

# Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism

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One major focus of recent value-pluralist literature has been the question of what normative consequences follow from pluralism. This essay critically examines three arguments that attempt to show that either liberalism or a bounded *modus vivendi* is the state of affairs that pluralism makes morally preferable. All three arguments are shown to encounter the same fundamental problem—once we have agreed that values and sets of values are unrankable, any effort to claim that one such set is morally preferable will inevitably contradict value pluralism, either explicitly or implicitly. If this is correct, it seems that pluralism leads to relativism.

During the past thirty to forty years, the idea of value pluralism has gotten a lot of attention from political theorists.<sup>1</sup> The basic insight is intuitive and compelling: it seems that values can conflict with each other, not only between value systems but even within them. Isaiah Berlin provides a classic and often quoted statement of the idea: “The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others” (Berlin 1969, 168). A concrete example is the one offered by Sartre of the young man who must choose between caring for his elderly mother and joining the French Resistance. Sartre’s point is that these are both compelling duties, that the young man cannot fulfill both simultaneously, and that there is no obvious way to decide which should “trump” (Sartre 1973, 35-37).

The academic discussion of value pluralism has focused on two main questions. First, are values plural in the way that Berlin suggests?<sup>2</sup> Second, if values are plural, what normative consequences does that have? In particular, does value pluralism lead to, imply, reveal, or in some other way require some particular normative response?<sup>3</sup> For example, does the condition of pluralism require us to be especially attentive to negative liberty, as Berlin suggests?<sup>4</sup> In this article, I assume for the sake of argument that values are indeed plural and examine what normative consequences (if any) emerge from that plurality.

I look at three representative arguments—one from William Galston, one from Bernard Williams and George Crowder, and one from John Gray—that attempt, in different ways, to connect pluralism to some normative outcome. Galston argues that accepting the truth of plurality makes us unable to justify, without self-contradiction, imposing our value preferences on others. Doing so inevitably assumes the moral superiority of our value system, which we have already admitted cannot be established. Thus, societies that respect their citizens’ “expressive liberty” to pursue their own conceptions of the good are morally preferable to societies that do not. Because liberal societies are arguably more likely to respect expressive liberty than are nonliberal societies, we have grounds for believing that liberal societies are morally preferable under conditions of plurality. Bernard Williams suggests, and George Crowder develops, the idea that if values represent objective human goods, then societies that instantiate more of them are morally better than societies that instantiate fewer. For that reason, liberal societies, whose emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy arguably makes them likely to permit the pursuit of the widest possible range of values, are morally preferable to nonliberal societies. Finally, John Gray argues that although theories such as those of Galston and Williams/Crowder cannot justify their preference for liberalism, since it is plausible that nonliberal societies may do as good or even a better job than liberal societies in permitting the expression of a wide range of values, there is nonetheless a kind of universal

minimum morality that constrains the kinds of societies that are morally acceptable under conditions of pluralism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the best we can hope for is a *modus vivendi*, but one within limits.

My main contention is that all three of these otherwise quite different efforts to find some normative consequences in value pluralism rest on the same illegitimate move: all of them implicitly violate the premise of value pluralism by assuming that some value or combination of values can be treated as supremely important and therefore capable of rank-ordering value systems. My more general conclusion is that there is no way to simultaneously argue for value pluralism and the moral preferability of a particular value or set of values. The situation is not simply that these three authors make mistakes of logic but that the problems in their arguments reveal that the task they attempt is impossible.

If that conclusion is correct, it raises serious problems for social cooperation. When we act, either as individuals or as groups, we inevitably rank the possible alternative courses of action (even if only by selecting one and lumping the rest together as an undifferentiated second-best). Moral choice requires choosing the most moral, or morally most appropriate, course of action. Similarly, political choice requires a group of people to all live by and obey (to some extent) some common set of values and value-reflecting institutions. If there is really no way to rank values or value systems, we may be unable to agree on the values that should guide our society, with potentially devastating consequences for social cooperation.

### What Value Pluralism Is

The term *pluralism* has been used in a number of different ways during the past one hundred years.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it will be helpful to briefly clarify what I mean by “value pluralism.” First, what do we mean by *values*? Although a number of different definitions and characterizations are given in the literature,<sup>7</sup> virtually everyone treats “values” as synonymous with moral rights and duties. Thus, Sartre’s famous dilemma, mentioned above, is moving because joining the French Resistance and caring for one’s elderly mother are not merely good things—they are things that one *ought* to do, things that one has a moral duty to do. What makes value pluralism philosophically interesting and difficult is the possibility that one might have conflicting moral obligations and that well-intentioned and thoughtful people may be unable to agree on what morality requires in even the most urgent circumstances.

Second, what do we mean by *plural*? Here again, Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” is the source of the later literature’s motivating ideas. There, Berlin argues that there is no universal ranking of moral rights and duties.<sup>8</sup> This idea has been unpacked to reveal two parts: the claim that values are plural because they are incompatible and the claim that they are plural because they are incommensurable. Values are incompatible when they cannot be put into practice simultaneously. They are incommensurable when they cannot be expressed either in terms of each other or by reference to a third term that could serve as a standard unit of measure for comparing them. Thus, if value pluralism is the case, we are confronted with a situation where we have conflicting moral duties that cannot be put into a rank order of importance. We will inevitably have to choose which to fulfill and which to leave unfulfilled, but we will have no principled basis for our decision.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that we are not concerned here with mere *empirical* pluralism—the noncontroversial fact that people sometimes disagree about value judgments or find it difficult to choose between conflicting duties. Rather, we are interested in *metaethical* pluralism—the claim that at least some values inevitably conflict with each other, even under conditions of rationality, good will, and full information.<sup>9</sup>

In the discussion of the normative consequences of metaethical value pluralism, commentators have taken three general positions. My brief characterizations of Galston, Williams/Crowder, and Gray have already sketched two of them. Galston and Williams/ Crowder represent the idea that pluralism leads

to, reveals, or requires some version of liberalism. As I have suggested in passing, I believe that this is also Berlin's position.<sup>10</sup> John Gray's position might be called "bounded *modus vivendi*" and rests on the claim that pluralism makes it impossible to show that any value system (such as liberalism) is morally preferable but that there are nonetheless some ways of life that are demonstrably immoral. The best we can hope for is a *modus vivendi*—a method of getting along together—within the limits of what is morally permissible. Thus, we can achieve a partial ranking of possible ways of life, but we cannot identify a single best value system. The third major response to value pluralism is relativism—the claim that the fact of pluralism means that there is a large number of differing and incompatible value systems that cannot be put into any rank order at all. At least in this general version, relativism is distinct from nihilism—the claim that there are no true moral values, and thus, that differing moral systems cannot be ranked because they are equally meaningless. Relativism is often a bogey against which other thinkers argue for some positive normative outcome from pluralism, but some thinkers<sup>11</sup> do embrace it more openly.

These three positions—liberalism, bounded *modus vivendi*, and relativism—reflect the logically possible positions with regard to pluralism. Either pluralism reveals or requires some particular normative response,<sup>12</sup> it gives us some less definite guidance about which actions are acceptable and which are unacceptable, or it leads to some version of relativism. Another way to say this is that the fact of pluralism either reveals a comprehensive moral duty (act like this), a limited moral duty (at least do not do this), or no new moral duty at all (in which case, there is no principled way to resolve the conflicts between values and value systems).

To assess these various possible consequences of pluralism, we need to distinguish between *realist* and *irrealist* approaches to moral language and knowledge. Some theorists argue for a plurality of *real* values. That is, roughly, they believe that our language of moral values refers (more or less well) to objectively real features of the universe that are at least to some degree independent of human recognition. On their view, there just happen to be several such values that are not *ranked* with regard to each other. This is an ontological or metaphysical claim—our inability to reconcile or commensurate these values reflects the fact that they do not have any intrinsic rank order. Berlin, Galston, Crowder, and Gray all take this position.

Other theorists argue that plurality arises precisely from the fact that values are not objective facts about the human-independent world. Thus, for example, if we believe that value language refers ultimately to engrained but contingent cultural traditions, it seems possible (although not inevitable) that intractable conflicts both within and between traditions could emerge. In this *irrealist* pluralism, at least some values and value-traditions could be permanently (for all practical purposes) *unrankable* with regard to each other.<sup>13</sup> The claim of unrankability is an epistemological claim, rather than an ontological one—it reflects a truth about the relationships among our ideas, not about relationships among features of the universe, since value language does not refer to any such thing(s). This position is famously associated with Nietzsche (e.g., Nietzsche 1994).

I argue below that both the realist and irrealist versions of pluralism lead to relativism, because the hypothesis of pluralism makes impossible any ranking of values or value systems. On this view, whatever explanation of the cause of metaethical pluralism we prefer, its normative consequences are clear: it inevitably leads to relativism.

### **Irrealist Value Pluralism**

If values are plural because they are irreal—that is, because they are merely contingent human constructs rather than objective facts about the universe—then pluralism leads to or reveals moral relativism quite directly. Again, I want to emphasize that I mean something precise by *relativism*—it is an inability to rank values or value systems. Relativism is potentially troubling because it seems to make moral choice difficult. But it is not the same thing as nihilism—the claim that there simply are no

genuine moral values. How we might respond to the fact of relativism is open to debate. We might pursue Nietzsche's fierce avowal of one's own personal values as an aspect of heroic self-creation (see Nietzsche 1994). We might pursue Richard Rorty's strategy of treating our values as unreal for the sake of making discussion and compromise easier, while denying that we can really know their metaphysical status.<sup>14</sup> We might (and almost certainly eventually will) simply impose an arbitrary rank ordering for the sake of bringing order to chaos. But what we cannot do, consistently, is claim that there is an intrinsic rank ordering entailed in the values themselves. The fact of their unreality makes any rank ordering among them inescapably arbitrary—it would be just one more human construct, with no claim to being superior to any rival ranking.

Of course, if two individuals, or two value-systems, conflict, it is possible that they may come to agreement. All of the ordinary resources of persuasion and argument are available here—I can argue with my opponents that they have misunderstood our common values, or that they are being inappropriately selfish or shortsighted, or perhaps that although we do not share common values, our common human experience suggests certain ideals and obligations that we should respect toward one another. But if these and other appeals fail, as it seems possible that

they may for irrealists, there is no reason to think that there are always other appeals available in principle that, properly used by competent and honest parties, should result in eventual agreement. Moral irrealism denies that all rational people must agree in identifying our moral rights and duties and also that they must agree on how to rank the rights and duties that they contingently do agree on. On this view, neither liberalism nor any other substantive value or value system is favored by the fact of pluralism.

If there is no reason for the irrealist to think that value conflicts must in principle be resolvable by finding some common commitment, perhaps such conflicts can be resolved by an appeal to mutual toleration, forbearance, or some other structural relationship. That is, perhaps we can find a solution based on a common response to the fact of plurality rather than on a common positive value. Yet, here too, there is no reason to think that this solution must be available. Faced with conflict, each party will inevitably refer back to their own value system (which of course may be narrower or broader, more or less internally consistent, and so on) to decide how to respond. Those systems may support toleration and accommodation, or they may support unremitting aggression and hostility. By hypothesis, there is no necessity that the parties contain any particular attitude toward such conflict, and thus, there is no reason to believe that they must respond in any particular way. The irrealist perspective does not deny that a *modus vivendi* might be achievable—or, for that matter, even universal, contingent moral agreement—but it does deny that such a resolution must always be available.

Some critics of this irrealist view have argued that this kind of emphasis on context leads to a kind of Burkean or Oakeshottian conservatism, in which "our way of life" is seen as best not because of its intrinsic qualities but simply because it is ours, because it is constitutive of our personalities and institutions (see Gellner 1984; Nyíri 1981). This claim attempts to avoid the apparent relativism of irrealism by showing that it consistently leads to a particular normative outlook. However, this view rests on the assumption that ways of life are both internally consistent and hermetically sealed from contact with outside views—that a given way of life always delineates an unambiguous course of action and that different ways of life do not share common commitments that could be the basis of discussion. Since ways of life do not seem to be monolithic in this way, the claim of conservatism is overstated (see Lugg 1985; Flathman 1992, 58). Irrealism is not committed to the view that there can be no basis for discussion and agreement between contexts, only that there does not have to be such a basis in every circumstance.

If values are plural because they are unreal, then there cannot be any intrinsic rank ordering available to help us cope with pluralism, and we will find ourselves in a condition of relativism. Thus, recognizing

that irrealist metaethical pluralism is the case has no normative consequences at all—it leaves us each with our initial value commitments and offers us no new guidance about how to live with our differences.

### **Realist Value Pluralism**

The vast majority of theorists writing about pluralism assume or argue a position of moral realism, in part to avoid the relativism of irrealism. Thus, I now turn to the question, what, if anything, does realist pluralism lead to? To put the case as strongly as possible, let us assume that everyone is a realist value pluralist. Thus, we will put aside the possibilities that people might disagree about whether values are real, or about the list of real values, or about whether they are genuinely plural, which disagreements would presumably lead to a wide range of possible outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Instead, we will take the ideal case—everyone agrees that values are real moral rights and duties, everyone agrees on the list of such values, and everyone agrees that they are irreducibly plural. Does that condition lead to any particular normative outcome?

In the abstract, it is very hard to see how realist pluralism could lead to, require, or reveal any particular normative consequences. By hypothesis, we know what all the real moral values are, and we know that they cannot be put into rank order. Thus, no one value can trump another. By extension, it seems obvious that no set of values could trump another set of values, at least as long as the two sets are equal in number. Thus, if liberty cannot trump equality, and piety cannot trump courage, then liberty plus piety cannot trump equality plus courage, and so on with the other possible combinations.<sup>16</sup> (I address below the question of whether sets of values that are unequal in number can be ranked against each other.) The problem is revealed as even harder if we add two additional points, which I believe are implicit in the conception of moral rights and duties. First, moral goods trump nonmoral goods. Although there is some controversy about this claim, it largely concerns the nature of morality—whether our idea of a moral good itself can be defended rigorously.<sup>17</sup> Since in this essay I am defending the strongest version of realist pluralism to see whether that best-case-scenario argument can lead to any normative consequences, I am assuming that our traditional understanding of a moral good is roughly correct. On that view, the point of calling something a moral right or duty is to say that it has a superior claim over nonmoral considerations. The second additional problem, which is a consequence of the first, is that the only thing that could trump a moral good is a superior moral good.<sup>18</sup>

Given these restrictions, how do pluralist theorists attempt to connect pluralism to some substantive outcome? The most plausible attempts use structural or emergent strategies, which try to identify some fact about the plurality of values that reveals a ranking that is not obviously dependent on a rank order among the values themselves. Here, I look at two such strategies: one used by William Galston and one briefly suggested by Bernard Williams and later elaborated by George Crowder.

### **Galston, Pluralism, and Liberalism**

William Galston understands the problem of getting from the hypothesis of pluralism to the preferability of liberalism or any other value system. He writes in response to a critic: “To begin: it was not my intention to suggest that by itself, value pluralism entails any form of liberalism. From a purely formal standpoint, that claim would be bizarre. If value pluralism functions as one premise in the argument, then surely we must add another premise to have any hope of reaching the desired conclusion” (Galston 2004, 144). He continues: “If as a logical matter we must affirm something in addition to value pluralism to reach liberal conclusions, what might that something be? One candidate is my conception of expressive liberty” (Galston 2004, 145).

The idea of expressive liberty is appealing and carefully constructed: “This conception of expressive liberty is not straightforwardly a particular value. Rather, it reflects a structural fact about human agency

and gains value from the goods that it allows agents to fulfill. An individual is said to enjoy expressive liberty when surrounding social and political arrangements do not excessively or unnecessarily constrain the practices that collectively express that individual's conception of a good life" (Galston 2004, 145).

Galston draws the connection to liberalism in this way: "If this argument is correct, then there is indeed a link between value pluralism and political liberalism. Value pluralism suggests that there is a range of indeterminacy within which various choices are rationally defensible. . . . Because there is no single uniquely rational ordering or combination of such values, no one can provide a generally valid reason, binding on all individuals, for a particular ranking or combination" (Galston 2002, 56-57).

This raises a first objection to Galston's theory: that it is not possible for expressive liberty to be a nonvalue and yet still do the work that Galston wants it to do. His idea is that if we have, say, one hundred value systems that are all moral, then we need a good reason to interfere with any of them. In essence, this is an attempt to place the burden of justification on the enemies of expressive liberty.<sup>19</sup> But of course, the question this raises is, why do we need a justification here? Imagine that we somehow require the people of way of life number 34 to adopt way of life number 47. By hypothesis, both ways of life are equally moral, and both are objectively good for the people who lead them. Why do we need to justify this switch? Galston's answer seems to be because it violates the expressive liberty of the people formerly of way of life 34. But that answer would treat expressive liberty as a value—as something that people have a right to and as something the denial of which needs moral justification. If expressive liberty is a value, then by hypothesis, it is plural with the other values and has no claim to preeminence. As a practical necessity, every way of life must rank the various values, instantiating some and ignoring or downplaying others. If expressive liberty ends up at the bottom of the heap, and thus, gets ignored or violated by a society's practices (since by hypothesis, we cannot instantiate all genuine values at once), there is no reason consistent with value pluralism to object. Thus, if expressive liberty is a value, it cannot confer rank order on value systems because it is plural with other values and has no claim to preeminence. If expressive liberty is not a value, then it is irrelevant because it cannot be the basis of a claim that a justification is needed for our hypothetical switch.

A second objection is that violating someone's expressive liberty does not (necessarily) involve implicitly assuming that one's own value system is superior to theirs, which would obviously be self-contradictory for a pluralist to assume.<sup>20</sup> Imagine that Jane helps her terminally ill husband commit suicide because doing so is permitted (or even required) by her value system. Unfortunately, Jane lives in a society with a different value system, which treats assisted suicide as murder. When arrested, Jane argues that the society is violating her expressive liberty by punishing her for doing something that is permissible in her conception of the good, which all involved agree is based on genuine moral values. The rest of her society counters that while they recognize that Jane has a different and valid value system, the cohesion of any society requires a uniform set of laws and prohibitions. The society is not claiming that its value system is morally better than Jane's but rather that social cooperation would be impossible without everyone acting in accordance with a single conception of the good. The basis of their justification for constraining Jane's freedom to follow her own conception of the good is practical rather than moral. Jane might retort that in essence, her society is saying that Jane has incorrectly ranked compassion above achieving civic unity and is thus implicitly arguing that its different ranking is better than hers. The society's response can be clarified if we imagine that instead of seeking to punish Jane it sought to expel her. The society's claim would not be that Jane had acted immorally nor that she had failed to value civic unity properly but rather that her willingness to violate the laws makes continued cooperation with her impossible, since the other members of society cannot predict how she will behave. In short, they are no longer willing to live with her. However, if Jane would like to remain a member of the society, she can submit to the criminal punishment for murder, which the society will view as rehabilitating her as a member in good standing.

Galston acknowledges that such reasons might be possible: "It is not my view that no such reason ever exists. It may be the case that the costs to society, measured along another dimension, of not imposing a single way of life on all are so compelling as to override citizens' endorsement of competing alternatives" (Galston 2004, 146). However, he insists that "the authorities are obligated to make that case" (Galston 2004, 146). This raises a third objection to Galston's argument: that he cannot give an adequate argument for placing the burden of justification. If a society contains two value systems—for example, one that permits freedom of religion and one that does not—one or the other will win the political struggle for the right to institutionalize its preferences. Even though both value systems are equally moral in that both are based on genuine values, Galston's argument suggests that if the adherents of the value system that forbids freedom of religion come to power, they will need to justify their plans to restrict religious freedom, because those plans would violate the expressive liberty of other citizens. But of course, the victors could equally well claim that allowing religious freedom violates their expressive liberty to pursue their conception of the good. The fact that the two value systems are equally moral makes it impossible to decide which owes the other a justification for its preferences—there is no principled ground for assuming that one value system is doing something suspect.

If we claim that the burden of justification always lies with the person or institution that violates someone else's expressive liberty, the argument is circular: it assumes that expressive liberty is entitled to presumptive priority as one premise in an argument intended to establish exactly that priority. If we claim that the burden of justification lies with the person whose expressive liberty is violated, then the argument is pointless, since that person will presumably always lose (with the possible exception of Gandhi-like figures who can shame their adversaries into changing their minds). Finally, if we claim that the burden must be placed differently according to context, then the question is irresolvable, since the opposing sides will always disagree about where it should be placed and about who should decide. If values are genuinely plural, and if two value systems clash, there is no way to say that one bears the burden of justifying its imposition on the other without there being some universally applicable moral principle that imposes that burden, but the existence of such preeminent values is ruled out by the premise of plurality.

Thus, although Galston intends to avoid the obvious self-contradiction of asserting that expressive liberty is a preeminent value, it cannot do the work of ranking value systems unless it is precisely that. If expressive liberty is not a moral value, then it is merely a preference and does not bear any normative weight—that fact that some people prefer it does not and cannot impose a duty on others to respect it. If expressive liberty is a value, there are two possibilities. On one hand, if it is plural with the other values, then it cannot rank value systems. A society does nothing wrong if its value system ignores or dramatically discounts expressive liberty, since the fact of value pluralism shows us both that every value system must ignore some genuine values and that no value is of such preeminent importance that its presence or absence changes the moral quality of the value system. On the other hand, if expressive liberty both is a value and is of such importance that its instantiation or violation determines the moral quality of value systems, then Galston's theory disproves our initial hypothesis of value pluralism by demonstrating that some values simply are more valuable than others.

If we are convinced that realist pluralism is the case, then at least as far as Galston's argument can help us, it seems that pluralism has no particular normative consequences. The fact that pluralism is true does not help us resolve the problems that the condition of pluralism brings about—we have no new guidance about how to live together. As I argue below, this problem is not unique to Galston's argument but is endemic to any attempt to show that realist pluralism leads to any particular normative outcome.

## Williams, Crowder, and “More Is Better”<sup>21</sup>

Another attempt to find substantive normative consequences from the fact of pluralism is suggested by Bernard Williams: “There is the obvious point that if there are many and competing genuine values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More, to this extent, must mean better” (Williams 1979, xvii). George Crowder has developed this argument in greater depth (see Crowder 1998, 2002, 2007). He writes:

Value pluralism is the idea that there are many objective and intrinsic goods—that is, goods that are valuable for their own sake as components of human well-being. Each of these goods makes its own unique claim on us, requiring our respect. Since none of these goods is inherently superior to any other, we should in that sense respect them all equally. Therefore, when it comes to pursuing goods, all are equally worth pursuing, and we should pursue them all, as far as we can do so in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In principle, then, pluralism commits us to the promotion of as many goods as possible in a given situation—that is, pluralism generates a principle of maximum diversity.... Roughly speaking, it is generally better that a society embrace a greater rather than narrower range of values. (Crowder 2007, 132)

If this line of reasoning is correct, then there is a clear, partial rank ordering of value systems that does not derive from any rank order among the values themselves. Furthermore, it seems at least possible and perhaps even likely that a liberal social order would be more likely to permit the expression of the largest possible number of values than would nonliberal social orders. Following this logic, it seems that the fact of realist pluralism may make liberalism morally preferable to other general systems of social cooperation, and the answer to our question would be that pluralism leads to liberalism after all. Crowder makes that claim explicitly: “The argument from value pluralism to liberalism by way of diversity can be divided into two principal moves: from pluralism to diversity and from diversity to liberalism” (Crowder 2007, 131).

But is it true that more is better? A simplified example will be helpful in evaluating this claim. Imagine three value systems, A, B, and C. A is composed of one real value and one spurious value. The adherents of system A spend their days carrying out their values, and both values are actually expressed in the lives of the citizens. System B is also composed of two values, but they are both real. The everyday life of its adherents is also entirely devoted to carrying out the values of the system, and since all of those values are real, the entirety of that everyday life reflects real values. Finally, C is composed of three values, all of which are real. Once again, everyday life is dedicated to carrying out these values, and since all of them are real, all of that everyday life reflects real values.

It seems obvious that we have grounds for saying that both B and C are morally better than A, since more of the activities of their adherents instantiate genuine values. In other words, the people who live by those value systems live lives that are more moral. But Williams and Crowder’s argument is that we also have grounds for saying that C is morally better than B, since C instantiates *more* genuine values. This cannot be true for the same reasons that B and C are superior to A, since the adherents of B and C all live lives that are, by hypothesis, 100 percent moral. Rather, their claim is that it is better to pursue more genuine moral values than fewer, even if that means that each value in our system gets less time and attention devoted to it than it would if we tried to instantiate fewer values. (The limit of this argument is when the effort to instantiate additional values interferes with the instantiation of values already being put into practice, such that the total number of values actually instantiated either plateaus or declines.<sup>22</sup>)

To say that carrying out more moral duties is morally better than carrying out fewer is to make carrying out more itself a moral duty. I would not be fully (or adequately) moral if I failed to carry out as many moral duties as I could (given the limitations of time, energy, and self-defeating conflicts among my



various efforts). Furthermore, Williams and Crowder are claiming that obeying this duty of moral diversity is not on the same level as other moral duties but is superior to it. If I recognize the duty of moral diversity but rank it very low in my de facto ranking of the various plural values, their argument implies that I have done something morally unacceptable, a charge that by hypothesis we cannot make about any other de facto ranking of the plural values. In other words, the alleged duty to moral pluralism must be itself a supreme value, which imposes a rank order not on the plural values but on systems that instantiate them.

Where does this alleged duty of moral pluralism come from? Is it an underappreciated part of our conception of morality? This would be advantageous to Crowder, since it would justify the duty to diversity without claiming that it is itself a moral value, thus avoiding the question of whether the duty is plural with other values. It seems self-evident that the idea of morality requires us to behave in a moral way at all times. We can rightly reproach people whose lives include some morality but also some immorality.<sup>23</sup> But can we sensibly reproach someone who has spent his or her entire life doing morally good things, on the grounds that he or she has not done a wide enough variety of them? Should we really say to the volunteer doctor, "Yes, your life was good because you spent every waking hour treating the sick, but your life would have been morally better if you had spent some of those hours feeding the hungry instead"? It is not obvious that this challenge to the doctor makes sense. We can imagine people of good will disagreeing about the ideal distribution of the doctor's time. The challenge to the doctor does not have the same moral obviousness as the reproach to the reprobate; the criticism "You have been immoral all the days of your life, and your life would have been better if you had been moral instead" is unobjectionable precisely because acting morally is intrinsic to the concept of morality. The fact that we can imagine reasonable disagreement about the criticism that the doctor has not done enough kinds of good things suggests that the alleged duty to diversity of goods is not simply part of the concept of morality.

If moral diversity is not part of the concept of morality, what gives it its normative force? In other words, what gives us a duty to ensure such diversity? The only answer can be that it is itself an independent moral obligation. But that leads to a (familiar) dilemma. One possibility is that the duty to achieve moral diversity is plural with the other moral duties and therefore cannot serve as a criterion for ranking moral systems, since the other duties have equally valid claims to being the ranking criterion, even though they would lead to different rankings. The other possibility is that the duty to moral diversity is not plural with the other values but is in fact a superior moral obligation; in that case, it would indeed be capable of providing a rank ordering among value systems, but it would do so at the cost of disproving our initial hypothesis of value pluralism. For these reasons, it cannot be true both that values are plural and that, when it comes to plural values, "more is better"—it has to be one or the other.

These observations also answer the question deferred above, about whether value systems with unequal numbers of values can be ranked against each other. The answer appears to be no—there is no basis, consistent with realist pluralism, for claiming that a value system that embraces more values is morally preferable to one that embraces fewer values, or vice versa. The only thing that could rank value systems would be their intrinsic moral quality, but the hypothesis of value pluralism denies that there can be any such difference among value systems (composed of genuine values). No value or combination of values is so important that its inclusion would make a value system superior to all rivals. Therefore, there is no quality that could rank value systems—not the number of values in them and not the quality or importance of the values in them. Thus, while all pluralists agree that there is no way to rank individual values, it now also appears that there is no way to rank sets or systems of values without violating the initial premise of pluralism. Overall, Williams and Crowder's argument seems to have the same problem that Galston's did—since the only thing that can impose a rank order on values or value systems is a superior moral value, and since the hypothesis of value pluralism holds that there is not any supreme

moral value, it seems that pluralism does not and cannot lead to (or allow) the privileging of any substantive normative outcome. Recognizing the fact of the plurality of values does not reveal any new moral duty that might help us grapple with the practical problems caused by value conflict.

### **John Gray's Bounded Modus Vivendi**

John Gray has a different and more modest proposal for finding some help with the problems of value pluralism. Gray agrees that the fact of value pluralism means that neither liberalism nor any substantive doctrine can claim a privileged place. For example, he writes, "What does follow from the truth of pluralism is that liberal institutions can have no universal authority. Where liberal values come into conflict with others which depend for their existence on non-liberal social or political structures and forms of life, and where these values are truly incommensurables, there can—if pluralism is true—be no argument according universal priority to liberal values. To deny this is to deny the thesis of the incommensurability of values" (Gray 1996, 155).

Yet, Gray seeks to avoid the apparent relativism of pluralism by arguing that since the plural values are objectively real moral obligations, they collectively create what he calls a "universal minimum" of values. He writes: "Strong pluralism does not reject all universal moral claims. It does not deny that [t]here are universal, pan-cultural goods and bads. It affirms their reality. It sees such universal values as marking boundary conditions beyond which worthwhile human lives cannot be lived. For those who are subject to them the practices of slavery and genocide are insuperable obstacles to a worthwhile human life; but there are indefinitely many ways of life that lack these and other practices precluded by the universal minimum of generically human values" (Gray 1998, 23-24). On this view, we can create at least a partial ranking of value systems, since some of them will be within the boundaries of the universal minimum morality and others will be on the outside. While this offers significantly less guidance than Galston and Williams/Crowder hoped to, it suggests that we can make at least some judgments among moral systems. Indeed, given the problems that Galston and Crowder/Williams encounter, it seems that Gray's binary ranking of value systems is the best that we could possibly do.

However, there are reasons to believe that even Gray's more modest ranking of value systems may not genuinely be available to us. Gray has been criticized for his optimism about the content of his universal minimum. For example, Gray writes, "In contemporary circumstances, all reasonably legitimate regimes require a rule of law and the capacity to maintain peace, effective representative institutions, and a government that is removable by its citizens without recourse to violence. In addition, they require the capacity to assure the satisfaction of basic needs to all and to protect minorities from disadvantage. Last, though by no means least, they need to reflect the ways of life and common identities of their citizens" (Gray 2000, 107). As William Curtis has pointed out, this articulation of the universal minimum appears to smuggle much of liberalism back into Gray's modus vivendi (see Curtis 2007, as well as Talisse 2000). The practical effect of that move is to impose limits on pluralism that are not justifiable from a pluralist perspective. We can easily imagine societies whose value systems deny the importance of rule of law, representative institutions, or the right to remove the government or that acknowledge such things as goods but rank them very low in the society's de facto ordering of goods, such that they are rarely or never expressed. As long as those values systems consist entirely of genuine moral values, and assuming as always that our initial premise of realist pluralism is the case, there is no way that we could claim that such value systems are morally deficient. Gray's hopeful list of minimum conditions cannot be justified.

But there is also a more fundamental logical problem with Gray's effort to identify bright-line rules for what is beyond the pale of plural morality. Remember what Gray says about such evils: "For those who are subject to them the practices of slavery and genocide are insuperable obstacles to a worthwhile human life . . ." (Gray 1998, 23-24). For this objection to make sense, we need to read it as Gray's saying

that denying people the possibility of a worthwhile human life is a moral wrong. In other words, there has to be some reason why I must view myself as being obligated to either help others live worthwhile lives, or at a minimum, avoid interfering with their ability to do so. The only thing that can so obligate me is a moral duty. But if there is genuinely such a moral duty, then it is either plural with the other duties or it is superior to them. In the first case, the duty to ensure worthwhile lives for others is merely one duty among many, and there is no principled objection to a society choosing to rank it very low in its de facto ranking of values. (Although that might seem a bizarre choice when stated so abstractly, it is a comprehensible choice in practice. For example, members of a salvific religion may see it as acceptable to enslave infidels to prevent them from committing mortal sins or to kill them for failing to worship properly. The infidels would not think of themselves as leading worthwhile lives under such circumstances, and the believers would not feel obligated to take that concern into account.) A value that is merely one of the plural many cannot establish a bright-line rule. In the second case, where the duty to ensure worthwhile lives for others is in fact a supreme duty, Gray's argument violates the initial hypothesis of plurality. Thus, either values are truly plural, in which case there are no bright-line rules, or values are not all plural with one another, in which case the hypothesis of value pluralism was wrong.

Gray's goal is to deny that pluralism leads to any particular normative duty (especially liberalism), while at the same time denying that pluralism leads to relativism. If he could succeed in doing this, he could demonstrate that there is at least a partial rank ordering of value systems. Even among systems that are composed entirely of genuine values, on Gray's view, only those whose ranking of those values leads to systems that adequately protect the universal minimum morality can be seen as morally acceptable. (So-called value systems that contain no genuine values, or that contain spurious values that actually lead to moral wrongs, are also morally inferior.) While this partial ranking would not reveal a comprehensive moral duty like the ones that Galston and Williams/ Crowder argue for, it would at least mark off certain methods of social organization as unacceptable. On this view, pluralism would allow us to choose among a wide variety of possible ways of life but would avoid the relativistic conclusion that any system based on genuine values is acceptable. The problem, as I have argued, is that Gray's argument does not and cannot work, because he cannot justify the partial ranking without implicitly assuming that some value is supreme with regard to the others, such that it must always be satisfied and cannot ever be sacrificed to achieve other values. Accepting that position entails abandoning pluralism; holding on to pluralism entails abandoning such efforts to rank values and value systems, because the only thing capable of effecting such a ranking is a value that is morally more important than all the other values, and pluralism denies that there is any such preeminent value. Simply put, the two projects are logically incompatible.

Where does this leave us? If we are realist pluralists, we must accept that every system based on one or more genuine values is plural (that is, unrankable) with regard to every other such system. Perhaps a quick bit of math will make this problem more vivid. If we assume that there are only twenty genuine moral values, which seems a very small number, more than one million possible value systems can be assembled from them. In such a moral universe, a liberal society that seeks to embrace as many values as possible will be on the same moral footing as a narrow and intolerant society whose institutions and practices only reflect one genuine value. While we may be able to judge as morally inadequate those societies that do not reflect any genuine values, we will have no basis for judging among the enormous number of vastly different societies that do.

If we are irrealist pluralists, the problem is even more profound, since we cannot expect to reach agreement on whether values are metaphysically real, which (if any) of the many human goods are actually values, and whether values are plural in the first place. In that moral universe, the relatively limited relativism of the realist position blossoms into a true relativism, in which each society will necessarily make its own moral judgments and rankings but in which no society has any reasonable

expectation that other people should agree with its conclusions. In both cases, the potentially profound problems that relativism poses for political cooperation have no obvious solutions.

### **Conclusion: Relativism Regained?**

My general claim about value pluralism is very simple: if values are moral goods, and if they are incommensurable and incompatible, then there is no way to rank either the values themselves or the sets of values that underlie forms of life. This is true whether we make a flat claim to the superiority of some value (as I believe Berlin does), whether we argue that the fact of pluralism creates a situation where the violation of an individual's autonomous expression of his or her values requires moral justification (as Galston does), whether we argue that a system that permits or instantiates more moral goods is better than one that instantiates fewer (as Williams and Crowder do), or whether we try to show that some combinations of values are morally preferable to others (as Gray does). In each case, the argument necessarily takes the following form: state of affairs A is morally preferable to state of affairs B. And in response to each such argument, pluralists can and must raise the same basic question: what makes A morally better than B? When A and B are both states of affairs that are acknowledged as being morally acceptable because they instantiate genuine moral goods, and if, as I have argued, the only thing that can make one moral state of affairs morally better than another moral state of affairs is that it instantiates a more important moral good, then the hypothesis of value pluralism must always lead to the conclusion that A is not and cannot be morally superior to B. If our moral intuitions tell us that A really is better than B, then obviously we should try to explain why that is so, but our first step will have to be to deny the truth of pluralism.

If my argument is correct, value pluralism leads to (or reveals) a version of moral relativism. This is so whether we approach pluralism as moral irrealists or as moral realists. This condition of relativism raises serious concerns about the possibilities of social cooperation. One of the most basic assumptions of social organization is that everyone within a given area or polity can be led either to adopt the same values or at least obey the same institutions. But if it is true that there is no definitive way to resolve conflict over values, value systems, and the institutions that embody and enforce them, then it seems that our traditional bases of cooperation may be threatened. Given limitations of space, I cannot address adequately the question of what new possibilities for cooperation are available to us. Instead, I merely sketch some reasons to think that such possibilities may exist. It seems obvious that pluralism leaves open to us some avenues of cooperation. To the extent that individuals or ways of life contingently share some (or many) values, they will be able to cooperate on the basis of moral principle. Societies and individuals who do not find themselves in such substantive agreement would be able to pursue a Hobbesian *modus vivendi*—cooperation inspired by each participant's self-interest. Some societies would probably combine these two strategies, seeking principled agreement in some areas and a cooperation born of enlightened self-interest in others. With luck, perhaps those thin bases of cooperation could be modified or strengthened over time, by the creation of interpersonal and cultural ties, the emergence of institutions that many people value for different reasons, or a change in people's views because of a gradual convergence born of mutual respect. Thus, instead of the traditional philosophical goal of political cooperation bounded by moral obligations that all rational actors must acknowledge and obey, and instead of a mere Hobbesian ceasefire among mutually hostile parties, we could achieve a kind of layered pluralism, in which individuals and societies cooperate in a wide variety of ways, for a variety of reasons, some resting on moral duties, others on support for institutions, and yet others on various kinds of self-interest. There is much to be dissatisfied with in such a vision of politics, but that may be the world in which we find ourselves.

## Notes

1. William Galston offers an excellent brief discussion of the major works (2002, 3-7).
2. For an excellent synthetic overview of the arguments, see Chang (1997).
3. William Galston recently identified as a “major scene of pluralist contention today” the question of “whether Berlinian value pluralism supports, undermines, or is neutral with respect to liberal democracy” (2006, 753).
4. “Pluralism, with the measure of ‘negative’ liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind” (Berlin 1969, 171).
5. On the notion of a minimum morality, see Gray (1998, 24).
6. “During the past century, thinkers have explored ‘pluralism’ under at least five different rubrics. *Political* pluralism emerged in Britain, then migrated to America, as a reaction to doctrines of plenipotentiary state power. William James counterposed *metaphysical* pluralism to philosophies that claimed the ability to comprehend all truth in single, unified doctrines. Isaiah Berlin drew a distinction between monism and *value* pluralism—the thesis that worthy goods and principles are heterogeneous and cannot be combined into a single best way of living, for individuals or communities. James Madison enjoyed a midcentury revival in the theory of *interest group* pluralism. Most recently, John Rawls has cited the *fact* of pluralism—the diversity characteristic of modern societies under circumstances of liberty—as a challenge that legitimate liberal societies must address” (Galston 2006, 751). The present essay is concerned only with value pluralism.
7. Berlin uses the term broadly: “values, of which equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order are perhaps the most obvious examples” (Berlin 1969, 170). Galston briefly summarizes values as being “worthy goods and principles” (Galston 2006, 751). Crowder identifies them as “goods that contribute to human flourishing objectively” (Crowder 1998, 8). Although these definitions differ, they agree in fundamentals. Most importantly, it is not the case that values are valued because they are valued but rather that values are (or should be) valued because they are values—as Crowder and Galston point out, values are things that are in some sense genuinely or objectively good for human beings.
8. “To assume that all values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide-rule could, in principle, perform. To say that in some ultimate, all-reconciling, yet realizable synthesis, duty *is* interest, or individual freedom *is* pure democracy or an authoritarian state, is to throw a metaphysical blanket over either self-deceit or deliberate hypocrisy” (Berlin 1969, 171).
9. The inspiration for the distinction between empirical and metaethical pluralisms comes from Crowder (1994) and Wong (1991).
10. Berlin’s pluralism appears to rely on the idea that one value or a small number of values is superior to the rest of the plural values, which thus creates at least a partial ordering among value systems. I believe this is his implicit idea in asserting the primacy of negative liberty. However, I believe that this strategy ultimately relies on one of the strategies I examine in this essay. We need some reason to believe that negative liberty is prior to the other values. Since, given the initial hypothesis of value plurality, that reason cannot be the mere assertion of negative liberty’s superiority, it must rest on some reason, and Galston and Williams put forward the most plausible such reasons.
11. Richard Rorty is a thinker who argues that acting as if relativism were the case need not be disabling, although he does not argue that values are actually relative, because of his belief that we cannot know the metaphysical status of our value beliefs (see Rorty 1979, 1989). Nietzsche famously argues that values are relative and that that poses no obstacle to achieving any worthwhile human goal (see Nietzsche 1994).
12. Obviously, liberalism is not the only possible normative response, but it is the one that most recent thinkers have focused on.
13. Could such contingent values actually be permanently unrankable? Mitchell Silver argues that we cannot make such a strong claim, since their very contingency means that circumstances *could* change in a way that made the values rankable. While this argument seems right in principle, it seems to me to miss the point. Of course unrealistic values could be reconciled if things were very different from how they actually are, but that does not offer any practical advice to people who cannot reconcile their values today, despite prolonged and conscientious efforts. There is a danger here of mistaking the abstract possibility of a reconciliation for the reasonableness of expecting one (see Silver 1994).
14. See Rorty (1989). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.
15. See Robert Talisse’s concise discussion of these possibilities (Talisse 2000).
16. The fact that the incommensurability of individual values leads logically to the incommensurability of sets of equal numbers of values suggests that George Crowder is at least partially mistaken when he writes, “Here we should take note of a fundamental point that is widely underappreciated in the literature of value pluralism and certainly not adequately acknowledged by either Gray or Galston: the notion of value pluralism is primarily a notion of the plurality and incommensurability of *goods*, not ways of life” (Crowder 2007, 134). Since, for the value pluralist, ways of life should be understood as sets of values, the incommensurability of values does lead to the incommensurability of ways of life. See below for a discussion of the incommensurability of sets of values that are unequal in number.
17. See, for example, John Kekes’s argument that nonmoral values can, under some circumstances, trump moral values, as well as his discussion of other literature on this question (Kekes 1993, Ch. 9).
18. George Crowder attributes to William Galston, and appears to endorse himself, the view that there may be a hierarchy of types of plural values. He writes, quoting Galston, “Some goods may be seen as more ‘basic’ than others, ‘in the sense that they

form part of any choiceworthy conception of a human life’—that is, they are universally valid. These basic goods—examples may include liberty, equality, justice, courage—will override less basic goods where there is a conflict. But they will not invariably override other basic goods” (Crowder 2007, 125, internal citation omitted). This point is compatible with my claim that moral goods always outweigh nonmoral goods, assuming that moral goods are more basic in the sense used above. It is also susceptible to my more general point that attempts to derive liberalism from pluralism inevitably treat some one value as supreme.

19. Talisse also points out this burden-shifting maneuver (Talisse 2004, 132-135).

20. See a further discussion of this point in Talisse (2004).

21. John Gray could also be seen as arguing that “more is better,” since part of the point of his emphasis on permitting different ways of life to flourish is that this is the best way to allow the widest possible expression of the plural values (see below for a summary of his views).

22. Crowder recognizes this point (Crowder 2007, 132).

23. The hypothesis of pluralism also makes it true that we could reproach people whose lives contain ostensibly morally neutral activities, since the time spent on those things could be spent instantiating genuine moral goods that are otherwise neglected in their way of life.

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