all that political action can achieve is the creation of machinery for the prevention of too much friction, the suffering caused by too much many conflicts and collisions, *without attempting to suppress them wholly*. (SR, 121 – my emphasis)

This hierarchy of priorities is rooted in Berlin’s tragic conception of our moral predicament. Values are real moral objects, whose suppression generates loss and sometimes even tragedy. And because moral diversity is a product of the free exercise of our moral intuitions and reasoning, of people having pieced together and assembled a moral framework out of the myriad of conflicting values and claims with which they have been confronted, the space for outright moral condemnation (as distinct from moral criticism) is relatively small. Berlin’s conception of the tragedy of our moral predicament, as I discussed in chapter three, introduced into his political thought a forgiving element that narrows the space for moral condemnation. Truly tragic choices cannot be judged too harshly.

This sentiment comes across in the following remarks on the issue of the Judenrat and their role in the Nazi execution of the holocaust. Berlin argues, contra Hannah Arendt, that choices made in the face of such utterly tragic moral dilemmas cannot be subject to moral condemnation. Envisioning a scenario of a Jewish man, head of Jewish

²⁵⁴ As these quotes indicate, Berlin conceives it as possible to make rough approximations of expected utility. This is worth noting since his conception of value pluralism commits him to rejecting quantitative calculations of utility. Because values are incommensurable – that is, lack a common currency – it is not possible to aggregate values according to a single scale. Berlin’s comment need not be considered an inconsistency, however, as Berlin nowhere indicates that what he is referring to would need to rely on a precise calculation of utility, as I indicate in the above passage.

council appointed by the Gestapo, being asked to give the Nazis the names and addresses of all the Jews in the community in exchange for the lives of seventy-two people, Berlin says

What does a Jew in the situation described by Miss Arendt do? ... Miss Arendt in effect said that you had no right to sup with the devil: you should allow yourself to be shot, and that's that. I disagree. In my view there are four possible choices. One is that you say, 'I am not playing your game' – in that case you are probably soon executed. The second choice is to commit suicide rather than talk to the Gestapo – at least you'll kill yourself – perfectly worthy, at least your conscience is clear – but perhaps not quite clear, because you might have saved seventy-two people. The third choice is to say, all right, I'll give you the names – and then you tell all the Jews that they must do everything they can to flee; and you know that once your act is discovered you are virtually certain to be killed, that the possibility of escaping is very small. The fourth choice is to accept: you get away, with seventy-two others. ... What is the morally correct answer to this? There can be no question of any trade-off between any of these possibilities. In so extreme a situation, no act by the victims can (*pace* Miss Arendt) be condemned. Whatever is done must be regarded as fully justified. Praise and blame are out of place – normal moral categories do not apply. All four choices – heroic martyrdom, and the saving of innocent lives at the expense of those of others, can only be applauded. (CL, 107-108).²⁵⁵

Matters of public policy and the moral choices the political world confronts us with will generally be of a less acute nature. And in most cases the normal moral categories do apply. Yet Berlin's remarks nevertheless shed light on what he saw as the normative implications of tragic moral dilemmas. The fact that the world ties itself in tragic knots means we should look at entrenched political disagreement and deep plurality of values with forgiving eyes. While there are moral choices that are clearly wrong according to Berlin, there are an awful lot of moral choices that are reasonable and fully justifiable. So on what grounds can we condemn them? Sometimes we may have no choice – the survival of my own values may depend on it. But if a tragic outcome can be avoided through a compromise, we have, at the very least, good grounds for considering it.

²⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Berlin's comments are a bit muddled here. If "praise and blame are out of place" it cannot be the case that "all four choices ... can only be applauded." His point, I take it, as he makes clear in the same passage, is that we ought to consider all four choices to be justifiable from a moral perspective. In that sense, they warrant at least the acknowledgment that they are not immoral choices.

If the principle of moderation in consistency is meant to facilitate a politics that approaches political and social issues from a grounded perspective, helping to avoid the pitfalls of utopianism, the moral foundation in Berlin's thought provides an antidote to the hard-nosed realism found in the agonistic conception of politics found in thinkers like Carl Schmitt. Political action must be grounded in the particular problems being faced, in all their concrete complexity. Issues such as how to negotiate conflicting cultural claims, religious diversity, and the like, should be seen as a chance, as Stanley Fish has put it, for "improvisation and not as an occasion for the application of rules and principles."²⁵⁶ Yet an improvisation guided by the desire to avoid truly tragic outcomes, when possible and, perhaps, reasonable. And, by the desire to qualitatively realize as large a number of genuine human aspirations as the context allows. These priorities are no doubt motivated, in part, simply by a particular set of moral beliefs and preferences. But they are also a product of a belief that the reality of value pluralism places real limits on what is possible to achieve through political action.

5.7 Conclusion

Berlin's political ethic, I want to suggest, is committed to a certain form of moral particularism. It rejects as inadequate and problematic deontological and consequentialist ethical and moral theories; but it does so without rejecting the moral relevance of the different values, or ends, to which these theories appeal. The answer to the question of 'what is the right thing to do', for Berlin, is situational and can only arise within a particular context. And in many cases, Berlin insists, there will be more than one legitimate and rationally defensible course of action. There is a tragic grounding to Berlin's moral particularism, such that even when we do what is morally right we might still be said to have done something that ought to be considered a moral transgression. The situational character of Berlin's ethic, his insistence that no moral or ethical principle can capture what the morally right thing to do is, means that Berlin is committed to a kind of pragmatic moderation, with a central role assigned to practical reasoning. The plurality of values and the constant risk of tragedy also gives us reason, Berlin suggests, for

²⁵⁶ Fish, *Trouble with Principle*, 64.

viewing compromise as an indispensable, and indeed genuinely valuable, political activity.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: VALUE PLURALISM AND POLITICAL ACTION

The central question that I have pursued in this dissertation has pursued concerns how we ought to make sense of moral conflict and what our account of moral conflict means for political action and judgment. I have argued that Berlin's concept of value pluralism provides a compelling account of the moral dimension of political life. In particular, I have suggested, it helps us make sense of moral conflict. It avoids the reductionism of monist accounts of value and the conceptual (and moral) problems that plague relativist and subjectivist accounts. How we make sense of moral conflict matters. Monist, relativist and subjectivist accounts of value risk introducing problematic incentives for political action and can cloud political judgment. In contrast, conceiving moral conflict in tragic terms, as Berlin insists, gives us reason to confront normative questions and dilemmas from a grounded, context-sensitive, perspective.

In this chapter, I want to conclude by discussing and exploring the merits, weaknesses as well as some of the broader implications of Berlin's thought, and particularly his conception of value pluralism. Picking up on some recent work by Margalit and Sen, I want to focus on what value pluralism – and particularly the notion of incommensurability – means for compromise and the capacity for moral knowledge and judgment.²⁵⁷ Doing so helps shed light on both the contribution and limits of Berlin's political thought and ethic.

6.1 *Lingering Objections*

Let us begin by focusing on some problems and perceived shortcomings in Berlin's political thought. These are by no means all the objections that could be leveled against his thought, but they are the ones most relevant to what I have been considering in this dissertation.

It is true to begin with that Berlin's conception of value pluralism is insufficiently theorized and developed. It is not always clear what, precisely, he means by the term

²⁵⁷ Margalit, *On Compromise*; Sen, *Idea of Justice*.

value, or whether incommensurability should be understood in a weaker or in a stronger sense. More problematically, it is not clear what precisely Berlin means by a human horizon to values, or how one might know what exactly it is. Berlin gives us a sketch, but it leaves many questions unanswered. It may be that Berlin's inability to give a coherent and satisfactory account of the concept of the human horizon reflects the inherent difficulty in grounding a moral minimum – a problem of which Berlin was no doubt aware. But in so far as the moral minimum is meant to distinguish value pluralism from relativism the lack of a satisfactory account of the human horizon is a problem for Berlin. It is not a fatal one, to be sure. There are other important distinctions between value pluralism and various species of relativism and subjectivism, particularly in terms of what it means for how we conceptualize moral conflict. But it is a problem that leaves Berlin's account of value pluralism without a clear demarcation line between what human practices, ends or beliefs can be said to constitute values and which cannot.

Indeed, it is hard to see on what grounds Berlin would ever be justified in saying that a particular set of practices or beliefs lie beyond the human horizon, except in extreme cases. Berlin is insistent that not all beliefs and practices can be said to constitute values, but how are we to tell the false values from true values? Berlin is committed to the view that there is an answer to this question. It is possible to be wrong about values, to be in error, on Berlin's account. But he fails to provide a clear set of criteria or a method that might help us distinguish mere beliefs and practices from what are genuine values, or help us determine when someone might be in error. As a consequence, Berlin's account of value pluralism is left ambiguous and under theorized.

Berlin also at times seems to overstate the extent to which values and forms of life may be said to be incompatible. His insistence that freedom and equality are incompatible is a case in point. While it is hard to deny that the two values *may*, and sometimes *do*, conflict, it is quite another thing to say that they *necessarily* conflict – that they are, as Berlin seems to suggest, *constitutively* incompatible. While a consistently careful and nuanced writer, Berlin occasionally makes claims along the following lines, which seem to exaggerate incompatibilities: “what is clear is that values clash – that is why civilizations are incompatible” (CTH, 12). Now, it is true that when we factor in all of Berlin's reservations and counter-examples a more nuanced and complex portrait of the

reality of moral conflict emerges than appears at first glance. Berlin is not saying, on closer examination, that freedom and equality, or positive and negative liberty for that matter, are *necessarily* incompatible.²⁵⁸ Asked in an interview about moral diversity in contemporary Western societies, Berlin replies: “One can exaggerate the absence of common ground. A great many people believe, roughly speaking, the same sort of thing. More people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed” (CL, 119). While in the same interview Berlin repeats the claim that he suspects some non-Western cultures are fundamentally incompatible with the values of Western liberalism, he qualifies his claim by saying that while “some of their values may be wholly opposed to those of the West ... not all, not all by any means” (CL, 120).

These reservations and qualifications are important to keep in mind. Yet, just as monists are arguably guilty of trying to fit a procrustean pattern on the world of values, so Berlin is arguably guilty of overemphasizing value incompatibilities, and thereby blurring from view cases where values are be mutually supportive. Put differently, Berlin seems to be right about the big picture – value pluralism provides a more compelling account of the world of values than rival theories – but the micro-foundations of his theory, his accounts of particular cases of moral conflict, are sometimes less persuasive.

In terms of his political ethic, there are similar issues. Berlin provides a compelling account of the need to take the inescapability of moral conflict and loss into consideration. And his insistence that there is no reliable crutch on which to anchor our political judgment is well placed. But, even in light of the implications that follow from his conception of value pluralism, Berlin’s ethic is plagued by ambiguities. He is an ardent defender of both unflinching commitment and utilitarian compromises; yet there is no thorough account of the type of compromises that would be unacceptable. He is a critic of progressive exuberance and conservative complacency, yet we are left without a compelling account of when and why moral views are misplaced and ought to be abandoned. As with his account of value pluralism, Berlin’s conclusions are largely compelling. Yet the arguments that support and underpin them are not always articulated and supported sufficiently.

²⁵⁸ See chapter 2, section III.

It is important, however, not to conflate the ambiguities and indeterminacy of Berlin's ethic with some kind of moral skepticism or relativism. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Berlin was a moral realist. He did not subscribe to either cognitive or ethical relativism. It is also worth emphasizing that the indeterminacy of Berlin's ethic is in part a function of its situational character. Indeed, Berlin's ethic is perhaps best understood as a specific way of approaching ethical and moral dilemmas, rather than specific set of ethical principles. It is true that, as a consequence, Berlin's ethic does not leave us with a clear decision-making procedure for how to resolve moral dilemmas or for determining what the right thing to do is. It is not clear to me, however, that this ought to be considered a problem. If indeterminacy is the consequence of taking moral conflict seriously, it is a price worth paying.

The fact that moral reasons can emerge from a range of different viewpoints – be they relational, impersonal, private, ideal, etc.²⁵⁹ – makes it difficult to anchor an Archimedean point that would allow us to determine which type of claims ought to be given priority, since it is not always clear how one can or ought to compare claims that originate from different viewpoints or sources. It is not sufficient to argue that some criteria rely on higher-order moral reasoning, or that it presupposes lower, or simpler, forms of moral reasoning. The simple fact that something is more complex, abstract, or occurs later in a process of development does not have any particular moral implications in itself.²⁶⁰ Nor is it sufficient to point to the impartial nature of a moral claim. For one thing, there are several incompatible moral principles that can meet that the demand of impartiality – be they Aristotelian, utilitarian or deontological. It is also not clear why impartial claims should necessarily trump partial ones – be they private or relational. In particular cases there might be good reasons for giving priority to one set of moral claims over another. In the context of democratic decision-making, there may often be good grounds for giving priority to claims that each and every citizen could reasonably endorse. But there may also be times when utilitarian criteria are morally preferable; or times when private or relational claims should rightfully trump competing claims. Value pluralism in effect means that we do not have good reason to say that any particular type

²⁵⁹ Nagel, "Fragmentation of Value".

²⁶⁰ Lukes, *Moral Conflict*, 227-232.

of moral claim ought to be given *consistent* priority over all others. So the criticism that Berlin's political ethic is at fault for leaving us without clear ethical or moral guidelines is misplaced. It could have done so only at the expense of its account of value pluralism. If value pluralism is true, moral questions can often admit of more than one fully justifiable answer.

There is a further criticism we should consider. In much of Berlin's writings, there is, as I have discussed, a distinct sense that an awareness of value pluralism can serve as a kind of antidote to the problems Berlin associates with monism. I have already made clear that Berlin's argument is not that value pluralism entails, in any strict sense of the term, liberalism and tolerance. Yet there is nevertheless a sense in which Berlin sees an awareness of value pluralism as something that is conducive to sound and responsible political action. Tragic guilt provides the ground, Berlin seems to suggest, for responsible statecraft.

Against this argument, which appears to link value pluralism with liberal moderation, John Gray has pointed to the example of Machiavelli. Berlin saw Machiavelli as a thinker who uncovered the "insoluble dilemma" value pluralism represented: that "ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration" (PSM, 320). Yet this discovery, Gray notes, did not make Machiavelli a liberal. Indeed, as Berlin himself writes regarding Machiavelli, "There was no problem and no agony for him; he shows no trace of skepticism or relativism; he chose his side, and took little interest in the value that this choice ignored or flouted" (PSM, 315). But how can this be, Gray asks, if value pluralism is meant to impart liberal moderation? If Machiavelli can recognize the truth of value pluralism yet reject any modicum of liberal moderation or tolerance, how can it be claimed that value pluralism is conducive to the kind of liberal ethic Berlin espouses?²⁶¹

While it is true that value pluralism does not in itself entail a commitment to liberal moderation, as Gray argues, the Machiavelli objection is nevertheless misplaced. The reason for this is that Berlin did not actually interpret Machiavelli as someone who consciously embraced the value pluralist thesis. In Berlin's words, Machiavelli "confused

²⁶¹ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 48-9.

the proposition that ultimate ideals may be incompatible with the very different proposition that the more conventional human ideals – founded on ideas of natural law, brotherly love, and human goodness – were unrealisable and that those who acted on the opposite assumption were fools, and at times dangerous ones” (PSM, 315). This is a different proposition with different implications for the moral imagination.²⁶²

In important ways, it helps explain why the problem of dirty hands was not, for Machiavelli, tinged with tragedy. The necessity to violate conventional moral standards was precisely that, a necessity. The problem of dirty hands did not, therefore, constitute a genuine moral dilemma, where fully justifiable moral claims existed on both sides of the issue. There was ultimately only one justifiable course of action, only one course of action that could be construed as reasonable, wise and – indeed – moral for the ruler, the person charged with the responsibilities of public office. For the ruler to refrain from violence and deceit when it was necessary was irresponsible and an invitation to disaster. If you are serious about actually doing what is best for your community, abiding by conventional moral norms is not an option. The prince who dirties his or her hands need *not* feel any guilt – indeed, *should* not feel guilt. In some respects, therefore, the example of Machiavelli speaks precisely to Berlin’s point, which is that without a *tragic* conception of moral conflict we are liable to be dismissive of contrary moral considerations.

A question that Berlin does not address directly, but which hovers in the background of his ethic, and particularly his account of judgment, is *who* should be making these judgments? Or put differently, where or how does democracy fit into Berlin’s picture? In addressing this question, it is worth noting, to start, that Berlin appears to have viewed democracy in a way not uncommon among postwar European liberals. Democracy certainly seemed to represent a safer bet than the alternatives; but democracy represented no guarantee against tyranny or corrupt governance. Individual rights and liberties could come under challenge in a democracy, just as they could in a dictatorship. He writes in “Two Concepts of Liberty”, “Self-government may, on the whole, provide a better guarantee of the preservation of civil liberties than other regimes

²⁶² Indeed, Berlin explicitly says, “I do not mean that Machiavelli explicitly asserts that there is a pluralism or even a dualism of values between which conscious choices must be made” (PSM, 321).

... But there is no necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule” (L, 177).

There is much in Berlin’s thought that lends itself to a defense of democracy. His account of moral conflict gives us reason for defending the legitimacy political disagreement and compromise. Indeed, one of the problems with Marx’s account of moral conflict, Berlin argued, was precisely that it “undermines the basic assumption of rational dispute, [and therefore] of the possibility of uncoerced consensus which alone justifies democratic government” (SR, 136). Berlin’s thought can be put to productive use in the defense of the messy world of half-solutions, bickering and compromises that can often characterizes democratic politics.

But Berlin is unwilling to assign participation in public life and democratic deliberation the kind of status it enjoys in republican and deliberative democratic thought. He does not think we are political animals in the sense that participation in public life is a necessary component of a fully flourishing life. His value pluralism provides a defense, one might even say, of the disengaged citizen. In so far as democracy realizes a value of equality, or equal respect, Berlin would likely acknowledge that there is an intrinsic, and not merely instrumental, value to democracy. But his value pluralism commits him to recognizing the moral force of criteria that are distinct from – and might even come into conflict with – the values he associated with the democratic decision-making. The integrity of the democratic process – all those affected having had a say and so forth – would conceivably have mattered less to Berlin than the actual policy outcomes. What mattered to Berlin was that individual rights and liberties were protected and that suffering and undue hardship was alleviated. In so far as democratic institutions of accountability and decision-making help make this a reality, it is to be applauded – and of course there is a very strong case to be made for democracy on the grounds that it does precisely that. But it would be the quality of the decisions, not the integrity of the democratic process, which would primarily have matter to Berlin, I suspect.

There is an aspect of Berlin’s thought and his ethic, therefore, which can be interpreted in a vein that is not entirely friendly to democracy. Berlin was of course no defender of dictatorship; he disdained paternalism and rejected as false the view that governing could be construed as a kind of technocratic activity. But the model of

democracy that seems most consistent with his stated views appears to be an elite driven model, where, ideally, policy makers in the mold of F.D.R. use their capacity for political judgment in the pursuit of worthwhile ends. But this is largely speculation. Berlin did not develop a theory of democracy; indeed he is largely silent on the question of how to structure political institutions so as to facilitate good governance. His writings were concerned with a different set of questions. Yet his political thought and his ethic – and particularly his account of political judgment – invites us to ask the question of what type of institutions are best suited for generating policies that take into account the reality of value pluralism and meet the criteria for sound political judgment that Berlin puts forth.

In answering *that* question, Berlin’s writings are largely silent. But it seems likely that the type of institutions most conducive to dealing adequately with the moral dilemmas and complexities of governing Berlin’s writings shed light on would benefit from being thoroughly democratic. The epistemological benefits that accrue from the competition of ideas, from political argument, competitive elections and democratic methods of accountability, we have good reason to think, are massive. Democracies, we know today, are better equipped than the alternatives to deal with the limited and fallible nature of knowledge and information. Berlin’s insistence that we take into account the tragic nature of moral conflict and factor in the moral loss that our decisions may bring also seems to give us reason to favor an inclusive democratic framework, one which is open to the voices of those likely to be affected by the political decisions being made.²⁶³

6.2. *Incommensurability and Compromise*

In chapter five I explored the central role compromise plays in Berlin’s political ethic. For Berlin, the fact of value pluralism means that even under ideal conditions compromise would be a necessary feature of political life. “That we cannot have everything” Berlin wrote, “is a necessary, not a contingent, truth” (L, 215). Yet this leaves us with something of a paradox. If value pluralism gives us reason for rejecting any kind of moral perfectionism – by insisting ultimate and genuine values are often

²⁶³ For a useful discussion of how democracy might fit in relation to Berlin’s thought, see Ella Myers, “Berlin and Democracy,” in *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: ‘Two Concepts of liberty’ 50 years later*, ed. Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2013).

incompatible – it also seems to deprive us of the ability to weigh and compare different goods, something which would seem to undermine the spirit of compromise.

Let me explain what I mean. The philosopher Avishai Margalit compares two contrasting pictures of politics, each of which lends itself to a particular view of political compromise: the economic and the religious. While both are necessary to political life, it is the economic picture that facilitates compromises.²⁶⁴

The religious picture is in the grip of the idea of the holy. The holy is not negotiable, let alone subject to compromise. Crudely put, one cannot compromise over the holy without compromising the holy. Conversely, in the economic picture of politics, compromise is at the heart of politics, and the ability to compromise is highly praised. . . . Economic life is based on the idea of substitution: one good can be replaced by another, and this enables exchanges in the market. Exchanges leave room for negotiation, and where there is room for negotiation, there is room for compromise. *Compromise has an internal relation to what is exchangeable and divisible.*²⁶⁵

It is Margalit's last point that would appear to complicate the relationship between value pluralism and a spirit of compromise. To the extent to that values are incommensurable, what we will lack is precisely the ability to measure, quantify and compare goods in the sense demanded by the economic picture. Indeed, Margalit suggests that we think of the economic picture as roughly corresponding to the utilitarian perspective of politics whereas the religious perspective is closer to the one we get from Kantian morality.²⁶⁶ And, as we know, value pluralism challenges precisely the claim of comparability that is central to utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism.²⁶⁷

To be sure, we must be careful to distinguish the conception of value that is embedded in the incommensurability claim from the conception of value Margalit characterizes as religious. The religious picture is rooted in a claim of qualitative incomparability.²⁶⁸ That is to say, it is rooted in the claim that a particular value or moral

²⁶⁴ It is worth noting that there are numerous possible justifications for compromising, not all of which fit neatly into Margalit's account of the economic picture, at least not at first glance. Compromises can also be justified on strategic, moral and epistemological grounds.

²⁶⁵ Margalit, *On Compromise*, 24. My emphasis.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁶⁷ See Raz, *Morality as Freedom*, ch. 13; Cherniss and Hardy, "Isaiah Berlin."

²⁶⁸ Margalit, *On Compromise*, 27.

good is of such higher qualitative status that a comparison is not possible. God's law, it might be claimed, for example, cannot be compared to positive law. In such cases, as Margalit puts the point, "Incomparable is an expression of high praise."²⁶⁹ The religious picture is rooted, in other words, in a qualitative incomparability claim regarding the comparative status of different values or goods. And incommensurability, as Berlin understands it, as I have made clear earlier in this dissertation, does not signal qualitative incomparability.²⁷⁰

Yet the problem would remain, it seems. If compromise "has an internal relation to what is exchangeable and divisible," incommensurability would seem to complicate and make more difficult the spirit of compromise. As Lukes has argued, the central metaphor we get from the economic picture is one of *trade-off*: we trade one good for another. Meanwhile, incommensurability seems to call forth the metaphor of *sacrifice*: we sacrifice one good for another.²⁷¹ This is of course consistent with the imagery Berlin's writings provide. Value pluralism, Berlin insists, means that we are often confronted with tragic choices and the prospect of irreparable loss. But the bar for agreeing to a compromise is set higher, surely, if what it means is that one value will have to be (partially or completely) *sacrificed* for another, rather than merely traded for another. So how can it be that value pluralism is conducive to a spirit of compromise, as Berlin insists?

Margalit's study suggests one reason that is central, as we have seen, to Berlin's defense of value pluralism: it alerts us to cases of conflict. The value conflict that is the focus of Margalit's *On Compromise* is the potential conflict that can arise between peace and justice. In cases where a just peace is not possible, the question arises whether justice ought to be sacrificed for the sake of peace or peace for the sake of justice.²⁷² That is to say, it is only in conceptualizing peace and justice as two distinct and (potentially) incompatible values that the question of whether or not to compromise even arises. If peace and justice are seen as entailing one another, such that one cannot truly be achieved

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 27.

²⁷⁰ See chapter 2, pp. 48.

²⁷¹ See Steven Lukes, "Comparing the Incomparable: Trade-Offs and Sacrifices," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason*, 187-8..

²⁷² Margalit draws on concrete historical examples from World War II for his study.

without the other – a peace without justice, it might be said, is no real peace – or if justice is given a qualitatively higher status than peace, such that peace without justice is not conceived as worthy of consideration, it is not clear there would be grounds for even considering a compromise.

But the usefulness of value pluralism here is primarily tied to its account of values as fragmented, plural and potentially incompatible; what about the incommensurability claim? Does it undermine the spirit of compromise? The answer is both yes and no. In one obvious sense, incommensurability clearly raises the bar for when a compromise might be conceived as justified. If one were to apply a strict utilitarian perspective to the historical examples Margalit uses in his exploration of when and how we might be morally justified in sacrificing justice for peace (and when we are not), the trade-off between peace and justice carry little intrinsic weight. Assuming there was a way to accurately assign a welfare function to peace and justice in the particular context of World War II that is the focus of Margalit's study, the question of whether and how much to sacrifice justice for the sake of peace, for instance, would be wholly determined by the utility calculation. No intrinsic value would be attached to justice or peace as such. Just as utilitarianism has been charged with not taking the moral separateness of persons seriously,²⁷³ so we might say that utilitarianism does not take the separateness of moral goods seriously. As a result, on the economic picture, where goods are perfectly comparable and divisible according to a common currency, there is nothing to prevent peace, justice, or some other value, from being traded away. The barrier for trading one good for another, for compromising peace for the sake of justice or vice versa, would be low.

If the moral goods are conceived as incommensurable, the grounds for sacrificing one for the other, partly or wholly, will be less clear-cut.²⁷⁴ In that sense, incommensurability complicates the question of whether or not to compromise, when compared with the economic picture. Yet the economic picture, precisely by conceiving

²⁷³ Hart, "Utility and Rights."

²⁷⁴ Whether or not two or more alternatives are incommensurable is of course context-dependent. The argument is not that peace and justice are always and necessarily incommensurable. The issue here concerns those situations, or contexts, where transitivity has broken down and the choice between peace and justice can rightfully be characterized as pitting two incommensurable alternatives against each other.

moral goods as fully exchangeable and divisible, can obscure from view actual cases of moral conflict, and thereby fail to alert us to cases where the question of whether or not to compromise a particular moral good is relevant.

Put another way, value pluralism alerts us to the problem of transitivity. Not all goods can be translated into a homogenous unit without loss. Michael Sandel has examined, for instance, the ways in which “[t]he language of virtue” fails to translate “very well into the language of utility.”²⁷⁵ He gives the following example to illustrate his point.²⁷⁶ In the 1970s, as pressure grew to relax rules against male guests staying overnight at the all female St. Anne’s College, Oxford, a group of older women at the faculty decided to oppose the relaxing of the rules. Too embarrassed to make the case on the grounds of sexual morality, they “translated their arguments into utilitarian terms”; they appealed to the monetary cost that the college would incur from men staying overnight, using extra hot water, etc.²⁷⁷ An initial compromise was reached – boys wishing to stay overnight would have to pay a small fee, and no more than three overnight visits were allowed per week – but soon “the parietal rules were waived altogether.”²⁷⁸

Because the language of virtue could not be translated without loss, the conflict withered away. Seen from the economic perspective, there was no real conflict. The actual monetary cost of allowing the overnight stays was negligible and could in any case be addressed without maintaining the rule of no boys staying overnight. While an initial compromise was reached, it was a compromise aimed at meeting the objection grounded in utility. What this indicates is that the process of rendering distinct moral values into a comparable unit can render them moot. This can have the effect of dissolving or blurring from view actual cases of moral conflict. Simply put, under the economic picture some conflicts will vanish from view, and with it any need to consider the question of how to resolve the conflict between the relevant values at stake.

²⁷⁵ Michael Sandel, *Justice: What Is The Right Thing To Do* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 47. Sandel’s point in raising the example is precisely to support the claim that not all goods can be translated to a homogenous unit without loss.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. Note, I am not trying to say anything about the merits of the virtue argument; the point is merely that it does not translate without loss into the language of utility.

In cases where two or more goods are in conflict, it may still be necessary to utilize a homogenous unit of comparison. In allocating scarce resources in health care, for example, it is in some respects necessary to put a price on people's lives. Yet even where this is necessary, Berlin's concept of value pluralism provides what is, in some ways, a healthy starting point. It is arguably important to remember the artificial nature of certain types of cost-benefit analysis and the extent to which something is being lost in the translation of particular goods into homogenous units.²⁷⁹ By conceptualizing the sources of value as being fragmented and the nature of moral conflict as often incommensurable, value pluralism helps do just that.

6.3 Incommensurability, Moral Knowledge and Judgment

Berlin, as I have pointed to in this dissertation, is a moral realist. Values are real, part of the furniture of the world. Values may be contingent creations, the product of history, circumstance and the human imagination, and their duration is never guaranteed, but this does not render them less sacred or binding. Indeed, Berlin's insistence that the contingent and 'relative' validity of our values was not an obstacle to unflinching commitment was grounded in his commitment to a form of moral realism. Berlin should not be confused with the moral skeptic who maintains that we can give up on the idea of objective values and still lead morally responsible lives. Berlin's claim is not that we cannot have moral knowledge. Rather, the problem – if that is the right word – that we are faced with is that moral goods and principles are often both incompatible and incommensurable. This has the consequence of rendering reason unable to give us grounds for concluding that one alternative outweighs the other.

The question of what incommensurability means for moral and ethical decision-making and judgment is a complex one. A central claim of this dissertation has been that conceiving values as incommensurable actually aids a sound approach to political action and judgment. For Berlin, the incommensurability of values was not a cause for indecision.

²⁷⁹ See for instance Martha Nussbaum, "The Cost of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits to Cost-Benefit Analysis," in *The Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Cost-Benefit Analysis: Legal, Economic, and Philosophical Perspectives (Jun., 2000), 1005-1036.

There are several reasons for this, as I have discussed in this dissertation. The first relates to the account of human agency that underpins Berlin's thought. Berlin's views contrasts with the rationalist account of human agency, which holds, as Raz characterizes it, that "paradigmatic human action is action is taken because of all the options open to the agent, it was, in the agent's view, supported by the strongest reason."²⁸⁰ Berlin's thought draws on something more akin to what Raz refers to as the classical account of human agency, whereby "paradigmatic human action is action taken because of all the options the agent considers rationally eligible, he chooses to perform it."²⁸¹ It is important to note the role reasons play in these different accounts. Reasons, on the classical account of human agency and for Berlin, render options eligible. But it is the will – not reason, not desire – that determines whether we choose to do A or B. In other words, it is not necessary to determine whether the reasons for alternative A outweigh the reasons for alternative B in order to choose between them. Incommensurability, therefore, is not as much of a problem as it appears if we consider the issue from the perspective of a rationalist account of human agency.²⁸² Indeed, as Sen points out, many of the choices we face in our daily lives – even some of the most trivial choices we face – involve alternatives that are not commensurable in the strict sense of the term.²⁸³ Yet this does not prevent us from being able to choose between them.

For those uncomfortable with the incommensurability thesis, however, the problem is perhaps not so much how it fits with human agency; the problem, rather, is the impact incommensurability appears to have on justification. We tend to want to say that we ought to have good reasons for our choices. And this is often taken to mean that the reasons we use to justify our choices should be such that they are better – more persuasive, more plausible, better supported by evidence, etc. – than the reasons for choosing something else. Indeed that is what it appears to mean to say that a choice was justified. If the reasons for A cannot be said to outweigh the reasons for B, the choice of

²⁸⁰ Joseph Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency," *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason*, 111.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁸² As Raz, among others, has shown, there are good grounds for holding that the classical account gives us a more accurate conception of human agency than the rationalist account. See "Incommensurability and Agency" and *Morality of Freedom*, ch. 13.

²⁸³ Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 240-1.

A rather than B appears arbitrary. It is not enough to say, from this perspective, that there are two or more alternatives that are fully justifiable on their own terms, in light of different yet genuine moral values.

In response to this objection, it is important to reiterate that incommensurability does not entail that moral judgment cannot be rationally based.²⁸⁴ Consider the following example of value incommensurability provided by Amartya Sen.²⁸⁵ Imagine that you have to decide which of three children – Anne, Bob and Carla – should receive a flute over which they are squabbling. “Anne claims the flute on grounds that she is the only one of the three who knows how to play it.”²⁸⁶ Bob defends his claim to the flute by “pointing out that he is the only one among the three who is so poor that he has no toys of his own.”²⁸⁷ Whereas Carla insists that she deserves to get the flute since she is the one who made the flute, through her own labor, and that it was only when she was finished that Bob and Anne tried to get the flute for themselves.²⁸⁸ The important thing to note, for present purposes, is that all three claims are grounded in good reasons. Each can draw on a distinct and well-grounded conception of justice. Each is supported – as Sen makes clear in his discussion – by the available evidence. Carla really did make the flute; Bob really is the only one among the three who is so poor he that has no toys of his own; Anne really is the only one of the three that knows how to play the flute. All three alternatives are rationally grounded, in other words. What is lacking are reasons that would allow us to say that one of the claims outweigh the others.²⁸⁹

Now, it is true that no matter which alternative is chosen, the choice is likely to appear arbitrary. When we are unable to point to reasons that speak decisively in favor of one alternative *rather than* another, when we lack reasons where reasons are needed, to echo Thomas Nagel, the choice will seem arbitrary.²⁹⁰ The choice need not be considered arbitrary in any wider sense, however, if there are good reasons in support of the chosen

²⁸⁴ See chapter 2, pp. 45-52.

²⁸⁵ Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 12-15.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸⁹ All three claims, as Sen emphasizes, are impartial. If one wanted to include a claim rooted in our particularistic duties, one could add that one of the children was the son or daughter of the person having to choose who to give the flute to.

²⁹⁰ Nagel, “Fragmentation of Value,” 128-129.

alternative, considered independently. If a decision were made to give the flute to Carla, for example, there would be no grounds for saying that the decision was irrational. There were good reasons for why Carla had a moral claim to the flute. When we couple this with the account of human agency that runs through Berlin's political thought, we get an even firmer sense of why, for Berlin, incommensurability was not a threat to the very notion of rationality in ethics.

There is another problem associated with the claim that values are incommensurable that we need to consider. One implication of value pluralism – and the incommensurability claim in particular – is that it renders the notion of an ideal society, or an ideal conception of justice, incoherent even in theory. This is said to be problematic on the grounds that it renders us incapable of assessing what would make the world a more just place. If we do not have a single standard by which to judge institutions and practices, a standard that tells us what justice would look like, we will lack the vantage point from which to critique existing institutions and propose ways of making them more just.

At first glance, this seems like a strong objection. If we do not know what justice is, how can we know what would make the world more just? The very notion of 'more just' seems to imply a single standard by which to measure, or assess, the level of justice. Yet, here too, appearances are deceiving. Knowledge of what justice *is*, or what an ideal society would look like, is not necessary in order to make a judgment as to what would make the world less unjust, more decent.²⁹¹ There are a couple of reasons for this.

First, the absence of a *single* answer to the question of what justice *is* does not entail that we can have no knowledge of justice and injustice. Just as there is more than one legitimate end embedded in the broader concept of liberty, so there is more than one valid and genuine concept of justice, more than one account of justice that gives expression to a legitimate value, or ultimate end. The question of what a just distribution of resources, honors, rights and liberties looks like is a question that can be legitimately answered in a plurality of distinct and incompatible ways. A conception of justice that draws on explicitly egalitarian principles will be different, in important respects, from a

²⁹¹ This is a point that Berlin makes; yet Sen develops more clearly than Berlin does the reasons as to why this is so. See Sen, *Idea of Justice*. See also Margalit's *Decent Society*.

conception of justice that draws on a Kantian, rights-based, set of norms. These in turn will be different from a conception of justice that draws on an Aristotelian virtue-based framework. And this is to give just a few examples. Value pluralism, it is worth repeating, is a theory about the nature of the good. It is grounded in a form of moral realism. To know what these conceptions of justice stand for is thus to have some knowledge about justice and injustice.

It is also worth noting that there is some overlap in the type of conditions that the conceptions of justice mentioned above would condemn. The persistence of grinding poverty, exploitation and the denial of basic liberties would be considered an injustice regardless of which of the above conceptions of justice was used as a measuring stick. Worrying about a unique answer thus amounts, as Ian Shapiro puts it, “to worrying about things three points to the right of the decimal when the problem at hand is to its left.”²⁹² We do not need a unique answer to the question of what justice is in order to be able to make an assessment as to what would make the world, with its myriad of genuine problems, a less unjust place.²⁹³

Second, when confronted with two incommensurable alternatives, knowledge of what the ideal solution would look like is not necessarily relevant or helpful. To borrow another example from Sen, if confronted with a choice between a Dali and a Picasso, it would not help much if we were told that the Mona Lisa is the perfect painting.²⁹⁴ This is partly because, as Sen puts it, “there are different dimensions in which objects differ (so that there is the further issue of assessing the relative importance of distances in distinct dimensions).”²⁹⁵ There is also the fact that “descriptive closeness is not necessarily a guide to valuational proximity.”²⁹⁶ It is possible to prefer alternative A to alternative B, even though alternative B more closely resembles one’s ideal preference. For instance, a person who loves red wine might still prefer white wine to a mixture of the two.²⁹⁷ In the

²⁹² Ian Shapiro, “Book review,” review of *Idea of Justice*, by Amartya Sen, *Journal of Economic Literature*, XLIX (December 2011), 1255.

²⁹³ This is one of the central contentions Sen makes in *The Idea of Justice*. The question of how far this ‘overlapping consensus’ would extend not one that I can address here. Conceivably, it extends to cases of extreme deprivation, humiliation and tyranny; but perhaps not much further.

²⁹⁴ Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 16.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 16.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 16.

²⁹⁷ Example is from Sen, *Ibid*, 16.

real world, in other words, we are always faced with choices between alternatives. And when confronted with such choices knowledge of what would be ideal is often simply not relevant.

It is no doubt true that incommensurability can in many ways complicate instances of moral conflict. But value pluralism – and the incommensurability claim in particular – is not incompatible with either moral knowledge or rationally based decision-making.

6.4 Conclusion: Value Pluralism and Political Action

How we make sense of moral conflict matters. It shapes how we approach and respond to the moral and political questions with which the world confronts us. It also shapes how we view, respond to and engage with political disagreement. Perhaps the central virtue of Berlin's theory of value pluralism is that it gives us reason for taking both moral conflict and moral disagreement seriously. It gives us reason to approach moral and political questions from a situational standpoint. It gives us reason to view compromise as a necessary, and indeed even indispensable, ingredient in political life. And it gives us reason to take seriously the moral costs that accompany political decisions – even decisions that are morally justified.

Through his account of value pluralism, his critique of hedgehogs, his account of tragedy, political judgment and the liberal predicament, Berlin sheds light on the intricate link between the way in which we make sense of moral conflict and how we approach political action. Berlin's political thought is perhaps best characterized as a defense of a particular way of thinking about and approaching the moral and political world. It is a plea, one could say, for the importance of 'negative capability' – the willingness to inhabit, deal with and confront the tense and paradoxical nature of the world around us without reaching for more solid ground. Berlin's political thought does not provide us with solutions to the problems and questions on which he sheds light. Yet by getting us to ask some of the right questions, it does a service to our continued – and indeed inevitable – engagement with the moral dimension of political life.

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