

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Between history and philosophy: Isaiah Berlin on political theory
and hermeneutics.**

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it). The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent. I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a positive reinterpretation of the relevance of Isaiah Berlin's political thought. It re-examines his work hermeneutically with the double aim of claiming its intrinsic relevance as a work of political theory beyond what most critics have acknowledged, first; and second, with the intention of using it to draw conclusions that will address some of the most pressing discussions found in contemporary liberal political theory, such as the conflicting link between value pluralism and liberalism, or the recent confrontation between political moralism and political realism. This is achieved by reading Berlin hermeneutically, and thus transcending the categorical differentiation between historical and philosophical methods in his work.

The argument is presented in three sections. The first one is a biographical introduction that acts as a methodological statement. In it, the dilemma on the nature of values that sits at the heart of Berlin's work is defined by reference to his biographical context. The second section of the thesis is formed by three chapters that look at the central philosophical aspects of Berlin's political thought: value pluralism and a neo-Kantian normative ethical theory that emerges in relation to it. By claiming a relationship between Berlin and Kant, and by presenting value pluralism as a meta-ethical theory, the thesis offers an alternative reading of Berlin's work that deviates substantively from most existing scholarship. The third section of the thesis compares Berlin's political interpretation of value pluralism with that of Bernard Williams and John Rawls, in order to claim that liberal theory demands a hermeneutic method in its justification. This will show the enduring relevance of Berlin's contribution to political theory as one that expands beyond his own historical moment, against what many commentators have argued. It also raises a strong claim on the crucial implications of method in political theory, calling for a more hermeneutic approach.

Acknowledgements.

To compare the completion of a PhD with the process of bringing a baby to the world is an old analogy: they're both difficult, full of stress and pain, but ultimately rewarding. While this is all true, giving birth seems to me too solitary and linear a task to convey my experience over the last years. If anything, the process of writing this thesis has been more like the organic and communitarian task of raising a child. If it was a child, this PhD would by now have made it to that fascinating, and at times irritating, phase in life in which they want to know the *why* of everything, quite a fitting one for a PhD philosophy, for 'philosophers are adults who persist in asking childish questions', as Berlin said. More importantly, if this PhD was a child, by now it would bear the mark of all of those that have been around during its development. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of some of them.

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Abbreviations:

Works by Isaiah Berlin.

TCL: Two Concepts of Liberty. (1998)

PIRA: Political Ideas in the Romantic Era. (2006)

SVOE: Subjective Versus Objective Ethics. (2006)

Works by John Rawls.

TJ: A Theory of Justice (Rawls 1973)

PL: Political Liberalism (1993).

The human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.¹

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London : Sheed and Ward, 1989): xxi.

Introduction

1. Aims of the thesis.

‘Berlin's own failure was that, poised between history and philosophy, he could do neither.’²

‘...he was overrated as a thinker (whether one classifies him as a political thinker or more precisely as a historian of ideas)...’³

‘...what his work as a whole leaves behind, does not add up to a coherent vision of politics, let alone to anything more directive on how it is good or bad to act politically.’⁴

This thesis offers a positive reinterpretation of the relevance of Isaiah Berlin’s political thought. It re-examines his work hermeneutically with the double aim of claiming, first, its intrinsic relevance as a work of political theory beyond what most critics have acknowledged; and, second, uses this claim to draw conclusions that will address some of the most pressing discussions in contemporary political theory, such as the conflicting link between value pluralism and liberalism, or the recent confrontation between political moralism and political realism. Berlin’s contribution has been repeatedly and widely dismissed: from Oakeshott famously introducing him before his Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture at the LSE in 1953 as “a Paganini of ideas”, to some more recent commentators who argue for the lack of consistency or relevance of his ideas.⁵ The challenges to his work are clear. This dissertation claims the

² H. Williams, 'An English Liberal Stooge', *The Guardian*, 14th April 2004.

³ N. Podhoretz, 'A Dissent on Isaiah Berlin', *Commentary*, 107 (1999):13.

⁴ J. Dunn, 'For Services to Conversation', *Times Higher Education*, 13th November 1998.

⁵ C. Hitchens, 'Moderation or Death', *The London Review of Books*, 20.23 (1998); N. Podhoretz, 'A Dissent on Isaiah Berlin', *Commentary*, 107 (1999):13.; E. Rothstein, 'Fresh Debates on the Legacy of Isaiah Berlin', *The*

relevance of Berlin's ideas in particular in relation to two of its main critiques: on the one hand, the 'bad historian' criticisms that dismiss his work as an intellectual historian;⁶ on the other, the theoretical critiques of his ideas as a liberal political theorist.⁷ This dissertation presents a hermeneutic reading of Berlin's works that shields it from both sides of the critique. It argues that Berlin's ideas are valuable insofar as they point directly at the connection between methodology and normativity in political theory, expressing the need to adopt a hermeneutic approach in order to provide a sound defence of liberalism within our current historical context. This methodological interpretation is especially interesting for current debates on liberal pluralism as it can overcome some of the major challenges faced by Berlin's work. The main claim of the thesis is that a hermeneutic reading of Berlin's work provides a fully articulated defence of the hermeneutic practice in politics as the best solution possible to the contemporary question of the normativity of liberalism in the face of value pluralism. That is to say, this thesis embraces the hermeneutic turn as expounded in the works of authors such as Ricoeur or Gadamer,⁸ focusing on the inescapability of interpretation and discourse in any kind of human knowledge. All philosophical texts are inevitably influenced by their social and historical context, and any understanding we may attain of said contexts is at the same time the result of

New York Times, 14th November 1998; M. Ruse, 'Isaiah Berlin and His Groupies', *The chronicle of higher education*, 14th February 2010.

⁶ A. Ryan, 'Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 12.1 (2013); Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b); J. Waldron, 'Isaiah Berlin's Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism', *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁷ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.1 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); J. Gray, 'On Negative and Positive Liberty', *Political Studies*, 28.4 (1980); J. Allen, 'Isaiah Berlin's Anti-Procrustean Liberalism: Ideas, Circumstances, and the Protean Individual', *Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Philadelphia, 2003); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice', *Cont Pol Theory*, 8.3 (2009); P. Franco, 'Oakeshott, Berlin, and Liberalism', *Political Theory*, 31.4 (2003); C. Galipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); W. A. Galston, 'Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 93.4 (1999); S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin's Dilemma', *Times Literary Supplement*, March 1998; A. N. Wilson, 'Isaiah Berlin, Dictaphone Don', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15th of July 2009.

⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

our own contextual contingency. This means that historical and philosophical questions are not opposed, but rather that they are intrinsically and indissolubly related. This dissertation overcomes the aforementioned critiques of Berlin's texts by reinterpreting them hermeneutically, claiming their value not as historical or philosophical texts, but rather as a hermeneutic political theory of liberalism. This also opens up a powerful means of tackling the current debates surrounding the link between value pluralism and liberalism.

Much of the scholarship concerning liberalism as a political theory exists as a philosophical development of the notion of value pluralism, offering a diverging defence of liberalism that ultimately stem out of different understandings of the meaning and implications of value pluralism. This already hints at the enduring value of Berlin's ideas, however the defence provided by this thesis spans further than simply trying to highlight Berlin's contribution as a precursor of the more celebrated theories of liberalism that came after him. Instead, it pays attention to the fact that portraying liberalism as a consequence of value pluralism is also, and paradoxically, the main source of debate in current liberal political theory. Against the most commonly adopted strategy⁹, the thesis does not attempt to develop further the philosophical connections between value pluralism and liberalism as a means of overcoming this issue, but instead raises awareness of the methodological roots of these challenges and argues that we can find within Berlin's work a compelling solution to them.

The central task of this thesis is thus to develop a positive hermeneutic re-interpretation of Isaiah Berlin's work. This provides a defence of liberal pluralism that proves the transcendence of his ideas past the commonly held interpretations of his work as a cold-war ideological

⁹ See for instance J. Allen, 'Isaiah Berlin's Anti-Procrustean Liberalism: Ideas, Circumstances, and the Protean Individual', *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, (Philadelphia: 2003); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (Jun 1994); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', *Refereed Paper Presented to the Political Studies Australasian Association* (2003); J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice', *Cont Pol Theory*, 8.3 (2009); W. A. Galston, 'Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 93.4 (1999); W. A. Galston, 'Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism', *The Review of Politics*, 71.1 (2009); A. Mack, 'Liberty and Pluralism', *Social Research*, 66. 4 (1999); J. Raz, 'The Role of Well-Being', *Noûs*, 38, (2004).

pamphlet,¹⁰ placing it in line with that of other fundamental figures in contemporary political theory such as John Rawls or Bernard Williams. Most interpretations of Berlin's work so far – if not all – have missed the deeper implications of the hermeneutic dimension of his work, which is where this thesis argues that its true value resides. Berlin's idiosyncratic approach to political theory has been commonly misread as either as a bad whig history of liberalism – by authors from the Cambridge school amongst others – or an incomplete or inconsistent theoretical defence of liberalism.¹¹ This thesis seeks to transcend this binary approach to Berlin, and to liberal political theory at large, by proposing an approach that rejects the distinction between history and philosophy and embraces the localised roots of liberalism without renouncing to its philosophical consistency. This is relevant insofar as it helps us re-read most contemporary scholarship on liberal theory under a subtly different light that helps fill in some of the most famous gaps in the debate. For instance, against the Cambridge school attack on Berlin as a 'bad historian', this thesis challenges the claim that political texts can only be read in one way, by showing how Berlin's work can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, but also by exposing the way in which history becomes the fabric of his defence of liberalism, and how this defence could not happen otherwise. Berlin's use of history not only challenges the Cambridge school claim that the language of political texts is univocal and only fully understood with reference to their context, but more generally the idea that history is a single

¹⁰ R. Cornwell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Our Greatest Thinker, Who Straddled a Terrible Century', *The Independent*, 7th November 1997; J. Dunn, 'For Services to Conversation', *Times Higher Education*, 13th November 1998; P. Johnson, 'A Low-Risk Philosopher', *The New York Times*, 12th November 1997; N. Podhoretz, 'A Dissent on Isaiah Berlin', *Commentary*, 107 (1999); E. Rothstein, 'Fresh Debates on the Legacy of Isaiah Berlin', *The New York Times*, 14th November 1998; Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b); H. Williams, 'An English Liberal Stooge', *The Guardian*, 14th April 2004; A. N. Wilson, 'Isaiah Berlin, Dictaphone Don', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15th July 2009.

¹¹ For instance, John Gray's *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c) fails altogether to recognise the hermeneutic value of Berlin's work and bases its critique in the philosophical coherency of his arguments – or lack of thereof – and Crowder's response to this in *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004) follows the same approach; Skinner's *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a) and 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b) throw an attack on Berlin's interpretative historical discourse for its inaccuracy, displaying an obvious failure to understand the hermeneutic content of this practice and its meaning.

narrative. Against this, his work stands as an example of how there are multiple *histories* as opposed to a single *history* – a notion that points at the hermeneutic turn and the idea of knowledge and meaning as interpretation. Also, against the philosophical charge of *agonism* issued by authors such as John Gray¹² and picked up by other major Berlin scholars such as George Crowder,¹³ this thesis points again at the need to integrate historical narratives in fostering the need for liberalism when theorising value pluralism as proposed by Berlin throughout his work. By welcoming history into the argument, value pluralism is presented as a common presupposition of our time, linking Berlin with R. G. Collingwood,¹⁴ and placing his work in line with that of contemporary hermeneutic thinkers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur.¹⁵ This claim also addresses some of the most pressing questions posed by the new political realists, rejecting the historicist approach to liberalism insofar as it understands philosophy and history as an integrated whole when it comes to political theory.

In conclusion, this thesis presents a reinterpretation of Isaiah Berlin's work by looking at it hermeneutically in a way that serves the double aim of claiming its intrinsic relevance as a much more sophisticated theory of liberalism than most scholars have noticed, but also and more importantly the dissertation uses Berlin's work as a means to proposing a series of answers to some of the most current debates in political theory, such as the conflicting link between value pluralism and liberalism, or the recent confrontation between political moralism and political realism.

¹² J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

¹³ G. Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (Jun 1994); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002); ; G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', *Refereed Paper Presented to the Political Studies Australasian Association* (2003); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin : Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

¹⁴ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928); R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989); P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

2. Isaiah Berlin's political thought: an overview.

The purpose of this section is to locate the fundamental claim of the thesis through a selective overview of recent scholarship on Berlin with a view to identifying the most prevalent interpretative trends surrounding his work. I will divide these into two main strands: those who take him as an historian, and those that understand his work as one on political philosophy. The aim of this is to point directly at the gap in the literature into which this thesis fits, and to show in an integrated manner how this thesis answers certain unanswered questions and problems surrounding Berlin's contribution to political theory. This overview of the existing literature will ultimately expose the fact that the hybrid methodology of Berlin's work has been widely misunderstood and treated as problematic when in fact it is in its eclectic approach where the strength of his argument resides. Furthermore, this overview will show how the fundamental questions raised in Berlin's work have been picked up by some of the most relevant texts in political theory and continue to be discussed within current debates in political theory. This thesis provides an interpretation of Berlin's work that addresses both direct criticisms of his work and more general debates on liberalism and value pluralism – since these have been ultimately inspired, as this literature review will show, by the notions contained in Berlin's work.

With the exception of his biography of Marx, his anthology of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and his study of J.G. Hamann, Berlin's work took the form of essays,¹⁶ often originating in lectures, and often appearing in somewhat inaccessible places at first. Most of his published works are in fact the result of the efforts of his lifetime editor, Henry Hardy, and they have appeared as compilations of essays. Berlin's first book "Karl Marx: His life and

¹⁶ For more on this, see J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice', *Cont Pol Theory*, 8, 3 (2009), J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin as an essayist' *Political Theory*, 40.5, and M. Hughes, 'The Papers of Sir Isaiah Berlin at the Bodleian Library', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16.2 (2005).

Environment” appeared in 1939, however it was not until 1969 that his “Four Essays on Liberty” – including the famous ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’¹⁷ (hereinafter referred to as TCL) – were published. Nonetheless the lectures that compose his famous collections of essays were already well-known by the time they made it to printed books, having inspired numerous critics. Of the numerous collections of essays, books, and selected letters that have been published, “The Proper Study of Mankind”¹⁸, and “The Crooked Timber of Humanity”¹⁹, include the most comprehensive selection of writings available, presenting a good sample of the entire range of the topics he touched upon: from analytic philosophy to social commentary on the salient figures of his time. In addition to this, “Concepts and Categories” is a valuable collection of essays insofar as it presents a portrait of his early beginnings as an analytic philosopher, and it includes an enlightening foreword by Berlin as well as a very useful introduction to Berlin’s oeuvre by Bernard Williams. Finally, his “Political Ideals in the Romantic Age” (PIRA from hereinafter) presents his only conscious attempt to compile his main ideas in a *magnum opus* and, albeit unfinished and only published posthumously, it provides at times a fresh insight into some of the key themes of his work.²⁰

¹⁷ I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford U.P, 1969).

¹⁸ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b).

¹⁹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

²⁰ This dissertation considers Berlin’s writings in a holistic way and casts its gaze beyond the classic focus on TCL and the distinction between positive and negative liberty - hence the decision to devote a chapter on the topic of liberty, that most would take for granted. However, given the prolific nature of his work, a strategic selection of central texts becomes inevitable and necessary for supporting the main arguments of the thesis. *The Proper Study of Mankind* and *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* both of which present a comprehensive selection of his main ideas on the topics relevant to the argument of the dissertation. Within these, the most relevant essays include: ‘The Pursuit of the Ideal’ (PI from now onwards), ‘The concept of Scientific History’ (CSH), ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, ‘Historical Inevitability’ (HI), ‘From Hope and Fear Set Free’, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (TCL), and ‘The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West’ on topics on meta-ethics and politics, pluralism and monism and liberty; ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’, ‘The apotheosis of the Romantic Will’, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, ‘Herder and The Enlightenment’, ‘Giambattista Vico and Cultural History’, and ‘Joseph the Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’ contain his most substantial ideas on the Enlightenment and Romanticism, including some of the key reflections of Vico and Herder that allow this dissertation to tie Berlin to Collingwood and Hermeneutics. In addition to this, some of the essays included in *Concepts and Categories* are considered too in order to explore Berlin’s early analytic beginnings – such as ‘Verification’ and ‘Logical Translation’, and the introduction, written by Bernard Williams, deserves a special mention. Finally, this dissertation also extracts some key notions from PIRA, especially those elements that uncover his links with Kant and his particular view of ethical knowledge as a *sui generis* type of knowledge.

Berlin's entire work showcases a series of themes that ultimately pivot around the central distinction between fact and value which he had to confront early on in his intellectual development- this will be described in the following chapter. This is what explains his obsession with the Enlightenment,²¹ to which he traces the birth of this distinction, and for which he makes Kant responsible- an idea that will be looked at in chapter five of this thesis. However most scholarship seems to have missed the ultimate relevance that Berlin attributes to the methodological and ontological implications of the fact/value distinction – although it has touched upon it more or less superficially via the analysis of some of the other themes present in his work. The main focus of scholarship on Berlin has been either on his work as an intellectual historian, or more famously on his differentiation between positive and negative liberty, the related definition of value pluralism and its associated need for liberalism. In addition to this, there is a large number of authors that have focused on Berlin's ideas on nationalism and Zionism – including Stuart Hampshire,²² Joan Cocks,²³ Avishai Margalit, Richard Wollheim, Michael Walzer, David Miller,²⁴ and Joshua Cherniss,²⁵ – however this thesis considers Berlin's views on these issues to be more of a development of his core ideas on liberalism and value pluralism.

Reactions to Berlin's work started early in his career. Even though he was not by any means alone in his attempt to provide a liberal argument against totalitarianisms in the Europe of the mid and late forties, surrounded as he was by Hayek's "The road to serfdom",²⁶ Popper's

²¹ Jeremy Waldron has adduced that Berlin fails to take the Enlightenment seriously insofar as he neglects the emergence of constitutionalism during this period, which represents for Waldron its most enduring contribution. This dissertation does not wish to deny by any means this claim, however the fact that Berlin does not focus on institutional design –be it in his studies of the Enlightenment or in general- does not stripe his work of value altogether. This thesis also analyses the more meta-ethical or theoretical issues of liberal pluralism without focusing on the associated institutional design implications. Waldron's point is not without value, however, and it could be explored in further research.

²² I. Berlin, E. Ullmann-Margalit, and A. Margalit, *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991).

²³ J. Cocks, 'Individuality, Nationality, and the Jewish Question', *Social Research*, 66.4 (1999).

²⁴ M. Lilla et al., *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001).

²⁵ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁶ F. a. V. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London, UK: Routledge, 2001).

“The Open Society and its Enemies”²⁷ or Oakeshott’s ‘The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism’²⁸ – Berlin’s account of liberalism ‘was worked out in his own manner’.²⁹ This ‘own manner’ is what this thesis seeks to address – against what most of the literature has done so far. This is visible in the way in which most of the literature has addressed his work: Berlin has either been criticised for his use of history, on the one hand, or has been instead taken as a political philosopher and his ideas have been then stripped of their historicist embeddedness prior to their analysis and critique.

2.1. Berlin as the ‘bad historian’.

Berlin famously declared to have abandoned philosophy during the nineteen forties, and instead considered himself a ‘historian of ideas’ for the rest of his life.³⁰ This denomination is surprising when we consider that he is mostly known as a political thinker. As we will see in the following chapter, this abandonment of what Berlin conceived as philosophy was largely the result of the intellectual context in which he grew, which did not allow him to think of philosophy beyond the intellectual context of the Oxford Philosophy of the 1930s. Against this, Berlin reacted by turning to history – or what he thought, at first, as history – in order to explore his own questions on human nature. In particular, Berlin focuses on the ideas that emerged in the Enlightenment and Romanticism and how their development has shaped our society and culture. Examples of this are his book “Three Critics of the Enlightenment”,³² essays such as ‘The age of Enlightenment’, or ‘The Roots of Romanticism’, or his intellectual portraits of figures such as Rousseau or Joseph de Maistre.³³ In these allegedly historical studies of ideas

²⁷ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2011).

²⁸ M. Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996).

²⁹ I. Harris, 'Berlin and His Critics', in Henry Hardy, Isaiah Berlin, and Ian Harris (eds.), *Liberty: Incorporating 'Four Essays on Liberty'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 351.

³⁰ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories : Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981): xxvii.

³² I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment : Vico, Hamann, Herder*, (London: Pimlico, 2000a).

³³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind : An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b); I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

it is easy to witness the normative and theoretical implications underlying his narrative, something that becomes more evident in his ‘Historical Inevitability’ or ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, and which crystallises fully in his attempt to provide a summary of the core ideas of his thought in the posthumously published – and unfinished – “Political Ideas in the Romantic Age”.³⁴ In addition to this, Berlin’s more philosophically-oriented essays, such as TCL or ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist’, still carry a substantial load of historical references as part of his argumentation. This dissertation explains how Berlin’s weaving of history and theory is not by any means accidental or deficient, but rather a working example of the argument that he makes at large throughout his work – and his biggest strength. However this is a point that has been systematically missed, as evidenced by a number of reactions against his use of history.

The main body of criticism against Berlin’s approach to intellectual history has come from the group known as the Cambridge School. This group, formed by authors such as Quentin Skinner, J.G.A Pocock or John Dunn,³⁵ defends a historicist or contextual approach to the interpretation of past political texts, and opposes what they see as the largely anachronistic interpretations of these texts that have been carried out by political theorists. Even if the claims of this group at large could be considered a critique of Berlin’s work, it is in Quentin Skinner’s work where the attack becomes plainly visible. Skinner addresses Berlin more or less tacitly: in his “Visions of Politics”,³⁶ for instance, Skinner seems to be denouncing with his writings on methodology Berlin’s lack of historical rigour, to which he attaches obvious ideological reasons. He claims that bad intellectual history evades contextualism and

³⁴ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age : Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

³⁵ Examples of this can be found in J. Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. Dunn, ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’, *Philosophy*, 43, 164 (1968)., Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, ‘A Third Concept of Liberty’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b). and J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History : Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁶ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a).

leads to two main narrative mistakes: the generation of 'great text' narratives on the one hand, or alternatively epiphenomenalist readings of history, on the other hand.³⁷ The cure for these two mistaken approaches is, in Skinner's view, to read intellectual texts as the product of individual minds understood within specific historical contexts. Moreover, this reading has to be particularly cautious in considering the linguistic and terminological limitations faced by past authors at the time of writing the texts we wish to analyse and, even more importantly, this has to be considered so that we can achieve a precise understanding of what the final intentions of the author were in producing such ideas. In other words, what the historian needs to ask is what was the thinker under examination 'doing', in a purely linguistic sense, when producing their text, as the Cambridge scholars are mainly interested in speech acts. The final intentions of any thinker, Skinner explains, are always political and refer to the specific political context of the historical moment within which the utterance was made. Therefore, all texts in intellectual history should be seen as ideological texts, written with the aim of supporting the author's views. In Skinner's view, and in that of the Cambridge School of Intellectual history at large, Berlin's works are the perfect example of the 'great text' narratives that they wish to challenge, and this criticism becomes evident in the Isaiah Berlin memorial lecture 'A Third Concept of Liberty'.³⁸ In it, he contends that TCL is an impressive philosophical effort which nonetheless neglects some key facts in its historical argumentation, resulting in a biased portrait of the development of the notion of liberty. In this historical inaccuracy Skinner identifies Berlin's weakness, and maintains that his lack of an adequate historical methodology ultimately renders his works valueless insofar as they become mere political manipulations of only

³⁷ The first one refers to the tendency to imagine that eternal philosophical questions exist, and that different thinkers in different historical moments are in fact addressing with their works these universal questions. This is what most western intellectual histories have done, and Berlin's work can be easily seen as fitting in this category. The second mistake identified by Skinner is that of epiphenomenalism, which consists in seeing philosophical texts as the mere result of the conditions created by given socio-political and economic structures rather than the product of individual minds, as for instance Marxist theory does.

³⁸ Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b).

partially stated facts. In this respect, from the Cambridge end Berlin's works are seen as little more than propaganda, a discourse supported by some other authors inside and outside the Cambridge School, such as John Dunn, who openly attacked Berlin's work in a review titled 'For Services to Conversation', published in the Times Higher Education Supplement.³⁹ In it, for instance, he declares that Berlin's 'main contribution was more as a teacher and a moralist than as a strictly political thinker', and that his work as a political thinker 'does not add up to a coherent vision of politics, let alone to anything more directive on how it is good or bad to act politically.' Dunn's main target of criticism is that Berlin's work is entirely negative, and that by insisting on value pluralism, which stands, in Dunn's view, as 'a precarious combination of recognition of reality and ill-thought-through recommendation on how to respond to it' Berlin did little more than assert the starting point of politics – the inability to agree on final ends and values⁴⁰ – rather than to provide a political argument on how to act on them. This mirrors some of the earlier critiques of Berlin's work⁴¹ that implied that his attitude 'was nostalgic rather than practical'.⁴² Furthermore, Dunn argues that Berlin's arguments are contingent insofar as they were only aimed at the enemies of his time- drawing on the 'cold-war ideologist' image that has also been commonly attached to Berlin, and thus negating the depth of his work. The critique of Berlin's work put up by the Cambridge scholars is probably the most relevant for this thesis insofar as it addresses directly his methodology - displaying a

³⁹ J. Dunn, 'For Services to Conversation', *Times Higher Education*, 13th November 1998

⁴⁰ This is an interesting viewpoint that ties in with the realist vision of politics held by authors such as Raymond Geuss, which is considered as part of the Cambridge School of Intellectual history, but also famously represented by Bernard Williams, thought of by many as a continuator of Berlin's political thought. This convergence towards political realism of supporters and detractors of Berlin's method can be read as another way of highlighting the transcendence of Berlin's contribution to political theory, which would be wider and stronger than what is suggested by Dunn or Skinner. For more on this, see R. Geuss, 'Philosophy and Real Politics', (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008); R. Geuss, *A World without Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴¹ E. H. Carr, 'The New Scepticism', *Times Literary Supplement*, 357 (1950).

⁴² I. Harris, 'Berlin and His Critics', in Hardy, Berlin, and Harris (eds.), *Liberty: Incorporating 'Four Essays on Liberty'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 351.

blindness towards what this thesis sees as Berlin's most enduring achievement, and thus a perfect target for it. However the Cambridge School is not alone in criticising Berlin's take on intellectual history: David Nicholls and Anthony Arblaster⁴³ have questioned the accuracy of the intellectual history implied in TCL, David West⁴⁴ has challenged Berlin's portrait of Spinoza – which prompted a reply from Berlin⁴⁵– and more recently Jeremy Waldron has criticised Berlin's neglect of constitutionalism in the Enlightenment.⁴⁶

This thesis argues against the critique of the Cambridge School: not only in order to defend Berlin's work from it, but also, and more importantly, with the aim of exposing the need for and the inescapability from hermeneutic approaches to political theory. In this regard, Berlin's work becomes the tool to address purely contextual approaches to political theory and to claim the viability and necessity of narrative and context-based interpretations of political texts. That is to say, Berlin's work is read as a call for integrating both historical awareness and philosophical interpretation in the making of normative politics, and the extended attack on the distinction between fact and value that stretches through all of it – and which is specially visible in essays such as 'Subjective Versus Objective Ethics',⁴⁷ 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', 'The Concept of Scientific History', 'The Purpose of Philosophy'⁴⁸ – is understood as a defence of his own hermeneutic method. This adds to the body of critics that have faced Skinner and some others in their general claims about meaning and context,⁴⁹ while at the same time points forward to a new and original approach to political thought. In this respect this thesis is not

⁴³ A. Arblaster, 'Vision and Revision: A Note on the Text of Isaiah Berlin's Four Essays on Liberty.', *Political Studies*, 19.1 (1971); D. Nicholls, 'Positive Liberty, 1880-1914', *The American Political Science Review*, 56.1 (1962).

⁴⁴ D. West, 'Spinoza on Positive Freedom', *Political Studies*, 41, 2 (1993).

⁴⁵ I. Berlin, 'A Reply to David West', *ibid.*

⁴⁶ J. Waldron, 'Isaiah Berlin's Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism', *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

⁴⁸ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

⁴⁹ J. Tully, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1988); R. Lamb, 'Quentin Skinner's Revised Historical Contextualism: A Critique', *History of the Human Sciences*, 22.3 (2009); M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

alone either, as a number of authors have picked up the need to approach political history hermeneutically, addressing the issue with reference to Berlin, or without it, and expressing it more or less explicitly. A good example of this is Ryan Hanley's "Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry",⁵⁰ in which he uses Berlin's studies of Winston Churchill and Chaim Weizmann⁵¹ as examples in arguing that, definitions of liberty aside, Berlin made a crucial contribution to the debate over the nature of political inquiry, one that has been systematically overlooked. Hanley focuses on Berlin's critique of the scientific method for political and historical inquiry and his recommendation to remain attached to our 'sense of reality'⁵² when it comes to these fields of inquiry, given the particular nature of history and politics as 'human activities and reflections on human beings themselves', which implies that 'their study is necessarily self-referential and, unlike natural science, demands a certain intimacy between inquirer and subject'.⁵³ Hanley notes correctly that Berlin's defence of negative liberty is in fact part of a wider project 'to re-establish an appreciation of the moral responsibility and agency of individual political actors'⁵⁴ that ultimately justifies his concerns with methodology. As this thesis argues, Berlin's work can act as a medium for proving the link between methodology and normativity in politics, and in ethics, by extension, given how 'his objection to monism was not simply to its idea of a single truth, but to its notion of a single truth scientifically discovered'.⁵⁵ That is to say, Berlin's concern with method had to do with an awareness of the normative and ideological implications that different choices of methodology can have in politics, and hence his rejection of scientism

⁵⁰ R. P. Hanley, 'Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry', *The American Political Science Review*, 98.2 (2004).

⁵¹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b).

⁵² I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

⁵³ R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Henry Hardy and G. Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007): 329.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Hardy and Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007): 328.

and history. As an alternative to this, Hanley notes Berlin's definition of the 'sense of reality' as a kind of empiricism that 'begins by surveying the data and then constructs a view of the whole from a synthesis of the unique and discrete',⁵⁶ or as a sense 'of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what',⁵⁷ however he crucially fails to notice the obvious hermeneutic resonances of these assertions. This thesis works to bring up the link between Berlin's work and hermeneutics in a focused manner that cannot be found in any of the existing literature. For instance, it addresses Skinner's claims by noting Berlin's exploration of history as instigated by his contact with R.G. Collingwood, which in turn defined his hermeneutic tone. Hanley touches upon this superficially when referencing Berlin's adoption of Vico and Herder's methods,⁵⁸ however he misses the fact that it was Collingwood who pointed him in this direction. As Peter Skagestad has affirmed, 'while Berlin was not exactly a disciple of Collingwood, it may not be far-fetched to count him as an important successor to Collingwood- perhaps the most important successor'.⁵⁹ And again, just like Hanley notices Berlin's methodological affinity with Vico and Herder but fails to acknowledge his hermeneutic resonances and links with Collingwood, Skagestad presents a great case for considering Berlin a continuator of Collingwood's philosophy – but does little beyond the field of intellectual history, and does not present a case for defending Berlin from the 'bad historian' accusations that have been directed against his work or produces an argument to consider his writings from the perspective of methodology in a bid to prove their greater transcendence, as this thesis does.

⁵⁶ Op. Cit., p 332.

⁵⁷ I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Viking Press, 1978a): 69. This assertion reminisces strongly in Williams' definition of ethical knowledge as a matter of consistency. In Williams' view, when it comes to ethics, philosophy can show, at most, 'how a given practice hangs together with other practices in a way that makes social and psychological sense... we may not be able to find anything that will meet a demand for justification made by someone standing outside those practices. We may not be able, in any real sense, to justify it even to ourselves' (B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985)). In other words, it is only when we understand the absolute presuppositions of a given society that we can see the normativity of a given ethical practice. This can only be observed hermeneutically.

⁵⁸ R. P. Hanley, 'Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry', *The American Political Science Review*, 98.2 (2004).

⁵⁹ P. Skagestad, 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66.1 (2005): 112.

Thus, by shielding Berlin's work against the historicist critique this thesis highlights the relevance of his historical writings as part of a broader defence of liberalism of a markedly hermeneutic character. Hanley has once again scratched the surface of this issue by recognising Berlin's understanding of the role of the intellectual historian as that of deciding which questions to ask from history in order to come up with politically relevant answers.⁶⁰ This is effectively the hermeneutic view of history as narrative that allows Berlin to extract political normativity from past ideas, and also to counteract Skinner's criticism. Hanley is not alone in this and some other students of Berlin such as Alan Ryan⁶¹ or Paul Franco⁶² have noted this hermeneutic character of his methodology- albeit none of them have explored the implications of his method to its last consequences, as this thesis does.

By focusing on the hermeneutic character of Berlin's methodology this thesis not only shields him against the historicist critique described above, but more importantly it manages to highlight the current relevance of his ideas by linking them to the methodological debate that has emerged associated to the recent surge of scholarship in political realism. The realist critique sees 'politics as a sphere of activity that is distinct, autonomous, and subject to norms that cannot be derived from individual morality'.⁶³ Politics are defined by power and domination, and the aim of politics should not be to attain moral goods but rather to mediate such conflicts. This divide also has attached to it a methodological distinction between abstract philosophical and historicist approaches to political theory, which has inspired a heated argument for and against each side of the camp. Authors like Raymond Geuss, Bernard Williams, Glen Newey, or Stuart Hampshire, and of course the authors of the Cambridge School as noted above, have tried to subordinate the role of political theory to that of history.

⁶⁰ R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Hardy and Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007): 338.

⁶¹ A. Ryan, 'Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 12.1 (2013).

⁶² P. Franco, 'Oakeshott, Berlin, and Liberalism', *Political Theory*, 31.4 (2003).

⁶³ W. A. Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9.4 (2010): 368.

This thesis uses Bernard Williams as an example of the realist trend in political theory⁶⁴ and contrasts it with John Rawls' work in ideal theory in 'A Theory of Justice'⁶⁵ in order to show clearly the different normative and argumentative consequences that adopting philosophical or historicist methodologies can have for political theory. It also rides on the fundamental assumption that both Rawls and Williams aim to defend liberalism and that both do it departing from a radical assumption of value pluralism *a la* Berlin – pointing out the fact that their differences stem from methodological disparity rather than of fundamental argumentative discordance. By setting up this context first this thesis introduces Berlin's work as containing the key to transcending the conflict between political realism and political moralism: it argues that the methodological confrontation of these two camps – and its associated normative and argumentative differences – has its synthesis in a hermeneutic approach to political theory as exemplified by Berlin. It is interesting how some recent defences of Bernard Williams' realist arguments have in fact highlighted its most philosophical characteristics in order to validate it, bringing it to a middle ground that stands closer to hermeneutics than to historicism: some of the recent works by Edward Hall, Colin Koopman and Paul Sagar can act as examples of this.⁶⁶ However none of them are explicitly aware of the hermeneutic tones of their defences – or they do not verbalise it, at least-, and they all fail to bring up Berlin's work as a paradigm of the

⁶⁴ Other notable works in contemporary political realisms include R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); M. Philp, *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), and M. Sleat, *Liberal Realism : A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Two good review articles summarising the most prominent positions in the realism/moralism debate are W. A. Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9.4 (2010), and M. Stears, 'Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion', *British Journal of Political Science*, 37.03 (2007). Also, for a good collection of essays on the subject see J. Floyd and M. Stears, *Political Philosophy Versus History? : Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁶⁶ E. Hall, 'Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams', *Social Theory and Practice*, 40.4 (2014); E. Hall, 'Bernard Williams and the Basic Legitimation Demand: A Defence', *Political Studies*, 63.2 (2015); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a); P. Sagar, 'From Scepticism to Liberalism? Bernard Williams, the Foundations of Liberalism and Political Realism', *Political Studies*, 18 (2014).

approach they attribute to Williams, despite the closeness between the two authors. In addition to this, some authors seem to have in fact noticed the need to integrate philosophy and history in the making of political theory⁶⁷ and call for an approach not dissimilar to Berlin's. Where Koopman fails to acknowledge Berlin's work for carrying out the very same approach he calls for,⁶⁸ and Hanley, as has been explained above, credits him fully but without reference to the larger methodological debate he is part of, and certainly not associating him with hermeneutics, Paul Kelly⁶⁹ does in fact present a fully articulated case for the use of hermeneutics in political theory as a response to the historicist attack, and also credits Berlin for having done this. His case presents a great introduction to this thesis and a strong argumentative ally, however it can only be regarded as parallel to the object of study of this thesis, as it does not present an in-depth study of Berlin's works and their resonance like the present dissertation does. It is worth mentioning Arie M. Dubnov's intellectual biography of Berlin to this respect,⁷⁰ which also links Berlin with the hermeneutic tradition –placing him in line with authors such as Dewey or Gadamer, and makes use of the same hermeneutic methodology it attributes to Berlin in order to defend this argument, integrating intellectual biography and philosophical reflection, just like this thesis does. Again, Dubnov's work on Berlin should not be seen as a contender to this thesis but if anything an introduction that paves the way to its main argument, given how his

⁶⁷ C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64. 1 (2010); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a); P. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought', in Jack Hayward et al. (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1999); P. Kelly, 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); R. P. Hanley, 'Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry', *The American Political Science Review*, 98.2 (2004); R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Hardy and Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007).

⁶⁸ C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010).

⁶⁹ P. Kelly, 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷⁰ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a).

book is an intellectual biography directed towards claiming the relevance that Berlin's Jewish side played in his work.

All in all, these works examining the relationship between philosophical and historicist approaches to political theory are regarded as marking a pivotal moment in political thought that separates purely metaphysical approaches to political thinking from more contextually integrated reflections on it. This shift in paradigm signals the moment in which liberalism enters the equation of politics, a move that can only be supported hermeneutically, as Berlin does. It is for this reason that his work seems incomplete when assessed from either the historicist or the philosophical end only – and for this reason too it is that no theory of liberalism can stand on its own by recourse to classical metaphysical conceptions of ethics and normativity. This thesis goes on to show how Berlin's work at large can be considered an extended argument in this direction.

2.2. Berlin as a political theorist.

The other major question that this thesis addresses is that of the value of Berlin's work as political theory. In this sense, most of his writings have been interpreted and critiqued as a body of liberal political theory. Berlin's most celebrated essay is 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in which he famously elaborates on the meanings of the distinction between positive and negative liberty, and produces a detailed analysis and interpretation of the distinction between monism and pluralism. Berlin relates negative liberty, or lack of interference, to liberalism and value pluralism; and positive liberty, or freedom as self-realisation, to monism and totalitarianism. That this lecture had a specific meaning in the context it was delivered in 1945, in the midst of the Cold War, is undeniable. However the fact that it is still referenced, analysed and studied

today⁷¹ shows that the meanings contained in it are far from historically contingent, and if someone was to argue that they are, then they would have to admit that the historical moment they reference is the same one we inhabit today: that is to say, that Berlin's works refer not just to the Cold War, but to some larger historical moment such as modernity or even post-modernity at large. It is for this reason that most scholarship around Berlin has actually worked around his notions of value pluralism and his defence of liberalism, treating it not as a historical curiosity, but in fact as a serious theory of liberalism that, historical referencing aside, deserves consideration of its own. In fact, this thesis tries to show how some of the most relevant voices in contemporary liberalism are rooted in the notion of value pluralism that was the beating heart of Berlin's political thought – and how the majority of the debates surrounding liberal theory can currently be addressed from a Berlinian perspective.

Most of the attention directed towards Berlin from political theorists is focused around the intimate link he establishes between value pluralism and liberalism. On the one hand, there is a number of authors who consider that Berlin's assertion of value pluralism necessarily involves relativism, such as in Leo Strauss' essay 'Relativism',⁷² Hilary Putnam's 'Pragmatism and Relativism: Universal Values and Traditional Way of Life',⁷³ or Steven Lukes' 'Berlin's Dilemma'.⁷⁴ Berlin was not unaware of the relativist concern surrounding his works, and addressed it in essays such as 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought' and 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', both reprinted in "The Crooked Timber of Humanity".⁷⁵

⁷¹ For instance, in R.E. Goodin, P. Pettitt and T. Pogge (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons: 2012), the entry 'Liberty', authored by Chandran Kukathas, draws on Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty. It also makes an appearance on several reference works, such as Tim Gray, *Freedom*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Raymond Plant, *Modern Political Thought*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons: 1991), and Steve Buckler and Peter Lassman, *Political Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

⁷² H. Schoeck and J. W. Wiggins, *Relativism and the Study of Man* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1961).

⁷³ H. Putnam and J. Conant, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁷⁴ S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin's Dilemma', *Times Literary Supplement*, March 1998.

⁷⁵ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

Nonetheless, the debate around Berlin's works is more far-reaching than this, and it can be approached from three different ends.

First, a significant number of authors have grappled with the notion of value pluralism, its meaning and implications, given the relative vagueness with which Berlin sketches it over his works. Examples of this are found in works such as Ruth Chang's "Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason"⁷⁶ – dedicated to Berlin's memory - as well as "Making Comparisons Count" and 'The Possibility of Parity',⁷⁷ Thomas Nagel's 'The Fragmentation of Value',⁷⁸ Charles Taylor's 'The Diversity of Goods',⁷⁹ Michael Walzer's "Spheres of Justice",⁸⁰ Alan Montefiore's 'Value',⁸¹ or Bernard Williams' 'Conflicts of Values'.⁸² All these authors explore questions that are not answered explicitly in Berlin's texts, such as the definition of what is meant by 'value', or a statement of the difference between the incompatibility and incomparability of value. This thesis touches upon these issues in chapters two and three, however it does so only with the aim of setting up a general discussion on the need to address political theory hermeneutically, as maintained by Berlin. This is done, for instance, by defining value pluralism as a meta-ethical notion (against the widespread understanding of it as a normative concept), a move that forces us to look for the normative foundations of Berlin's theory elsewhere (such as the history of political ideas). Having said this, it should be made clear that it is not the aim of this thesis to Berlin's work as one in

⁷⁶ R. Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷⁷ R. Chang, *Making Comparisons Count* (London: Garland, 2002a); R. Chang, 'The Possibility of Parity', *Ethics*, 112.4 (2002b).

⁷⁸ T. Nagel, 'The Fragmentation of Value', in C. W. Gowans (ed.) *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷⁹ C. Taylor, *The Diversity of Goods: Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁸⁰ M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Robertson, 1983a).

⁸¹ A. Montefiore, 'Value', in Brenda Almond and Bryan R. Wilson (eds.), *Values: A Symposium* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988).

⁸² B. Williams, *Conflicts of Values: Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

political philosophy that can and should stand against the light of analytic examination, and thus it will not produce a reflection of this kind.

Second, this thesis takes into account a number of authors who are happy to admit the value of value pluralism as a non-relativistic theory, and then move on to elaborated reflections on what the implications of accepting value pluralism can have for the defence of liberalism. Most of the critique in this regard revolves around a single line of argument, put in very simple terms: if value pluralism is true, with its telling us that different, and even conflicting, ways of life can be equally valuable and there is no way of hierarchically ordering them, then why should we favour liberalism over other political alternatives. Probably the first work to address this issue explicitly, and the one that seems to have inspired most of the contemporary studies around Berlin's work is John Gray's book "Isaiah Berlin", whose main arguments were already introduced in his two papers 'On Negative and Positive Liberty' and 'Berlin's Agonistic Liberalism', and followed up in his "The Two Faces of Liberalism".⁸³ Gray puts forward a case disregarding the link between value pluralism and liberalism, and concludes that value pluralism can only guarantee an agonistic liberalism at most, in which the assertion of liberalism is under constant threat and in need of continuous reassertion. The notion of 'agonistic liberalism' has stuck in the liberal literature, becoming the target for instance of Rawls' and Williams' work, both of whom challenged it by providing more comprehensive doctrines of liberalism than Berlin had done.

Responses to Gray's contention against Berlin's work are not widespread. Probably one of the most notable ones is George Crowder's, of which this thesis takes good account. In his "Liberalism and value pluralism"⁸⁴ he addresses both Gray and Berlin, supporting the view of

⁸³ J. Gray, 'On Negative and Positive Liberty', *Political Studies*, 28.4 (1980); J. Gray, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1993); J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b); J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

⁸⁴ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002).

value pluralism as a meta-ethical thesis, and arguing that the only reason we may have to argue for the link between value pluralism and liberalism is in fact a historicist one, alluding to Rorty, Walzer, the late Rawls and Raz as representatives of this trend. This article prompted a reply from Berlin and Williams,⁸⁵ with further comments from Crowder. Moreover, Crowder has expanded his views on pluralism and liberalism in a few works, such as his comprehensive study of Isaiah Berlin “Isaiah Berlin: liberty and pluralism”, his book “Liberalism and value pluralism”, and articles such as ‘Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin’ or ‘Pluralism and liberalism’.⁸⁶ This thesis presents a very similar case to Crowder’s in this regard – it presents value pluralism as a meta-ethical theory, and insists heavily on the necessity of historicism in order to understand the link between it and liberalism – however it shifts the focus away from the vision of Berlin as a political theorist and towards a more integrated view of his work that starts by surveying the question on methodology and the deep meanings that this has for political theory. Where Crowder’s discussion has focused mostly on the particular political and even institutional implications of value pluralism and liberty as defined in Berlin’s work, this dissertation only pays attention to them in order to build an argument that extracts the hermeneutic relevance of his work. Thus, without dismissing Crowder’s work, this thesis claims that there is an aspect of Berlin’s work that has not been identified and systematically analysed by Crowder or any other author, for that matter. Other authors that have taken Berlin’s work as one in political philosophy include William A. Galston, who is generally aware of the particularities of his method – noticing even his hermeneutic capacities in his tendency to exercise something like Vico’s ‘fantasia’⁸⁷ – as well as of the enduring value of his ideas,

⁸⁵ I. Berlin and B. Williams, 'Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (1994).

⁸⁶ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', *Refereed Paper Presented to the Political Studies Australasian Association* (2003); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

⁸⁷ W. A. Galston, 'Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism', *The Review of Politics*, 71.1 (2009): 98.

going as far as defending him from Gray's attacks.⁸⁸ Nonetheless Galston also seems to touch upon the question on method only superficially, and eventually he seems to understand that Berlin's total contribution amounts to having put forward ideas 'that future scholars are likely to ponder, and some to emulate'.⁸⁹ In this case Berlin's heterodox liberalism is seen as an interesting pool of thought-provoking insights that given their scattered nature are valued more for their suggestive powers than for their ability to make a substantive contribution to liberal theory. Other authors that have produced similar discussions of liberalism on the grounds proposed by Berlin are Jason Ferrell, Matthew J. Moore or Ella Myers, all of which again focus on the logical and philosophical inconsistencies of Berlin's argument while failing to understand the necessity to approach his work hermeneutically as this thesis does.⁹⁰

Third, and in addition to this, Berlin's strand of pluralist liberalism has inspired a significant amount of literature that questions the specific meanings of the notion of liberty and the value of individual autonomy and its normative implications. Notorious examples include Rorty's 'ironist' approach⁹¹, which argues the subjective nature of value and the impossibility of generating a philosophical defence of liberalism, and the related 'liberalism of fear' enunciated by Judith Shklar,⁹² that is only able to build such a defence by identifying a *summum malum* in suffering that is allegedly avoided by recourse to liberalism, rather like Galston.⁹³ Raz and again Crowder have presented a 'perfectionist' notion of pluralist liberalism, which argues a link between value pluralism and the need to promote liberalism universally as a

⁸⁸ W. A. Galston, 'Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 93.4 (1999); W. A. Galston, 'Two Concepts of Liberalism', *Ethics*, 105.3 (1995).

⁸⁹ W. A. Galston, 'Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism', *The Review of Politics*, 71.1 (2009).

⁹⁰ J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice', *Cont Pol Theory*, 8.3 (2009); M. J. Moore, 'Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism', *Political Research Quarterly*, 62.2 (2009); E. Myers, 'From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin', *The Review of Politics*, 72.04 (2010).

⁹¹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁹² J. N. Shklar, 'A life of Learning', in B. Yack (ed.), *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹³ W. A. Galston, 'Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 93.4 (1999).

means of allowing and encouraging the betterment of individuals.⁹⁴ This entails an instrumental valuing of autonomy and the view that the state cannot force individuals to be free – one of Berlin’s *bêtes noires*, captured in his definition of positive liberty – but that it should at least actively encourage and promote their adoption of liberal values and attitudes. Martha Nussbaum also stands in the perfectionist camp, with the added element of linking liberalism to cosmopolitanism.⁹⁵ The degree to which perfectionist interpretations of pluralism are consistent with Berlin’s position is open to debate. Even though Weinstein is adamant that he ‘surely would have found [such views] unacceptable’,⁹⁶ the reading of Berlin offered by this thesis offers the possibility of arguing otherwise. Once again, this is possible due to the hermeneutic approach that takes into consideration not only the logical and philosophical implications of pluralism, but also the context within which we find ourselves theorising about it and the genealogy of the concepts that we use. All the aforementioned debates on the meaning and implications of liberty and autonomy and their relationship with liberalism are relevant to Berlinean scholarship, however they stand too far from the topics explored by this thesis. As the dilated number of debates on the meanings and implications of Berlin’s work evidence, his oeuvre lacks an explicit indication on the practicalities of liberal politics. Far from this being an issue, this thesis argues that Berlin could not present a monolithic definition of political liberalism addressing all the issues discussed by the aforementioned authors as this would contradict the very nature of the hermeneutic take on liberalism he professes. Liberalism is, in Berlin’s hands, much more fluid and adaptable than the rigid ethical paradigms or even political blueprints that most political theorists propose, or at least seem to want to achieve.

⁹⁴ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); J. Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); J. Raz, 'The Role of Well-Being', *Noûs*, 38, (2004); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin : Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); G. A. Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004)

⁹⁵ M. C. Nussbaum, 'Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39.1 (2011).

⁹⁶ D. Weinstein, 'Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Liberalism', in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

In reading Berlin as a hermeneutic theorist this thesis integrates what have been regarded as his writings on intellectual history – largely overlooked by the political theorists assessing his work – into his normative discourse. Doing this allows the inclusion of a normative neo-Kantian argument for liberalism that stands separate from value pluralism while at the same time inextricably linked to it. The genealogy of the fact/value distinction that Berlin presents is not anecdotal, but a central component of his argument for liberalism: only by becoming aware of the historical development of those ideals underpinning our ethical and political convictions can we affirm them or revise them: philosophy – or analytical philosophy – alone is not enough when it comes to human beings and societies.⁹⁷ TCL is a brilliant example of this, in which the notions of negative and positive liberty are not presented in the abstract but as part of genealogical developments, and it is precisely from their historical evolution that we can draw normative arguments for defending either one or the other. In the same way, by tracing back to Kant our current understanding of moral values and turning this into an unavoidable condition of our current historical moment – like one of Collingwood’s metaphysical presuppositions – it is possible to argue for the need of liberalism in the setting of value pluralism. That is to say, the sign of our time is not only that values are plural, and often incommensurable, but also that we conceive the meaning of value to be irrevocably linked with autonomy, and this cannot be reverted or denied. The main thrust of Berlin’s argument is methodological: his narrative is neither purely historicist, which would at most allow him to make a conservative argument about preserving the liberal *status quo*; nor purely philosophical, as it ends with the seeming logically irresolvable conflict between value pluralism, relativism and the argument in favour of liberalism. Berlin’s comprehensive defence of liberalism only makes complete sense if we approach his work hermeneutically.

⁹⁷ Colin Koopman presents Williams as having done this, but interestingly enough it was Berlin who did this first, which has been consistently overlooked too. Williams does not present a true genealogy of liberalism, but borrows Berlin’s, as chapter six argues. (C. Koopman, 'Bernard William's on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010))

3. Thesis structure.

This thesis presents an interpretation of Berlin's work that challenges the criticisms depicting him as a 'bad historian', while at the same time strengthening the link he outlines between value pluralism and liberalism. This is achieved by reading Berlin hermeneutically, and thus transcending the categorical differentiation between the historical and philosophical methods in his work. By integrating his historical narrative of the emergence of value pluralism with his philosophical explanations of value pluralism, the thesis provides his argument with the solidity it may lack when only examined from a philosophical viewpoint. At the same time, this hermeneutic reading helps shield Berlin's work against the usual criticisms addressed towards his approach to the history of ideas. The argument is put forward in a series of loosely tied chapters that can be ordered in three main sections.

The first section is composed of the first chapter, a biographical introduction that acts as a methodological statement. In it the dilemma on the nature of values that sits at the heart of Berlin's work is defined by reference to his biographical context. First, it looks at Berlin's childhood experience of the Russian revolution and his experiences in adulthood of the devastating effects of Stalin's policies, all of which generated his initial interest in the safeguarding of individual liberties and his aversion to violence and to the politics of extremes. It also points at Berlin's fascination with the Russian Intelligentsia and his construction of the Russian side of his identity around it as a sign of the heightened sensitivity towards the arts that he was to display for the rest of his life – and that influenced his valuing of freedom as a necessary condition in the fostering of the creative capabilities of human beings. Second, it provides a brief intellectual context of the Oxford of the late 1920's and the 1930's that was the site and context of Berlin's intellectual formation. It highlights the intellectual crossroad

that he had to face being at the heart of the group that was later to be considered the founding moment of the so-called ‘Oxford Philosophy’, with its analytic character and strong rejection of metaphysics – and thus of ethics and political philosophy – while at the same time feeling drawn to explore precisely those questions on ethics and politics that the rigid methodological approach of the Oxford Philosophers did not allow. This chapter also presents Berlin’s connection with Collingwood as an early connection to Idealism, and puts forward a case for considering this link as crucial in the development of his work, insofar as it will allow us to understand the hermeneutic character of value pluralism as something akin to the ‘metaphysical presuppositions’ described by Collingwood.⁹⁸

These two elements of Berlin’s context – his linkage to the Russian Intelligentsia, and his experience of the so-called ‘Oxford Realism’ – when combined, provide the key to understanding his work as a broader statement of the relevance of method in political theory that takes shape as a hermeneutic exploration of human nature. Having grown up intellectually to reject anything that looked like metaphysics, but unable to find the normative argument to protect individual liberty in the positivist philosophy of his time and place, Berlin turns to the history of ideas in order to understand and explain the need for liberty in a way that is not entirely abstract and metaphysical, but as firmly rooted in our experience of the world as possible. This lays out the main premise of the thesis: namely that Berlin’s work should not be understood as a mere work in analytical political theory or as one in the history of ideas, but instead as a hermeneutic exploration of the presuppositions that make up our time. In addition to this, the chapter acts as a working example of the methodology to be followed in the thesis, which is in fact the same methodology which this thesis traces in Berlin’s work, and the one that has been consistently under detected by most of his critics.

⁹⁸ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928); R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

The second section of the thesis is formed by three chapters that look at the two central philosophical aspects of Berlin's political thought: value pluralism, and a neo-Kantian normative ethical theory that emerges in relation to it. The first two chapters of this section analyse value pluralism with the aim of clearing it from the most common misconceptions that surround it, making it difficult to read Berlin hermeneutically. In particular, this thesis looks at theories that view value pluralism as a normative theory we can accept or reject, and proposes that instead value pluralism should be understood as a meta-ethical narrative that simply describes the composition of our ethical landscape, without attaching to it any normative implications. The third chapter of this section introduces a significant departure from all the existing scholarship on Berlin by locating a neo-Kantian normative argument in his work that acts as the link between value pluralism and liberalism. It focuses on the need for a Kantian sense of autonomy as a necessary pre-condition for value pluralism to be true, and therefore argues that these two elements are inseparable. By doing this it explains the need to favour liberalism over any alternative political doctrine, for liberalism protects first and above anything else the autonomy that is a pre-condition of value pluralism. In addition to this, by linking the meta-ethical definition of liberalism with the Kantian argument this chapter makes explicit the hermeneutic character of Berlin's argument: the link between value pluralism and liberalism is not defined entirely by reference to abstract philosophical notions, but neither does it stand as a mere conservative reinstatement of the status-quo via a purely historical presentation of the genealogy of liberalism. Instead, the argument for liberalism is presented as something that makes philosophical sense within our current historical context. In fact, this thesis aims to highlight the way in which when it comes to providing normative arguments in politics, the lines between philosophy and history are blurred. Berlin presents his ideas making use of this methodology.

The third and final section of the thesis aims to prove the fact that liberal theory demands a hermeneutic method in its justification, as presented in the second section. This will show the enduring relevance of Berlin's contribution to political theory as one that transcends his own historical moment. In order to do this it will look at the work of John Rawls and Bernard Williams, both famous for their contributions to contemporary liberal theory. Although they both present defences of liberal pluralism, their opposing methodological approaches highlight the extent to which methodology can impact the normative implications of political theory. More importantly, it will show the convergence of both authors towards a more eclectic approach that is neither purely analytical, such as in Rawls' initial case, nor purely historicist as intended by Williams, but instead one that combines the two approaches in one, just like Berlin does throughout his work.

A normative argument for liberal pluralism requires, thus, a hermeneutic methodology. This is exactly what we find in Berlin's work, and the main point of the thesis. This is argued by introducing the origins of the methodological issue in the first section of the thesis, followed by a practical exposition of the way in which the hermeneutic method works in the second section, and finally an applied argumentation not only of the suitability of the method, but of its unavoidability, in the final section.

Part One: Content and Method

Chapter One

Getting the context right

1. Introduction.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to Isaiah Berlin's life and intellectual development in order to lay out the main questions that the thesis seeks to explore, as well as to introduce the methodology that will be used. By running Berlin's work through a methodological examination that combines both history and theory, this thesis proves the validity – and the necessity – of assessing political theories hermeneutically, which acts in turn as the main argument claiming a higher consideration for the relevance of Berlin's work. Henceforth, in this sense the choice of methodology is almost self-justifying: it is only via a contextual analysis that the nuances of the text become clearly visible. In particular, the hermeneutical interpretation of Berlin's work highlights two central implications of it that are otherwise unnoticed. The first one is that the motivation underlying all of Berlin's works stems from an insatiable curiosity about human nature. This becomes clear when his works are placed alongside his biography, where examples of this curiosity become particularly evident. For instance, Berlin shows a pronounced and sustained interest towards the arts, such as the works of the Russian Intelligentsia or his lifelong love of music. It is for this reason that his meeting with Anna Akhmatova in St. Petersburg in 1945 – 'the most important event in his life'¹– represents a turning point in his career, steering him towards an openly normative political tone in his writings that he had sternly avoided up until that point. This special connection with the arts can be credited for Berlin's familiarity with the complexities of human nature, which in

¹ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 168.

turn can be accounted for his refusal to jump aboard the analytic train of the philosophy of his time. A look at his biography helps explain his turn away from analytical philosophy and towards his eventual refuge in what he liked to call *the history of ideas*, Berlin's way of talking about what is really a hermeneutic approach to political theory. This brings us to the second central idea of the chapter, namely the relevance of Berlin's method. His interest in the history of ideas and the unorthodox ways in which he approached the subject are by no means contingent, the result of carelessness or lack of purpose, or even an ideological manipulation of history, as some have suggested.² Instead, Berlin's use of history is the result of a highly intuitive exploration of human nature in hermeneutic form, and not an inaccurate intellectual history, as argued by Skinner,³ or a precarious philosophical argument for liberalism, as Gray suggests.⁴ By claiming this, the thesis paints a portrait of Berlin that is also a far cry from the commonly held view of the Cold War scholar, frozen in time and whose message is of no use to us anymore. Instead, it shows clearly how if nothing else, Berlin was a thinker 'ahead of his own time',⁵ to put it on Berlin's own hermeneutically anachronistic terms, whose philosophy carries a series of lessons from which we can still learn a considerable amount today.

At this point it should be made clear that this thesis is not one on intellectual history. Having said that, it would not be completely inaccurate to maintain that the task carried out in this chapter is akin to that of the intellectual historian, seeing as argument and biography are almost inseparable at times in Berlin. As Alan Ryan has observed, this is partly because 'Berlin practiced the history of ideas in a highly personal and imaginative fashion', and thus 'the

² Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b); C. Hitchens, 'Moderation or Death', *The London Review of Books*, 20/23 (1998); P. Johnson, 'A Low-Risk Philosopher', *The New York Times*, 12th November 1997; M. Ruse, 'Isaiah Berlin and His Groupies', *The chronicle of higher education*, 14th February 2010; D. Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah : The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

³ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b).

⁴ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12, 01 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

⁵ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 178.

student of his analysis is also a student of his sensibility'.⁶ This follows the trend of recent years in which intellectual biographies,⁷ collections of interviews,⁸ as well as selected correspondence⁹ have been published. This sudden explosion of interest surrounding his character and work is not merely historical or anecdotal, this thesis claims, but it responds in fact to a heightened awareness of the potential his work has to teach us new lessons.

1.1. A shift in perspective.

It is obvious that any textual analysis can be enriched by means of contextual interpretation, and Berlin's work is no exception. In this case, by referring to his biography we are able to fill in the blanks present throughout his work, which are to a large extent the result of a notoriously unsystematic style of writing.¹⁰ With the exception of his very early study of Marx, and the unfinished "Political Ideas in the Romantic Age",¹¹ all his work is written in essay form and their topics can appear as incredibly diverse at first glance, to the point that they may look like a collection of caprices devoid of real argumentative narrative. This makes it extraordinarily difficult to achieve an integrated understanding of his writings. Students of Berlin often struggle to fit his work into a single discipline, and in general his oeuvre has been analysed using a metonymical method. That is to say, Berlin has been read mostly by establishing one or a few of his essays or ideas as central, and only considering the rest of his works as more or less relevant depending on how much or how little they relate to the ideas established as pivotal.

⁶ A. Ryan, 'Wise Man', *The New York Review of Books*, 45.20 (1998): 29.

⁷ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a); M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

⁸ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992); I. Berlin and B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006); I. Berlin and S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, 52-135 (1998).

⁹ I. Berlin and H. Hardy, *Letters, 1928-1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); I. Berlin and H. Hardy, *Building: Letters 1960-1975* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013); I. Berlin, H. Hardy, and J. Holmes, *Enlightening: Letters, 1946-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009).

¹⁰ J. Ferrell, 'Isaiah Berlin as Essayist', *Political Theory*, 40.5 (2012).

¹¹ I. Berlin, *Karl Marx; His Life and Environment* (London: T. Butterworth Ltd., 1939); I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

This has allowed the widespread dismissal of Berlin's work as an historian, and instead placed him as a liberal political theorist with a curious, albeit contingent, interest in the history of ideas. Conversely, this thesis argues that the saliency of Berlin's political thought resides precisely on his capacity to grasp the inseparability of history and philosophy when it comes to defending liberalism. In this sense, Berlin's pioneering ideas have been largely misread, and it is the object of this thesis to bring attention to them and inspire a discussion on the need to assess political ideas hermeneutically.

Berlin was one of the first authors – if not *the* first one – to pursue ‘the study of past thinkers as part of the activity of normative political theory, and not as pure “historical” enquiry’ in a way which ‘maintains a continuity between the history of political thought and normative political theory’.¹² The continuous line he traces between history and normative political theory is made possible by his deep understanding of those elements that define our current understanding of human nature and the consequent critical examination of methodologies in political theory that colours all of his works. Thus, Berlin's ideas can only be weighed in full when considered as an investigation of human nature that uses history and philosophy as its medium, and not its subject matter. Berlin's historical writings are conducive to something other than merely painting a portrait of a particular historical moment, and his philosophical reflections on normative concepts are not just thought exercises. Berlin is in fact doing something with his writings, and doing it the best he could have done it, given the particular historical and intellectual context in which he wrote them. In this regard, I am happy to ‘humbly’ draw partly from Skinner's methodology as a departing point ‘when maintaining that an understanding of the meaning of a given text requires one to understand what question the writer was addressing, what concepts, ideas, and political vocabulary were available to him

¹² P. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought', in Jack Hayward et al. (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1999): 43, 50.

to express his ideas, and how he acted in the world through his text(s)'.¹³ However this thesis disagrees with Skinner and other Cambridge Historians alike in their insistence that texts only respond to other texts, and that intellectual biography – or history-making, in general – is not a method of textual interpretation. Finally, I fully subscribe to Dubnov's contention that 'one cannot avoid narration and reconstruction of 'textual' as well as 'nontextual' surroundings if one wishes to understand, first, the questions and challenges texts were designed to answer, and, second, the vocabulary and bank of ideas available to the thinker'.¹⁴ In order to show that this is the case, I will not only apply this method to my interpretation of Berlin, but more importantly show how Berlin's work stands as a functioning example of the way in which this is done. This presents the foundations to argue that there are strong hermeneutical reasons to argue for a deeper relevance of his work. Berlin was not just an essayist or a social commentator, nor a deficient historian or a philosophically languid Cold War liberal ideologist. If his defence of liberalism seems to suffer from any of these flaws is because his method has been largely misunderstood and underestimated in its potential to produce a robust defence of liberalism. The main aim of this thesis is to produce the evidence to support this argument, and the first step in this direction is the contextual interpretation of his oeuvre presented in this chapter.

1.2. The writer who hated writing.

'I have been conscious of a point neatly put to me by Henry Hardy: that one should be wary of discrepancies between what Berlin says, what he means, and what he ought to say.'¹⁵

¹³ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): ix.

The conditions surrounding the publication of the majority of Berlin's works have undoubtedly affected the current general perception of it as well as that of the motivations behind it. When Berlin was awarded a CBE in 1957, Patricia Douglas congratulated him for his services 'to conversation':¹⁶ his reputation was at this point, in fact, larger than his publication record. Of all the texts that are conventionally considered to be paradigmatic of his work, only "The Hedgehog and the Fox" and his study on Marx¹⁷ – which is in fact the only book he ever finished – had been published by then. In most cases, Berlin did not write with the intention of publishing, and at times it seems almost as if he did not intend to write at all. Most of his works were, in fact, dictated to a dictaphone, then transcribed, then forgotten; many others only surfaced as lectures. Most of his essays lay unpublished for a long time, and it was not until after he had reached a degree of notoriety that they began to appear published in thematic collections, the fruit of Henry Hardy's efforts. To a certain degree, it would even appear as if his academic success was almost accidental. He often compared himself to a taxi driver or a tailor who only works on commission, as if trying to lighten the relevance of his works, or emphasising his hatred of writing. As he wrote to Irving Singer in 1960: 'I hate being Professor, I hate lecturing, I hate work... I do not feel in the least professorial'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, this lack of academic ambition could be read precisely as a mark of the authenticity of his interest in the subjects on which he wrote. Despite being prone to divagation and resentful of writing, Berlin only wrote on those subjects that he found interesting and relevant, and he did so moved by deeply personal reasons. His extremely personal tone, in which references to his own motivations and interest in the subject are not rare, indicates as much. Moreover, when all his works are considered together it is not too hard to see them gravitating around certain general topics, which later served as a guide for their publication in thematic clusters. It is hard to

¹⁶ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 222.

¹⁷ I. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox; an Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953); I. Berlin, *Karl Marx; His Life and Environment* (London: T. Butterworth Ltd., 1939).

¹⁸ I. Berlin, H. Hardy and M. Pottle, *Building: Letters 1960-1975*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013): 14.

imagine how one could encounter such argumentative passion and thematic consistency had Berlin been just the taxi driver or the tailor he pretended to be, working on commission and not moved by his own ideals. When carefully and collectively considered, a slow, almost organic development of ideas can be traced all along his works. But he never articulated his thoughts in a clear and systematic manner – *academically*, one could say – and never produced a book to refer to as his magnum opus that threaded together the main arguments of his essays. This fact has played a crucial part in building the reputation of Berlin as a shallow scholar that has stuck to this day.¹⁹ Berlin not only had a lot to say, but he did in fact say it, and that he said it in the only way he could for it to be as effective as it has been. Proof of the endurance of his work is that we are still talking about them, and as Henry Hardy admits: ‘the number of publications on Berlin, or on topics treated by him, is now so large, and increasing at such a rate, that it is impossible to make a useful selection’.²⁰

The most celebrated and well-known essay by Berlin is his ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’,²¹ which he delivered as his inaugural lecture at Oxford after becoming the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory. In it he spells out some of his most prominent ideas, such as value pluralism or the distinction between positive and negative liberty. For most Berlinian literature, TCL epitomises the heart and soul of Berlin’s works: some have seen in it the ‘crystallisation’ of the main ideas that stand somehow diluted in the rest of his oeuvre.²² This attention to TCL has had a reductionist effect, leaving unconsidered some of the most insightful notions present in his work. This thesis argues that Berlin’s key contribution is not only the spelling out of value pluralism or the establishment of a link between this and liberalism, but also, and even

¹⁹ J. Dunn, ‘For Services to Conversation’, *Times Higher Education*, 13th November 1998; M. Ruse, ‘Isaiah Berlin and His Groupies’, *The chronicle of higher education*, 14th February 2010; C. Hitchens, ‘Moderation or Death’, *The London Review of Books*, 20.23 (1998).

²⁰ H. Hardy, ‘Concise Bibliography of Isaiah Berlin’s Papers’, *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/psm/latest-biblio.pdf, accessed 31/05/2016.

²¹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): ch. 6.

²² M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

more importantly, his use of hermeneutics in order to build an argument for the defence of liberalism as a contingent yet necessary answer to our current political needs. This idea opens up a much richer understanding of Berlin that expands on the already well-known image of the Cold War liberal ideologist, or even the pluralism-obsessed thinker, painted by most current scholarship. Even if Berlin was certainly aware of, and even content with the liberal persona that was created around him as a result of the popularity of *TCL*, he still called himself a historian of ideas until the end of his life, and was equally happy for many of his other essays that did not deal directly with the question of liberalism or value pluralism to be published- a fact which should not be taken lightly if we see Berlin as someone who regarded written words as ‘embarrassing witnesses of one's momentary states’.²³ This thesis begins to articulate its defence of Berlin’s methodology by diverting attention to a feature of his work that seems to have remained largely unnoticed: his foundational interest in human nature. For it is only from an understanding of political theory as a discipline that relates directly to epistemic conceptions of human beings that the methodological demand for hermeneutics emerges. However it is only if we examine Berlin’s biography and intellectual origins that it becomes clearly visible the degree to which his work seeks to answer the question of politics and human nature in a fundamental way.

²³ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 175.

2. “The three strands of my life”.

‘I had been formed by three traditions – Russian, British and Jewish’.²⁴

Berlin was born in Riga in 1909 and lived there until 1915, before his family moved to Petrograd for four years until definitively migrating to London in 1921. He initiated his academic career in Oxford as a student in 1928, an engagement that was to last practically until the end of his life, with the exception of the period he spent from 1940 until 1944 working for the British embassy in the United States, and then in Russia from 1945 until 1946. He died in Headington House, Oxford, in 1997. Famous for his loquacity, sense of humour and speed of thought, Berlin managed to captivate some of the most significant minds of his time. Those who knew him attest to the uniqueness of his character, significantly defined by his eclectic background: his Russian and Jewish origins gave him the certain ‘un-Englishness’²⁵ noticed by many. This section explores some of the biographical traits of Berlin in relationship to his work in order to provide an argumentative basis about the motivations behind it, as well as the particular relevance that his methodological approach had in this respect.

However, the exploration of these particular strands of his personality and character constitutes an inevitable exercise of reductionism. Identifying what there is of ‘Russian’, ‘Jewish’, or ‘British’ in Berlin requires that we work with certain definitions of what ‘Russian’, ‘Jewish’, or ‘British’ means. Since a necessary definition of these terms is not only impossible, but also irrelevant for the purposes of the thesis, they should only be understood as interpretative typologies. What I mean by Berlin’s Britishness or Jewishness or Russianness should only be understood as an assessment of the degree to which those experiences and

²⁴ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 255.

²⁵ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 100.

characters Berlin associates to each one of these imaginary constructs can be used to explain the origin and relevance of his ideas and method, and build the narrative that supports the main arguments of the thesis. In short, ‘Britishness’, ‘Jewishness’ or ‘Russianness’ only matter in this thesis to the extent to which they serve as contrived categories which will help us in the analysis of Berlin’s thought. To this extent, the descriptive ambitions of these categories are clearly overshadowed by their pragmatic functions, and this should be kept in mind throughout this chapter. Moreover, as obvious as it may seem, it should probably be pointed out that these traits of Berlinean character did not show as the neat strands of a braid, but instead more as the loosely merged components of a tightly woven fabric. The differentiation in strands is simply a tool for understanding better the mixed elements that compose Berlin’s biography. These three general categories are not by any means contradictory, but if anything the opposite: one of the most characteristic traits of Berlin’s personality was his astounding capacity to combine his complex cultural background into a solid and coherent personality which was every bit as Russian, Jewish and British as it was always something else.

This chapter will focus mostly on some of the elements associated to the British and Russian strands of Berlin’s biography, for it is in relationship to these that some of the most relevant biographical events took place. It is not meant by this that his experience as a Jew is not worth considering at all when looking at his work hermeneutically, but simply that this ‘Jewishness’ plays a minimal role in the definition of those aspects of Berlin’s work that this thesis addresses. It deserves a mention, however, for having prevented him, despite his ‘long defence of individual liberty’, from ‘march[ing] with those who, in the name of such liberty, reject adherence to a particular nation, community, culture, tradition, language, the ‘myriad impalpable strands,’ subtle but real, that bind me into identifiable groups’.²⁶ Berlin’s Jewish background makes him aware of the need to belong to communities, to identify with others,

²⁶ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 258.

and distances him from atomistic liberalism. This could be interpreted as having landed him in an uneasy position between a fundamental respect for individual liberty, on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of the necessity of cultural and social ties for individuals, on the other hand. Nonetheless, as this thesis will argue, Berlin's defence of liberty is also far from being the exclusively negative and atomistic version of liberal freedom that some have interpreted, and it occupies instead a middle ground that appears more concerned with a balanced defence of human autonomy and capabilities. This not only fits in well with the portrait of Berlin's Jewish background and his Zionist aspirations as the explanation behind his respect for communities, but can also help to argue the complete opposite: that is to say, Berlin's more balanced defence of individual autonomy is not entirely rooted in or inspired by his Jewishness, as Dubnov seems to argue at times,²⁷ but stems from his ethical understanding of human beings as self-creating creatures as explained in chapter four. Berlin was also highly critical of many aspects of nationalism, as seen in his works on the German Romanticism, so Berlin's Zionist aspirations should be taken with a pinch of salt too. He always remained more or less vague about this aspect of his life, and rarely mentioned it in public appearances. Berlin seemed uncomfortable with certain forms of 'Jewishness', and his animosity to thinkers like Hannah Arendt or Isaac Deutscher had a root in this.²⁸ Berlin rarely mentions his Jewishness in his works in the same way that he does with the Russians, and he was evidently influenced by the British academic context within which his work developed. The scarcity of references to his Jewishness could mean that its impact came at a much deeper level than can be explicitly stated or analysed. Berlin himself said about it: 'they are so deep, so native to me, that it is idle for me to try to identify, let alone analyse them'.²⁹ Even if this is true, this is irrelevant for the

²⁷ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a); A. M. Dubnov, 'What Is Jewish (If Anything) About Isaiah Berlin's Philosophy?', *Religions*, 3.2 (2012b).

²⁸ D. Cauter, *Isaac & Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013); I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992).

²⁹ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 257.

thesis: all that counts, after all, is what he *did* analyse, those features of his life that he reflected upon and interpreted. Once again, the thesis does not deny the impact that his Jewishness had in the development of his ideas, and to this respect both Arie Dubnov and Joshua Cherniss have provided valuable analyses³⁰ of the impact that his Jewish background had in the development of his political ideals. However, in order to bring out the hermeneutic character of Berlin's work, this dissertation will only focus on the Russian and British aspects of his biography. The possibility of re-examining Berlin's Zionism and other Jewish aspects of his work, once the main thesis of this dissertation has been established, remains open.

3. The Russian Side

'My Russian is due mainly to reading and something ingrained in childhood'.³¹

Even though Berlin only lived in Russia as a child until 1920, when his family moved to London, he maintained important ties with the country throughout his life³², learning and practising the language and, more importantly, devouring the works of the Russian Intelligentsia³³ which were to become a central source of inspiration for Berlin. His early

³⁰ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a).

³¹ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 6.

³² However, not everyone has seen in this unconcealed love of all things Russian a sign of true 'Russianness'. For instance, Dubnov thinks that 'Berlin's passion about everything Russian and his acculturation are intimately tied' (A. Dubnov, 'On Isaiah Berlin', *The New York Review of Books*, 60, 14 (2013)). With this Dubnov is indeed suggesting that there was something inauthentic in Berlin's ties with Russia insofar as they were mostly sustained upon Berlin's own active forging of them – more specifically, this forging responded to Berlin's need to forge a new identity upon moving to England – unlike what happened with his Jewish heritage, which was so deeply planted in his soul that did not need of any elaboration. Regardless of whether what Dubnov says is accurate or truthful or not, it is certainly not relevant for the analysis carried out in this thesis. As I have indicated in the introduction, regardless of how the notion of 'Russianness' was formed, what is undeniably true is that Berlin adjudicated to that Russianness a huge responsibility on the shaping of his thought, and by looking at his works and his biography it becomes evident that this was not an exaggeration.

³³ 'I preserved my Russian, mainly, I think, by reading the Russian classics' I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 6.

memories of Russia are deeply conditioned by his first-hand experience of the Russian Revolution. He has admitted to having been aware of a degree of tension underlying the ostensibly peaceful daily life of his well-off family in Riga first, and more importantly he has in many occasions referred to an episode he witnessed during the outbreak of the Revolution in 1917, when a man was overpowered and dragged by police in Petrograd. This episode, he confessed, awoke in his young self a lasting preoccupation with liberty and toleration, as well as a lifelong repulsion of violence, and even more importantly, began to steer him towards the history of ideas.³⁴ In addition to that, Berlin's Russian origins contributed to the formation of the *alien* connotations associated to his persona, as perceived by Berlin himself and by others too. Even if he did not have any major issues adapting to Britain, this condition of being a perpetual outsider had a clear influence on his thought, which can be read in two ways: on the one hand, Berlin was something of a *rara avis* who indulged in his own exoticism, which may have helped develop his sensibility towards pluralism. On the other hand, his unshakeable alien condition seems to have made him particularly aware of the value of communities and cultures for individual well-being, as he showed a gregarious nature throughout his life, seeking the company of Russians and Jews wherever he went. When he is first attracted to Herder and Vico it is because of their study of societies and cultures: Berlinean value pluralism does not stem from an aim to portray and defend man as an 'unencumbered self',³⁵ but instead the consequence of his concern with the different ways in which men can choose to develop their lives, and how these different developments find an expression and realisation within different cultures. This also can help us understand the ease with which he faced value pluralism: his own personal story was one of pluralism. Moreover, and leaving psychological interpretations

³⁴ When being asked 'Do you consider your interest in the history of ideas was profoundly influenced by your political and philosophical experiences at Oxford?', Berlin replies: 'Not exactly. First of all, I couldn't help being affected by the existence of the Soviet Union. I was never attracted by Marxism, nor by the Soviet regime...' Op.Cit., p 9.

³⁵ M. J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

aside, we know that Berlin made of the Russian Intelligentsia his main bank of inspiration and ideas. It is a fact that his work often reflects on that of the Russians, and it is full of references to them, like Alexander Herzen, who Berlin referred to as ‘my hero for the rest of my life’,³⁶ Turgenev, Plekhanov or Dostoevsky, just to name a few. Ignatieff claims that this interest in the Russians became more accentuated during the research he carried out between 1933 and 1938 for his book on Marx, for which he read Plekhanov as Marx’s precursor, which in turn ‘led him to the Enlightenment thinkers; and from there forward to the nineteenth-century socialists’. Moreover, the reading of the Russians carried out by Berlin during this period provided him with ‘the intellectual capital on which he was to depend for the rest of his life’.³⁷ It is beyond question that Berlin’s absorption of the Russians during this period directed him towards very specific themes for the rest of his life. However Berlin’s interest in the Enlightenment is also motivated to a great degree by his relationship with Collingwood, who directed him towards Vico and the question of human knowledge, for which he finds in the study of the Enlightenment and the so-called Counter-Enlightenment a good source of answers. In any case, what is clear is that Berlin’s connection to the Russian thinkers – the subject-matter even of one of his collection of essays – was strong and influential, and that it shaped in many ways his thought. As Berlin would put it, his Russian heritage was ultimately responsible for his ‘life-long interest in ideas’.³⁸ These ideas are collected from fiction, non-fiction and poetry works. His ability to fit ideas belonging to different disciplines and historical moments as parts of a single philosophical cosmos can be seen as the early steps of his hermeneutic method. In addition to this, his interest in the Russian intelligentsia and their works can be read as an indication of his particular artistic sensitivity, which was also visible in his lifelong love of

³⁶ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 12-13.

³⁷ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 71.

³⁸ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 256.

music.³⁹This admiration for the creative capabilities of the authors that formed his Russian heritage can account for the shock Berlin experienced when visiting Russia in the mid-forties, and in particular for the deep impression that his meeting with Akhmatova had on him, which was later reflected in his work. In the admiration of the creative powers of man and the experience of their suppression via his contact with the Russians, Berlin's particular understanding of man as an essentially autonomous creature is defined, as well as the normative consequences that flow from this and constitute the basis of his defence of liberalism. Let me now explain in more detail the reasons we have to argue all the ideas stated above.

3.1. Berlin and Akhmatova.

In 1945 Berlin spent some months in the Moscow embassy, and in 1946 he had the chance to visit Leningrad –and meet the poet Anna Akhmatova. This Russian journey had a crucial impact in the development of his work, triggering some of his most salient reflections on liberty. His first-hand experience of the consequences of Leninism exacerbated his rejection of Marxist communism and reinforced his conviction about the value of personal freedom. It was not until after this visit that his work became explicitly politicised, and also it was only after this experience that he started defending the need to foster liberty. In his 'Personal Impressions',⁴⁰ he portrays Moscow and Leningrad as full of misery and fear. He details his encounters with some of the members of what had been the magnificent Russian intelligentsia, now struggling with poverty and censorship, who told him of famines, incarcerations and forced labour camps. In particular, meeting Anna Akhmatova left a deep imprint in Berlin. She

³⁹ His secretary, Pat Utechin, recalls that when he was 86 and they had just finished booking ahead for concerts – a yearly ritual – 'she looked back and saw him in his armchair, quietly murmuring to himself, in a voice at once sad and full of pleasure, "I do so love music"' (M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 296). Numerous examples of his interest in music are present in Ignatieff's biography of Berlin, (Op. cit: 56, 79, 209, 238, 289,300), and more importantly in the numerous music reviews he authored for the Oxford Review since under the pen name of "Albert Alfred Apricott". For a full list of these please refer to the bibliography page in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library listed in the bibliography of this dissertation. .

⁴⁰ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a).

was struck by misery and lived in fear that state forces would send her son to a forced labour camp for the second time. The great Russian poetess was for Berlin a symbol of a formerly splendid intelligentsia, now reduced to a state of misery as a result of the abuses committed by a totalitarian government in the name of freedom. The reflections inspired by this journey stayed with Berlin for life: in his own words, the evening he spent with Akhmatova became ‘the most important of his life’.⁴¹

The impact this trip had on Berlin can be read on two different levels: the first one, which was most directly translated into his works, is that it highlighted the importance of individual liberty and showed him the dangers of subordinating it to the realisation of greater political ideals. Regardless of whether the failure of the USSR was due to economic reasons – Berlin never addresses this, which is why some authors have portrayed him as a socialist – the problem with Stalinist communism was that it showed itself as blind to the essential value of individual liberty, placing it below the realisation of other ‘greater’ aims. Berlin recalls Akhmatova having told him that the difference between the two of them was that Berlin came ‘from a society of human beings, whereas here we are divided into human beings and... (Sic)’.⁴² This takes us to the second point I wish to make about the relevance of the 1946 visit to Russia, and in particular about his meeting with Akhmatova. It could be said that Akhmatova embodied an entire generation of creative individuals and Berlin’s understanding of man as an autonomous being has much to do with his acknowledgement of our creative nature. By this I am not saying that in Berlin’s understanding individual liberty is only valuable insofar as it allows man to pursue creative endeavours or, for that matter, to lead a *good life*, but rather that his valuing of individual freedom was to an extent inspired by his delight in the creative artistic sensibility, and that by keeping this in mind we can achieve a more complete understanding of

⁴¹ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 48.

⁴² I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 198.

his defence of liberty. He describes the Russian Intelligentsia as a ‘genuine Renaissance’ which, by means of ‘cross-fertilisation between novelists, poets, artists, critics, historians, scientists... created a culture of unusual vitality and achievement, an extraordinary upward curve in European civilisation’: civilisation and creativity are inherently tied in Berlin’s view. Thus, one of his main worries was the way in which Lenin’s dictatorship destroyed ‘the conditions in which poets and artists could create freely’.⁴³ By establishing a link between Berlin’s defence of liberty and his high regard for creative enterprises I draw attention to the fact that his defence of liberty is not limited to the bare ideal of negative freedom as stated in TCL – ‘the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others’⁴⁴– but also includes a measure of what could be understood as positive liberty, which he links to ‘the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master’⁴⁵. That is to say, the kind of freedom that Berlin aims to defend is not the minimal laissez-faire type of liberty regularly associated with neoliberalism, but instead a protection of individual sphere that allows for a certain degree of autonomy. From Berlin’s perspective, liberty is not intrinsically valuable, but it needs to be protected insofar as it allows human beings to employ those capabilities that make them such a thing. In Berlin’s view, this is the autonomy to become a free-thinking, creative individual in the liberal sense. This trait is what allows us to demand more of liberalism than the simple lack of state intervention, and what places Berlin in some ways closer to socialism than to neoliberalism and allows perfectionist interpretations of liberalism such as those provided by Raz, Nussbaum or Crowder, just to name a few examples.⁴⁶ This interpretation of Berlin’s

⁴³ Op.Cit., p 158.

⁴⁴ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 194.

⁴⁵ Op.Cit., p 203. Joshua Cherniss has argued this too, for more on it please refer to his work J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), and J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); J. Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); J. Raz, 'The Role of Well-Being', *Noûs*, 38,(2004); M. C. Nussbaum, 'Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39.1 (2011); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and*

defence of liberty is central for the thesis as it establishes a triadic link between a specific understanding of human nature⁴⁷, explored here, but also in the following three chapters on value pluralism and ethics; the demand for a particular method in political theory attached to it, which is introduced in the following section of this chapter, and touched upon in the chapter on value pluralism and developed throughout chapters five and six; and a justification of liberalism that presents it as contingent but necessary, in line with the conclusion of the thesis.

In summary, then, despite having moved to England at a very early age, Berlin's Russian heritage should be taken seriously as one of the determinant elements of his character. His lifelong concern with liberty and his repulsion of violence find an early root in his witnessing of some of the events of the Russian Revolution as a child. Moreover, his condition of émigré and the way in which he dealt with it also had a bearing in the shaping of his ideas, for instance in his awareness of the relevance of communities for individuals or in the possibility of value pluralism itself. Berlin's Russianness found two main expressions: on the one hand there are the explicit and constant references to Russian authors we find in Berlin's work. From some of these authors' work, Berlin asserts, came the questions that inspired many of the notions we find in his own thought. On the other hand we must not forget the significance of Berlin's visit to Russia in 1946 and his meeting with Akhmatova, described by Berlin himself as the most relevant of his life, an event intimately tied to his Russian sensibility and also accountable for having inspired some of the ideas central in his philosophy.

Value Pluralism (London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin : Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); G. A. Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004)

⁴⁷ 'Conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man' I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 206.

4. Britain is the best country in the world’.

‘No one was more English and yet less English at the same time.’⁴⁸

Berlin talked about himself as having a ‘pro-British bias’:⁴⁹ he attached values central to his thought, like toleration or freedom, to his British heritage. This gives us an idea of what his constructed understanding of ‘Britishness’ stood for. Unlike with his Russianness, actively nurtured by an enthusiastic cultural dedication sustained throughout his entire life, or his Jewishness, not as openly and explicitly affirmed, Berlin’s Britishness is short of constituting a puzzle. Even if his mixed background conferred him a distinctly ‘un-English’⁵⁰ air, we know that, as a child, it did not take him long to merge his Russian façade with a distinctively British flair.⁵¹ Later in life, however, he turned the exoticism of his origins to his own advantage, articulating around it an eccentric persona that proved magnetic, attracting around him some of the most brilliant minds of his time. As William Waldegrave, his colleague at All Souls College wrote in the Daily Telegraph after his death: ‘If you had asked me to show what I meant by the ideal of Englishness, I would have taken you to see a Latvian, Jewish, German, Italian mixture of all the cultures of Europe. I would have taken you to see Isaiah Berlin’.⁵² Britain was not just the accidental backdrop of his life, but a homeland towards which he felt deeply related as it offered everything he wished his natal Russia had delivered. In his own words: ‘Britain is the best country in the world: the least corrupt, the least cruel, the least liable to enormities’.⁵³ His high regard for these values does not only have a root in his experience as

⁴⁸ I. Buruna, 'The Last Englishman', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah : Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Boydell Press ; in association with Wolfson College, 2009): 198.

⁴⁹ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Pimlico, 1998a): 257.

⁵⁰ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a).

⁵¹ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992).

⁵² W. Waldegrave, 'The Last Great Liberal', *Times Higher Education*, 6th November 1998 .

⁵³ R. Cornwell, 'Isaiah Berlin: Our Greatest Thinker, Who Straddled a Terrible Century', *The Independent*, 7th November 1997.

a British citizen, but also in his extreme awareness of the effect that the *absence* of such values had in the Russia he visited during the forties. In addition to this, and more importantly, his sense of Britishness accounts for his eclectic mode of philosophising, which incorporates both firm empirical foundations and richly historical reflection. His foundational interest in methodology can be tracked back to the formative years in Oxford. In particular, Berlin's experience of the development of analytic philosophy in Oxford and his relationship with R.G. Collingwood as his first contact with the philosophy of history played a paramount role in shaping his idiosyncratic approach to philosophy, as well as his intuitive adoption of a hermeneutic method in his defence of liberalism. In fact, as this section explains, to a large degree his work could be seen as British insofar as distinctively Oxonian: just like his experience of Russia is tied to his preoccupation with liberty and his interest in politics, his experience of Oxford shaped his early and deep awareness of the specific methodological demands attached to the study of politics.

4.1. Berlin and Oxford.

Berlin arrived in Oxford in 1928, where he read Classics as his first degree, and then went on to pursue a second degree on Philosophy, Politics and Economics, both at Corpus Christi College. He was appointed as a philosophy tutor at New College immediately after finishing his studies, and very shortly afterwards, aged only twenty-three, was elected for a prize fellowship at All Souls College – he was the first Jew to be awarded one – and eventually was awarded the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory. With the exception of a few years during the war spent in the British embassy in Russia and Washington, he only left All Souls in order to found Wolfson College- a radically innovative college both in its architecture and its governing structure, which was much more democratic than any other college in Oxford. The reformist aims displayed here are an example of Berlin's critical attitude towards Oxford's

dated hierarchies; the effort he put into modernising and improving it a sign of the profound affection he felt for the institution. He left Wolfson in 1975, once the new college had been fully established, and retired to Headington House, Oxford, from where he still maintained a close relationship with the university until his death in 1997.

Of those sixty-nine years spent in Oxford, his formative period was essential. At the time of his landing, Oxford was buzzing with young philosophical revolutionaries and analytic philosophy was taking a radically logico-linguistic turn, and Berlin's philosophy emerged as an attempt to fill in the gaps he saw in this. His academic upbringing took place in an environment that rejected metaphysics as the enemy, a notion he embraced and interiorized for the rest of his life, however he was primarily concerned with questions on politics and ethics that cannot be tackled by the empirical and positivist methods of the so-called Oxford realists. It is as a result of trying to juggle his empiricist commitment on the one hand with his innate sense of the unavoidability of metaphysical questions about human nature on the other, that Berlin ended up navigating most of the topics in his work with his characteristically unorthodox approach that combines historicism and abstract philosophical reflection. Likewise, Berlin's central interest in the Enlightenment is related to his attempts to understand the scientism that pervaded among the Oxford philosophers of this time, and which he also located at the heart of Marx's vision.⁵⁴ If his interest in liberty and its value rests on his Russian side, we could argue that his curiosity about human nature was inspired by the epistemological conundrum at the centre of which he found himself in the Oxford of the thirties. More importantly even, it is during this period that Berlin becomes aware of the interconnectedness between normativity and method in political theory, given his close experience of the methodological revolution that philosophy as an academic discipline underwent in the Oxford of the 1930s.

⁵⁴ I. Berlin, *Karl Marx; His Life and Environment* (London: T. Butterworth Ltd., 1939): 9-12; I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992).

4.2. Oxford Positivism

During his undergraduate years Berlin acquired the basic tools for turning his untidy mind and style into those of a philosopher. Particularly influential was the role of one his tutors, W.F.R (Frank) Hardie, ‘the single most important intellectual influence upon Berlin’s undergraduate life’, whom, by teaching him to approach philosophical matters in a straightforward fashion and to avoid excessive lyricisms in his writings, began the stylistic transition towards ‘the British empiricism that became his intellectual morality’.⁵⁵ Hardie was a staunch Aristotelian who rejected determinism frontally: a combination that we can see reflected in Berlin’s valuing of individual autonomy and his linking of politics and ethics. However Hardie alone should not be made accountable for Berlin’s empiricism, seeing as it was a philosophical style difficult to escape in the ‘Oxford texture’ of the 1930s⁵⁶. If, during the late nineteenth century Idealism had been the predominant trend in Oxford philosophy under the influence of T.H. Green, by the beginning of the last century a shift towards realism began to take place with authors such as John Cook Wilson and H.A.Pritchard, whose work Berlin read and admired for being ‘rigorous and clear and rational’.⁵⁷ Thus, when Berlin arrived in Oxford he encountered a

⁵⁵M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 49-50. There are some discordances on the impact that Hardie had on Berlin’s intellectual character. Arie Dubnov has portrayed Hardie as an Idealist influence, against the Realism of Berlin’s other tutor, Gilbert Ryle. Moreover, Dubnov maintains that Ryle’s influence on Berlin was crucial insofar as it was under his shadow that he developed, alongside Ayer, the realist pose he was to maintain during his formative years in Oxford. If Berlin preferred Ryle’s Realist and analytical offer was, in Dubnov’s view, because he wanted to fit in the “Oxford texture” of the time. (A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 56-67.) While there are no solid grounds to question Dubnov’s interpretation, it does not seem at all implausible to believe Ignatieff’s account, especially considering how much closer on a personal level Berlin seemed to Hardie than to Ryle, and the fact that Hardie was not so evidently influenced by Idealism as Dubnov suggests. However this is no doubt a matter of interpretation which is by no means crucial to the argument at hand. Regardless of how it happened, the important fact is that Oxford Realism did definitely have a strong influence over young Berlin.

⁵⁶ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 57. As Joshua Cherniss has put it, ‘Berlin shared his generation’s sweeping anti-metaphysical empiricism- their ‘general denial of anything that professed to give information about the world as a result of pure thought’, their suspicion of ‘the a priori’ and ‘necessary connections’ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 5.

⁵⁷ S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 67.

general rejection of Idealism – of which Collingwood stood as its last living representative – and witnessed the emergence of what came to be known as *Oxford Philosophy*, which Berlin referred to as ‘a kind of general undoctinaire empiricism, united with an analysis of language’, part of ‘an old English tradition’ that included authors such as ‘Locke, Hume, Mill, Moore and Russell’.⁵⁸ Berlin was close to the trend to the point of assuring that it had been born in his rooms⁵⁹, where philosophers such as A.J. Ayer, who also introduced him to Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, Stephen Hampshire and Stuart Spender, with whom he met to discuss ideas, ‘influenced as they all were by Oxford empiricism, and to some degree by Oxford realism’.⁶⁰ However, the notion of ‘Oxford Philosophy’ is a loosely defined title: it comprises a set of authors who clearly shared a philosophical momentum, but whose works are not necessarily developed as part of a joint philosophical effort or programme. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Berlin’s generation grew to become a significant one in the history of philosophy at Oxford. Even if he always maintained a relatively distant attitude towards Oxford Philosophy, his own thought has often been portrayed as shaped precisely by the two main philosophical approaches – empiricism and realism – which he places at its the heart. Successful or not, Berlin’s empiricist vocation is clearly visible throughout his work. For instance, his insistence on value pluralism is the reaffirmation of the imperfect character of human relationships he observes as an empirical fact against the metaphysical claims of Idealism. This acknowledgement of the imperfect is also directly connected to political realism of the sort developed by Williams which is fundamentally rooted on value pluralism, as we will see in chapter six. An equally if not more relevant manifestation of this empiricist commitment – and a commitment is not necessarily a successful endeavour – is his interest in history: his defence of liberalism is not built on abstract premises, on pure thought, but distilled from the factual narrative of history.

⁵⁸ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 14.

⁵⁹ Dubnov maintains that this was a bit of an exaggeration in *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a).

⁶⁰ I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b).

Even if he unavoidably builds his ideas up to a metaphysical level, his point of departure is always as empirical as possible: he writes about what he sees and what he experiences, not about hypothetical or imagined realities. Thus, even if the questions that he poses cannot be resolved entirely by means of the empiricism he endorses so strongly – for they are questions on ethics and politics, and their nature is indeed ‘metaphysical’ in the broadest sense, the struggle to keep metaphysical abstraction at bay is a determinant factor in his work: but it is in trying to find a balance between the idealist and empiricist approaches that Berlin finds the path of hermeneutics in the study of human nature.

Despite Berlin’s own concession that he became during his early time in Oxford ‘a kind of realist’,⁶¹ it is unclear what he meant by this. In the first place, it is important to point out that realism is a largely contested notion which can acquire a broad range of meanings when being used as a thesis from epistemology or logic, which are complicated further when we add in ethics or political philosophy. It would seem that Berlin talks about realism as almost a synonym for empiricism. That is to say, realism as an epistemological approach that shies away from metaphysical realities and abstract Idealism. This interpretation of Berlin is not uncontested. For instance, Cherniss has seen in Berlin a political realist, linking him to the emergence of the trend in direct relationship to the collapse of ideologies experienced during the First World War. In inter-war Oxford, this realism placed its emphasis on ‘the centrality of power and conflict, and a general distrust of ideologies and panaceas which derived from the reaction against political messianism and the violence to which it gave rise’.⁶² Realism provided a good counterbalance against political utopianism – embodied mostly by the Stalinism and Marxism that Berlin abhorred – sitting at the other side of the political spectrum, insofar as ‘it also promoted its own intellectual ethic of rigour and responsibility, opposed to

⁶¹ S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 67.

⁶² J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007): 99.

the claims of ideology'.⁶³ The lack of political interest displayed by Berlin, his philosophical companions of the time,⁶⁴ and the general absence of direct references to political realism we find in his work, provide a good hint that it may not have been political realism that he had in mind when talking about his connection to realism in Oxford. With this this thesis does not deny that Berlin is in fact close to political realism, but it merely indicates that his admission of the 'realist' dimension of his work is more plausibly interpreted when understood as an allusion to the particular kind of epistemological anti-Idealism held by Oxford philosophy at the time. Having said this, it should be pointed out that his use of the term is ambivalent: he attributes to it a clearly epistemological meaning when affirming that it is 'the belief that the external world is independent of human observers',⁶⁵ but at the same time he is clearly aware of the political meaning of the term, and not too fond of it, when he affirms in one of his lectures that 'whenever you hear a man speak of 'realism', you may always be sure that this is the prelude to some bloody deed'.⁶⁶ These two statements provide a good clue about his rejection of what he thought of as political realism, as well as making it easier to understand how deep an imprint epistemological realism left on his thought. To this extent, realism in Berlin's mind could even be equated with empiricism, becoming equivalent terms. Even if he was never an active member of the realist resistance, his efforts to fit in with this group are evident, and the mark this left on his work undeniable.

Thus, the Oxford Philosophy to which Berlin refers can be understood as a radicalised version of the realism initiated a century ago by Cook Wilson, which had already acquired a series of different meanings by the time Berlin met it at Oxford. It aimed to challenge Idealism

⁶³ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 5.

⁶⁴ 'I simply did not come across such intellectuals interested in general ideas or passionate advocates of political or social or aesthetic ideas with followers and opponents in Oxford.' I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 6.

⁶⁵ I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b): 2.

⁶⁶ Ignatieff, Michael (1998), *Isaiah Berlin: a life* (New York: Metropolitan Books): 225

to its last consequences. Not only nurtured by a yearning for academic rigour, there was in the defence of the new philosophy a component of generational change too – represented by ‘a group of heroic rebels who were repulsed by the shallow waters of Hegelian-inspired philosophy’⁶⁷ – as well as a political slant to it which made it even more attractive: the new philosophy became associated to a liberal attitude of political progressiveness. By the time Oxford Philosophy developed, Idealism understood in the terms of T.H. Green’s era was already withering in Oxford, with Collingwood as its only standing representative. Oxford Philosophy aimed to cleanse philosophy of the murky vagueness and high claims of metaphysics and to bring to it some clarity of thought and expression of the kind attained by the empirical sciences. This demanded the adoption of a deeply analytical and highly abstract way of processing knowledge. At a time in which Europe was experiencing radical political and social changes, with a pressing need for new ideologies,⁶⁸ Oxford Philosophy turned its face away from the Idealism of the past and responded with its own ‘modernist philosophical group that restored the true merits of “British” philosophy, namely, scepticism, uncompromising anti-metaphysical empiricism, and a greater proximity to “common-sense” realities’.⁶⁹ In addition to this, Ayer had brought to Oxford the methods of the Vienna Circle, in particular that of logical verification characteristic of the analytic philosophy of language of the time. Logical Positivism, with a ‘consciously anti-clerical... left-wing and progressive aura’,⁷⁰ constituted in Oxford the maximum expression of the *progressive* character which, almost like an artistic ‘ism’, inhabited to a certain degree all of the philosophical debates in the Oxford of the time, partially setting ‘the agenda of philosophy for the group to which Berlin

⁶⁷ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 54.

⁶⁸ J. W. Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Thought in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 54.

⁷⁰ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 83.

belonged before the war'.⁷¹ Albeit the realist revolution at Oxford was different from the anti-Idealist movement led by Moore and Russell in Cambridge, Berlin's intellectual group of the time was composed by 'fidgety Young Turks who adopted Moore and Russell's indirect realism'.⁷² When Berlin read Moore's 'Principia Ethica',⁷³ even though he was to reject it later, he found himself at the time 'illuminated'⁷⁴ by 'its expositional clarity, its pure moral tone and the comforting implication that goodness might be as clear, distinct and intuitively apprehensible as primary colours'.⁷⁵ The early appreciation Berlin showed for clarity in ethical matters, or in philosophy in general, is one of the main factors to be taken into consideration in the analysis of his formative years, for it had a lasting influence. Even though Berlin never became 'a true disciple', and instead preferred to stay 'a heretic, though a friendly one',⁷⁶ Oxford Philosophy undoubtedly influenced his own philosophical perspectives and concerns, not only during his formative period but throughout the rest of his life.

The impact that Oxford Philosophy had on Berlin can be understood both positively and negatively, like the two sides of a leaf. On the one hand, as we have seen, the kind of empiricism praised by Oxford Philosophy stayed with Berlin for the rest of his life, colouring everything else he thought.⁷⁷ Even when writing about subjects that would have been considered metaphysical nonsense by the Oxford philosophers of the thirties, such as ethics or political philosophy, he strives to remain as firmly anchored in our empirical experience of these subjects, and to stay as far from metaphysical reminiscences as possible. When writing about ethics he is always extremely careful in making clear that he does so only insofar as they are an undeniable part of our experience, even if they escape the analytical possibilities of

⁷¹ B. Williams, 'Introduction', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Concepts and Categories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980): xii.

⁷² A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin : The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 60.

⁷³ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

⁷⁴ S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 67.

⁷⁵ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 50.

⁷⁶ I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b): 2.

⁷⁷ Op.Cit., p 20; G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): 17, 175.

philosophy.⁷⁸ For instance, as we will see in the following chapter, he defines values as *objective*, as if they were, indeed, *empirical* elements of our moral universe, the existence of which we know about through experience and not as a result of abstract thought. This empirical spirit is what makes him affirm without hesitation the universal character of values, or the Kantian heritage of our ethical frameworks, as will be explained in chapter four, just to give some examples.

On the other side of the leaf there is Berlin's early resistance to accepting the rigidity and narrowness of the method proposed by Oxford Philosophy. He did not only disagree with certain aspects of Oxford realism and logical positivism due to what he saw as internal logical inaccuracies, which he was, nonetheless, willing to debate as he made clear in some of his early essays, such as 'Verification', 'Logical Translation', or 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements'.⁷⁹ But he also found the analytic methodology too narrow a method to reflect on the questions on politics and human nature that he was interested in. In the positivists' eye, philosophy had exhausted its capacity to provide new knowledge, and instead it had to be looked at as a tool for processing thoughts and translating them into language propositions that could be logically verified. Philosophy did not have questions of its own anymore, and its final aim was to distil questions to its purest form so that they could be processed by other sciences. Philosophy was being turned at this stage into a proto-science, unable to provide any new knowledge independently. Berlin's early inclination towards the history of ideas is a consequence of this, and responds to an acute awareness of the need for a philosophical approach that is capable both of formulating and answering, in a relevant way, questions concerning politics and ethics. He makes this claim the spinal cord of his work, by defining liberalism hermeneutically. This definition is never explicitly stated as such, however

⁷⁸This seems to pave the way for Bernard Williams' understanding of ethics as stood beyond the limits of philosophy, a notion explored in chapter six of this thesis, and in B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

⁷⁹I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories : Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

as this dissertation argues, the hermeneutic character of his work is undeniable. The early reluctance to deny the value of ethics and politics drives Berlin's later elaborated rejection of scientism, and this in turn raised the question on human nature that occupies a central place in his political philosophy. For instance, Berlin famously explained how he decided to quit philosophy in order to pursue instead a career in the history of ideas, 'a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun',⁸⁰ an admission which provides a good hint about the extent to which his Oxford framing moulded his initial understanding of philosophy as an overly narrow form of inquiry.

This particular framing of philosophy and its method posed a crucial dilemma for Berlin: on the one hand, he had been fed a systematic dismissal of metaphysics as useless, unclear, and even dangerous. On the other hand, the extreme realism of Oxford Philosophy was too reductionist and limited, with its eventual disregard of those questions on ethics and human nature that truly captured Berlin's interests. It is by trying to find a way out of this dilemma that he posed the questions on human nature and the epistemology of ethics and politics that are the beating heart of his philosophy. Some of his essays address the subject explicitly – 'Does political theory still exist?', 'The purpose of philosophy',⁸¹ or 'Politics as a descriptive science'⁸² – however this question underlies all of his work. By reflecting on the possibility of human knowledge, as opposed to the scientific knowledge so revered by the Oxford philosophers, Berlin arrived at the hermeneutic exploration of human nature via the history of past ideas central in his thought. As much as he had been taught to disregard Hegel and many of his German counterparts as representatives of the metaphysics that one was to avoid at all costs, we eventually witness Berlin turning to history as the only means of explaining and understanding human behaviour, and even later in life explaining the great degree to which

⁸⁰ Op.Cit., p iii.

⁸¹ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

⁸² I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age : Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

Kant had shaped his thought. Berlin's curiosity about human nature is the heart of his philosophy, the point of departure for everything which was to come later. And it was his intuitive opposition to Oxford realism, with some aid from Collingwood, as we shall see shortly, which drove it.

In conclusion, the impact of Oxford Philosophy on Berlin's thought can be measured in two main ways. On the one hand, it helped shape his lifelong commitment to empiricism, which is undoubtedly one of the determinant elements of his work. Berlin's rebuttal of Idealism is clearly ideological and instrumental, and not only methodological, and the origins of this position can be traced back to his formative period. On the other hand, Berlin's early rejection of the confined methodologies of realism and logical positivism can be seen as the beginning of his hermeneutic sensitivity. In this way, Berlin managed to take the best of what this new philosophical texture had to offer – its rejection of metaphysical Idealism – while also discarding those elements of it that withheld the development of a philosophical, reflective investigation of those topics which really concerned him, resulting in an intuitive turn towards hermeneutics. This turn was to a great degree instigated by Berlin's relationship with R.G. Collingwood, one of the most crucial relationships that the young philosopher was to find at Oxford in that period.

4.3. Berlin and Collingwood.

Berlin's revolt against Oxford philosophy appears to have been largely instinctive: he clearly sensed that the analytic philosophical pose of his generation was not adequate for addressing questions on human nature, and thus began his turn against Oxford realism. Even if Berlin seems more inclined to list long-dead authors as his intellectual heroes, such as Herzen, Vico or Kant, than to directly point at any of his contemporaries as a solid influence over his thought – a habit which undeniably has contributed to create the image of Berlin as an unique thinker,

working in solitude and *against the current* – there is enough circumstantial evidence to make a case on the influence exercised by at least one Idealist author over the development of Berlin’s work: Robin George Collingwood.⁸³ Although Berlin has declared that it was in preparation for his monographic on Karl Marx⁸⁴ that his interest in the Enlightenment and the history of ideas arose,⁸⁵ his relationship with Collingwood can also be accounted for this development and in a much more profound way.

This thesis is not the first one to explore the relationship between the two authors, which has sparked much interest in recent years,⁸⁶ with divided opinions on the subject. This section will explore Collingwood’s influence on Berlin in order to bring up the roots of Berlin’s historicism. Even if Berlin liked to call himself a historian of ideas, his work is clearly one in political theory, with most literature regarding him as a liberal author. This raises a fundamental question about method in history and in philosophy. It is not rare to see Berlin’s historical method being criticised, with the most famous example of this criticism being probably

⁸³ Dubnov has suggested that not only Collingwood is accountable for planting idealist notions in THE young Berlin’s mind, but also Frank Hardie. Dubnov has seen in Hardie an Idealist influence for Berlin, identifying Hardie’s idealism in his particular understanding of Aristotelian eudaimonia as a “goodness” or “well-being” which required a proper activity of the soul and psyche as a means of achieving happiness (via the political life). We do not have much information available on Hardie, but Dubnov’s idealist characterisation of Hardie as the influence in Berlin as opposed to that of Ryle, his other tutor, appears as somewhat forced. It is true that Hardie was an Aristotelian scholar, but this was something very common amongst realists, and in some of his works his extreme preoccupation with language presents a clear realist character (W. F. R. Hardie, 'My Own Free Will', *Philosophy*, 32, 120 (1957)), which is consistent with the realist characterisation of Hardie presented by Berlin in his conversations with Ignatieff (M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998)). Nonetheless, I agree with Dubnov in his identification of Hardie as an influence who may have steered Berlin away from the topics commonly addressed by the Oxford philosophers of his intellectual group. They had a close personal relationship, and with Hardie interested in topics like free will or determinism (which he rejected), it is not hard to see the impact he may have had on young Berlin. However, it looks like Hardie’s methods were still largely realist and analytic and it would be a bit too bold to list him as an ‘Idealist’ influence over young Berlin, at least to the same degree as Collingwood.

⁸⁴ I. Berlin, *Karl Marx; His Life and Environment* (London: T. Butterworth Ltd., 1939).

⁸⁵ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 12.

⁸⁶ J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a); P. Skagestad, 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66, 1 (2005); A. Kelly, 'Getting Isaiah Berlin Wrong', *The New York Review of Books*, 60.11 (2013); M. Ricciardi, 'Berlin on Liberty', in Henry Hardy and G. Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007); R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Henry Hardy and G. Crowder (eds.), *ibid.*

Quentin Skinner.⁸⁷ Skinner, like many others, challenges Berlin's hand-picking and combination of past ideas with the aim of providing a normative background to his arguments. However, it is the aim of this thesis to argue that Berlin's alleged utilisation of past ideas is not by any means 'bad history', but rather a widely misunderstood hermeneutic defence of liberalism. By understanding Berlin's method in line with that of authors such as Ricoeur or Gadamer not only are his historical texts infused with new life, but more importantly the reasons behind Berlin's turn to history become more visible than ever.

R.G. Collingwood was the only representative of idealist metaphysics still standing during Berlin's formative period, and he was generally regarded as a philosophical dinosaur in the Oxford of the time, given his Idealist foundations. However, even if biographical evidence about the relationship between Berlin and Collingwood is at best vague, we know that Berlin attended a series of lectures on the philosophy of history delivered by Collingwood during the summer of 1931, and that he seems to have been very impressed by them. It was in one of those lectures where Berlin heard the famous Kantian quote 'from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made' which was to become recurrent in his own works. Also, in one of his letters of the time, he calls Collingwood 'exciting and risky', also 'a very sly lively continental sort of philosopher', 'sensational, entertaining, enormously ingenious' and 'the only philosophy tutor in Oxford who is also a man of genuine culture'.⁸⁸

Following their initial contact in 1931, Berlin invited Collingwood to have tea in his rooms, an invitation that was politely declined. Also, in an unpublished interview with Richard Wollheim from 1990, Berlin recalls that he used to visit Collingwood's house for dinner, and that Collingwood would also visit him in All Souls, sit in an armchair in his rooms and tell him: 'I can talk to you because you are a man of considerable culture. So am I; but as for the

⁸⁷ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b).

⁸⁸ I. Berlin and H. Hardy, *Letters, 1928-1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 44.

rest!⁸⁹ Berlin admits finding this very flattering, and also that he ‘liked him because he was very agreeable to talk to and he was civilised and he had met interesting people and he talked well’.⁹⁰ I am bringing up all these biographical facts because from these we can infer that the relationship between the two was in fact much closer than Berlin admitted during his life, as he also declared that Collingwood's philosophy was ‘deceitful and unsound’ and even ‘of no interest’.⁹¹ This can be seen as yet another sign of Berlin’s own reluctance to admit his own metaphysical inclinations. After all, Berlin always saw himself as an empiricist, and he firmly believed that there were thick borders between his philosophical approach and Collingwood’s. Thus, even though Collingwood’s works on history were only published posthumously during the fifties, some of the notions with which Berlin became acquainted during the 1931 lectures stayed with him for the rest of his life.⁹² Even if he was reluctant to list Collingwood as an influence throughout his life, Berlin’s work is peppered with recurrent references to Collingwood’s notions of absolute presuppositions and the common good, as well as allusions to his similar understanding of the different methodological demands of the human and the natural sciences.⁹³ Moreover, he never denies the link with Collingwood when this is brought up in interviews, however the degree to which he admits this relationship affected him varies considerably depending on the occasion he is asked about it.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Interview with Richard Wollheim, 2nd of July, 1990. Housed with the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, Wolfson College, Oxford.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ I. Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946*, eds Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (Oxford: Random House Books, 1932): 44.

⁹² Dubnov has even gone as far as to suggest Collingwood’s influence on Berlin becomes particularly relevant after the forties, when *An essay on Metaphysics* was published, an influence which can be directly traced to PIRA (A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 70, 72), but I am dubious about this. As I will explain, there is an undeniable amount of Collingwood in Berlin, but the influence is not as directly traceable as Dubnov makes it.

⁹³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 13, 131-47, 60-1, 77; I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 8, 43, 64; I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 305, 24; I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981): 16, 34, 36, 52, 151-2, 95, 322-2.

⁹⁴ J. Allen, 'Isaiah Berlin’s Anti-Procrustean Liberalism: Ideas, Circumstances, and the Protean Individual'; M. Ricciardi, 'Berlin on Liberty', in Hardy and Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New

Collingwood exercised a remarkable influence on young Berlin, either directly with his own ideas or indirectly, pointing him towards philosophers such as Vico. It was Collingwood who prompted Berlin to read Vico, an author whose work became central for Berlin, and from whom he acquired notions that connect him to Collingwood's philosophy. These are precisely the ideas that allow us to regard Berlin in line with the hermeneutic tradition, which in turn tie in almost seamlessly to some of the philosophical interests that Berlin acquired during his early years in Oxford as seen in the previous section. For instance, Vico places an emphasis on 'making' as the chore of the human world, 'by virtue of which this world is a creation, consciously intended and retrospectively knowable, in ways in which the realm of nature is not',⁹⁵ as opposed to materialistic theories of history that understand it as a force of its own, independent of the actions of individuals. Herder too places human creativity at the heart of human nature, and both authors reflect on the subject not on political grounds, but rather historical ones: if we want to understand history we need to do it from the viewpoint of those human beings that shaped it, as it is the result of human action and nothing else. This is exactly the methodological approach we witness in Berlin, except he emphasises the relationship between history and politics, an emphasis that was initiated by Collingwood. In 'Political Action',⁹⁶ Collingwood defines politics as the activity conducive to creating and maintaining a particular kind of order – political order – which is only effective insofar as free individuals decide to obey the rules that shape such order: 'the centre of gravity of political life lies not in the group, but in the individual'.⁹⁷ In his view, politics and history are tied insofar as history needs to be brought up when providing political explanations: political order 'can never be a hard-and-fast system invented and constructed once for all, or borrowed like the shell of a

York: Prometheus Books, 2007); M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 58,203; I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 78.

⁹⁵ F. M. Barnard, 'Reason and Self-Enactment in History and Politics Themes and Voices of Modernity', (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2006): 107.

⁹⁶ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928).

⁹⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 170

hermit crab; it is perpetually changing, and this change is my political history. But I cannot organize my own life without any reference to the organisation of other people's. They, too, have a political history of their own'.⁹⁸ This does not mean that the reasons behind our political actions are entirely historical and thus outside our choice, for history is nothing else but the result of human action, but rather that by looking into the history of our political actions we can locate the abstract arguments where the source of political normativity resides for us and others, helping us gain a better understanding of the roots of our political agreements and disagreements. This is, according to Collingwood, because whenever we act politically, even if our actions are particular, they embody 'an element of universality' which is 'essential' to them, and without this element of universality 'the political value of the act would disappear'.⁹⁹ That is to say, in Collingwood's view politics are about the action of creating laws, obeying and mandating them, and the only arguments we have for demanding that anyone else obeys them – or for obeying them ourselves – are linked to universal arguments, even if in their immediate performance they appear as addressing and affecting the particular. The link between the particular and the universal in politics is mediated by appeal to political history, for it is in there where the reasons for action appear interlaced with our abstract systems of thought in a way that we can recognise. Collingwood's insistence on *purpose* – or, more precisely, the thought of it – as the hallmark of human history 'echoes Vico's and Herder's distinction between causal teleology in human agency and causal teleology in processes outside it. This distinction forms the central theme of subsequent theorizing on historical consciousness and historical understanding, as it also informs Collingwood's thesis of "re-enactment" and crucially underlies the doctrine of *verstehen*'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928): 170.

⁹⁹ *Op.Cit.*, p 163.

¹⁰⁰ F. M. Barnard, 'Reason and Self-Enactment in History and Politics Themes and Voices of Modernity', (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2006): 7.

It is not hard then to draw a line from Vico and Herder to Collingwood, and from there to Berlin and even finally to Bernard Williams, who goes one step further than Berlin by picking up Collingwood's affirmation that 'political action, as such, is not moral action'¹⁰¹ as well as that 'political action is essentially regulation, control, the imposition of order and regularity upon things'.¹⁰² The common thread linking the philosophies of all these authors is their more or less obvious sensitivity to the hermeneutic nature of politics, which is at the same time driven by a common delineation of history and politics as the trails left behind by the self-creating actions of human beings- and not the other way around. It is in this notion that Berlin's early opposition to determinism, as well as his sensitivity to the creative capabilities of human beings, finds its ultimate expression – and this is also the kernel of his justification of liberalism. Berlin's argument for liberalism is a particular universal of the sort described by Collingwood above: it is not entirely relative insofar as it appeals to abstract, metaphysical notions – such as the definition of values as objective and universal, as we will see in the next chapter – yet it challenges any claims of universal validity as it is entirely self-aware of its own local character.

Having said this, there are also fundamental differences between Berlin's and Collingwood's works. The central one, and possibly the main reason behind Berlin's refusal to admit any intellectual link with Collingwood, was Collingwood's focus on metaphysics, a fact that appears reflected mostly in his understanding of political principles as deriving from abstract systems of thought, and his firm reliance on human rationality as the basis of all knowledge and political understanding. The differences between the two authors become particularly visible when looking at the notion of re-enactment, one of Collingwood's most enduring philosophical contributions which Berlin also discussed openly and recurrently. It is worth exploring what Berlin had to say about re-enactment insofar as it provides a sizeable

¹⁰¹ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928): 159.

¹⁰²Op.cit., p. 165

insight into his method. It is in his rejection of Collingwood's philosophy, despite their obvious similarities, that Berlin clarifies the central characteristics of his own philosophy. In this case, it seems like the difference is centred around method, for the themes of their works are remarkably similar. For instance, they share an interest in the history of ideas, an interest which 'is not incidental, or peripheral, to Berlin's liberalism'.¹⁰³ In some of Berlin's later works,¹⁰⁴ he tackles the distinction between natural and human knowledge, a distinction which was essential to Collingwood too. Both thinkers also appear in principle to agree on the notion of human knowledge as *sui generis*, and its crucial demand for a certain degree of identification with the object of study, unlike theory in the natural sciences:

We know how a rock, or a table, behaves because we observe it and make conjectures and verify them; but we do not know why the rock wishes to be as it is – indeed, we think it has no capacity for wishing, or for any other consciousness. But we do know why we are what we are, what we seek, what frustrates us, what expresses our inmost feelings and beliefs; we know more about ourselves than we shall ever know about rocks or streams.¹⁰⁵

This is where the notion of re-enactment and its relationship to Berlin's philosophy becomes interesting. Collingwood observes that we understand human action not by external observation, like we do with natural events, but instead as 're-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind'.¹⁰⁶ This means that the historian has to recreate in her own mind the

¹⁰³ C. Galipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 11.

¹⁰⁴ 'The Concept of Scientific History', 'Does Political Theory still exist?' or 'The Purpose of Philosophy', to name a few (I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b); I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003)).

¹⁰⁵ I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b): 7.

¹⁰⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 215.

process which took place in the minds of those whose lives and actions she is trying to understand. Collingwood goes even further to affirm that re-enactment is involved in any kind of human knowledge, insofar as all human knowledge is, indeed, historical (even self-knowledge): all I know about human beings, or about myself, I must have learnt in the past, and thus it is by re-examination of the facts I knew that I can achieve new knowledge. This view is not too far from the hermeneutic understanding of knowledge as discourse, as seen in the works of Gadamer or Ricoeur,¹⁰⁷ in line with which the current thesis places Berlin's work. The differences between the hermeneutists and Collingwood are, also, the differences between Berlin and Collingwood- differences that have to do mostly with Collingwood's failure to recognise the central role played by contexts in generating meaning and knowledge, which he locates mostly within individual experience. This eliminates the possibility of interpretation in Collingwood, so essential for hermeneutics. Berlin expresses this view by attacking the resulting metaphysical depiction of historical knowledge found in Collingwood:

To conceive what living in a society unlike one's own must be, it is not necessary to introduce the somewhat mystical notion of transporting oneself into the past, or making a timeless flight (as Collingwood comes near to saying) into Caesar's consciousness, which would enable one to know by direct introspective means what it was that made him invade Britain, what his feelings and ambitions and purposes were.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

¹⁰⁸ I. Berlin, 'Is a Philosophy of History Possible?', in Yirmiyahu Yovel (ed.), *Philosophy of history and action: papers presented at the first Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, December 1974* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978c): 223.

It looks like re-enactment is, in effect, far too metaphysical for Berlin's empiricist spirit. The difference is subtle, but meaningful: Collingwood's re-enactment is not Vico's *fantasia* or Herder's *verstehen*.¹⁰⁹ Human knowledge is not the result of internally re-enacting the thought process of others, a process that Berlin describes as a 'quasi-mystical act of literal self-identification with another mind and age',¹¹⁰ but rather the product of a conscious effort to understand and communicate with others despite the impossibility of accessing their minds directly. Berlin's criticism is not the result of an 'uncharacteristic lack of understanding' of Collingwood's philosophy¹¹¹, but rather of a deeper understanding of the sources and implications of value pluralism. Berlin criticises Collingwood for interpreting Vichean *fantasia* as re-enactment,¹¹² for Berlin's understanding is that Vico's take on human knowledge is closer to his own, in that it is devoid of metaphysics and reliant on interpretation. When Berlin argues that human knowledge is different from human sciences because one can understand other human beings, whilst one cannot understand tables or trees, what he is alluding to is the common ground which allows human understanding and communication, and not to a special capacity to recreate the minds of others within one's own mind.

Berlin's notion of understanding shows a fundamental disagreement with Collingwood's philosophy. Unlike Collingwood, Berlin displays a strong acknowledgement of the inescapability of human difference, that which creates plurality and allows us to talk about individuals. By denying the possibility of entering the minds of others, he is indeed recognizing the unbridgeable gap that separates every individual, society and culture from another. In addition to this Berlin's philosophy wants to bring attention to the fact that the possibility of mutual understanding and communication should not always be taken for granted, for the meaning we attribute to values is not universal. Unlike Collingwood, who affirms that 'if the

¹⁰⁹ I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000a).

¹¹⁰ Op.Cit., p 118.

¹¹¹ P. Skagestad, 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66.1 (2005): 104.

¹¹² I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 78.

principles which I accept in my own personal life are valid for me, they must be valid for everyone whose situation is in the relevant respects like my own',¹¹³ Berlin affirms his empirical experience of value pluralism as final over the metaphysical expectation of the possibility of universal understanding spelled out by Collingwood. This expectation for individual communication is also found in a sense in Rawls' work, and this relationship will be explored in chapter five of the dissertation. On the other hand, Berlin's philosophy is rooted in the idea that human communication and understanding are always the result of a conscious effort that begins with a recognition of human differences. Collingwood's re-enactment, with its confidence in the possibility for universal human understanding, looks like a denial of the irreducible fact of value pluralism to Berlin. What allows communication with others to happen – the same one at the heart both of historical knowledge and political argumentation – is not a capacity to transplant oneself into someone else's mind, but, according to Berlin, it is instead the result of our capacity to understand the reasons that individuals provide when justifying their actions within particular contexts. That is to say, according to Berlin there are no universal reasons for actions, but only contextual ones, and yet these have to be held in an absolute and not a relative manner when they are being enacted.

It is in this regard that Berlin and Collingwood find a common ground, as Berlin's interpretative reading of values – the reasons we have for acting in one way or another – looks remarkably alike Collingwood's 'absolute presuppositions'.¹¹⁴ Collingwood maintains that 'every thought we find ourselves thinking is the answer to a question',¹¹⁵ and that these questions arise from presuppositions. Metaphysics, according to Collingwood, is the process of *detangling* our affirmations by means of asking and answering questions. In other words, it is the process that allows us to understand the origins of our thoughts and beliefs, and also to

¹¹³ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928): 170.

¹¹⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 29.31.

¹¹⁵ Op.Cit., p 36.

challenge them, and even to conclude that the beliefs we held were not satisfactorily justified, and that we should abandon them if so. Some of these presuppositions, however, cannot be justified or denied, for there is always a final presupposition we cannot explain or justify no matter how hard we try, and one may even respond to this finding ‘with a certain degree of violence’¹¹⁶, given the challenge they pose to the moral principles which until then we assumed to be the result of rational, logical knowledge. Those presuppositions are the basis of our knowledge – ethical knowledge, in Berlin’s work – and although we may not be able to justify them logically, as the positivists intended to do, we do not feel capable of abandoning them either. This, in Collingwood’s view, is the central notion of metaphysics, and therefore ‘all analysis is metaphysical analysis; and, since analysis is what gives its scientific character to science, science and metaphysics are inextricably united, and stand or fall together’.¹¹⁷ This is the basis of his critique of realism, which he characterises as based upon ‘human stupidity’,¹¹⁸ given how he understands it as a discipline devoid of questions, and as opposed to metaphysics.

The notion of absolute presuppositions is essential in trying to understand Berlin and his relationship to Collingwood. This thesis argues that despite their differences on understanding others, Berlin is in fact an heir to Collingwood’s notion of absolute presuppositions, and he is so even beyond what he explicitly cared to admit throughout his works: once again, it was through Vico and Herder and the philosophy of history that he allowed the notion of values as objective and universal, or that of a human core or a human horizon, to become a central part of his philosophy of value pluralism. All of this will be explored over the next two following chapters. However it is clear that the kernel of these ideas is found in Collingwood too and, as this chapter has been arguing, Berlin’s relationship with Collingwood seems to be much closer than what is commonly acknowledged. In any case, Collingwood’s vocal and open rejection of

¹¹⁶ Op.Cit., p 44.

¹¹⁷ Op.Cit., p 40-1.

¹¹⁸ R. G. Collingwood, 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29, (1928): 34.

realism and fierce defence of metaphysics provides again a good reason to think that Berlin's resistance to be linked with the Oxonian idealist was to a degree the superficial result of having been seduced from an early age by the possibility of a realist ethics – as in Moore, which was explained above – and not of a serious understanding of Collingwood's ideas. It is true, nonetheless, that if there is a metaphysical aspect to value pluralism this is the result of having built up to it from positivist foundations. As reluctant as Berlin is to associate with metaphysics, we see him freely adopting the notion of absolute presuppositions towards the end of his life, in PIRA. In the prologue he already refers to 'what Collingwood used to call the "absolute presuppositions of experience"', as 'categories and concepts which were taken for granted and had been taken for granted before, and seemed to secure to be shaken, too familiar to be worth inspection', and nonetheless, during the French Revolution, were 'altered' by a 'great ferment of ideas'.¹¹⁹ This is one of Berlin's greatest theses, as he explains clearly in TCL too: ideas are what shape societies, politics, and ethics; and these ideas can change and develop over time, and therefore they are historical, just as Collingwood conceded, yet some of them are taken for granted for so long that they can only be shaken or inspected via revolutions. Berlin's work is directed towards making us aware of the fact that our current absolute presuppositions can only be safeguarded by liberalism. And this argument can only be made hermeneutically, that is to say, via a narrative that combines both a historical examination of our ideas, and a philosophical justification of them.

Berlin allows ideas their own identity and autonomy, as if they were in fact part of our empirical experience, only giving relative weight to the context they are tied to, but also acknowledging the crucial role posed by interpretation: ideas do not subsist on their own, but they only exist insofar as they are read, interpreted and held by individuals. And vice-versa,

¹¹⁹ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006):13.

the ideas that shape our context also shape our reading of them. That is hermeneutics, and in that way ideas are not stable and universal in the idealist sense, nor are they entirely tied to their contexts like more Skinnerian interpretations would maintain – and which could ultimately lead towards relativism. As Berlin explains it:

My view of philosophy is coloured by my fascination with the genesis and development of general ideas... There are certain subjects which advance by accumulation... Philosophy is not like that... The questions Plato asked can still be, and indeed are, asked today... The major ideas, outlooks, theories, insights, have remained the central ideas of philosophy. They have a central life of their own which is trans-historical. Some people disagree. They say you can understand questions and ideas in terms of the historical environment in which they occur. (...) There is some truth in that, but only some. Central ideas, the great ideas which have occupied minds in the Western world, have a certain life of their own... but major ideas survive in some sense despite the ignorance of the material aspects or historical details of the world in which they were born and exercised influence.¹²⁰

With this we can conclude that Berlin, trapped between two philosophical cultures – scientific and metaphysical – refuses to reduce all human understanding to re-enactment insofar as it appears as a purely metaphysical and subjective notion. However this does not undermine the scope of the influence which Collingwood had over Berlin's work. As this section has shown, the links are clear and substantial. And yet it is important to understand that Berlin elaborated those influences he received from Collingwood further in order to pursue his own

¹²⁰ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 25.

philosophical path, one which would direct him towards the historical interpretation of political arguments as a means of distilling normative political statements. It is in exploring Berlin's realist roots and Collingwood's influence that the reasons behind Berlin's interest in intellectual history, and in the history of the Enlightenment in particular, become evident. Berlin's interest in Vichian understanding or Herder's *verstehen* highlights two elements fundamental to his method which are absent in Collingwood's. The first one, a strong acknowledgement of the inescapability of human difference, is what, for Berlin, creates plurality and allows us to talk about individuals. This is how his famous value pluralism is born too. By denying the possibility of shedding our own values, of ignoring our own context when trying to examine the thought of others past and present, Berlin is emphasising the crucial fact that individuals, societies and cultures stand separate from each other, and that mutual understanding and communication should not always be taken for granted. Second, Berlin argues, against Collingwood, that all knowledge is interpretation, and not re-enactment, although there is obviously a component of this in it. Human understanding, should it take place, is always the result of an effort, and a great part of Berlin's philosophy is a call precisely to make this effort. For Berlin intellectual history is not made just by explaining as accurately as possible a series of past texts with reference to their own contexts, but it also requires a certain degree of interpretation in which the historian engages the text fully laden with his own concepts and categories. The results of interpretation may or may not be derived *from the text*, but one thing is always true: that as the historian begins to comprehend the text better so she also begins to comprehend herself, as well as her own ideas, concepts, and categories. This is why Berlin chooses history as the vehicle for exploring human nature.

In Berlin's view, historians are always an active part of history, whether they like it or not. This is what interpretation, and *fantasia*, and *verstehen* are about. This approach to intellectual history also generates a discourse richer than a mere recollection and exposition of

past events. The history of ideas is not just a tool for cataloguing past ideas, as if they were museum pieces, but instead a means of bringing them to life and enabling self-understanding. More importantly, by doing so it allows us to unearth the absolute presuppositions of our moral landscape, which are in the end the key to producing normative arguments in politics and ethics. Berlin's point is, however, that holding metaphysical presuppositions as free-standing, self-justifying moral principles alone will not do: it is the process of unearthing them historically and argumentatively – the elaboration of a discourse – that vests them with the normativity that political principles demand. That is to say, to make sense of our moral principles, and to be able to defend them in front of others we need to present them as inserted in wider historical narratives, for it is through them that they acquire their normative weight. And this is why hermeneutics matter to Berlin.

Part Two: Ethics and Meta-Ethics

Chapter Two

What is value pluralism?

‘Pluralism: the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability, of the values of different cultures and societies, and, in addition, in the incompatibility of equally valid ideals, together with the implied revolutionary corollary that the classical notions of an ideal man and of an ideal society are intrinsically incoherent and meaningless’.¹

1. Introduction.

John Gray opens his 1995 book on Berlin by stating that all of Berlin’s work is ‘animated by a single idea of enormous subversive force ... value pluralism’.² Many scholars have followed suit, and as explained in the introduction, most of the studies that take Berlin seriously as a political thinker are in fact analyses on value pluralism and its alleged links to liberalism. I do not wish to deny the centrality of value pluralism in Berlin’s thought, however, on the account presented in this thesis, it should be understood as only one of the faces in which the division between human and natural knowledge that sits at the heart of his philosophy manifests itself. Berlin’s work is ultimately informed by a profound understanding of the special demands of human knowledge stemming out of a consideration of human beings as possessing a special status insofar as they are ethical creatures. This is what Berlin refers to as the ‘humanist view... of human society’,³ a notion that will be described in depth in chapter four. It is from this view

¹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind : An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 368.

² Gray goes as far as affirming that ‘all of Berlin’s work is animated by a single idea of enormous subversive force... value pluralism’ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c): 1

³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 207.

where a series of dichotomies which persist throughout his entire oeuvre are drawn: human versus scientific knowledge, value pluralism versus monism, positive versus negative freedom, and so on. To this extent, Berlin presents two competing and conflicting understandings of human nature, differentiating clearly between those who stand on the side of pluralism and all the elements associated with it, and those whose views and beliefs ultimately rest on a monist conception of our moral universe.⁴ Understanding the difference between what is human and what is not, drawing the line between human and natural knowledge, between science and politics or positive and negative liberty underlies the entirety of Berlin's oeuvre: 'these conflicting humanistic and non-humanistic definitions of freedom, the latter of many kinds... all these appear ultimately to depend partly upon the views held of what men are like, how they behave, and what are the results of the interplay between them and other forces'.⁵ A significant portion of Berlin's work is in fact aimed at providing a clear characterisation of these dichotomies, and his defence of liberalism cannot be understood without having a clear image of them. It is undeniable that a strong link between value pluralism and liberalism exists, not only within Berlin's outlook, but in more general terms as well. However the origins and consequences of this connection vary greatly depending on different epistemological and ontological understandings of both concepts. As central a place as value pluralism clearly occupies within Berlin's works, it is also true that the definitions of this notion that he provides are multiple and generally open to interpretation. As a result of this, any readings of Berlin that float around the notion of pluralism tend to differ fairly strongly with each other. I intend to explore value pluralism with the aim of providing a clearer picture of the term, especially in order to show how its value and implications are changed when placed within the larger hermeneutic argument that this thesis identifies as the central argument in Berlin. In particular,

⁴ Op.Cit., p 205.

⁵ Op.Cit., p 207.

the main characteristic to be highlighted about value pluralism by the end of the following two chapters is its meta-ethical character. That is to say, value pluralism will be described as non-normative, thereby contradicting a large portion of Berlinean scholarship, such as the works of John Gray or George Crowder.⁶ It is important to do this, first, given the considerable disagreement on this point as shown by most existing scholarship, and second – even more importantly – because the implications that value pluralism has in defining liberalism will be different depending on what kind of theory it is understood to be. In order to build this argument, however, some specific elements of value pluralism will have to be analysed. This chapter follows Gray in his definition of the status of value pluralism as ‘internal realism’,⁷ a grey territory between Idealism and realism,⁸ between cognitivism and non-cognitivism,⁹ which nonetheless combines elements from both approaches. This detailed analysis should not be regarded as a mere means to an end, however, as it also serves a purpose of its own. Some of the characteristics of value pluralism elucidated in the following two chapters will reveal the hermeneutic traits of Berlin’s method, while others will also provide the basis for the argument on Berlin’s neo-Kantian ethics, as portrayed in chapter four.

This chapter begins with the concept of value as found in Berlin’s works. It argues that values are finite, objective and universal, and that what makes human attitudes and points of view different are the particular systems of value that human beings compose using a more or less universal set of values. After this, it will move towards providing a definition of value pluralism as a meta-ethical category.

⁶ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Political Theory and Contemporary Politics; London, New York: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK Polity, 2004); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', Refereed Paper Presented to the Political Studies Australasian Society (2003); J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b); J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

⁷ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: HarperCollins, 1995c).

⁸ J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007).

⁹ D. Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (New York: Cornell University, 1988).

2. What is value?

‘Values are not discovered but invented... Ideals and goals were not found, they were created’.¹⁰

It is hard to provide a definition of value pluralism without establishing the meaning of ‘value’ in the first place. However, this is such a broad task that it could constitute the subject matter of a dissertation on its own. This chapter will therefore only limit its definition of value to an analysis of the meanings that the term acquires within Berlin’s work. In accordance with his general style, Berlin does not elaborate a detailed and systematic theory of value in which he thoroughly explains its origins and characteristics – but some of these can still be deduced from his work. In addition to this, this section introduces the notion of systems of values, and argues that Berlin’s value pluralism refers to pluralism of these rather than to pluralism of single values as discreet entities. That is to say, the main point to be taken away at the end of this section will be that value pluralism refers to the existence of a finite number of objective values which can be universally recognised, however individuals value them differently and rank them in different systems of value. This is how the ethical diversity observed by Berlin arises. This reading of his work challenges relativistic understandings of value pluralism, by providing them with verifiable meaning within particular contexts. It also reinforces his links with Collingwood by portraying the objective nature of values as a notion akin to that of the absolute presuppositions spelled out by the Oxonian idealist philosopher.

¹⁰ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 10.

2.1. The objectivity of value.

In a basic sense, ‘values’, ‘ends’ and ‘purposes’ are equivalent terms for Berlin: ‘purposes – ends, values which we strive to realise’.¹¹ Values are for Berlin that which gives human actions meaning or a sense of purpose, as opposed to the lives and actions of plants and objects, or to the universe as a whole, which lacks, in Berlin’s view, this sense of purpose: ‘we understand what we mean by purpose or by value only when we contrast it with what does not have it, namely the world of natural objects’.¹² By establishing this, Berlin settles one of the essential distinctions of his thought: between fact and value, between scientific and human knowledge, between what is human and what is not. He is adamant in denying values as observable in the same way as the physical elements of our universe are. He denies values ‘to be ingredients of the universe, to be found in it by whatever faculty it was with which investigators had classified the inventory of the world’.¹³ This responds to his preoccupation with the distinction between the human and the natural sciences, the same preoccupation that arose during his early years in Oxford, as described in the previous chapter. Berlin challenges strongly the belief, which in PIRA he locates as having been born in the Enlightenment, that to say that a thing is ‘good or bad, right or wrong’ is to produce ‘a descriptive statement’.¹⁴ By establishing this it is stated that albeit appropriate to call them objective,¹⁵ the objectivity of values is not similar to that of scientific data. Berlin denies that the process of producing value judgements can in any way be similar to that of providing verifiable statements that can be proven as right or wrong, like science does. However, he concedes that there is a degree of ‘truth’ within ethical statements, and that this can be verified. Nonetheless, this truth is not by any means verifiable by the same methods as in science. Thus, if value statements are not verifiable in terms of truth or falsehood,

¹¹ Op.Cit., p 137.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Op.Cit., p 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 79.

like in science, how can we describe values as ‘objective’ at all? The answer to this question is a complex one, and it opens up a window that unveils part of the hermeneutic composition of Berlin’s theory of value pluralism. The objectivity of value comes given, first, by the meanings we attribute to them: values are objective because they are ‘simply facts about the people who hold them’,¹⁶ and second, by their character as shared elements between all the individuals of a given society. Values act, in fact, a little bit like the ultimate presuppositions described by Collingwood:¹⁷ when critically examined, our convictions will unveil some fundamental moral commitments that we are not willing to do without, even though we cannot justify them in a logical way.¹⁸ This objectivity of value is not comparable to that of the objectivity of our experience of tangible objects, or that of logical constructs, but they are still to be conceived of as *objective*. Another reason why it can be assured that Berlin conceives values as objective, and in fact, as ‘equally objective’,¹⁹ is that he describes them as finite and universally shared.²⁰ This implies that their meaning is universally understood, even if their practice is not shared: values like freedom, equality, love or honesty have universal validity, if not equal weight for all human societies and individuals. This means that the objectivity of value is achieved, a bit like the Heideggerian conception of *publicness* in Dasein,²¹ by their collective experience of them in society. When we make a choice between two moral goods ‘it is not a matter of purely

¹⁶ J. Cherniss and H. Hardy, 'Isaiah Berlin', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>), (2013), Last accessed July 2016

¹⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁸ This definition of value may seem conducive to extremism – the unwillingness to discuss one’s own moral convictions, and the will to assert it over that of others – however as it will be seen throughout the thesis, the context of pluralism generates a space of self-consciousness (akin to that delineated by Bernard Williams B. in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985)) that makes individuals aware always of the relative validity of their own values, demanding a constantly reflective and critical approach to one’s own moral convictions. This generates the space necessary for discussion and consideration of the values of others – a position that stands opposite moral extremism.

¹⁹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 79.

²⁰ Steven Lukes provides a thorough account of this aspect of Berlin’s philosophy in his *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (New York: Verso, 2003), especially in ch. 7

²¹ ‘Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted...’ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978): 165.

subjective judgement, 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, whether or not they are in conflict, by the majority of mankind throughout recorded history'.²² This way, Berlin insists, the objectivity of value is not something derived from empirical observation of tangible or logical facts, as with science, but instead we attain a sense of the specific content of values 'from the inside', in the course of our lives and experience as human beings. Thus, once we reject ideal theories of values, ethical knowledge is devoid of stable points of reference like science, and history becomes the pool of knowledge from where the reflection on the content of values is extracted. We cannot achieve a sense of definitive truth in ethics to the extent in which we have it in biology or chemistry, but we can verify the truthfulness of our convictions by critically reflecting on their origins and their standing in the world. In this respect Berlin is very close to Bernard Williams' rejection of philosophy as a means for achieving ethical knowledge, a similarity that will be analysed in depth in chapter five.²³ The objective dimension of values is particularly relevant insofar as it allows the understanding of 'worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own'.²⁴ Human beings are able to understand and relate to cultures different from their own because being human means precisely having access to the universal meaning of values: 'what men have made, other men can understand'.²⁵ This is how communication between different cultures is possible, though an exercise of 'sympathy and understanding'²⁶ is necessary in order to unveil the raw values that lie beneath the complex systems they are ingrained into. This is what Berlin calls imagination and what Vico calls *fantasia*, the notion

²² I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind : An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 15.

²³ B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁴ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 9.

²⁵ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 60.

²⁶ Op.Cit., p 47.

that we can always identify in others the same values we hold ourselves by making an effort in our minds, for these values are ultimately finite and objective for all:

Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible only because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them. But our values are ours, and theirs are theirs. 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.²⁷

This idea may sound dangerously similar to Platonic Idealism in some aspects, but it is in reality very far from it. Values are not known as abstract, discreet, absolute values, for value pluralism does not acknowledge the existence of values in such a form. Values, as will be explained in the chapter on Berlinean ethics, are the creation of men, and do not precede them. We know them as part of our experience, that is to say, integrated in our systems of values, and we can in some way isolate them and at most exercise our imagination enough in order to understand the way in which others have considered them differently within their systems of value. This is not Platonic Idealism. If values could be contemplated in their perfect form, as Platonic Idealism affirms, the exercise of fantasia would not be necessary when engaging with others. Only Enlightened knowledge would allow understanding between individuals insofar as they were able to observe rights in their *true* form.²⁸ There exists ‘a world of objective

²⁷ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 9.

²⁸ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

values'²⁹ which form what Berlin famously called the 'human horizon'³⁰ or the 'human chore'.³¹ However this world is at the same time the direct product of our ethical experience and cultural and historical contexts, and it does not precede them. More importantly, far from being eternal values in the Platonic sense, the meaning and content of these objective values can be altered over time, like Collingwood's absolute presuppositions. Not all human beings attribute the same relevance to the same set of values, but they all have a certain notion of the *meaning* of all existing values. This meaning is not formed as the result of abstract philosophical analysis, but in the experience of individuals as members of societies and cultures that have shaped the meaning of such notions overtime. This is not subjectivism, relativism or nihilism, for there is a public dimension to the meaning of values, first; and second, because ethical convictions can be, to a degree, critically examined. That is exactly what Berlin does throughout his work when arguing for the need to observe value pluralism and accommodate it politically: he does not produce this argument as a truth-claim, but instead as a hermeneutic argument that reflects on the historical development of our current values and the political demands attached to them. In this regard there is an undeniable objective dimension to values insofar as they are public, or that they can be seen, indeed, as facts of human life. It could be said, too, that there is also a degree to subjectivity in their composition insofar as our knowledge of them stems out of individual experience: values cannot be held up for collective examination and evaluation like facts can. Nonetheless this apparent contradiction between the objective or subjective nature of values can be subverted whenever we think of ethical knowledge as a *sui generis* kind of knowledge, as expressed by Berlin, where these categories of knowledge do

²⁹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 9.

³⁰ Op.Cit., p 10.

³¹ In pp 293-297 of G. Crowder and H. Hardy, *The One and the Many : Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007)., the two authors provide an appendix titled 'Berlin's universal values- core or horizon?' in which they try to throw some light over the difference of the two notions. This thesis will treat them as rough equivalents.

not apply.³² Ethical knowledge happens hermeneutically instead, as an interpretative exercise on the shared value notions we experience within specific contexts. The objectivity of value in this case has to do with their finite and universal nature as defined by Berlin. Pluralism of value is not the result of an unlimited plurality of values that are culture-specific, but rather of the endless combinations produced with these values. That is to say, individuals observe systems of value and not isolated values. Clashes of value have to do with the different hierarchical ways in which these are ranked. The next section will explain this in more detail.

2.2. Systems of value.

The previous section brought up a series of questions on the nature of clashes of value. Many critics and readers of Berlin³³ see in his writings the depiction of two kinds of values: first, certain values which we should call ‘objective’, identical for all of us, and which enable cross-cultural communication; and second, other values that are referred to as ‘subjective’, which, being upheld only by certain individuals, create the plurality of outlooks in life central to value pluralism. This highlights a seeming contradiction between the claim that values are universal and objective, and the differing one that described them as the product of individual, autonomous choices. Also, it seems difficult to argue that they clash and are at times incompatible, while at the same time portraying them as facilitating intercommunication and mutual understanding between different societies and individuals. This lack of clarity about the two levels of value pluralism has understandably earned Berlin much criticism. For instance, this apparent ambivalence constitutes one of Gray’s main points of criticism of Berlin’s theory of liberalism. Curiously enough, Gray is at the same time perfectly happy to defend the notion

³² I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

³³ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Political Theory and Contemporary Politics; London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b).

of culturally exclusive values.³⁴ These challenges are answered by arguing that Berlin's value theory portrays systems of values as plural and subject to endless configurations, but the values that compose them as finite. It is not that we pick values from a catalogue of independent entities and follow them through life, nor that, when faced with situations that require us to choose, we decide to act respecting one value we pick among all the available ones. Instead, ethical conviction is the result of observing different systems of value in which a set of values are combined following some internal logic, and responding to certain hierarchical orderings. Systems of value are largely inherited from and influenced by the cultures to which individuals belong, however this does not mean that they are assimilated uncritically. This is a particular sign of modernity, a characteristic that Berlin signals as having shaped the development of Europe from the Enlightenment onwards.³⁵ The need for individual validation of value systems will be examined in the following chapter, and it also constitutes the subject matter of chapter four. Furthermore, this characterisation of modernity as carrying the mark of autonomous and critical reflection on values is depicted as key in the constitution both of Joseph Rawls' and Bernard Williams' theories of liberalism in chapters five and six respectively.³⁶ It is precisely this configuration and observance of different systems of values what gives individuals a sense of individuality, and the clearer mark of their autonomous character. With this re-interpretation of human values as systems of value composed by universally objective values, this dissertation is able to shield Berlin's theory of value pluralism against accusations of ambiguity or incoherence.³⁷

³⁴ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c).

³⁵ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

³⁶ What Rawls refers to as 'constitutional democratic cultures' (J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 44,126), and Williams as the 'self-consciousness' (B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 163) he associates with 'modernity'.

³⁷ J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b); J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

For example, we say that there is pluralism of values not because subject A believes in value X and subject B believes in value Y, and subject A is blind to the meaning of Y while subject B is blind to that value X. Instead we say A values X over Y, and B values Y over X. When I say that abortion is immoral and you disagree, our disagreement ultimately springs out of the fact that our ethical outlooks are shaped by different systems of value – maybe so complex that breaking them down completely into ‘simple’ values might not even be possible – within which we can definitely identify certain values as being more relevant than others, and this is how we allow certain values to steer our actions in particular ways. For me it is a fundamental respect of human life that informs my argument, whereas for you nothing can be more important than the right of women to choose what to do with their own bodies. Equality versus liberty, but you might still hold equality as valuable in some way, and so do I with liberty. Thus, values can be both universally understood but singularly interpreted, and we can disagree with other outlooks but still understand and judge them. This is due to the fact that when Berlin is talking about *values as ends of life* he is referring to *systems of value* as that which determines our ends, and not isolated values. Systems of values are, in short, those ‘beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do...’³⁸ Even when certain values are entirely disregarded, their meaning is not lost. The kind of values which Berlin is looking at in his work – ‘love and honour, public and private loyalties, liberty and equality, individual genius and society’³⁹ – point at the ‘generic character’ that human nature, ‘however various and subject to change... must possess if it is to be called human at all’.⁴⁰

³⁸ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 1.

³⁹ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

⁴⁰ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 80. This idea is also closely related to the Berlinean humanist project, with its rootedness in a fundamental respect of that which makes men human, differentiating them from other creatures and objects of the universe. The key difference is, for Berlin, precisely the autonomous observance of values that give direction and meaning to human lives, unlike what happens with other creatures and elements of our universe. This idea is explored further below.

Different individuals across different societies and in different historical times have led different lives as a result of giving more or less importance to some of these values, of favouring some of them over others. What makes moral outlooks differ is not that they observe values that are completely alien to each other, as if they were words of a foreign language, describing a never-seen object, but simply the fact that they rank these universally recognisable values differently. The need to favour some values over others is the result of their inherent incompatibility and incommensurability, which will be looked at in the next chapter, and of the internal demand of these systems to be *coherent* in order to work as action guiding systems.⁴¹ Values, as objective and universal, make communication between human beings, groups, societies and whole cultures possible, but their constitution into different systems is also responsible for the creation of insolvable divisions between individuals and whole cultures. That is to say, their weight within different systems is mutable and subjective. Systems of value change over time: some ideas develop and grow, others lose their lustre until being forgotten and discarded. The systems of value that determine human lives are not the perfect, abstract, eternal and immutable values of Platonic Idealism. Their meaning is local and contingent, however this does not make value pluralism a relativistic theory. To this extent, it could be said that systems of value are in Berlin's definition concrete universals: they are far from eternal and universal, yet while being observed within specific contexts their validity is by all means final.

⁴¹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 80.

3. Value pluralism as a meta-ethical theory.

This section argues that value pluralism as outlined by Berlin should be regarded as a meta-ethical argument.⁴² That is to say, value pluralism does not stand as a normative theory containing particular commandments. It only provides an account of the origin, structure and role of values that constitute the moral universe of individuals. Value pluralism has attached to it nonetheless certain normative implications that condition the kind of normative theories that are possible or desirable. In Berlin's case, value pluralism is used as the backdrop of his justification of liberalism: the normativity of liberalism is not extracted from value pluralism, however value pluralism defines the setting in which our ethical pronouncements are to take place without defining their contents. This delineation of ethical limits is key to understanding the emergence of value pluralism as almost exclusively a negative version of monism, motivated by demonstrating the implausibility and the dangers of theories which try to deny the limits established by our moral experience. As we saw in chapter one, Berlin is faced with the reductionism of the 1930s Oxford Philosophy early in his career, and his value pluralism is to an extent a reaction to this. Value pluralism states the impossibility of theories of virtue that aim for the complete dissolution of conflict, since values are plural and often incompatible, and this incompatibility is in fact final due to the incommensurability of values. All these traits of value pluralism will be looked at closely in the following chapter. To begin with, it should be made clear that value pluralism stands against monism, the view that

‘all men have one true purpose, and one only, that of rational self-direction; second, that the ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a single universal,

⁴² Normative statements can be produced using value pluralism as a strong basis for them, but this normative face of value pluralism is only an elaboration separate from it, and never a logical conclusion of it. This idea will be explored on the chapter on chapter 4.

harmonious pattern, which some men may be able to discern more clearly than others; third, that all conflict, and consequently all tragedy, is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational or the insufficiently rational – the immature and undeveloped elements in life, whether individual or communal – and that such clashes are, in principle, avoidable, and for wholly rational beings impossible; finally, that when all men have been made rational, they will obey the rational laws of their own natures, which are one and the same in them all, and so be at once wholly law-abiding and wholly free.’⁴³

However value pluralism on its own does not provide the normative arguments we need in order to spell out a sound rejection of monism: it only states that values and systems of values are plural and incompatible, that they clash, and that these clashes of value are often final and unavoidable. It only states how things are, not how they ought to be. The normative argument against monism is present in Berlin’s work, however unlike what some scholars of Berlin have argued, the implication is not that value pluralism entails liberalism. There is a moral theory that runs through Berlin’s work, but that is not value pluralism. Instead, what we find is a subtle and refined hermeneutic reading of European history commanding us to reject monist ethics. The next two sections will proceed to explain why value pluralism should not be considered a normative theory, but instead a meta-ethical or first-order ethical theory. This should throw some light over the ongoing debate surrounding the connection between liberalism and value pluralism, which is to a great extent derived from an unclear understanding of the theoretical status of value pluralism.

⁴³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 225.

3.1. Value pluralism and Berlin's methodological approach.

The complex ontological status of value pluralism is a perfect example of Berlin's characteristically eclectic approach to philosophy. Berlin writes in a way that is more narrative than systematic, and incorporates elements and approaches from many different philosophical traditions in order to compose his own arguments. This, against what both the historical and philosophical critiques of his work have argued at times, does not necessarily imply inconsistencies, but almost the opposite. In fact, it is the main point of this dissertation to argue how the strength of Berlin's argument resides precisely in his hermeneutic methodology. In order to see this, a hermeneutic reading of Berlin's method is required: as the introduction has explained, when put in context, Berlin's work showcases a synthesis of both analytical and historical approaches to philosophy, and an understanding of ethical knowledge that aims to be as grounded in empirical experience as possible, without reducing ethical ideals to pure 'nonsense'⁴⁴ as the Oxford realists did. For instance, in the view of logical positivists like Ayer, a figure of great influence in Berlin's formative years, first-order ethics were not a properly philosophical attitude at all insofar as they were not capable of truth or falsehood.⁴⁵ Even if Berlin turned his back on Oxford Philosophy to become what he called 'a historian of ideas',⁴⁶ he did not completely shed his positivist roots there and then either. This can be seen, for instance, in his insistence on differentiating facts and values throughout his work. As has been explained in the introduction and first chapter, Berlin's obsession with this distinction is central to his work, and what ends up launching him into hermeneutics. However, unlike some the hermeneutic thinkers that were to come after him – such as Gadamer or Ricoeur, or even Bernard Williams if this categorisation can be stretched out a little – Berlin does not seem to see clearly how facts and values collapse into an integrated whole when it comes to reflectively

⁴⁴ R. Carnap, *The Unity of Science* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1934): 26-7.

⁴⁵ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a); A. J. Ayer, *Metaphysics and Common Sense* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1970).

⁴⁶ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981): xxvi.

analysing the history of ideas as a means for generating normative statements, which is the main task he performs in his works. Still, Berlin's road to hermeneutics is a long and winding one at times, and in many ways 'a more accurate description of Berlin would be one that describes him as suspended between two philosophical worlds, rather than as a zealous member of one camp alone'.⁴⁷ Value pluralism is an excellent example of this. Even if Berlin devotes a great part of his work from the end of the thirties onwards to express the inadequacy of holding logical positivism as the only valid method of philosophical inquiry,⁴⁸ he also avoids building a purely metaphysical theory of ethics. As a result of this he only finds a comfortable niche for his value pluralism somewhere between positivism and metaphysics, between idealism and realism. This is what gives his value pluralism its distinctive meta-ethical character, grounded in empirical experience but amply inclusive of notions with a long metaphysical resonance too. It is for this reason that Berlin has been called an 'anthropological historicist'⁴⁹ who roots his philosophy in the conclusion that man is irreducibly diverse. Berlin's anthropological eye is one that examines the historical need of man to develop its life in a plurality of ways, often conflictive and always constitutively incommensurable. Historical knowledge and empirical experience cannot argue on their own that monism is unattainable, but they can act as a basis from which to build such an argument. After all, our past shows signs of perennial disorder above all, not of the cosmic order advocated by the monist theories that tried so eagerly to end it. Berlin was indeed repelled by the idea of a 'fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions, each within his own rigorously defined province, in the rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy of the perfect society'.⁵⁰ And even considering

⁴⁷ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 55.,

⁴⁸ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981); I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996); I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b).

⁴⁹ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c).

⁵⁰ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 123.

this, Berlin's argument is not a conservative reflection on our political history of pluralism. Instead he uses history as a reflective tool from which to develop the discourse that will support his defence of individuals above ideals in order to prevent the great totalitarianisms of the past from happening again. Berlin's first building block is that 'it is a fundamental feature of our ordinary experience that goods conflict, just as it is that we are free subjects, not deterministic objects'.⁵¹ Berlin sticks to this fundamental empirical knowledge partly because, as Gray maintains, 'we do not have the theory to displace these phenomenological certainties'.⁵² Thus, Berlin's pluralism is a kind of 'internal realism',⁵³ which 'conceives of values or reasons for action, not as external Platonistic entities of some sort, but as truths about our natures and practices'.⁵⁴ Cherniss and Hardy affirm this too when analysing the objective face of Berlin's values, by insisting that for Berlin 'the belief in or pursuit of certain values is the result of objective realities of human nature'.⁵⁵ This is how we should make sense of Berlin's self-description as 'a kind of realist'.⁵⁶ The 'objective' character of value pluralism, that which keeps it separated from scepticism, relativism, subjectivism and nihilism, lies in the fact that we have an objective sense of knowledge about the plural character of our moral reality with all that this entails. This notion may seem slippery, and maybe it is so to an extent when compared to the kind of knowledge we are accustomed to in the sciences. However Berlin is not alone in claiming the particular character of ethical knowledge. As the first chapter explained, Collingwood asserts something distinctively similar when outlining the notion of ultimate presuppositions.⁵⁷ These are normative statements that cannot be logically verified, however that does not affect their validity. On the other hand, chapter six will look into

⁵¹ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c): 62.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c): 73.

⁵⁴ J. Gray, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 297.

⁵⁵ Cherniss, Joshua and Hardy, Henry (2013), 'Isaiah Berlin', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>), July 2016

⁵⁶ I. Berlin and S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, 52-135 (1998): 76.

⁵⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

Williams' notion of ethical knowledge as *sui generis*, and his proposition that ethical matters do in fact escape the limits of philosophical reflection.⁵⁸ Berlin's theory of pluralism can be placed in line with these understandings of ethical knowledge, and it is ultimately dependant both on historical reflection and abstract reasoning. By combining elements from both traditions, value pluralism does not appear as weak or inconsistent, but instead it displays a robustness difficult to trump. Its strengths resides in the fact that it elaborates a conceptual system of values that is both philosophically coherent and also backed up by our empirical experience as human beings, as well as by our historical knowledge of European values.

4. The meta-ethical character: ethics as a special kind of knowledge.

Value pluralism stems from 'the realisation, which came as something of a shock, that not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another'.⁵⁹ Value pluralism is the basis of a broader argument which runs through the entirety of Berlin's oeuvre, drawing a line between human and scientific knowledge. Knowledge about human beings – about what they feel, what moves them to act, how they make choices and decide to pursue one life instead of another – cannot be grasped in the way science does, for, Berlin explains, the answers to these questions are not observable like scientific facts are. Human knowledge is of a special kind, given the indeterminacy and complexity of its sources, as it always involves not only knowledge of facts, but also a certain degree of individual *interpretation*. Understanding human behaviour is not only a matter of reading facts, but almost more importantly it requires of a certain intuition, a certain imagination or *fantasia* which conjures a notion of knowledge that is not fully comprehensible

⁵⁸ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

⁵⁹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 7.

in scientific terms. The existence of a *human horizon* is what allows for this interpretation, this *understanding*, to take place. On the other hand, any scientific understanding of man is the product of a monist understanding of reality. As Berlin explains in PIRA, before Kant there was not an understanding of ethics in which man's autonomous character was acknowledged, for the recognition of this autonomy lead to a denial of monism, 'the proposition that there must be a generally accepted 'objective' truth about behaviour, which is attainable, as there are generally accepted truths about the external world or in geometry'.⁶⁰ It is partly in order to challenge this that Berlin builds his theory of value pluralism, with the aim of denying the Enlightened and Christians notions that, when it comes to ethics, 'virtue is knowledge', a knowledge which is 'objectively true' and 'must consist in facts – or patterns of things or persons or other entities – which are what they are independently of thoughts, doubts, questions about them'.⁶¹ Monism asserts that there is one truth only, and that moral dilemmas are the result of incomplete or wrong knowledge. The totalitarianisms that Berlin wants to challenge are rooted in a monistic understanding of morals: in his view most despots were not evil, but in fact well-intentioned. What was wrong with Stalin were his monist foundations, and that is what value pluralism wishes to challenge. This reasoning is particularly visible in his analysis of Joseph de Maistre's counter-Enlightened revolutionary ideals during the French Revolution. He refers to him as 'a remarkable, and terrifying, prophet of our day',⁶² and shows him antagonising the Enlightened thinkers, whom Maistre accuses of having misunderstood 'the processes both of history and of the human soul by applying to them categories which at best can be useful only in dealing with chemistry or mathematics'.⁶³ Instead, Maistre tried to find the answers to questions on human aims and goals – that is to say, answers to questions on

⁶⁰ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 137.

⁶¹ Op.Cit., p 23.

⁶² I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 174.

⁶³ Op.Cit., p 114.

politics and ethics – in ‘religion, and in history, as the embodiment of the inner pattern which at best we see darkly and intermittently by placing ourselves in the great framework of the tradition of our society, of its modes of feeling and action and thought – in which alone is truth’.⁶⁴ In this way, Berlin places Maistre on the side of the counter-Enlightenment, linking him to German Romantics such as Schelling and Hamann. The ‘inner pattern’ that history delivers, Maistre states, is one that shows human nature as confrontational and bloodied, as responding to passions and emotions that cannot be underpinned by the cold principles of science or reason, and that demand a strong approach to politics in order to be harnessed and directed towards ‘the goal towards which the universe – conceived almost as an animate organism – is striving’.⁶⁵ It is in this teleological and realist conception of history that Berlin locates the origins of modern fascism: his contention against the Enlightenment is not, as Waldron has argued,⁶⁶ that all of it was bad insofar as rooted in nationalism, but instead that it was wrong insofar as it unquestionably followed a monistic and teleological view of human nature. In the same essay he also writes that ‘in order truly to understand the central doctrines of an original thinker, it is necessary, in the first place, to grasp the particular vision of the universe which lies at the heart of his thought, rather than attend the logic of his arguments,’⁶⁷ and furthermore, that Maistre, ‘like all serious political thinkers... has before his mind a view of the nature of man’.⁶⁸ The main breach in politics and ethics that Berlin observes during his time is defined by the two major outlooks on the nature of human beings represented by monism and pluralism. Regardless of the internal logics of their arguments, monists are, for Berlin, simply wrong about human nature, and consequently their attempts to govern societies are doomed to failure. Unless we understand that men are essentially autonomous and that

⁶⁴ Op.Cit., p 115.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ J. Waldron, ‘Isaiah Berlin’s Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism’, *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 161.

⁶⁸ Op.Cit., p 124.

value pluralism is here to stay, we are condemned to reproducing the same errors of the past over and over again. Berlin uses his historical analysis to demonstrate this narratively. Joseph de Maistre's example is a particularly suited one to the argument of this thesis insofar as it pinpoints the fact that Berlin's defence of liberalism is not about rejecting rationalism and embracing historicism, but rather as admitting pluralism first and then finding the method that better suits the pursuit of answers in ethics and politics considering the condition of pluralism. In Berlin's case this is a hybrid approach that combines history and philosophy, or what this thesis calls a hermeneutic approach. As this section argues, and his analysis of Joseph de Maistre highlights, Berlin does not see anything wrong in empiricist or scientific approaches to politics *per se*, but his issue is instead with the ultimate conceptions of human nature that justify such a methodological choice.

By acknowledging the inescapability of conflict, the scientific view of politics – as a descriptive science – is also discarded by Berlin. He cannot ignore what he observes empirically, and asks himself: 'if nature is a harmonious whole, why is it that one man's happiness often seems incompatible with that of another, that there is a struggle for wealth, power, existence itself in which the virtuous are often defeated and ruined?'.⁶⁹ Even if it is only for the sake of coherence, monism cannot be accepted as an account of the reality we inhabit, especially when applied to the realm of ethics or politics. The orderly worlds described by monism could be, at most, a blueprint for a utopian future. But Berlin's elaboration of value pluralism as a reflection on the history of ideas and empirical experience is dismissive of this possibility. Value pluralism, when seen in this light, does not make any normative claims, for it simply points out historical misconceptions, directing us towards a new and more accurate understanding of our moral landscape. If human knowledge does not exist merely as dry, solid

⁶⁹ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 47.

facts, if there is a great deal of interpretation and understanding involved in it, the provision of a univocal, universal and absolute normative moral code is a completely inadequate method for dealing with ethical problems, for it does not make use of the tools that issues related to human nature demand. This is why Berlin establishes a theory which, far from defining norms, describes only the *limits* of what is possible or coherent for ethical theories to aim for. It is in this regard that he is adamant in affirming that our experience of man as a free and autonomous entity, whose values are at times incompatible, is not the result of a flawed perception or understanding, or of a current lack of knowledge. Value pluralism strives to establish that these experiences of human nature provide a picture of all there is, and that the solution to our ethical and political problems does not reside in some hidden knowledge about a cosmic order which we are yet to discover. Instead, value pluralism argues, we inhabit an ethical environment which demands the pursuit of our goals in full awareness of their relative validity, as well as of the inherent contradictions of our nature and the impossibility to overcome clashes of value implied by this. This does not mean that value pluralism as defined in Berlin states that values *are* plural and therefore they *ought* to be plural, as some readers have interpreted;⁷⁰ but simply that values are plural, often incompatible, and that this poses certain constraints to what we can and we cannot aim to achieve in our ethical and political lives. Just like Newton's law of universal gravitation does not tell us that we should not jump out of a seventh floor window, but merely that if one does, it will have fatal consequences, value pluralism only warns us about the implausibility of the ethical aims posited by monist perceptions of the world. Even if ethics are not like science and the future consequences of human actions cannot be predicted, we can be sure of the fatal consequences of negating value pluralism. This is what we call hermeneutic knowledge. A close look at the history and development of our current ethical and political

⁷⁰ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Political Theory and Contemporary Politics; London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', Refereed Paper Presented to the Political Studies Australasian Conference (2003).

ideals, as carried out by Berlin, validates the notion of man as essentially autonomous as one of the ultimate presuppositions of our time. ‘We must say that the world in which what we see as incompatible values are not in conflict is a world altogether beyond our ken’, that is to say, for us, modern Europeans, a world without value pluralism is ‘not merely unattainable... but conceptually incoherent’.⁷¹

5. Conclusions.

This chapter has argued that value pluralism is a meta-ethical theory, an argument that challenges a sizeable portion of the existing literature on Berlin. There are in his work normative claims but these, albeit related to value pluralism, are not a direct consequence of it. The meta-ethical character of value pluralism as present in Berlin draws from two different philosophical traditions – empiricism and idealism – showing the great mark that the Oxonian intellectual context he experienced during his early academic years left in his work. In the end, value pluralism has to be read as a hermeneutic theory. To this extent, value pluralism reveals itself as a meta-ethical theory with strong empirical roots which places a special emphasis on historical knowledge, constantly redirecting analysis towards experience and history, or even anthropology, as Gray argues, as its frame of particular reference. Value pluralism affirms both that values are universal and objective and, at the same time, different for each individual and society and even incompatible between them: another mark of the middle ground that it occupies. This potential contradiction has been transcended in this thesis by proposing a rejection of the extended understanding of value pluralism as positing the existence of two different kinds of value: universal and objective values on the one hand, and subjective, plural

⁷¹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 11.

values on the other. Instead, this thesis adopts a different reading which understands all values as universal and objective, based on Berlin's claim that values are all finite and equally objective, as well as in the related allusions to the possibility of intercultural understanding, or even the existence of what is referred to as a human horizon. On this view, the plurality of values is derived from a plurality of culture-specific and individually-constituted *systems of value*. This allows Berlin to keep the notion of a human horizon common to all individuals, as well as the universality of values that allows for an understanding of and the critical engagement with moral theories different from our own. This notion of systems of value is crucial insofar as it raises the issue of the coherence and consistency of systems of value, which points us towards two equally relevant directions for this thesis. On the one hand, in order to understand why systems of value have to be coherent it is necessary to explore notions like the incommensurability or incompatibility of value, a task completed in the following chapter; and on the other hand, the need for coherence is intimately tied with the central role played by individual autonomy in creating and maintaining the consistency that is key within systems of value. This second point is crucial and acts as the key to opening up the understanding of Berlin's neo-Kantian or humanist ethics that will be explored in chapter four.

Chapter three

Value Pluralism and Systems of Value

1. Introduction.

The previous chapter has focused on establishing the status of value pluralism as a meta-ethical theory. This chapter will be devoted to analysing some of the theoretical implications of values as defined in the previous chapter. As already noted, Berlin's descriptions of value pluralism are scattered throughout his work, sometimes in such a diluted form that it has led to confusion and contradiction about its meaning. Value pluralism, in its basic form, 'merely denies that there is one, and only one, true morality or aesthetics or theology, and allows equally objective alternative values or systems of value', and more crucially, 'it is *not* relativism; nor, *a fortiori*, subjectivism'.¹ Thus, pluralism is not only about the plurality of values or systems of value, but more importantly about their incompatibility and their constitutive incommensurability, which leads to the clashes of value regarded as temporary by monism, but as permanent by value pluralism. Herein lies the heart of value pluralism, and in order to understand it, it is necessary not only to explore the plural nature of values, but also and more importantly, their incompatibility and incommensurability.

¹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 87.

2. Pluralism of values and the problem of relativism.

It has already been pointed out that by Berlin understands values as the ‘purposes – ends, values which we strive to realise’.² It has also been explained that individuals do not pursue their life ends by holding single values as abstract and discreet entities in an absolute form as their single life-defining purpose. Instead, individuals guide their actions by observing systems of values in which a combination of values to which they give different weight are distributed in a coherent way. The values that form these systems are objective, finite and universal, and this is what allows critical engagement with value systems different from our own. Systems of value are also to a great extent deeply rooted and influenced by their shifting cultural contexts, but they should always be considered as valid insofar as individuals maintain a critical relationship with their configuration. This chapter will explore this characteristic of values and value-systems in depth, and chapter four will focus on some of the implications derived from it. The dual nature of values as both contextually defined but individually validated has confused some authors. John Gray, for example, regards Berlin’s conception of value pluralism as a form of cultural relativism.³ This is a sign of Gray’s lack of awareness concerning the fundamentally hermeneutic approach to ethics that Berlin proposes. When philosophy and history are understood as the integrated whole that they are, value judgements cannot but appear as fundamentally contingent and tied to their historical moment. However this contingency does not automatically entail relativism. As I have argued in the previous chapter, there is an objective dimension to values that has to do both with their publicness and with the capacity that individuals have to reflect on them critically. This is what Bernard Williams calls ‘confidence’ as opposed to ‘knowledge’ in ethics, a notion that will be explained in chapter six.

² I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 137.

³ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c).

The controversies around the alleged relativistic nature of value pluralism are not entirely unfounded, however. I will now provide a brief analysis of value pluralism in relationship to the charge of relativism in order to identify and diffuse some of the most common assumptions and concerns in this direction.

Berlin spells out value pluralism as ‘the conception that there are many different ends that individuals may seek and still be fully rational, fully individuals, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other’.⁴ Value pluralism is spelled out in contraposition to monism, defined as the belief

in the first place that, as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the third place that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another—that we knew a priori.⁵

This monistic conception of the world is ‘not merely unattainable, but conceptually incoherent’,⁶ as explained in the previous chapter. If different human beings lead different lives and disagree with each other about which ends to pursue, or even which means to follow in order to pursue such ends, it is not because either one or both parties are mistaken in their beliefs, but simply because values are plural and their incompatibility final in many cases. Monism maintains not only that the good is univocal, but also, somehow ‘that all true

⁴ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 9.

⁵ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 5.

⁶ Op.Cit., p 11.

knowledge is descriptive: and depends for its validity upon correspondence with objectively existing ‘facts’.⁷ Therefore, the fundamental questions of politics of *how to live* or *why should I obey* are resolved by knowing, not by choosing: monism rests on the assumption that ‘the true ends of life are given’.⁸ If this was true, human beings, when *virtuous*, are simply followers of ends pre-existing to them and given, not chosen. This is why the Enlightenment adopted as its motto that *virtue is knowledge*. If monism is right, we are not fully autonomous in our acting well: ethical knowledge would tell one ‘not merely how to get what you wanted, but what to want’.⁹ Value pluralism radically challenges this view by asserting that there is no single ethical code that all individuals ought to follow, as some kind of universal *truth* we all ought to know and respect. On the contrary, there are many. More importantly, Berlin’s value pluralism does not refer solely to the existence of a variety of ends and principles which individuals might hold as valuable, for this is something which monism acknowledges too, but to the impossibility to point at some of these ends as more valuable than others according to some truth-claim. This brings up the issue of relativism again, if different people are to hold different values that often clash and cannot be combined, how does this differ from simply having different opinions that cannot be reconciled? Berlin writes that ‘pluralism – the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends – is not relativism; nor, a fortiori, subjectivism’.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that values are objective and universally known, and that is the reason why value pluralism recognises the virtues of sympathy and imagination that allow individuals to understand alien ethical positions. This highlights the fundamentally moderate character of Berlinean thought, which often relies on a pragmatic notion of *reasonableness* rather than on a calculative notion of rationality: at the heart of his thought is

⁷ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 28.

⁸ Op.Cit., p 47.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 87.

the notion that ‘a practical decision could not in principle be made completely algorithmic, and a conception of practical reason which aims at an algorithmic ideal must be mistaken’.¹¹ Thus, Berlin, albeit ultimately denying the possibility of a perfect solution to conflicts of value, still relies heavily on the possibility of effectively managing those conflicts. He is generally repelled by radical statements, and contests relativism by calling for a moderate approach that will make individuals aware of the relative validity of their convictions. Relativism means that ‘I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said. That is relativism’.¹² There is in fact more to be said, and that is the point of value pluralism. Since values are finite, universal and objective, we can always find a way ‘to look at societies different from our own, the ultimate values of which we can perceive to be wholly understandable ends of life for me who are different, indeed, from us, but human beings, *semblables*, into whose circumstances we can, by a great effort which we are commanded to make, find a way, enter, to use Vico’s term’.¹³ The notion of *entering*, in Vicoan terms, or *verstehen* (understanding, as opposed to *wissen*, knowing) in the case of the late German romantics¹⁴ is key for Berlin, as it is what makes value judgements possible. Berlin’s philosophy is a call for understanding others with whom we disagree instead of merely rejecting or opposing their views, or simply claiming that we cannot judge them because their values are rooted in principles different from our own, the latter being the hallmark of ‘cultural relativism’. We might even find that there are moral positions we find unfathomable: ‘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’.¹⁵ Berlin

¹¹ I. Berlin and B. Williams, 'Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (1994).

¹² I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 9.

¹³ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 79.

¹⁴ Op.Cit., p 62.

¹⁵ Op.Cit., p 80.

is relatively vague in defining exactly what he means with this ‘incomplete humanity’, but this can be read as a reference, again, to our knowledge of – which does not imply an endorsement of – all the existing values, for their number is finite. ‘Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon. If they are not, then they are outside the human sphere’.¹⁶ The *human sphere* to which Berlin refers here is nothing other than the limited realm formed by values: when we find others who direct their lives by some purpose which stands outside this realm then we can call them something which is not human. This is because conceptions of human nature are historically contingent, as Berlin shows throughout his work: it is not only until the Enlightenment that the idea of values as being different from facts, and human beings as essentially autonomous emerges. Therefore the values that define the ultimate moral horizon of each society are the result of historical evolution and change, however this does not entail that they should be observed as relative.¹⁷ When we judge the values observed by others we do so by a sympathetic effort that begins by understanding the general framework to which their ethical principles refer: ‘to judge one culture by the standards of another argues a failure of imagination and understanding’.¹⁸ There is no universal measuring rod for judging values, and thus any understanding or critique of them is ultimately reliant on interpretative exercises with reference to the specific ethical framework of each individual. This definition of values and value judgements as the result of narrative interpretation shows once again the highly hermeneutic character of Berlin’s theory of value pluralism. However the nature of values as rooted in the contingent framework of historical and cultural contexts does not mean that they are necessarily relative or purely subjective. In Berlin’s moral universe there is an undeniable sense of internal realism which

¹⁶ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 10.

¹⁷ This is also what Berlin refers to in his example about the wood worshippers who do not follow any values known to us. (Ibid).

¹⁸ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 38.

allows for a certain assessment of the validity of our claims. Value pluralism is not relativism or subjectivism precisely because we are aware of the plurality of values as a constitutive element of our moral universe, as well as of the *sui generis* character of ethical knowledge. It is only when we have the backdrop of metaphysics as the fundamental assumption about the truth of our values that we expect them to appear as objectively true as facts do. But when ethical knowledge is painted as a particular kind of knowledge with rules of its own, it becomes clear that the validation of the truth of values with reference to historical frameworks is enough to deny the charge of subjectivism. Our capacity to reflect critically on them also means that the challenge of cultural relativism as put forward by Gray does not hold.¹⁹ We are as sure as we can be about the normativity of our value judgements, and their nature means that we are equipped to judge the values of other cultures and individuals: we are not blind to the ethical value of their practices, and insofar as communication between cultures is possible – a possibility that has been increased by globalisation – the threat of relativism begins to fade. The key to arguing this is the clear delimitation of a realm of ethics, with questions and methods of its own. Berlin's entire work is devoted to arguing that ethical questions can only be addressed hermeneutically if we want to have the certainty that they are not mere expressions of opinions.

With this in mind, the following two sections of the chapter will look into two essential characteristics of value pluralism: the incompatibility and incommensurability of values. These characteristics are relevant because they justify the final character of conflicts of values that sits at the heart of value pluralism. The notion of the irreconcilability of values is crucial insofar as it provides a powerful weapon in defeating monism. After all, monism does not deny pluralism of values, but only the view that the conflicts that arise between these different values cannot ultimately be ordered into a single and harmonious system. By acknowledging the

¹⁹ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c).

irreconcilable nature of certain values, Berlin is uncovering the philosophical foundations upon which the utopian political projects of his time rest, and giving us the reasons we need in order to oppose them.

3. Incompatibility of values.

Berlin speaks of incompatibility as the phenomenon that allows different values to be ‘pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective, ends’.²⁰ Incompatibility of values can be experienced in four different levels: ‘they can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me. Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual...’, however, ‘what is clear is that values can clash- that is why civilisations are incompatible’.²¹ The constitutive incompatibility of values is crucial insofar as it highlights the relevance of individual autonomy: if values are all equally valid and they are incompatible, it is therefore down to individuals to choose which values to observe, and which ones to discard. This feature of value pluralism will be developed further in the next chapter when analysing Berlin’s reinterpretation of Kantian ethics. This section will present some examples of moral dilemmas to illustrate the constitutive incompatibility of values. It will also show how the incompatibility of value is ultimately responsible for the combination of values into consistent systems. Having said this, it should be noted that Berlin’s main preoccupation is not with internal moral dilemmas as much as it is with clashes of value at a social level. After all his philosophy is a political philosophy, and it

²⁰ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 80.

²¹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 10.

explores the complex implications of the relationship between individuals and groups. This is one of the first motivations of all of Berlin's political philosophy: to provide, if not the solution to these clashes, at least some solid grounds from where to think about the best way to manage them. It is in this spirit that he elaborates a theory based on the recognition and acceptance of the incompatible nature of some values.

Incompatibility of value refers to the impossibility to pursue two or more values simultaneously, making 'the very notion of a final solution... not only impracticable but, if I am right, and some values cannot but clash, incoherent also'.²² Within the current literature, value incompatibility is presented as appearing in two different levels. The first one maintains that some values tend to crowd each other out, which means that within a single biography, or even within a single culture, they cannot be held as equally relevant, for they steer lives in opposite directions. This is the problem that Raz addresses with the example of the individual torn between pursuing a career as a clarinettist or as a lawyer,²³ which presents a case of lives which are incompatible almost exclusively from a *practical* point of view. The individual may not have infinite time to devote it to learn the skills needed to excel in both disciplines, so she must choose either one or the other. This is one case for incompatibility which argues that the need to choose springs out of the *limited* room for action within individual lives and societies. This notion has influenced authors like Crowder when affirming that 'the range and diversity of human values is such that not all genuine goods can be realized within the same social space',²⁴ and Galston, who uses this idea of the 'limited space' to argue that liberal neutrality is the regime most accommodating of plural values.²⁵ Then there is the second level of

²² Op.Cit., p 13.

²³ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

²⁴ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Political Theory and Contemporary Politics; London, New York: Continuum, 2002): 138.

²⁵ W. A. Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); W. A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

incompatibility of value. We could think about the famous case of the impossibility to become both a Catholic Saint and a Machiavellian Prince as spelled out by Berlin. The prince could be a catholic prince, and in this case incompatibility does not seem to be a practical problem of 'space', but rather an issue of coherence and inconsistency. One could, at least in principle, profess a certain religiosity, pray, commend one's soul to God, and so on, and also carry out those duties associated with being the head of a state, the Machiavellian prince. However, the problem with this as identified by Berlin is one of lack of coherence. One cannot be merciful like a godly saint and ruthless like a Machiavellian prince at the same time. This issue, which Gray identifies as one of 'moral psychology or philosophical anthropology'²⁶ is closely tied to the demand of internal coherence that belongs to the very idea of a system of value. Raz is right in affirming that the meaning of values, goals or ends of life of individuals are the result of their personal commitment to their pursuit.²⁷ This is key to understanding Berlin's approach to Kantian ethics as analysed in the following chapter. In other words, the systems of value held by individuals become *meaningful* only insofar as each individual is committed to such values and expresses that commitment, among other things, by pursuing them consistently. It is incoherence what Berlin detects when he points at the incompatibility of Christian faith and Machiavellian *virtù*. It is possible to establish scales of value, to negotiate between values at times, and systems of value seem to allow some flexibility at times, but flexibility does not mean inconsistency. This is not a matter of lack of practical means to pursue both ends, like what happened with the clarinettist and the lawyer, but simply a radical incompatibility at value level. One could claim to be a Christian while murdering their political enemies in order to act like the perfect Machiavellian prince, but this would render their commitment to their Christian faith valueless insofar as incoherent. The resolution of these incoherencies is, at the same time,

²⁶ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c): 55.

²⁷ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

that which enables the creation of different systems of value and also the validation of such systems in the form of commitments. Value pluralism seems to redirect us in this way to the centrality of individual autonomy. If values are what define the purposes of human lives, moral disagreement is merely the result of the different choices individuals make about how to live their lives, given that there is no single final guiding principle when establishing our moral priorities. Individuals assimilate and interpret values in different ways, and this generates a broad diversity of systems of values, some of them incompatible. If we attribute meaning and relevance to certain values above others it is precisely because we are forced to choose among incompatibles: if values did not crowd each other out, choice would not be the essential device of self-expression or self-construction that Berlin rightly portrays it as within our current historical context. Therefore, the very idea of systems of value thus also carries their incompatibility in its heart: the reason why all human beings are able to compose different systems departing from the same finite number of values is a result of the need to establish priorities amongst incompatibles. This is what lies at the basis of some of the most pressing and enduring political debates of our time. Equality or freedom, as Berlin says, or some compromise between the two of them, but never absolutely both: ‘total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs’²⁸. Knowledge has little to do in the face of dilemmas like these, for there is no single right solution to them. It is all down to individual choice, which as explained previously is not simply the same as expressing a preference between coffee and champagne, given how moral choices are largely determined by their particular contexts and also the way in which they are susceptible to critical reflection and judgement.

²⁸ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 10.

4. Incommensurability of values.

The incommensurability of values is the second crucial element of value pluralism found in Berlin's thought. Not only because it contributes towards the final character of conflicts of value, but also, and probably even more importantly, because it provides a clearer idea of the central role that values have in the configuration of human lives. Values provide meaning and direction to human lives, and also in their pursuit human beings exercise the autonomy that defines them as such. Incommensurability of value provides an essential clue in understanding this notion, as it opens a window from where to look into the infinite transcendence of values. The experience of the incommensurability of value is what makes evident their inextricable relevance for human life, as well as that of autonomy, for choices among incommensurables are always the product of individual processes of reason giving. The incommensurable character of values also uncovers the fact that individual choice-making is irreplaceable by external maxims, imperatives or calculative rationality.

In a basic sense, incommensurability means precisely that: that values cannot be *measured*, at least not using a single and universal measuring rod. The final character of value clashes is due not only to the fact that values are incompatible, but also to their incommensurability. If this was not the case, it would be perfectly reasonable to imagine that their incompatibilities could be solved or at least softened by ordering them in an integrated and harmonious system that would establish a hierarchy with relation to a third, superior value. But this would constitute a form of monism. Incommensurability of value refers to that characteristic of values which makes them impossible to be 'graded in some single order of excellence', for there are 'no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgement'²⁹ in terms of which this can be done. Liberty is not 'higher' than equality, nor the other way round: no value is, as it were

²⁹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 37.

in itself, more important than any other. The awareness of the incommensurability of value is inspired in Berlin by his reading of Herder when he affirms that ‘values, qualities of character, are not commensurable: an order of merit which presupposes a single measuring-rod is, for Herder, evidence of blindness to what makes human beings human’.³⁰ In Herder’s view, ‘every nation has its own centre of moral gravity, which differs from that of every other’, and this means that each nation strives for ‘the development of its own national needs, its own unique character’.³¹ That is to say, each nation has its own system of values which attends to its own rules and meanings, with ‘its own attributes, which must be grasped in and for themselves’.³² This centre of moral gravity is intrinsic to each culture and cannot be measured against the standards of another culture. That is to say, each culture is unique and their attributes valuable in themselves for that culture, and therefore they cannot be compared in equivalent terms. To this regard it can be said that values are incommensurable insofar as it is at times impossible to compare the relevance of two or more values. However, there is a much more transcendental sense of incommensurability than mere incomparability. Herder viewed men as fundamentally embedded in their cultures, for it was to this extent that they acquired their own character, incommensurable against the character of individuals belonging to other cultures. This is obviously not a fully-fledged defence of individuals as autonomous, like the one found in Berlin’s work, but this acknowledgement of the incommensurability of cultures constitutes nonetheless a fundamental step towards the final recognition of individual autonomy. Herder was, so to say, one step behind Berlin’s definition of individual autonomy, but one giant leap ahead of monism in his acknowledgement of the incommensurability of cultural values. This does not imply that Berlin sees the individual as an unencumbered self who produces systems of value *ex-nihilo*, with no cultural heritage nor social contextualisation. As the first chapter

³⁰ Op.Cit., p 39.

³¹ Op.Cit., p 37.

³² Op.Cit., p 38.

explained, Berlin's awareness of nationalism has often been associated to his Jewish heritage, and is remarkable for a liberal theorist. Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between recognizing this, and affirming that certain value-orderings are 'culture-specific'.³³ Values are never *culture-specific*, but simply different constructions of value are more or less predominant in certain cultures than in others. Values are constitutively incommensurable, and it is from the conformation of different systems of value that the plurality of forms of life and whole cultures springs, as explained above.

This is the other face of incommensurability that cannot just be reduced to incomparability. Values, insofar as incommensurable and incompatible, can carry a huge significance for those who observe them. This is why certain choices are called *dilemmas*, for even if the total outcome is not necessarily going to be negative, these kinds of choices always entail a certain loss: it is not a negative outcome to become a clarinettist instead of a lawyer, however the tragic dimension of having to make such a choice responds to the significance that we attribute to certain values. If value pluralism is true and values are constitutively incommensurable, one should be able to recognise that none of these career choices is objectively 'better than the other', nor are they 'of equal value'.³⁴ They are, if so, incommensurable. Raz's definition of incommensurability is in this sense very effective, and yet it does not fully acknowledge a

³³ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: HarperCollins, 1995c): 64. Gray identifies three levels of incommensurability: the first one, of incommensurables which are so only to the extent to which there are 'forms of human flourishing that belong with or presuppose as their matrices social matrices or entire cultures which are constitutively uncombinable' Op.Cit., p 55.; the second one: the uncombinability of 'individual agent virtues or excellences at a moral psychology or philosophical anthropology level'; a form of uncombinability which is "empirical"; and finally those incommensurabilities of value which are 'conceptual rather than empirical' (ibid). In my view, if Gray adopted the idea of values as finite entities of universal validity and systems of value as individual constructs, this classification would not be necessary. In particular the first level of incommensurability, for which he takes Raz's argument of incommensurability as incomparability (or what Chang has called 'Small Improvement Argument' in R. Chang, 'The Possibility of Parity', *Ethics*, 112. 4 (2002b).), arguing that certain goods are only incommensurable to the extent that they are embedded in cultures or societies which are themselves incomparable between them. He calls these 'culture-specific' values, and implies that by changing the root culture in which they are embedded, the whole value can be changed. He goes even further to argue that what Kantian or utilitarian ethics aim to do is precisely to even out these cultural matrices as a means to ending incommensurability of this kind. What Kantian and utilitarian ethics are trying to do is not to change specific cultures, but to impose a universal system of value for all individuals to follow- which would obviously have an impact on cultural diversity.

³⁴ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988): 342.

crucial aspect of incommensurability which probably cannot be explored systematically. Incommensurability of value signals the absolute *meaningfulness* of values. It is only when values are truly meaningful for individuals that having to choose between them becomes what we call a moral dilemma. Raz refers to this as the ‘significance’ of incommensurability, separating it from indifference or rough equality.³⁵ If we find it hard to choose it is not because we find the two outcomes roughly equal, or because we are indifferent to what such a choice entails, but the complete opposite of all this: we just care too much about both to be able to choose. Like Sartre’s example of the young man who is torn between joining the Free French Forces in England, or staying to take care of his elderly mother in France,³⁶ the problem is not that he does not care, or that the value of both options is equivalent, but simply that both options represent such meaningful alternatives that they are truly incommensurable. He cannot choose *rationally*,³⁷ and when he does, the loss of having to do without one of the options is by no means balanced out by the gains from the alternative. It is then that the lack of universal standards bites and we are left alone with choices that are exclusively the result of our own deliberations and decisions.³⁸ It is in this sense that Berlin calls himself ‘an existentialist’,³⁹ for

³⁵ Op.Cit., p 343.

³⁶ J. P. Sartre, 'Existentialism Is a Humanism', in Walter Arnold Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956): 287-311.

³⁸ Some authors, like Raz or Gray, have identified this darkness with lack of rational choice, but I think that the validity of these assertions is entirely dependent upon our understanding of ‘rational choice’. If rational choice is understood in Kantian or utilitarian ways, that is to say, as referring to an external, fixed, absolute system of values, then it is obvious that rationality has nothing to do with choices between incommensurables. But other than this, pluralism definitely makes room for reason-giving. Berlin and Williams distinguish between two different ways of understanding how value choices are ‘underdetermined by reason’ (G. Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (Jun 1994). In their reply to Crowder about the interpretation he makes out of this: first, there is the case ‘that it is not a requirement of reason that there should be one value which in all cases prevails over the other’, with which they entirely agree, and the second case, which maintains that ‘in each particular case, reason has nothing to say (i.e. there is nothing reasonable to be said) about which value should prevail over the other’, a view which they completely reject (I. Berlin and B. Williams, 'Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply', *ibid.*, (However, as I have already pointed out and as Raz affirms in the last section of the same book, individuals legitimate their own systems of value by sticking to commitments that they initially created. To this extent, choice among incommensurables can be seen as ‘rational’ insofar as one can choose in a way which is coherent with one’s own commitments. Trying to maintain the coherence of one’s own commitments seems like a good way of bypassing moral dilemmas, for there is a certain ‘truth’ to the answer to *how to act* within our own systems of value. This reminds a bit of Gray’s idea of *internal realism*.

³⁹I. Berlin and S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, 52-135 (1998): 101.

incommensurability ultimately leaves us in the dark. On the flipside, it is also due to this fact that choosing becomes such a *meaningful* human activity. Incommensurability does not mean that we cannot choose in life, as nihilists maintain, because we do indeed choose. What it means is that choices between incommensurables represent a special kind of choice. This notion is what links value pluralism with individual autonomy, as well as one of the pillars of Berlin's understanding of human nature. Choosing among incommensurables is ultimately a form of self-creation: in the absence of universal moral laws, the reasons that individuals draw for choosing among incommensurables are the result of their own reflection. In extreme cases, we might not even find *reasons* to choose, and that is when we 'plump' for one thing rather than another,⁴⁰ which is still essentially an act of self-creation. As crucial as individual moral dilemmas are for understanding incommensurability of value at a conceptual level, it is the implications of the incommensurability of value at a social level that are at the core of Berlin's political philosophy. The impossibility to judge the systems of value upheld by other individuals exclusively by one's own standards is what Berlin alludes to when he quotes Herder: we cannot and should not expect others to act in the same ways in which we do, as sound and grounded as we might regard our own choices, for values are incommensurable. This might sound like relativism but, as it has already been stated, communication with others who do not share our values is possible and necessary, which means that there is room for judgement of their moral choices. Even more importantly, choices of value are not just the result of our own internal processes of deliberation, but they always happen within public and social contexts. Berlin's liberalism strives to 'manage conflict rather than to transcend it'.⁴¹ In a context dominated by relativism this management would not be a possibility.

⁴⁰ Op.Cit., p 101.

⁴¹ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002): 147.

5. Conclusions.

This chapter has presented an examination of the notion of values as plural in contraposition with monism. It has also argued that the plurality of systems of value pointed out by Berlin does not lead to relativism or subjectivism, but rather to an ethical and political pluralism which is flexible enough to accommodate plural conceptions of the good whilst at the same time allowing for critical assessment of different systems of value. Section two explored those features of values which determine the final character of their conflicts: incompatibility and incommensurability. Some values are incompatible insofar as they cannot be combined within the same system, that is to say, it is impossible to pursue both simultaneously to the same degree. It is for this reason that we have to choose between different values, something which ultimately leads to the composition of plural systems of value, which is translated into different lifestyles, cultures and societies. However, these different cultures and lifestyles cannot be compared, for they are incommensurable. Incommensurability of value has been presented as a central notion in Berlin's thought, not only in the definition of his value pluralism but in his understanding of human nature. Values are incommensurable insofar as we do not have a single measuring rod with which to measure them, and thus comparisons between values in absolute terms are not possible. Incommensurability of value unveils the extreme relevance and meaning that values have for individuals, as well as the radically autonomous nature of human beings as choice-makers. This face of incommensurability adds a certain existentialist pulse to value pluralism, highlights the deeply transcendental understanding both of values and choice-making held by Berlin, and also serves as the first step towards reaching a full understanding of Berlin's reinterpretation of Kantian ethics which will be addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter four

Berlin's Humanistic Ethics

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to locate a theory of ethics¹ within the work of Isaiah Berlin. Chapter two established the epistemological status of value pluralism as meta-ethical, or as a purely descriptive theory of ethics from where normative statements cannot be directly derived. It has been acknowledged throughout chapters two and three, however, that value pluralism is a powerful and necessary component of any theory of liberalism insofar as it delineates the type of context from where the need for liberalism arises. If, according to Berlin, politics are a branch of ethics,² and value pluralism is not normative, his theory of liberalism must find its normative support somewhere else other than in value pluralism. Either that, or his work only acts as a denunciation of all that was wrong with the political outlook of his time, but not a

¹ It may be worth explaining why the term 'ethics' rather than 'morality', seeing as for the Oxford ordinary language school – and for Berlin himself probably – there is a significant difference between the two terms. Whereas 'morality' is about normative claims – that is to say, morality differentiates between the good and the bad, and tells us how to act – 'ethics' is worried mostly with the status and order of these moral claims. In Berlin's case the distinction between these two terms is very thin: his main claim is in fact that the way in which we understand ethics has an impact on the sorts of moral claims we commit to. As we will see in this chapter, Berlin's definition of ethical knowledge as a *sui generis* kind of knowledge, inseparable from individual experience, is directly related to the moral claim that defends the essential value of individual autonomy. As we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, one of the most remarkable and innovative contributions we find in Berlin is his method, which can be regarded partly as a result of his struggle to come to terms with the normative status of ethical claims. He defines ethical thought as 'the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based'. From this definition the relevance of ethics becomes evident: it is not only 'the intrinsic value of the discovery of truth about human relationships' that makes ethics valuable – that is to say, its role as a means of broadening our knowledge and even introducing conceptual and philosophical clarity - but more importantly, an awareness of the source of our moral claims constitutes in itself a moral requirement: 'only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where they are, where they appear to be going, whether they wish to go there, and if so, why, and if not, why not' I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind : An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 1-2. Thus, the connection between morality and ethics in Berlin is evident.

² Op.Cit., p 1.

proposal on how to mend that status, as some critics have argued.³ This chapter denies that argument by bringing attention to the possibility of extracting a theory of ethics from Berlin's work. This will be called Berlin's 'humanist' theory of ethics, borrowing the nomenclature that Berlin introduces in PIRA,⁴ as used by Joshua Cherniss⁵ as well. Berlin presents two opposed worldviews: the 'conflicting humanistic and non-humanistic definitions of freedom', which 'appear ultimately to depend partly upon the views held of what men are like'.⁶ The humanist or humanistic view of human beings is sourced from Kantian ethics. It maintains that human beings are essentially autonomous, and ultimately the kernel of 'the whole ethical content of nineteenth-century democratic doctrine'⁷ that has defined Europe as we find it today. What defines human beings as such, in Berlin's view, is the fact that they can choose autonomously, pursue their own goals and provide their actions with a sense of direction: 'to be free is to be self-directed'.⁸ In the same way, values only exist as the result of human action: they are not material, tangible elements of the world, but neither can we claim, based on our own experience, that they exist independently from human beings. It is via the establishment of this notion of human beings as fundamentally autonomous that choice, value and freedom become intertwined in Berlin's humanistic vision of ethics.

Berlin's theory of ethics stems out of a hermeneutic understanding of men as essentially autonomous, and this dissertation argues that this view, when combined with value pluralism, allows for a strong defence of liberalism. Berlin's understanding of human nature is strongly

³ J. Dunn, 'For Services to Conversation', *Times Higher Education*, 13th November 1998.

⁴ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

⁵ J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Cherniss, Joshua and Hardy, Henry (2013), 'Isaiah Berlin', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>), July 2016

⁶ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 207.

⁷ Op.Cit., p 154.

⁸ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 176.

influenced by Kant's philosophy, albeit this influence is only partial. In particular, Berlin rejects Kantian universalism and rationalism, however he is happy to incorporate his view of individuals as intrinsically valuable – of human beings as ends in themselves, and never as means, and as self-creating creatures – to his own definition of human nature. This presents a considerable innovation in comparison with most theoretical analyses of Berlin, as they either assume a normative argument within value pluralism,⁹ or they declare Berlin's theory as incomplete to this extent and try to elaborate a normative argument for liberalism by extracting conclusions directly from value pluralism.¹⁰ Berlin's ethical viewpoint is articulated in PIRA more explicitly than anywhere else throughout his oeuvre, however it is a view that shines through many of his works. The notion of humanistic ethics is not extensively developed or systematically detailed anywhere, but instead it comes through in the shape of a hermeneutical discourse that narrates the ideological changes that shaped Europe from the Enlightenment onwards, and the implications and consequences of these. Ultimately, Berlin's story of Europe is one of the establishment of human beings as autonomous creatures, and of the world and humankind as devoid from great teleological endings, against what the Christian heritage of Europe had determined until the French Revolution. Berlin's understanding of human nature is then not strictly metaphysical, insofar as it acknowledges that the view of human beings as fundamentally autonomous and of values as plural are the result of a historic development. This view may change over time, but it will stay as it is until some revolution changes it. His philosophy is a call to gain awareness of the fact that we have made it past the point of the teleological and ideal theories of our Greco-Roman heritage. To this extent, Berlin can be seen as a theorist of modernity, and even as a nihilist with his denial of the great narratives of humankind that he locates at the heart of the totalitarianisms he challenges with his work. This

⁹ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c).

¹⁰ G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).

explains the later linkage between Berlin and realist politics, as evidenced by the work of Bernard Williams,¹¹ and recognised by George Crowder.¹² But once again, Berlin's main contribution is not the elaboration of a particular theory of modernity, but the method he uses to support his arguments. His theory of ethics, unlike Kantian ethics, is historically contingent and hermeneutically revealed. Berlin uses history as a means of showing how our current moral intimations are ultimately grounded in ideas that have been moulded historically. It is as part of this historical development that ideas eventually crystallise into the particular ethical principles held by each society and that are transformed into normative political principles. The two previous chapters have outlined the objectivity of value that prevents the historical malleability of ethical presuppositions to be regarded as moral relativism. Ethical and political ideals may change over time, but this is only as a result of long and often revolutionary processes, and not of individual changes of heart – even though revolutions are often started and guided by individuals, as Berlin likes to show.

Berlin appears particularly puzzled by those historical events in which the moral horizon common to all human beings has been lost, and since he is convinced that moral principles do not stand alone, alien to societies, but can only be understood as springing from them, he resorts to a historical examination of the evolution of the ideas that led to such dark passages of history as a means of understanding what went wrong. This method reveals once again Berlin's commitment to empiricism, as well as his regard of ideas as the motor of social and political change. It is easy to see, however, that his exploration of the ideas of the past is not merely descriptive but also normative. His analysis of past ideas comes not only as a narration of events, but it stands as an extended judgement in their goods and evils, in what justifies our celebration or rejection of them. This is anything but descriptive. This chapter argues that the

¹¹ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹² G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

judgement of past ideas we find in Berlin is ultimately moderated by an understanding of human beings as intrinsically autonomous as the crucial characteristic of the European mind from the Enlightenment onwards. For instance, if the French Revolution ever took place and constitutional democracies became the standard form of political representation in the West it was because of the assimilation of an understanding of human beings as essentially autonomous, and when the totalitarian leaders of the twentieth century tried to deny this they were betraying the same ideals that lied at the heart of their own culture. Once the notion of humanistic ethics is unlocked, it is not difficult to see it permeating most of Berlin's works. To this extent Berlin's humanistic ethics should not be regarded just as a mere bridge between his liberalism and his value pluralism, but instead as the beating heart of all of his philosophy. This involves shifting the focus away from liberty or value pluralism as the core of Berlin's thought towards his understanding of human beings, an exercise that lands us with a new vision of the main topics featured throughout his works. If there was to be a propelling force moving and directing Berlin, that would be his vision of individuals as essentially autonomous, and not his defence of negative liberty or the belief in value pluralism, as most of the literature portrays him.

2. Morality and autonomy.

Berlin's work is constructed around a series of dichotomies: human and natural science, pluralism and monism, fact and value, positive and negative liberty, to name a few. Most of his writings, studies on the history of philosophy, political essays or reflections on the scope and role of philosophy can ultimately be understood as representations of these dichotomies. This chapter argues that all of them stem out of the differentiation he makes of 'the humanist from the non-humanist vision of human society', two poles which are ultimately defined by

opposing views 'of what men are like'.¹³ The view that stands on the humanist side is that which portrays human beings as 'essentially autonomous'.¹⁴

The notion of human beings as essentially autonomous lies at the heart of Berlin's humanism. He arrives at this conclusion via an argument which is twofold and circular: on the one hand there is the notion that values define human nature, for it is having values – that is to say, providing one's own actions with a certain sense of meaning and direction – what defines human existence. On the other hand there is the idea of values as a human product, for 'the ultimate authority of values consists precisely in the fact that they are willed freely'¹⁵, or that they only exist as normative entities insofar as individuals commit to them. This circular argument is the basis of Berlin's humanism: individual autonomy is essential to the extent to which it allows individuals to commit freely to certain values, and it is precisely because values are the product of autonomous choice that they cannot be used as a means for restricting man's autonomy. When not being freely willed, values lose their authority. This is at the heart of Berlin's warnings on the dangers of positive liberty. Positive liberty 'derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master', however it is a dangerous notion when a division between the higher 'autonomous' self and the lower 'empirical' self is drawn, giving the former version power over the latter. The higher self becomes then identified with higher goals that stand above individual desires, and the lower self with the actual desires and values of individuals. Within this framework it becomes possible to argue that forcing someone to act against their will constitutes, in fact, an act of liberation, as the totalitarian doctrines that Berlin aims to challenge with his work claimed. It is for this reason that values should be willed autonomously, and that collective values cannot be placed above individual wills. It is for this

¹³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 207.

¹⁴ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 208.

¹⁵ Op.Cit., p 207.

reason too that Berlin insists on negative liberty as absence of coercion as the primordial definition of liberty, which should always stand over any other understandings of freedom. This thesis places individual autonomy at the centre of Berlin's theory of liberalism, however it does not lose perspective of Berlin's wariness of such a term and of the way in which it can be manipulated to oppress individuals. However, this dissertation argues that far from defending only the minimal notion of liberty as lack of interference, there is in Berlin a more comprehensive notion of liberty that sees it as instrumental and closely related to notions of self-creation. This is obviously a delicate definition in that it can be easily altered into looking like the positive liberty that Berlin warns about in his TCL, but it does not necessarily have to be the case. This is consistent with the general thesis of this dissertation in maintaining that Berlin's definition of two concepts of liberty should not be seen as the reductionist case for endorsing only lack of coercion as liberty, as is the case with neoliberal narratives. The point of TCL is not to discard the notion of autonomy altogether, but rather to place a safety net around it in order to protect it from abuses and manipulation.¹⁶

2.1. Value is a human product.

Berlin's humanistic ethics arise from the Kantian affirmation that human beings are 'the sole authors of moral values'.¹⁷ When Berlin follows this Kantian narrative, he is emphasising the idea that the realm of value is exclusive to human beings. The existence of values is limited to their role in the determination of human action, and they do not exist in an ideal form, independently of human lives, but only as the result of individuals being committed to them. This is the reason why values transform and even fade overtime, a process we can understand

¹⁶ Joshua Cherniss has also argued that positive and negative liberty are in Berlin interlaced J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 151.

by looking at the history of ideas. We know about values from our empirical experience as sentient human beings. Moreover, Berlin tells us, we know from experience that values only have any relevance or authority if they are willed freely. Crowder proposes a good example for this with the student who is torn between preparing for an exam or going to the beach.¹⁸ None of these positions is intrinsically right or wrong, or more or less valuable in itself, but it is only individuals attributing value to either one or the other what provides them with a certain sense value. In this way, each man establishes a concretised form of the universal, or it *creates value*. For, if values are truly incommensurable and equally universal, what turns their relative validity into an absolute one is precisely their pursuit by concrete individuals within particular contexts. From this, Berlin derives that if ‘all values are made so by the free acts of men, and called values only so far as they are this, there is no value higher than the individual.’¹⁹ Therefore, individual autonomy should never be trampled on behalf of any other value: ‘human beings conceived as sources of acts of will, creators of values, could not be sacrificed to anything other than such purposes without stultifying the absoluteness, the end-in-itselfness, of these absolute values’.²⁰ This ‘end-in-itselfness’ of values highlights the existentialist nuances of Berlin’s humanistic ethics, for it is partly defined by an understanding of value that is reliant on the internal experience of individuals. That is to say, only an individual can judge the weight of a given value at any given point. The individual assessment of values is not, however, relativism, for as chapters two and three have explained the reasons that provide normativity to different values are generally public and contextual, being this also what allows for reason-giving processes and discussions to take place in ethics and politics. However, the ultimate decision over whether to commit to a value or not is always and should always be an

¹⁸ G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002): 60.

¹⁹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 208.

²⁰ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 151.

individual one. This is the constitutive idea of liberalism, and the fundamental way of protecting men from being treated as means rather than always as ends that Berlin proposes.

2.2. Human beings are essentially autonomous.

Berlin's humanistic ethics rely on the notion not only that values acquire their normativity from being ends that individuals commit to, and therefore that no value can be held above individual wills, but also on a related understanding of human beings as essentially autonomous. If value pluralism is true, and ends are not given, our choices are not anymore an expression of our knowledge, but of our will. This is one of the ideas informing all of Berlin's work. He provides a good argument against the sacrifice of human lives to higher social or political ends, and his active defence of individual autonomy as an essential characteristic of human beings constitutes the real core of his ethics. There is nothing as primordial as the life of an individual, a life that is unique for its meanings, its aims and goals, for the values that it endorses. To this extent values only exist as the propellers of the actions of human beings. It is, indeed, choosing and thence having values that differentiates human beings from other creatures. Each human being constitutes a unique value-producing entity of its own: with its choices and reasons, they are able to build a unique life plan, to attribute a meaning to their actions. In order for any of this to happen, individuals need their autonomy guaranteed. For, as we have seen, given our Kantian heritage values are only true when freely willed. Mirroring this notion stands the idea that human beings are only so to the extent that they are free to pursue their own ends: 'man is, above all, a creature endowed not only with reason but with will. Will is the creative function of man'.²¹ This can be better understood by bringing Crowder's example back into the text: if one had not been given a choice between studying in the library or napping on the beach, but forced to do one of them, this action would not be regarded as a choice, and the value

²¹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 41.

commitment behind it would fade totally or partially.²² When an individual is not free to choose she is not being treated as a human being, but as something else. It is only by means of reflective and critical engagement with their values that human beings can choose and act truly as such. This understanding of autonomy as a necessary condition of humanity is what defines the essential principle of Berlin's humanistic ethics, and thus, 'all forms of tampering with human beings, getting at men, shaping them against their will to your own pattern, all thought-control and conditioning, is, therefore, a denial of that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate'.²³ This understanding of man brings a new dimension to Berlinean thought, which has been classically understood as an endorsement of a strictly negative defence of liberty as lack of interference as a defence for any potential tampering with individual liberty by totalitarian states. Once it has been established that 'the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings',²⁴ Berlin's definition of liberty and human nature appears not only as a mere condemnation of or a shield against totalitarianisms, nor even as solely inspired by fear of that which lurked at the other side of the Iron Curtain, but almost as an expression of Berlin's fascination with the overwhelming variety of human capabilities. After all, 'men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals'.²⁵ It is from 'intense preoccupation' with these goals that 'the best moments come in the lives of individuals and peoples'.²⁶

²² Of course, there could be the case of an individual being forced to do that which they would have chosen anyway if given a free choice (what is known as the 'contented slave', as presented and analysed by Katrin Flikschuh in *Freedom: Contemporary Liberal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007)), which brings up the question of free will and liberty. Flikschuh criticises Berlin precisely for the absence of a theory of free will within his work. However as this thesis explains, Berlin's most enduring contribution is not the provision of a particular definition of liberty, but instead his explanation of the need for a hermeneutic defence of liberalism. This chapter explores Berlin's defence of autonomy only as a step towards uncovering his neo-Kantian roots and his interpretation of modern Europe as essentially defined by his influence, and thus analytic debates on free will and its significance will not be entered.

²³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 208.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ I. Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 292.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

This shows why it is crucial to define Berlin's understanding of human nature, for it delivers a different interpretation of some of his most well-known works and supports the main claim of this thesis about his distinctive preoccupation with human nature. Berlin's preoccupation with method is the result of an inquiry into how to best approach the specific demands attached to the particularities of studying human nature. If values are vastly the product of contexts and socialisation, as chapters two and three have explained, but their individual and autonomous observance is a key ontological element of them, any discipline willing to study and understand values, such as ethics or politics, should be able to address both the generalities and particularities of its field of inquiry – which in this case have to do both with history and philosophy. This is why Berlin turns to hermeneutics, because it allows to critically address particular cases while at the same time reflecting on the general contexts that define the patterns in which such cases are entrenched, allowing for a sense of objectivity without incurring in questions of objective scientific or logical knowledge. Understanding the nature of human beings both as value-creating and value-dependent entities is what ultimately allows Berlin to affirm that ethics are a sui-generis field of knowledge. The assimilation of systems of value that have been collectively and historically defined by individuals and the capacity to alter them by critically reflecting on them that is constitutive of liberalism cannot be tackled by the traditional methods of science or metaphysics, but is only subjective to interpretative assessments. This is particularly true in light of the levels of self-consciousness that the unveiling such mechanisms implies: it makes us aware as analysers of both our own contextual situation and of the contingency of our assessments, rendering the possibility of absolute moral values impossible. To this regard, Berlin has probably more in common with post-Marxist critical theorists than what he ever imagined.

It is probably worth pointing out in this regard that even if Berlin's awareness of the plural capabilities of human beings is clearly intertwined with his awareness of value pluralism, this

does not spring exclusively from it. That is to say, Berlin holds a certain conception of what it is to be human that cannot be distilled only from value pluralism, and this is the reason why he elaborates a normative theory that stands separately from it. That values and human lives are plural does not necessarily imply that they *ought to be* plural, however if we consider man as fundamentally autonomous that plurality becomes the only expression of its autonomy.²⁷ It is not hard to see from this perspective how to a great degree Berlin's fixation with value theory was motivated by an interest in understanding human capabilities. Berlin's ethical stance is not just the direct consequence of having acknowledged that in the light of incommensurability of value different and incompatible lifestyles arise (for this notion is not normative, but descriptive); it also springs from deep recognition and enthusiasm towards that which is distinctively human: autonomy, the ability to be constructive, to choose and stand unflinchingly for those choices, taking responsibility for them. This is why for Berlin, human beings are ends in themselves, and 'nothing is worse than to treat men as if they were not autonomous'.²⁸ It is this concern with individual autonomy what motivates Berlin's crusade to unveil monist foundations through the history of ideas. Most of Berlin's work targets precisely the inherent contradiction of all those thinkers that have wanted to combine the notion of man as autonomous with the existence of objective, single and universal moral knowledge that men could not but comply with once it had been discovered. Opposing this stands the notion of man as a self-made creature underlying all of Berlin's political and ethical thought. Not self-made in the sense criticised in TCL when mentioning positive liberty – that is, self-made following

²⁷ This provides a basis for pluralist liberalism which is not the agonistic liberalism of Gray as he articulates it in *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c), and *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), for the aim is not to protect as many values as possible (*the more, the better*, as found in G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Political Theory and Contemporary Politics; London, New York: Continuum, 2002), an idea that comes straight through Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985)., but to protect individual autonomy and creative powers first. There might be non-liberal cultures which contribute to 'cultural pluralism' (in Gray's terms) but highly coercive of individual autonomy, and these are not acceptable in Berlinean terms. The point is not protecting a plurality of value for its own sake, but the degree of individual autonomy that allows this plurality to flourish.

²⁸ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 209.

the predicaments dictated by others – but a self-made only since its actions are all freely willed. After all, since ‘the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life’, as value pluralism shows, ‘the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition’.²⁹ This is why those who believe in perfect solutions, that rely on being told what to do, how to act, what to pursue, ‘are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human’.³⁰

3. Defining Berlin’s ethical approach.

3.1. Ruling out natural law.

Berlin bases his ethical theory upon a solid conviction on the fact that human beings are universally autonomous: ‘nothing is worse than to treat men as if they were not autonomous... to treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined... it is to treat men as if they were not free’,³¹ and that curtailing this autonomy constitutes always a violation of human nature that is morally reprehensible. It is for this reason that the safeguarding of individual autonomy is a pivotal element of his thought, and the normative heart of his theory of liberalism. This affirmation, insofar as it acknowledges the existence of an inherent human nature which should be respected in all cases, seems to bring Berlinian ethics very close to natural-law ethics, however this is far from being the case. In Berlin’s own words, ‘natural law, classical, medieval and modern’ was ultimately responsible for the idea that ‘moral or religious or political truths were valid for everyone, everywhere, at all times’, and that these truths ‘were,

²⁹ Op.Cit., p 239.

³⁰ Op.Cit., p 11.

³¹ Op.Cit., p 209.

of course, discoverable'.³² However, Berlin insists that values cannot be known,³³ insofar as they are not facts. In a post-Kantian world in which facts and values are differentiated,

political thought is not a form of knowledge in the sense in which the sciences or common sense contain knowledge, or facts... Political theory is an aspect of thought (and sometimes feeling) about men's relationships to each other and to their institutions, in terms of purposes and scales of value which themselves alter as a result of historical circumstances of varying types... each political philosophy responds to the needs of its own times and is fully intelligible only in terms of all the relevant factors of its age, and intelligible to us only to the degree to which (and it is a far larger one than some modern relativists wish to persuade us that it is) we have experience in common with previous generations.³⁴

Thus, whereas natural-law scholastics 'knew what was the best life for men' he is 'not so privileged'.³⁵ If natural-law ethics preach an understanding of human nature dependent upon concrete knowledge of human goals, Berlin's take on ethics starts with a perplexed attitude on this respect. Natural laws tell us not only that men are meant to be free, or virtuous, or happy; they also tell us how to be free, virtuous or happy: how to act, what to desire, what to reject, and how to accomplish it. Berlin's definition of human nature has more to do with means than with ends. Furthermore, if we take into consideration the fact that his definition of ethics is linked to the idea of individual commitment to values as the ultimate source of normativity, the proposal of a theory of ethics containing a well-defined, final and closed set of moral

³² I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 171-2.

³³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 67.

³⁴ Op.Cit., p 12.

³⁵ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 69.

commandments would be inconsistent. Instead, Berlin's definition of ethics leads to a single overarching claim about the need to protect individual autonomy. This claim is normative almost exclusively in procedural terms, however it is undeniable that by restricting and shaping means, ends are unavoidably and irrevocably altered too. That is to say, the theory of ethics that this thesis locates in Berlin is about human nature, and in this respect it may seem similar to natural law theories, however it does not establish the ends that human beings have to pursue, but only the means that should be ensured in order for them to autonomously pursue their own individual ends.

The 'essentially autonomous'³⁶ nature of individuals allows human beings to live their life in a variety of ways, often even incompatible amongst them but all equally acceptable. This is intrinsically linked with value pluralism, and Berlin's liberalism aims to protect this status. Against this, natural law theories smooth the irregularities of human behaviour by brandishing a single lifestyle as the best life for human beings, an ideal which Berlin strongly denies. Humanism rejects the understanding of human nature as the knowledge of those ends which men should pursue, for if these 'are given, by God, by reason, by tradition, then the only genuine questions left are those of means', and ethical problems 'turn out to be pure questions of technology'.³⁷ Such an approach paves the way to an understanding of politics as mere 'engineering of human souls',³⁸ one of Berlin's *bêtes noires*. An understanding of politics that only questions ends, and never means, is an obvious sign of a monist understanding of the

³⁶ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 208.

³⁷ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London, New York: Chatto & Windus Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 174.

³⁸ This was one of Berlin's favourite phrases when defining Stalin's approach to politics, a phrase that he borrows from Stalin himself. For a history of the term itself, see I. Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004):135. For examples of the ways in which Berlin uses the term, see I. Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 82; I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 73; I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b): 17. Finally, Joshua Cherniss has written a fantastic paper examining the nuances attached to this interpretation of politics from Berlin's perspective: J. L. Cherniss, 'Against 'Engineers of Human Souls': Paternalism, 'Managerialism' and the Development of Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism', *History of Political Thought*, 35.3 (2014).

world, according to Berlin. Value pluralism means that human beings differ fundamentally in their ends, and politics has to make sure that they all have the same resources at their disposal in order to be able to pursue this.

Berlin's humanist theory of ethics has many special characteristics that make of it a unique ethical theory, however it would be inaccurate to affirm that the idea of man as creator of its own ends is of Berlin's making. Berlin is mostly accountable for its unearthing and his historical account of it. More importantly, what is relevant about this conception of man as essentially autonomous is the way in which Berlin takes it to its last consequences, even if this ultimately means acknowledging the precariousness of liberalism. Berlin locates the root of this understanding of man as creator of its own will back to the Romantic period, which has shaped the ethical thought of our time, and in which Kant in particular plays a fundamental role. This brings us to the second essential point that needs to be clarified in order to understand what is unique of Berlin's ethics, namely its relationship to Kantian ethics. Berlin's understanding of ethics are to a large extent parallel to Kantian ethics, however they differ in some crucial aspects. The next section will explore this.

3.2. The Kantian roots.

“Anglo-American philosophy and Kant formed me”.³⁹

This section of the chapter examines the relationship between Berlin's humanistic ethics and Kantian ethics. Claiming a connection between Berlin and Kant may in principle seem bold, especially given Berlin's aversion to universalistic theories of ethics of the sort expounded by Kant. However the references to Kant's work and the crucial role his influence had in opening

³⁹ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 26.

up the development of the modern European mind are too many to be overlooked. Furthermore, the very notion of values as the result and expression of human autonomy is deeply Kantian. This dissertation does not wish to argue that Berlin was a fully-fledged Kantian, but far from it, it will present him as a neo-Kantian (or even a post-Kantian) who felt that the justification of liberalism was anchored in the absolute presupposition of human beings as essentially autonomous that entered the European mind through Kant's works. Berlin's reading of Kant is idiosyncratic at best: explicit references to his work are scarce, and his interpretation of it is nothing short of colourful at times. This ambivalent attitude towards Kant is possible due to his hermeneutic method: as explained in chapter one, Berlin's approach to the history of ideas is less concerned with providing an accurate reading of the original *a la* Skinner, than it is with finding meaningful ways of generating a normative discourse via the interpretation of past political texts. In other words, Berlin's reading of Kant is aimed at highlighting the fact that, whether we like it or not, his fundamental distinction between fact and value and his presentation of human beings as autonomous have become constitutive elements of the European mind. This is why Berlin places him at the centre of his philosophy, even if he disagrees deeply with many other aspects of his work. He goes as far as asserting that 'no political proclamation, no statement of purposes in peace or war, none of the conflicts of moral and political ideas which have agitated Europe and America in the last century and a half would be intelligible in pre-Kantian terms'.⁴⁰

These terms include crucially the distinction between fact and value. By bringing attention to this distinction, Berlin is not necessarily endorsing Kantian ethics in full, but using them for a double purpose. First, as a means of highlighting the impact that the fact/value distinction has had in the development of the Western understanding of ethics. And secondly,

⁴⁰ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 154.

Berlin brings attention to this distinction in order to point out way we approach facts cannot and should not be equal to the way in which we think about values. This second point comes motivated by the philosophy and political thought of his time, which as we have seen in the first chapter favoured facts over values, dismissing the latter as secondary or irrelevant kind of knowledge. Berlin adopts as a central element of his ethical thought the idea that what ultimately distinguishes values from facts is that the former are ultimately the product of human will, as has been explained in chapter three. This notion Berlin attributes to Kant, and it holds a central place in the configuration not only of Berlin's understanding of ethics, but also in his political philosophy. It is through this notion that him and Kant are linked, even if what Berlin makes out of individual autonomy is entirely different from Kant: almost the opposite, we could say. Whereas Berlin sees in autonomy the source of pluralism inherent to human nature, Kant understands it as the ultimate solution to conflicts of value. If individuals ought to be autonomous it is only so that they can all agree on the terms of a universal reason that is exclusively accessible by the means of individual reflection: 'to be truly free, a man, for Kant, must be free to go to the bad as well as to the good; otherwise there is no merit in (rationally) choosing the good, and the notion of desert becomes empty'.⁴¹ Unlike Berlin, Kant ultimately holds a view of the world as ultimately harmonious, and not perennially dominated by conflict. Berlin disagrees with this. Our experience shows that moral dilemmas or even clashes between different moral systems are not always solvable by means of reason, and it is to this extent that Berlin affirms that 'Kant does not give a convincing explanation of how we come to know what is right and what is wrong'.⁴² However, having said this, Berlin holds strongly onto Kant's affirmation 'that to conceive something as one's duty is not the same as merely to wish it, however strongly', or, in other words, that 'the content of duty had nothing in common with

⁴¹ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 176.

⁴² I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 109.

the object of desire'.⁴³ What Berlin is trying to highlight here is that Kant, albeit not going as far as shunning the teleological and harmonious conceptions of the world and human life of his time, understood for once that knowledge was not virtue, and that duty and desire would often conflict. This is the seed of the distinction between fact and value, and when taken to its last consequences it returns a portrait of human beings as deeply imperfect. Once again, Berlin's early rejection of metaphysics and his empiricist aspirations prevent him from endorsing a perfectionist view of human beings like Kant does, and instead stays close to the human imperfection he experiences. As much as Berlin liked to repeat Kant's famous quote that 'from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made' to highlight the inherently imperfect nature of human beings, he seems to always leave out the previous passage of the quote,⁴⁴ which refers to the need of all human beings for a master. In Kant's view, this master can be oneself, positing something akin to the domination of the lower passions by the higher self as a form of self-betterment – and approach that Berlin notoriously rejects as linked to notions of positive liberty.⁴⁵

⁴³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 149-50.

⁴⁴ 'For every one of them will always misuse his freedom when he has no one over him to exercise authority over him in accordance with the laws. The highest supreme authority, however, ought to be just in itself 11 and yet a human being. This problem is therefore the most difficult of all; indeed, its perfect solution is even impossible; out of such crooked wood as the human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated.' A. Rorty and J. Schmidt, *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 15.

⁴⁵ This is an interesting point as well because the eclectic way in which Berlin combines references and ideas of other thinkers in his own discourse is a central feature of his work that shows as well in the distinction between positive and negative liberty. The reader may have noticed that this thesis does not devote a chapter to explain Berlin's definition of liberty, which has been generally treated as his main and most intriguing contribution. This is because the thesis aims to deny the fact that the establishment of the distinction between positive and negative liberty sits at the heart of Berlin's work. The definition of human beings as essentially autonomous for instance would be extremely hard to combine with this, given how negative liberty, in its most liberal laissez-faire meaning, would hardly amount to the kind of principle that needs to be pushed in order to guarantee a minimum of autonomy for all human beings. Berlin's ambiguity in reading Kant is also visible in his definition of positive and negative liberty. Joshua Cherniss argues that the two notions may be much closer than what most interpreters have read, and this dissertation strongly subscribes his thesis (J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)).

The roots of Berlin's 'imperfectionism' are, thus, to a great extent Kantian insofar as tied to an understanding of man as fundamentally autonomous, free to make its own choices and determine its own ends, with the degree of fallibility that this entails. Berlin's project preserves Kant's normative commitment to individual autonomy, but weights it down by tying it to realism or common sense metaphysics, rather than lightening it by attaching it to fleeting metaphysics. He is entirely committed to a defence of ethics that is not the product of abstract reasoning or logical elucubrations, but instead anchored in an empirical experience of the world. At the same time, Berlin opposes frontally any attempts to subject values to the same verification processes as those used in logical or scientific propositions. Values and facts belong to different realms, but that does not necessarily mean that values are the mere product of our opinions or emotions. This tension between relativism and objectivism in value has already been explored in the chapter on value pluralism. For this dissertation, the truly relevant is the way in which Berlin articulates his ethical theory around the notion of human beings as essentially autonomous and values as the result of the commitments they pursue. This generates a space in which the normativity of values is directly related to the autonomy of human beings, meaning that no human value can be sacrificed in the name of any higher value. This is what Berlin is referring to when writing that it was Kant who inspired 'the notion of humanity as something in the name of which rights can be claimed, crimes punished, revolutions made':⁴⁶ the only thing that justifies politics in action is in fact the protection of humanity, that is to say, the protection of the human autonomy that defines human beings as such.

⁴⁶ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 154.

3.3. The epistemology of Berlinean ethics.

The single feature that differentiates Berlin's theory of ethics from Kantian ethics on the one hand, and natural-law type ethics on the other, is the particular epistemological foundations upon which it is based. Berlin's humanistic conception of individuals, ethics and society is rooted in an empiricist basis and builds up to a level which could very well be described as that of 'common-sense metaphysics', entirely different to the metaphysics openly challenged by Berlin and embodied, for instance, in Kant or Plato. The metaphysical realm to which these authors make reference is akin to idealism and Berlin identifies it with monism: the belief that some conflict-free order is achievable by following the steps dictated by logical reasoning, and ignoring empirical experience. The problem with idealism, Berlin explains, resides in the fact that we have no proof whatsoever of the existence of such an order; moreover, our own experience stubbornly proves that individuals have different views on how to live and that these are often impossible to combine without conflict or clashes. If anything, Berlin makes a point throughout his works of how we know historically of the disastrous consequences that come attached to any attempt to achieve the metaphysically outlined blueprints of idealism.⁴⁷

Thus, Berlin's theory of ethics is grounded on an hermeneutical reading of human nature. Berlin's normative assertion that men are fundamentally autonomous is the result of an interpretative reading of the history of the ideals that have shaped European culture and society, as well as a critical reflection on their meaning and implications. As a result of this, he points out Kant's paramount role in opening up the path that ultimately leads to the establishment of value pluralism as the main ultimate presupposition of our time. If value pluralism is a meta-ethical theory, as chapter two argued, then this means that at most it can only tell us that our

⁴⁷ Even if this historical argument could be used as the foundation of Berlinean ethics, it is part of the object of this thesis to challenge the idea that Berlin's normative stance is ultimately justified by the occurrence of such events. On the contrary, even though there is in Berlin a continuous line between history and ethical and political normativity, ultimately there is an ethical principle overarching all of his work which is valid regardless of the context in which it is applied – or at least it is so until the ultimate presuppositions of that historical moment change, normally via a revolution. That is why Berlin is still relevant to us today.

moral landscape is like an untidy room, filled with a multiplicity of lifestyles that can develop both in overlapping and contradictory directions. On the opposite end of the ideological spectrum Berlin identifies monist theories of ethics as ultimately rooted in idealist conceptions of man, stating that it is possible and necessary to tidy the disorder of value pluralism. Against this, Berlin argues that nothing in our actual experience of the world, in our historical knowledge, or in our critical reflection on these fields indicates that tidying up the disorder of value pluralism is in fact possible. If anything, all these sources of knowledge indicate that the results of trying to fight back value pluralism are catastrophic. Moreover, it seems that, given the autonomous character of human nature, value pluralism is a morally desirable status insofar as it allows men to develop the self-creating activities that are attached to the pursuit of values. Even if the definition of man as essentially autonomous is clearly ‘metaphysical’ in the strictest sense of the term, for it deals with questions that obviously transcend the ‘physical’ sense of human beings, it does not state in any case to be presenting ‘facts’ about human nature. It is not metaphysical in an ideal sense, insofar as it describes human nature as something different from that we can ‘observe’ empirically. A bit like Bernard Williams’ notion of ethical ‘confidence’,⁴⁸ Berlin is presenting with his work a different kind of knowledge insofar as ethical knowledge. He does not claim to be defining eternal truths about human nature, but only the terms in which we can currently make ethical sense of our actions and those of others without becoming relativists or totalitarians. Thus, it can be said that Berlin’s ethics are suspended in a middle ground between metaphysics and realism. Ultimately, the epistemological structure of Berlin’s definition of human ethics has in its core the same struggle which colours all of his oeuvre: on the one hand there is a warning against the pervading scientism of his time – especially when it enters the territory of human knowledge – on the

⁴⁸ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); B. Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', *Philosophy*, 75.04 (2000); B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

other, an emphatic claim stating that the fact that knowledge about human beings is acquired by means different from science does not undermine the solidness of its foundations. Hence Berlin's desire to steer clear of metaphysics and his love of empiricism even when it comes to defining ethical principles which are, by definition, metaphysical.

This particular epistemological middle ground of Berlinean ethics is clearly set out in 'Subjective versus Objective ethics' (SVOE from now), an appendix to PIRA.⁴⁹ In it Berlin explains how ethics and moral principles are not objective, as Hume maintained, but neither are they subjective 'in the sense of not being objective'.⁵⁰ They are, instead 'sui generis, to be assessed by methods appropriate to them... and no longer capable of being modified on the grounds that they are merely subjective and therefore lack sufficient authority'.⁵¹ This is as explicit as Berlin ever goes in his works about defining the *sui generis* character of ethical knowledge, however this is the crucial argument of his oeuvre at large, as this thesis argues, and the reason why he is so concerned with methodologies and opts to embrace political theory hermeneutically – for neither metaphysics nor empiricism alone could ever grasp the way in which ethics work. To this regard his notion of the *sense of reality* 'a refined common sense, a sceptical alternative to the claims of both social science and philosophy',⁵² is particularly relevant. In other words, ethical principles – that is, the principles that guide our actions telling us what is good and what is bad, what is acceptable and what is not – are not, from a Berlinean perspective, to be 'built upon such shifting sand as the individual tastes and inclinations of particular persons, in particular circumstances, at particular moments of their lives... and therefore incapable of forming the basis for permanent modes of behaviour',⁵³ but neither do

⁴⁹ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 260-66.

⁵⁰ Op.Cit., p 264.

⁵¹ Op.Cit., p 265.

⁵² R. P. Hanley, 'Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry', *The American Political Science Review*, 98.2 (2004): 330.

⁵³ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 260,61.

they respond to universal truths which, once accessed, will provide us with ultimate answers about human morality (as Kant expected to be the case). One thing is certain, however, namely ‘the fact that there do exist sharp and profound differences between statements of personal taste or inclination and statements about the ends of life and the rights and duties of individuals’.⁵⁴ Ethical knowledge constitutes a kind of knowledge of its own, and trying to address it using philosophical or scientific tools that do not recognise its particular epistemological status in the first place is bogus. Ethical knowledge ‘begins by surveying the data and then constructs (sic) a view of the whole from a synthesis of the unique and discrete, preferring the atypical to the typical’.⁵⁵ The ‘data’ to which Hanley refers here is a combination of our present experience of the world, as well as of our memories and historical knowledge. It is worth insisting on the fact that Berlin’s use of history is not by any means ‘scientific’, in the Marxist sense, given Berlin’s aversion to determinism: history teaches us in fact how necessary causal relations are not applicable to the actions and reactions of human beings and societies. Whenever we ‘explain’ the behaviour of others we do so by running the sort of interpretative analysis that is only possible amongst human beings. It is in aspects like these where Collingwood’s influence over Berlin and his general hermeneutic approach becomes clearly visible. Berlin’s use of history and his insistence on the possibility of ethical knowledge, even if *sui generis*, rests upon the assumption of the absolute presuppositions as outlined by Collingwood that maintain the stable contexts to which all human beings of a given society can refer. This, chapter six will explain, is the same reasoning behind Bernard Williams’ definition of liberalism as contingently attached to modernity.

It is from this position that Berlin can comfortably affirm the existence of absolute ethical principles, while at the same time declaring that ‘different ideals of life, not necessarily

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ R. P. Hanley, ‘Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry’, *The American Political Science Review*, 98.2 (2004): 332.

altogether reconcilable with each other, are equally valid and equally worthy'.⁵⁶ By defining the realm of moral knowledge as a particular kind of empiricism first, Berlin allows his ethics to be loose enough to accommodate pluralism but not so much as to collapse into relativism. In fact, he seems to be advocating a practice-based conception of ethics, in which moral rights and wrongs are more contingent than ideal. It is to this extent that history becomes relevant in Berlin, for it is by means of sharing certain values and acting upon them continuously – like a kind of praxis – that human beings establish their normativity. This is not conservatism, for the demand that human beings choose their goals autonomously has attached to it a necessarily critical consideration of them. The public status of most values also validates their normativity. Berlin believes in fact in the existence of ethical principles 'common to human beings as such, that is, for practical purposes, to the great majority of men in most places and times'.⁵⁷ This is because somewhere deep in Berlin's philosophy rests the conviction that 'what it means to be human is revealed only in being and acting with other human beings'.⁵⁸

Berlin appears always as more occupied with highlighting the flaws of other modes of ethical inquiry than with methodically explaining his own. However this does not mean that there is not a strong affirmation of his theory of ethics in his work. As a result of his framing of ethics as a *sui generis* type of knowledge, his justification of normative arguments, as well as his theory of liberalism at large, are laid out using a methodology unlike that of moral or political philosophers. Berlin's way of articulating his theory of ethics is via a hermeneutic narration of the history of Europe, in which the normativity of human autonomy becomes clear

⁵⁶ I. Berlin, 'Democracy, Communism and the Individual', in *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library* (1949b): 1.

⁵⁷ I. Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 25. I have identified in Berlinean humanism one fundamental immovable principle of Kantian roots which tells us about the nature of man as essentially autonomous, but there is also in Berlin the notion, sustained by pluralism, of a multiplicity of moral positions as a constitutive element of our ethical universe which are subjected to change and variation. This notion runs parallel to Berlinean ethical theory, which is both fundamentally concerned with establishing certain political principles that would ensure a minimum protection of basic rights and liberties while at the same time acknowledging a plurality of mutable cultures and traditions.

⁵⁸ R. P. Hanley, 'Berlin and History', in Hardy and Crowder (eds.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007): 131.

as a self-evident truth, almost like a ‘common sense’ conclusion. Berlin does not provide a clear and systematic explanation of the nature of the *sui generis* ethical knowledge simply because this cannot be done. It is in this sense that Berlin calls himself ‘a kind of existentialist’.⁵⁹ For existentialists, in Berlin’s view, make absolute commitments to certain values which cannot be affirmed with absolute clarity and stability. We see something similar in Berlin’s humanist ethics, except it recognises as well the strong role played by cultures and societies in defining values. After all, Berlin recognises the existence of reactions, ‘in us, whoever we are’ whenever we see others ‘like ourselves manipulated, trampled on, dehumanised’.⁶⁰ Does this ultimately mean that value judgements are ‘not judgements at all, but arbitrary acts of self-commitment’? – the answer, Berlin tells us, is ‘both yes and no’.⁶¹ Moreover, Berlin tells us, we know what is right and what is wrong ‘because we live by a moral code: some call it conscience’,⁶² the existence of which, once again, we know empirically and from the inside, and not by means of analytic, abstract philosophical exercises. It is an uneasy balance between the two commitments: the empirical roots on the one hand, the existentialist lack of absolute foundations on the other. And yet, Berlin’s position looks much safer than the alternatives: after all, he tells us, this theory of ethics causes ‘more logical than moral discomfort’.⁶³ As we know, not only was Berlin utterly uninterested in logical problems during most of his life but, more importantly, he was wildly aware of the potential dangers that came with ignoring moral discomforts for the sake of fitting ‘in the procrustean bed of some rigid dogma’.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 101.

⁶⁰ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 177.

⁶¹ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992): 109.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 193.

⁶⁴ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 76.

4. Conclusions.

This chapter has established the existence of a theory of ethics within Berlin's work by following a suggestion found in PIRA, where he describes a distinction between the humanist and the non-humanist understanding of human nature. It has been shown how Berlin's thought rests to a large extent on this normative principle which defends a conception of individuals as fundamentally autonomous above anything else, an understanding that is strongly influenced by Kant. However, it should be read more as a neo-Kantian theory given its frontal opposition to metaphysics and universalistic conceptions of value. This is crucial in making room for value pluralism, which is also fundamentally attached to Berlin's understanding of human nature. This definition of humanistic ethics allows a crucial change of perspective in examining Berlin's work. For instance, it provides an alternative way of looking at the conflicts associated with linking liberalism and value pluralism. Berlin intimates the existence of a relationship between the two notions yet never explains it methodically in his work, to the point that this has become over the years one of the main points of debate surrounding to his work. By portraying value pluralism as meta-ethical and locating the normative terms of Berlin's theory of liberalism within a neo-Kantian framework, this dissertation produces an argument that addresses directly scholars like Gray, who has dismissed Berlin's work for the lack of normativity of value pluralism, or Crowder, who values Berlin's work but tries to distil a theory of liberalism straight from his value pluralism. Crowder's assessment is not necessarily wrong, however in his theoretical re-elaboration of the implications of value pluralism he misses the crucial point that Berlin's normative statement is not the result of direct knowledge about human nature, but rather of an awareness of the gradual assimilation of Kantian ideals in the modern western world that can only be achieved via a hermeneutic reading of history. Berlin's work can only be truly transcendent if we grasp its hermeneutic condition in full, which is what

allows it to readjust to the political and ethical questions that have arisen and will continue to do so past the specific context of the cold war.

In addition to this, the spelling out of Berlin's humanistic ethics opens a window to a reinterpretation of his famous distinction between positive and negative liberty. This dichotomy has also proved problematic, for the idea of negative liberty does not seem at times to encapsulate all the political or ethical concerns and interests found in Berlin's work, such as his enthusiasm for the creative capacities of human beings. This makes it hard to understand what exactly is so problematic about positive liberty for Berlin. This chapter highlights how blurred the lines between the two concepts of liberty are in reality in Berlin's thought, proposing a new and alternative way of solving some of the most pressing controversies associated with this distinction. It has been widely argued that negative liberty is too thin a definition to be normative on its own, for it can only lead to moral and political relativism at best.⁶⁵ However, by including the element of humanistic ethics we are forced to understand Berlin's notion of liberty in a different way.

As a final remark two main normative consequences of observing Berlin's humanistic ethics will be outlined. These could potentially provide a good basis for the defence of a liberalism of the kind that his work outlines. First, it guarantees an openness towards the convictions of others, which facilitates the understanding of them as ends, not as means; and second, because it creates awareness of the relative validity of absolute values, their pursuit becomes a somewhat active choice, a constant affirmation, and not simply a passive compliance to given ends. It is this which lies at the heart not only of Berlin's theory of ethics, but of all of his philosophy: the notion of human beings standing unflinchingly for that which they have chosen, even if they are aware of the relative validity of their convictions.⁶⁶ If ends

⁶⁵ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a).

⁶⁶ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 242.

are not given, our capacity to build and pursue our own goals becomes central to any ethical outlook. To treat a human being as if it were not autonomous, even if for their own sake, is not to treat them like a human, but merely like ‘human material for me, the benevolent reformer, to mould in accordance with my own, not their, freely adopted purpose’.⁶⁷ For Berlin human beings are defined by their ability to choose, by their sense of purpose, their capacity to generate and pursue goals and ends of life; the need to respect and protect this ability is the only true normative principle stated in his work.

⁶⁷ Op.Cit., p 209.

Part Three:
Value Pluralism and Political Theory.

Chapter five

Value Pluralism and Political Theory I: Rawlsian Moralism

‘Berlin opened up critical discussion of the concept of freedom in much the same way that Rawls later opened up discussion of social justice and the foundations of liberalism.’¹

1. Introduction.

This chapter will provide a brief analysis of John Rawls’ theory of liberalism and it will compare some of its main theses with those found in Berlin’s work. In particular, it will look at the methodological differences between the two authors. This chapter is the first one in the third section of the thesis, formed by two chapters that compare the different methodological approaches of two crucial political theorists – John Rawls and Bernard Williams – in order to highlight the relevance of the points raised by Berlin in his work. This section highlights how value pluralism has shaped the development of contemporary political thought in ways more profound than what most students of Berlin’s thought have noticed. Whereas the three previous chapters made the reader familiar with Berlin’s defence of liberalism, the present chapter and the following one will present two examples of theories of liberalism that have been influenced by Berlin as a means of highlighting the transcendence of his work. This chapter reveals how Berlin was right in his insistence that political theory be approached hermeneutically, and supports his view of liberalism demanding a political method that combines a critical reading of historical facts with the abstract reflection on ethical ideals. By

¹ G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin : Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004): 189.

exploring the ties that attach value pluralism to liberal political theory, Berlin made a claim to hermeneutics that does not only confer internal relevance to his work, but more importantly stands out as a constitutive element of political theory. Berlin seems more aware than any other political theorist of the fact that the development of political theory is a consequence of the development of the same context that demands liberalism as part of it. From the Enlightenment onwards the assimilation of value pluralism and of human beings as essentially autonomous has made of these notions absolute presuppositions of the European society and culture. If it was not with value pluralism as a backdrop, the continuous process of questioning and justification of the normativity of political principles inherent to political theory would not be necessary. Without value pluralism, the notion of ‘the political’ as an independent sphere of action and knowledge with rules and demands of its own as acknowledged by Rawls and Williams would hardly make any sense. It is only when politics are understood as occupying a field that does not open up to universal and eternal answers that political theory as a discipline makes sense. Political statements are always contingent, however this does not necessarily imply relativism, as the previous two chapters have argued. This is an idea that will be explored further throughout the following two chapters as well. Berlin’s claim of ethics as a *sui generis* kind of knowledge ties in with the delimitation of politics as a field that demands its own methodology. At the same time, the closeness with which Berlin portrays politics and ethics can be problematic in light of realist interpretations of his work. This final section of the PhD will also address this issue.

This chapter will use Rawls’ ‘A Theory of Justice’² (TJ and *Theory* from now on) as a paradigm of a philosophical theory of liberalism, or an ideal theory of liberalism, in order to highlight the detrimental effects of its lack of historical and contextual awareness. Rawls’ eventual grounding of his theory in a particular historical context – that of constitutional

² J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

democracies – in ‘Political Liberalism’³ (PL from now on). We will see in this development a clear sense of the inescapability of Berlin’s claims on the historical contingency of the normative argument underpinning liberalism.

This chapter argues that Berlin and Rawls, coupled by G.A. Cohen as ‘the most celebrated twentieth century Anglophone political philosophers’,⁴ stood close to each other in their political thinking, and shows how the central elements in Rawls are not just a further development of the ideas laid out by Berlin, who has been unfairly considered a predecessor to analytical theories of liberalism like Rawls. This chapter will explain how TJ can in fact be read as a reinstatement of the notions contained in Berlin’s work, and how, in fact, TJ benefits from taking Berlin’s hermeneutic warning about the contingency of liberalism more seriously. By asserting this it is not implied in any way that Rawls’ work has no original or relevant features of its own – nothing more far from the truth – however the argument is necessary in order to give a better sense of the reach of some of Berlin’s most commonly underappreciated ideas. Berlin’s insistence on value pluralism is not motivated just by a desire to generate yet another metaphysical or philosophical theory of values, but more importantly by a deep, and yet unrefined at times, awareness of the irrevocable consequences that a serious admission of the fact of pluralism can have for any understanding of politics as a field of theory and practice. This is the same idea picked up and developed by Bernard Williams in his political realism, which will be examined in the following chapter. In any case, the difference between Berlin and Rawls, and between Berlin and Williams, is not conceptual or theoretical as much as it is a difference in emphasis and methodology. As it is the aim of this chapter and the next one to point out, the final convergence of both Rawls’ and Williams’ understanding of the nature of

³ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁴ G. A. Cohen and M. Otsuka, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy', (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011):170.

politics and of political theory towards Berlin's proves precisely this point, for it is precisely then that the differences in method and emphasis begin to soften.

This chapter is laid out in three sections. First it offers a brief introduction to *Theory* explaining the main motivation behind it and outlining its main ideas. Second, it enumerates and analyses Berlin's charge against it. Finally, it traces the changes introduced by Rawls in PL, and explains how this evolution represents a convergence with Berlin. Rawls' convergence towards Berlin is key, as it ultimately supports the main claim of the thesis about the hermeneutic demands of liberal theory.

2. A Theory of Justice

2.1. Motivations and relationship with Berlin.

It seems almost unnecessary to introduce the reader to Rawls' work, seeing as it is generally understood as the stepping stone of contemporary liberal theory. Within his body of works, TJ has considered by many as the definitive theory of liberalism. The main aim of Rawls' theory is to help maintain justice overall, which he considers 'the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought'.⁵ This is because he thinks that 'each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice',⁶ the protection of which is *the raison d'être* of social institutions. Rawls' strategy for achieving the protection of individual justice is to formulate an interconnected set of norms – a theory – to which individuals can voluntarily ascribe, like a social contract. In his view, principles of justice are defined in order to guide the functioning of social institutions, and the role of these is to help assign and distribute the rights and duties of citizens as well as the division of social benefits in a society. His theory of justice, then, has

⁵ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the ultimate goal of regulating the distribution of social goods in order to make sure that everyone receives whatever is fair or just for them to receive.

Rawls makes an impressive effort in order to come up with a theory that is, in principle, infallible. Unlike Berlin's theory of liberalism, Rawls' poses a refined systematic effort that leaves as few loose ties as possible when analysed from a philosophical perspective. In order to satisfy his goal of creating a system that works universally, a system that can be applied to wherever a community of free and equal individuals exists, Rawls defines the terms of his theory with appeal to abstract concepts. TJ displays clearly Rawls' attraction to analytic philosophy, the same one that landed him in Oxford for a year during 1952 when he was taught by Berlin and Stuart Hampshire: in a letter to Berlin he refers to that year as giving him 'the most important part of my philosophical education & my sense of direction'.⁷ The full implications of this relationship will be discussed later in this chapter, but the main idea to be kept for now is the transcendence of Rawls' analytic origins. These are made explicit in the guiding motivation of TJ, which is to generate a 'viable alternative to the utilitarian and intuitionist conceptions of justice... which have long dominated our philosophical tradition'.⁸ Both intuitionism and utilitarianism stand as analytic theories, and Rawls' aim is to challenge them from within their own realm.

Rawls initiates this challenge by proposing an alternative to the justification of moral choices provided by intuitionism, normally with reference to purely conscientious acts. This doctrine states that our moral choices are the result of our internal understanding of their intrinsic goodness. The main issue with intuitionism is that it precludes the possibility of moral disagreement and processes of reason-giving as normative tools that follow from it that sit at the heart of liberalism. If moral choices are simply the result of an intimate understanding of

⁷ John Rawls to Isaiah Berlin, 6th December 1982. Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

⁸ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 3.

the moral goodness of certain actions, then there is very little that can be said to justify disagreement over the moral choices of others. It is a bit like a ‘pure preference’ of the sort displayed by an individual who expresses ‘a preference for tea rather than coffee’.⁹ This is exactly the way Berlin describes relativism: ‘I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne, we have different taste. There is no more to be said’.¹⁰ Just like Berlin, Rawls argues that if moral intuitionism is true, then discussing moral choices becomes irrelevant, and so does, by extension, political theory. Significantly enough, Rawls classes intuitionism ‘in this broad sense as pluralism’,¹¹ given that ‘intuitionism holds that in our judgements of social justice we must eventually reach a plurality of first principles in regard to which we can only say that it seems to us more correct to balance them this way rather than that’.¹² This sounds a bit like Berlin’s definition of pluralism, however it is not as its most distinctive feature, in Rawls’ view, is ‘the especially prominent place’ it gives to ‘the appeal to our intuitive capabilities unguided by constructive and unrecognisably guided criteria’.¹³ This is key and presents a strong sidelining with Berlin, who thinks, like Rawls, that communication on ethical matters is possible and necessary. The main refutation against intuitionism drawn by Rawls is the fact that ‘constructive criteria’ or ‘recognizable ethical principles’ exist – that is to say, recognizable by all – and examples of these are easy to give ‘drawn from tradition and common sense’.¹⁴ The similarities with Berlin’s idea of ethical knowledge with recourse to the common presuppositions of each time and place are remarkable. However, as we will see, for Rawls these examples are more of a sign of a deeper common ground rather than the final degree of communication attainable, as it is for Berlin. The difference is methodological, and has to do

⁹ Op.Cit., p 418.

¹⁰ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b):11.

¹¹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973):35.

¹² Op.Cit., p 39.

¹³ Op.Cit., p 40.

¹⁴ Ibid.

with Rawls' different understanding of ethical knowledge and his related optimism on the possibility of overcoming clashes of value. But more on this later in the chapter.

If the normativity of moral preferences stems exclusively from personal conviction or individual illumination, then there is no room left for public discussion. Even though similar, pure preference should not be confused, however, with Berlin's description of the choice-process between incommensurables as one of 'plumping'.¹⁵ In fact, this understanding of the choice process is, if anything, contrary to that of intuitionism and relativism: whereas what Berlin describes as plumping is the result of a deep awareness of the inescapability of moral conflict, and not only between individuals or groups, but also as an internal experience of all individuals, intuitionists and relativists locate the process of making moral choices within the opposite realm. That is to say, where the pluralist 'plumps' aware of the relative validity of her choice, and therefore leaving the door open to questions and debates on values, the intuitionist's choice stands as an expression of a preference that is for them unquestionable regardless of the preferences held by others, unfazed by their questioning.

Next, Rawls aims to defeat utilitarianism, and the Berlinean reminiscences are notable in the argument he builds up with this effect too. Rawls' opposition to utilitarianism stems out of a deep awareness of pluralism and a strong conviction of the need to establish the inviolability of that which defines human beings as such. Like Berlin, he worries about utilitarianism's disregard of every man's essential need for a certain degree of liberty, and therefore rules the guarantees it offers as insufficient. Henceforth his definition of human nature as 'founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override'.¹⁶ That is the origin of the first principle of justice that Rawls draws in his Theory. It protects the

¹⁵ I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969): 243,338; I. Berlin and S. Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, 52-135 (1998): 103. See also the entry for "Plumping" at the A-Z section in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library (<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/information/a-z.html>)

¹⁶ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973):3.

right of each individual to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the liberty of others. This principle reveals Rawls' deep awareness of value pluralism. Like Berlin, he knows that 'total liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs',¹⁷ and thus his theory cannot aim only to guarantee total freedom for all, as this is not possible. Instead, it presents a trade-off between liberty and equality as a means of guaranteeing that each individual enjoys at least a minimum basic degree of liberty. Even though utilitarianism understands politics as trade-offs, too, its offer to maximise liberty as a whole within a given group is not satisfactory from Rawls' perspective insofar as it does not observe the fundamental aspect of individual liberty as inviolable: 'justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others'.¹⁸ Hence his acknowledgement that 'an injustice is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice':¹⁹ by specifying that justice is not the only virtue against which any other benefits should be measured, he shields his theory from being turned into a utilitarianism. The similarities between Berlin and Rawls' theories of liberalism are clear to this regard: like Rawls, Berlin rejects both intuitionism and utilitarianism, the former for its subjectivity, the latter for its portrayal of men as means rather than as ends. Berlin sees in utilitarianism just another embodiment of the monism he abhors, and uses value pluralism to challenge it, pointing in the last instance towards liberalism. The same can be said of the positions of the two authors with respect to intuitionism and relativism. Just as Rawls attempts to find a middle way between utilitarianism and intuitionism, Berlin is suspended between monism and relativism. Even if at first glance their works may appear as dissimilar, when looked at closely we realise that their motives and conclusions are in fact strikingly similar. Unlike Rawls, however, Berlin does not extract a political theory of liberalism entirely from the assumption of value pluralism. Instead he adds the explicitly normative component of the

¹⁷ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 10.

¹⁸ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

essentially autonomous character of individuals. The differences between Rawls and Berlin have more to do with method and emphasis than with essential ideas. The following section will explain this.

2.2. Overcoming pluralism in ‘A Theory of Justice’.

References to ‘the fact of pluralism’²⁰ are not scarce in Rawls’ work, and in TJ he acknowledges that ‘the plurality of distinct persons with separate systems of ends is an essential feature of human societies’.²¹ Rawls’ understanding of pluralism is remarkably similar to that outlined by Berlin as explained in chapters two and three, showing he acknowledges it as descriptive rather than normative, being this the reason behind his rejection of intuitionism. Moreover, Rawls also maintains the individual’s worth over that of collective and social goals, hence his rejection of utilitarianism. His TJ stands as an action plan to combat the clashes of value offered by value pluralism while safeguarding the liberty of individuals, just like Berlin. Rawls’ affirmation of this, however, is the fruit of a purely theoretical effort: Rawls reflects on what he sees as the factual moral structure of our society, but there is not a shadow of historical reflection in his argument. There is the distinctive abstract conceptual certainty of analytic philosophy instead. In any case, it is because Rawls takes pluralism as a fact, and not in spite of it, that he needs a theory of justice of the sort he outlines: if deep conflicts of value did not take place in the way Berlin laid out, then a social contract of the sort found in Rawls would not be necessary. Rawls’ social contract starts, thus, with a deep awareness of pluralism and the rejection of monism, however its main accent is on the possibility of convergence, rather than on the inescapability of difference like in Berlin’s work. This acts as a very vivid example on how the main differences between the two authors have to do more with emphasis than with

²⁰ J. Rawls, ‘The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7.1 (1987):6.

²¹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 6.

substance. The possibility of convergence within the inherent disagreements of pluralism highlighted in Rawls is nonetheless not conceived as a means for dissolving conflicts of value – like utilitarianism would, for instance – but instead Rawls’ focus on the possibility of consensus is, in fact, devised with the final aim of allowing the greatest degree of pluralism possible to exist within any given society. The aim of TJ is to lay out a theory that will locate and highlights the common grounds existing *within* pluralism in order to generate a space in which all citizens can be guaranteed a minimum and equal degree of justice, necessary in order for each to develop according to their own values.

In order to do this, Rawls produces an ideal theory that ‘develops the conception of a perfectly just basic structure and the corresponding duties and obligations of persons under the fixed constraints of human life’.²² TJ looks at the conditions that allow basic agreements between individuals to occur and lifts them from their context in order to generate a basic abstract set of rules that ensures the generation and preservation of such a space within any context populated by free and rational persons. In Rawls’ own words, TJ’s task is ‘to present a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau and Kant’.²³ The original contract is not ‘one to enter a particular society or to set up a particular form of government’, but instead ‘the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association’.²⁴ The reader should note the remarkable similarity between this spelling out of a theory of justice in ideal terms and the political utopianism that Berlin wishes to challenge when rejecting metaphysical notions of ethics. The main reason Berlin had for criticising ‘the rationalist programme of the eighteenth century’ was the ‘central notion that reason discovers

²² Op.Cit., p. 245.

²³ Op.Cit., p. 11.

²⁴ Ibid.

ends as well as means'.²⁵ Utopianism starts precisely when the ends of life are understood to be discoverable by rational reflection detached from what experience and historical reflection suggest. Rawls' *Theory* ultimately roots the normative justification of liberalism in a universal capacity for reason. Having said this, there is one fundamental difference between what Berlin understands as utopianism and Rawls' *Theory*, namely that Rawls' contract aims to allow the social and political grounds necessary for the emergence and protection of pluralism, whereas utopianism as Berlin understands it necessarily implies its suppression. That is to say, TJ aims to present clearly those principles that will enable individuals to agree to a single system of political cooperation that does not represent an end in itself, but merely a means for allowing every individual to pursue ends of their own, to the greatest extent possible. As we will see next, despite of the pluralist rooting of TJ Berlin remained incredulous about the possibility of achieving a social agreement of the type in it specified. His main issue had to do with Rawls' use of ideal theory, a criticism that Rawls took on board by narrowing the scope of his liberalism into a 'political' liberalism in his later work 'Political Liberalism'. This evolution will be explored in depth later in this chapter. For now, the main idea to take away is that the main aim of TJ is to find a means for guaranteeing a minimum consensus in order to prevent the unavoidable clashes of values inherent to pluralism from turning into violent conflicts or great injustices. In this, too, he agrees with Berlin that the 'the first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering'.²⁶

Rawls' places at the centre of his plan to enable a social minimum consensus the notion of the original position, a notion regarded by Berlin as problematic. This is because instead of affirming the tragic character of final choices – the trade-offs that individuals must endure in order to arrive at agreements in the face of clashes of value – the original position assumes that

²⁵ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 104.

²⁶ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 15.

it is possible to come up with a set of rules upon which we can all theoretically (or *rationally*, as Rawls puts it) agree regardless of where we stand empirically. The terms of TJ are, thus, based on an assumption on the human capabilities for rational thinking that bypasses conflicts of value, rather than taking them seriously and to their last consequences. In TJ, Rawls maintains that we must arrive at the terms of the social contract by means of a rational process: ‘just as each person must decide by rational reflection what constitutes his good, that is, the system of ends it is rational for him to pursue, so a group of persons must decide once and for all what is to count among them as just and unjust’.²⁷ This choice is made within an ‘hypothetical situation of equal liberty’, also known as the ‘original position’ in TJ.²⁸ The original position is delineated in order to guarantee justice as fairness, a term that ‘conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair’.²⁹ In this original situation parties are assumed to be ‘rational and mutually disinterested’,³⁰ however in order to guarantee a fair start they must shed any knowledge about their particular social situation. In the original position, ‘no one knows their place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like’.³¹ Crucially, they do not even know ‘their conceptions of the good’.³² This state of complete unawareness of one’s own position in society –and its associated moral conceptions- is Rawls’ famous ‘veil of ignorance’. It should be noted now that just like in any social contract theory, the original position and the veil of ignorance are not ‘thought of as an actual historical state of affairs’ or ‘a primitive condition of culture’, but merely as thinking devices or ‘a purely hypothetical situation characterized so as to lead to a

²⁷ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 13.

³¹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 12.

³² Ibid.

certain conception of justice'.³³ This conception of justice is formed by a number of basic principles that can then be used 'to regulate all subsequent criticism and reform of institutions'.³⁴ The principles of justice as fairness are thus derived from the original position, making it an indispensable element of the theory. But before moving on to an explanation of the reasons that make the foundational role of the original position problematic, this chapter will advance a few observations on the two principles of justice as outlined by Rawls.

Justice as fairness as defined in TJ relies entirely in the adscription of all citizens to two principles. These principles are lexically ordered, that is to say, they follow 'an order which requires us to satisfy the first principle in the ordering before we can move on to the second, the second before we consider the third, and so on'.³⁵ Therefore the first principle of justice, which states that 'each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others'³⁶ has to be satisfied always first, and even the second principle of justice, claiming that 'social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all',³⁷ cannot trump it. The lexical ordering of the two principles of justice is of utter significance insofar as it provides internal coherence to the theory, while distinguishing it from utilitarianism and intuitionism. The idea is that the two principles of justice can be used as a matrix from where to generate social rules and institutions while combining a crucial combination of rigidity and flexibility. On the one hand the theory allows a fair degree of flexibility in its interpretation and implementation, as it is not constituted just by one single, overarching guiding principle as what happens with utilitarianism; on the other hand, the thesis shows a structural rigour provided by the boundaries set by the two principles

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 13.

³⁵ Op.Cit., p 42.

³⁶ Op.Cit., p 45.

³⁷ Op.Cit., p 60.

and their lexical ordering that cannot be trumped by any possible interpretation of the principles, no matter how far they are stretched and bent to fit specific situations. This includes a wider assumption on the universal rational capabilities of men, which will ultimately agree on the desirability of following the two principles of justice if for their own good. It is thus impossible for Rawls to arrive at the lexical ordering of the principles of justice without the original position, which in turn provides them with the robustness necessary for his theory to become a suitable alternative to intuitionism and utilitarianism. As will be explained in the next section of the chapter, Berlin's uneasiness with TJ springs partly from his doubts regarding the plausibility of the original position as a foundational argument. Significantly, these doubts mirror those that Rawls would express at later works such as PL. Nonetheless, as we will see towards the end of the chapter, even after Rawls modified his theory in PL, Berlin still displayed a great deal of scepticism about its chances of working on the ground: 'of course if that could be done, then I'd be happy, but I don't think it can'.³⁸ His main issue is one to do with method, which is in turn inextricably linked to the content of the norms: 'the question is who formulates the rules of justice. Who formulates them? How do we discover them?'.³⁹

At this point the question that remains is whether this scepticism was the result of real argumentative discordances, or instead merely of an overestimation of superficial dissimilarities associated with differences in emphasis and scope. That Berlin and Rawls developed their works in separate academic contexts, sometimes with very different goals and audiences is evident. However, as the next two sections argue, their final aims and essential arguments were not only overlapping as some may have averred, but essentially the same. This ties in with the main argument of the thesis, namely that Berlin's argument should not be considered as a precedent to the 'serious' or 'real' liberal theories that were to come afterwards,

³⁸ S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 113.

³⁹ *Op.Cit.*, p 112.

but instead as a sophisticated argument that transcends those of the authors that picked them up later, including Rawls. This will be shown next by explaining Berlin's initial (and mostly tacit) critique of Rawls, revealing how by the time Rawls was writing *Political Liberalism* him and Berlin were two separate voices speaking of essentially the same thing.

2.3. Berlin's criticism of 'A Theory of Justice'.

As much as Berlin respected and admired Rawls' work,⁴⁰ we can learn much more from the critical scepticism from which he approached it than from the praise he directed to it. From Berlin's point of view, TJ – and especially the original position – relies too heavily on an assumed capability of all human beings for abstract and rational thinking, which stands in tension with a fully-fledged theory of pluralism of the sort found in Berlin. That is to say, the original position is rooted on the basic assumption that as long as men are free and rational they will be able to agree on the two principles of justice and their lexical ordering. The explicit spelling out of the two principles, their lexical ordering and their reliance on a capacity for rational thinking sits uncomfortably when seen from Berlin's perspective, as it displays the kind of rigidity that resonates with monistic dogmatism in Berlin's ears.

Berlin takes issue with the original position not only because of its neutral justification of the principles of justice based on the assumption of a universal rational capacity, which is far from guaranteed, but also because it unknowingly assumes a specific political setting in which those institutions necessary for justice as fairness to work could form and develop, a second condition which is far from guaranteed. A number of concrete political arrangements is necessary in order for individuals to be able to reach the kind of consensus about justice as fairness delineated by the original position, and for justice as fairness to be able to generate the

⁴⁰ In a letter from 1978 addressed to Rawls, he refers to TJ as 'a masterpiece'. Harvard University Archives, Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

sort of moral and social stability as described in TJ. Berlin's main contention against TJ is that it assumes the availability of these political arrangements, when these are also nowhere near a given. In particular, the original position requires that all citizens be 'free and rational' as a first condition. This condition is nothing but a demand for a shared understanding of the ethical and the political: the understanding of all individuals as free and rational, as Berlin shows throughout his genealogy of Enlightened ideals, is a respectively new and revolutionary one that we should not take for granted. The view of all individuals as equally free and rational, or as potentially so, is specific to the liberal democratic societies of the Western world, and should not be taken for granted. Berlin's writings work precisely in the direction of highlighting this fact, and the normative foundations of his theory of liberalism rely heavily on an understanding and awareness of this historical evolution. Thus, Rawls has in fact a specific type of community in mind when he writes TJ. When this is understood, the purely philosophical formulation of TJ is hard to maintain, and so are its universalistic aims. As Berlin expresses in a letter to Rawls from 1988:

My only doubts arise about the degree of your optimism in the possibility of offering your views, with which I totally agree, as a permanent basis within which disagreements can be resolved ... The only thing that worries me... is that you are, I think, thinking mainly of Anglo-Saxon societies, in which there really is a genuine democratic condition since the late seventeenth century, in which all that you say is both applicable and feasible. But so much of the world has grown up on ideas, values and principles so different from these, that the attempt to offer them your view would I think in places be regarded as unintelligible.⁴¹

⁴¹ Harvard University Archives, Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

The Anglo-Saxon societies that Berlin refers to above are referred to as ‘constitutional democracies’ in Rawls’ later works.⁴² The way the original position is defined in TJ implies that it should act as a device capable of producing both the rules of the political game or the social contract as well as the institutions that support it, by appealing solely to the individual capacity of human beings for rational, abstract thinking. Rawls’ theory sees the emergence of the political institutions it demands as a result of its application. It is confident in a universal capacity for rationality that ultimately leads, after the right questions are posed to all individuals and rightly addressed, in the political institutions that support the kind of liberal regime outlined by TJ. That is the degree of confidence Rawls places in human rationality, a feature consistent with his analytic roots. Moreover, the rationalist and abstract foundations of TJ ensure a degree of comprehensiveness necessary to elevate it to the same level of abstraction of theories like utilitarianism and Kantian constructivism, so that it can pose an alternative to them as intended by Rawls. This comprehensiveness means that the normative principles contained in Theory are, insofar as extracted from a characteristic assumed to be inherent of human beings as such as it is their rationality, apply to all human beings universally. Ethical theories that are built from contingent roots, drawing from particular contextual and historical elements – like Berlin and Williams do – fail to guarantee that same degree of stability or universality. Berlin is highly critical of theories of politics that claim universal validity. Moreover, as this thesis argues, Berlin’s main message is that a strong theory of liberalism demands a formulation that begins with an admission of its own contingency, rather than a denial of it.

⁴² J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 44,126.

If we remember the discussion of Berlin's method in chapter one – particularly his conception of human communication vis-à-vis Skinner and Collingwood – it should not be hard to explain his scepticism towards Rawls analytic gamble. Berlin's understanding of human communication is to a great extent rooted upon the existence of a 'human horizon' or a 'moral core',⁴³ very similar to Collingwood's 'absolute presuppositions'.⁴⁴ It is only on the grounds of shared world-views that emerge and are assimilated historically where human beings can communicate and attain consensus in the face of value pluralism. Moreover, it could be said that the notion of value pluralism is in itself a contingent world-view that not everybody is aware of, and not a given fact like Rawls' theory would need it to be in order for it to work universally. Chapter two explained that Berlin's value pluralism portrays systems of values as individual commitments shaped locally, and also that it rejects the possibility of universally valid moral theories, what he calls moral monism. This stance makes it extremely difficult for an ideal theory like Rawls', due to its aspiration to define moral and ethical principles in a purely abstract way, to be successful in Berlin's eyes. The thesis of this dissertation argues that Berlin was right in this respect. His defence of liberalism does not spring out of a solid confidence in the permanent possibility of reaching overarching consensus rationally, but rather it is defined by a deep awareness of the need to find a political solution that protects individual freedom from the potential threat it faces from value pluralism, a need which liberalism seems to cover best. As has been explained in chapters two and three, Berlin is not a relativist or a nihilist. His theory of liberalism is confident about the possibility both of making solid and coherent choices when confronted with moral dilemmas, and of establishing fair judgements on the moral choices of individuals belonging to cultures different from our own. However his spelling out of his theory of liberalism is much more cautious than Rawls',

⁴³ H. Hardy and G. Crowder, 'Berlin's Universal Values- Core or Horizon? ', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007); I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 11.

⁴⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 29, 31.

and relies heavily in interpretative hermeneutic practices and heuristic considerations of politics. Berlin knows that liberalism is dependent on certain values that are far from universal. In the letter quoted above, Berlin also writes:

But so much of the world has grown up on ideas, values and principles so different from these (constitutional democratic ideals), that the attempt to offer them your view would I think in places be regarded as unintelligible. Which plunges me into deep pessimism – I think of Israel, for example, with which I feel an emotional connection – and the fanaticism there is such that the prevalence of your ideas and mine seems unlikely to prevail in the immediately foreseeable future.⁴⁵

This thought brings us to the last section in this chapter: Rawls' move from TJ to PL, where the deep historical and cultural rooting of liberalism is fully acknowledged, and therefore its initial spelling out as an ideal abstract theory is considerably toned down. This concession to history in the making of political theory brings Rawls closer to Berlin, pumping new strength into the one of the main arguments of this thesis, that of the *sui generis* nature of political knowledge, as spelled out by Berlin.

3. Political liberalism.

In 1993 Rawls published 'Political liberalism',⁴⁶ where he introduced a number of modifications to TJ addressing some of the criticisms it had received over the years. Some of the changes introduced are particularly telling for the argument of this thesis, especially the

⁴⁵ Harvard University Archives, Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

⁴⁶ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

redefinition of the notion justice as fairness as a *political* concept, and the move from the notion of the original position towards that of the overlapping consensus. These two elements are crucial to the degree to which they display a methodological and philosophical shift towards the Berlin's camp, a move that highlights once again the unnoticed transcendence of his arguments. To a certain extent the changes introduced in *PL* can be attributed to a newly acquired and refined awareness of the full implications of value pluralism as outlined by Berlin. In addition to this, both the definition of justice as fairness as a principle pertaining exclusively to the realm of the political and the introduction of the overlapping consensus present a significant shift in method, positioning Rawls alongside Berlin in this aspect as well. The meaning of these two changes will be explained next.

In *PL*, Rawls explains that justice as fairness should be taken as a political notion, and not a comprehensive doctrine. A comprehensive doctrine is one that 'Includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole'.⁴⁷ Against this, a political doctrine is defined as 'a moral conception worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely, for political, social, and economic institutions'.⁴⁸ More importantly, a political conception of justice applies to 'the "basic structure" of society', which in the case of justice as fairness has to be 'a modern constitutional democracy'.⁴⁹ In *TJ*, justice as fairness is not explicitly portrayed as a political doctrine, and the distinction between political and comprehensive doctrines is not made there either. However, and as has been pointed out in the previous section, due to Rawls' characterisation of justice as fairness as an ideal theory, with its principles lexically ordered, heavily reliant on

⁴⁷ Op.Cit., p 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Op.Cit., p 11.

human rationality and not particularly affected by historical contexts, it was hard to understand it as other than comprehensive. As Rawls points out:

There (in TJ), it is assumed that the members of a well-ordered society, whether it be a society of justice as fairness or of some other view, accept the same conception of justice and also, it seems, the same comprehensive doctrine of which that conception is a part, or from which it can be derived. Thus, for example, all the members of a well-ordered society associated with utilitarianism (classical or average) are assumed to affirm the utilitarian view – which is by its nature (unless explicitly restricted) a comprehensive doctrine.⁵⁰

The problem with the definition of justice as fairness as a comprehensive doctrine is that it presents a ‘utopian way of thinking of the well-ordered society of justice as fairness... which fails to take into account the condition of pluralism to which its own principles lead’.⁵¹ Thus, the acknowledgment of justice as fairness as a purely political notion constitutes a statement about the nature of the political that runs parallel to Berlin’s position.⁵² This shift is both philosophical and methodological. Like Berlin, Rawls conceives politics as ‘a branch of ethics’,⁵³ however it is only around the time of PL that he realises how ‘given the fact of pluralism, and given that justification begins from some consensus, no general and comprehensive doctrine can assume the role of a publicly acceptable basis of political

⁵⁰ J. Rawls, 'The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus', in Derek Matravers and Jonathan E. Pike (eds.), *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology* (Routledge, in Association with the Open University, 2003): 171.

⁵¹ Op.Cit., p 172.

⁵² As we will see later in this chapter, this distinction is also shared with Bernard Williams, who uses it nonetheless to produce a critique of Rawls vis-à-vis value pluralism and the pre-eminence of history for political theory (a critique that is nonetheless directed against the early rather than the late Rawls).

⁵³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 1.

justice'.⁵⁴ Unlike utilitarianism and intuitionism, Rawls' theory of justice is aware of the fact of pluralism and therefore it cannot generate principles to which all the members of the community will adhere uniformly and for the same reasons. Instead it has to begin with an admission of the fact that a commitment to justice as fairness is a precarious one that can only be reached in certain cultures where a willingness to reach a consensus purely for political reasons already exists: cultures where the principles it formulates make political sense. This demands the sort of ethical assumptions that Berlin describes as arising as a consequence of the distinction between fact and value that shaped the Enlightened revolutions throughout his works, and more crucially, a body of work like Berlin's that points this out in a hermeneutic way in order to highlight the normativity of this shift. At the same time, Rawls is concerned with stability and, unlike Berlin, reluctant to leave the conditions for the emergence of liberal institutions undefined. He wants to explain how liberalism can surpass the status of 'a mere modus vivendi'.⁵⁵ In other words, Rawls wants to establish solid foundations for liberalism that are not entirely contingent, as the notion of a modus vivendi suggests. This explains his initial drive towards the notion of the original position, as it could compete in scope with other comprehensive doctrines. However, a realisation soon drops that 'political philosophy must start modestly... if its conclusions are to be acceptable in diverse, liberal societies'.⁵⁶ This modesty translates into the limitation of the scope of justice as fairness as a political principle: political philosophy is to address political and not metaphysical questions, and therefore justice as fairness now should 'avoid, for example, claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons'.⁵⁷ This new approach resonates loudly with Berlin's ideas, especially with his aversion to include metaphysical considerations in questions of politics and ethics. Like Berlin, Rawls realises that one of the key elements of liberalism has

⁵⁴ J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7. 1 (1987): 6.

⁵⁵ Op.Cit., p 11.

⁵⁶ P. Weithman, 'John Rawls and the Task of Political Philosophy', *The Review of Politics*, 71. 1 (2009): 125.

⁵⁷ J. Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14.3 (1985): 223.

to be a refusal to make absolute metaphysical claims about human nature. At the same time, he is aware of the fact that liberalism needs a firm anchoring on certain principles that are equally valid for all members of society, or otherwise it turns into relativism, or just a *modus vivendi*. That is why there is both in TJ and PL an initial commitment to the equal moral worth of all individuals, which ultimately shines through the two principles of justice described in TJ. Without the initial commitment to the equal moral worth of all individuals liberalism cannot work: this is the point that Berlin makes emphatically over his works, yet never expresses in such explicit terms.

In Rawls, the equilibrium between the assertion of the equal moral worth of all individuals and the non-comprehensive or political form of his theory crystallises in the notion the overlapping consensus, conceived with the goal of showing how ‘on a political conception ... despite a diversity of doctrines, convergence on a political conception of justice may be achieved and social unity sustained in long-run equilibrium, that is, over time from one generation to the next’.⁵⁸ The overlapping consensus throws Rawls straight into the central tension of liberalism, the same one that Berlin faces: on the one hand, there is the acknowledgement of the fact of pluralism, which points in the direction of diversity of moral and political outlooks, instability, relativism or multiculturalism, and at most political arrangements in the style of a *modus vivendi*; on the other hand, there is a fundamental commitment towards the protection of individual liberty rooted in a basic recognition of the equal moral worth of all individuals, pushing towards a universal affirmation of liberalism. If pluralism is true, it seems, we cannot defend liberalism, at least not as a comprehensive doctrine with metaphysical claims to universal truth. What Rawls realises is that we can, nonetheless, defend liberalism on *political* grounds, for specific reasons, within a given time and space, whenever and wherever an existing culture has the implicit values to support it. More

⁵⁸ J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7.1 (1987): 6.

importantly, we should be aware of the fact that we have not arrived at liberalism in the abstract, as a result of rational thought only, as TJ proposed we did. We need to keep in sight the fact that liberalism and liberal institutions are the upshot of the development of a series of specific ideals within the particular culture of the west over the past three or four centuries. This is the main message of Berlin's account of the history of ideas, and one of his most gripping and often overlooked arguments. It is only when the citizens of a given society are willing to admit that the political realm is a distinctive arena, with rules of its own, within which, due to the fact of pluralism, comprehensive doctrines cannot successfully act as overarching moral or political theories that liberalism succeeds. As Rawls explains, this is distinctive of constitutional democracies: 'we are the beneficiaries of three centuries of democratic thought and developing constitutional practice; and we can presume not only some public understanding of, but also some allegiance to, democratic ideals and values as realized in existing political institutions'.⁵⁹ Thus, liberal theories only become valid where this setting exists, and attached to it there is clear a realisation of the impossibility of turning politics into ideal theories, as well as of the need to always keep abreast of the specificities of the context they address: 'the aims of political philosophy depend on the society it addresses'.⁶⁰

This statement raises again the question of method that is the spinal cord of this dissertation. We have witnessed Rawls' evolution from an ideal, abstract formulation of his theory of justice towards a final admission of the central and inescapable role of the contingent historical context in defining the agenda and aspirations of political philosophy. The change in methodology responds to a change in the understanding of the nature and functions of political philosophy. Liberalism stands always associated to a concrete understanding of the functions and powers of political communities which is entirely tainted by the assimilation both of value

⁵⁹ Op.Cit., p 2.

⁶⁰ Op.Cit., p 1.

pluralism and of human beings as essentially autonomous, as explained in chapters two and three. This is in itself the result of a historical development of ideas that emerged in the French Revolution. In 1983, while writing the ‘Tanner Lectures’,⁶¹ in which the main ideas in PL could already be found, Rawls writes to Berlin: ‘one theme of yours which is prominent in the lectures, and which deserved the emphasis you give it, is that of the conflict of values and the futility of attempting to find a scheme of thought which unifies them all without loss. We must face the fact that we have to choose between absolute values’.⁶² In the same letter, he quotes what Berlin writes on TCL: ‘to decide rationally in such situations is to decide in the light of general ideals, the overall pattern of life pursued by a man or a group or a society’.⁶³ Rawls’ admits that ‘all of this seems to me now profoundly right. I say seems to me ‘now’ because I think its force escaped me until I reread the essays several summers ago. The reason, I think, was that I missed how the notion of an overall pattern can be given reasonably clear, if not precise, sense.’⁶⁴ This ‘overall pattern’ is akin to the notion of general presuppositions that Berlin inherited from Collingwood. They refer to the more or less fixed moral and cultural texture of each society, in reference to which notions of ethical and political normativity are constructed. The principles of justice as fairness are not the product of rational abstract thinking as expected in TJ, but in fact of a long historical development that landed western societies with a particular worldview about the need to protect individual liberty and agency over anything else. This translates into a willingness to enter social contracts of the sort found in constitutional democracies, where political action is understood to have a limited scope, related to public life and separate from other spheres of life where comprehensive doctrines are fit. ‘Justification in matters of political justice is addressed to others who disagree with us, and

⁶¹ S. M. McMurrin, *Liberty, Equality and Law: Selected Tanner Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶² Box 39, Folder 6. Papers of John Rawls. 1983.

⁶³ I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford U.P, 1969): 42.

⁶⁴ Harvard University Archives. Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (1983) (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

therefore it proceeds from some consensus',⁶⁵ and that is the function of the overlapping consensus, to generate 'a consensus in which it [justice as fairness] is affirmed by the opposing religious, philosophical and moral doctrines likely to thrive over generations'.⁶⁶

When seen in this light, the overlapping consensus is revealed as nested in a conception of the political as a realm separate from that of religion, philosophy, metaphysics, and so on. It is the same consensus which, 'after three centuries of democratic thought',⁶⁷ allows us to make a distinction between the private and the public in modern western societies. This in turn answers the main tension between liberalism and value pluralism, as it shows liberalism as a meta-ethical doctrine rather than as an ethical one, or that is to say, as non-comprehensive or political instead of comprehensive: its aim is to create the framework necessary for the generation and protection of the level of individual freedom and equality required in order for individuals to live autonomously, and according to any comprehensive doctrine they may choose.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented a summary of some of Rawls' central ideas and their evolution, using them as a means for pointing out the vast implications of Berlin's contribution to contemporary liberal theory. In particular, the focus has been placed on exposing the how political theory as it has developed in the western world serves a particular function that is normally defined by the great presuppositions that shape the culture within which it has emerged. As such, political theory demands a specific theoretical, cultural and historical framework in order to make political sense, and to become truly useful. As Berlin highlights throughout his work the way in which past ideas have influenced the course of European history

⁶⁵ J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7.1 (1987): 6.

⁶⁶ Op.Cit., p 1.

⁶⁷ Op.Cit., p 2.

as well as how those historical developments have in turn shaped the constant evolution of political ideas, he is offering an argument on the need to become aware of the historical, local and contingent, origins of the abstract structures that sustain our political reasoning. That is to say, even abstract, ideal political theories like Rawls' are ultimately the product of particular contexts, and not of universally valid truths obtained philosophically.

By understanding this notion of political theory as historically contingent, the portrayal of the understanding of the political as a separate realm with rules and objects of its own as a direct heir of the evolution of the European thought from the Enlightenment onwards as offered by Berlin becomes of central relevance. Political theory as we know it, and the particular set of questions it addresses are the result of a particular cultural development too, and as such it needs to remain aware of its own contingency. Throughout this thesis I have aimed to raise awareness of this fact explicitly, and to acknowledge the contextual and contingent nature of political theory. This supports the demand to hermeneutic readings of history as a tool for political reflection. The corollary of this is perhaps the inescapability of our own presuppositions, and thus the contingent character of political thought. The historical perspective that enables this to be seen clearly is necessary in the definition of political principles and political practices if they are to be attentive towards the real needs of the communities and individuals they address. Berlin points this out throughout his works, sometimes more tacitly and narratively than explicitly and argumentatively, and Rawls' evolution from Theory of Justice to Political Liberalism stands as a confirmation of the centrality of Berlin's argument, the consequences of which are both methodological and ethical.

For Berlin, political theory is not for confirming abstract theories or metaphysical truths. The aim of political theory is to detect, interpret, articulate and order the general underlying values of a given culture, its overall patterns, its major concepts and categories, for

those are the ones where the normativity of ethical and political norms reside. In the case of the West, as Berlin highlights continuously, the cultural presupposition that colours all aspects of life is value pluralism, as well as the essentially autonomous nature of man. This notion is undoubtedly comprehensive in Rawlsian terms, however it also holds within itself an awareness of its relative validity, an unforgettable detail. This duality is what allows liberalism to be regarded in a distinctive way as a political theory rather than as a comprehensive doctrine.

The analysis of the development of the ideas contained in TJ through to PL, and the relationship that this evolution has with Berlin's work outlined in this chapter will help state the centrality of the insistence on method of the latter as well as some of the deeper implications of his portrayal and analysis of value pluralism. However, and as clear as the parallelisms between the two authors are, two final remarks should be made. First, we should recall Rawls' late insistence, even after the publication of PL, that 'despite many criticisms of the original work [referring to TJ], I still accept its main outlines and defend its central doctrines'.⁶⁸ He adds: 'if I were writing TJ over again, I would not write, as authors sometimes say, a completely different book'.⁶⁹ So his distance from Berlin remains.

Second, the reader should be made aware of Berlin's sustained incredulity towards Rawls' work, even after PL, and of his at times overbearing political pessimism, which poses a significant contrast to Rawls' approach. These two points highlight the extent of the differences between the two thinkers, which ultimately belongs to a difference in emphasis and method, as has been stressed throughout this chapter. Whereas Berlin is concerned with the tragic aspects of pluralism, with the impossibility of choosing rationally on the face of conflicts of value, Rawls is ready to admit this and push pluralism further towards the generation of a liberal understanding of the political that is attached to it. This translates methodologically into

⁶⁸ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): xi.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

a theory of justice and institutions in Rawls, a field that Berlin shied away from, given his fixation with the tragic character of pluralism and the deep and sometimes insolvable breaches it created. Having said that, these differences in approach do not pose an unbridgeable gap. As we have seen in this chapter, in the end both Berlin and Rawls were talking differently about the same thing, namely, the need to become aware of the specific cultural and historical presuppositions that support liberalism in order to use this as a bridge between clashes of value, and the distinct understanding of the political that this requires. And even if Berlin recognised that his viewpoint was more pessimistic than Rawls' – or more realistic, some would say – he still allowed room for convergence and hope too. In the same letter to Rawls from 1988 in which he had declared himself a pessimist, he allows a glint of optimism to shine through the finishing lines: 'Still, the truth! Let it go forward! We can but say what we believe and hope for agreement, if not now then in some enlightened future'.⁷⁰ Berlin may have been confident, after all, on the fact that pluralism is 'not a mere historical condition that will soon pass away; but a permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies',⁷¹ like Rawls was. The more political theory sustains an awareness of the fact of pluralism, and the more the individuals who live in these modern democracies become aware of it too, the closer we may be getting to the enlightened future mentioned by Berlin, where a political agreement of the sort depicted in TJ can be seen in the horizon as a plausible reality.

⁷⁰ Harvard University Archives, Papers of John Rawls. Box 39, Folder 6. (1988) (Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives)

⁷¹ J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7. 1 (1987): 4.

Chapter six

Value Pluralism and Political Theory: Bernard Williams' Political Realism.

1. Introduction.

‘In history we are the actors; in the natural sciences mere spectators.’¹

‘Philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history.’²

‘Whenever you hear a man speak of ‘realism’, you may always be sure that this is the prelude to some bloody deed.’³

This chapter analyses Bernard Williams’ theory liberal realism in relation to Berlin’s theory of liberalism. By doing this it provides a comparative defence of Berlin’s hermeneutic methodology. Just like the previous chapter focused on Rawls’ work due to the paradigmatic significance of his TJ, regarded by many as the foundational work of contemporary liberalism, this chapter will look into Bernard Williams’ realist defence of liberalism as one of the strongest Rawlsian contenders who proposes a radically different case for liberalism departing from a methodological change. Williams’ biographical and intellectual closeness to Berlin makes him an ideal candidate to show the extent of Berlin’s influence and the transcendence of his theory of liberalism. In particular, this chapter aims to highlight the way in which value pluralism as outlined by Berlin is the cornerstone of Williams’ distinctive brand of political

¹ I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment : Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000a): 88.

² B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 173.

³ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A life* (London: Random House, 2011): 225

thought – political realism – but also to point out how this approach to liberalism could benefit from moving towards a hermeneutic ground like the one defined by Berlin.

Williams' political realism poses a challenge to the metaphysical roots of Rawlsian liberalism, and replaces it with a historicist method. This chapter argues that Williams' position occupies the opposite end of the methodological spectrum than that taken by Rawls in TJ, and maintains that as valuable as this switch is in generating a new critical perspective for liberal theory, it could be improved by the incorporation of a more hermeneutic approach as well. Williams criticises Rawls' articulation of liberalism mostly for its moralist foundations – particularly as it stands in TJ – however this thesis argues that Williams' bid to provide a theory of liberalism without moral or philosophical roots is not successful either. Although much closer to Berlin's sensitivity than Rawls, Williams appears to miss in his work the crucial fact that when it comes to drawing normative political principles the separation between history and philosophy is much more blurred than portrayed in his philosophy. It is only when completing his philosophical writings on method with a historical narrative like the one found in Berlin that his theory of liberalism acquires full sense. It is for this reason that his work has been chosen to be used in this last chapter.

It has been argued throughout the thesis that Berlin's work is suspended somewhere between idealism and realism, or between metaphysics and empirical knowledge, a position responsible for its attractive idiosyncratic character, but which has also made it the target of serious criticism for not doing justice either to history or political theory. Whereas Rawls can be read as providing a representation of the metaphysical-ideal camp with his abstract and analytic defence of liberalism, as explained in the previous chapter, Williams' highly historicist definition of liberalism will be shown as an example of a theory placed on the realist-empiricist side of the argument. This dissertation identifies in both authors a common trend to move towards a more hermeneutic approach in political theory as they fine-tune their theories. This

way Berlin's reluctance to ignore the red lines separating the historicist and philosophical approaches to political theory is shown not as the result of academic clumsiness or sheer lack of purpose, as many of his critics have adduced, but rather of a sharp and accurate awareness of the needs and implications of political theory that situate him at the head of his generation of political philosophers.

By discussing political realism this chapter aims to bring attention towards the need to approach political theory from a historical perspective that is not blind to philosophical analysis. The main idea is that whereas Rawls tries to make a case for liberalism by appeal to an assumed universal reason shared by all human beings, embodied in the notions of the veil of ignorance and the original position, Williams' argument is instead rooted in the historical contingencies that shape our experience of the world. That is to say, where Rawls paints a picture of liberalism as a metaphysical construct, Williams' analysis returns an understanding of it as a localised and temporary phenomenon. In short, we can say that where Rawls' ideal theory appeals to abstract thinking, Williams' realism points directly towards history. This distinction is methodological, but it raises an unshakable awareness of the crucial way in which discourse and method are irrevocably intertwined in political theory. The discordances between Rawls and Williams are not about how to find the best means towards the achievement of a common end, but rather they present two essentially contested understandings of liberalism and, even more importantly, of what politics mean. This includes a disagreement on the available means for explaining and justifying the normativity of political principles in general: in political theory the means define the ends, and vice-versa. This view explains Williams' view that a justification of liberalism reliant on abstract metaphysical universals, like Rawls, delivers a moralised view of politics by establishing the primacy of a given set of moral principles as a departure point, and expecting political principles to mould themselves in accordance with them. On the other end, Williams' political realism articulates its defence of

liberalism by focusing on the demands of political legitimation within specific historical contexts, delivering in turn a very different ontological view of politics. Williams' argument is not that we can all agree on the need for liberalism qua rational animals – as Rawls states in his TJ – but rather that we will do so qua historical, modern, and European (or western) animals. However this chapter aims to prove that when examined carefully, Williams' realist argument emerges as substantially supported by abstract philosophical arguments. This represents a tacit gravitation towards the methodological ground postulated by Berlin, providing further support to the main thesis of this dissertation about the need to adopt hermeneutic approaches to political theory.

Having said this, the reader should keep in mind the fact that Williams places philosophy and history much closer to each other in his approach to political theory than Rawls does in TJ. Nonetheless Williams' efforts are still directed primarily towards challenging the possibility of justifying normative political principles philosophically and claiming the necessity of a historicist approach instead. Paradoxically enough, he fights history's corner using philosophy as his weapon: Williams' argument is laid out philosophically, and not historically. He does not provide the historical narrative in support of his own defence of liberalism, despite arguing that no theory of politics can do without a historical narrative upon which to support itself. This has become particularly evident in a string of recent publications that have highlighted the degree to which Williams relies on philosophical reflection in his defence of historicism.⁴ Thus, albeit Williams' argument is far from mistaken – it is, in fact, one of the most illuminating pieces of political theory of the past century – it can be seen nonetheless as incomplete. Williams refers to history as a source of political legitimacy and normativity continuously,

⁴ P. Sagar, 'From Scepticism to Liberalism? Bernard Williams, the Foundations of Liberalism and Political Realism', *Political Studies*, (2014); E. Hall, 'Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams', *Social Theory and Practice*, 40.4 (2014); P. Kelly, 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', in *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

however 'history is not a pre-given datum but the consequence of interpretation that itself involves theoretical or philosophical techniques',⁵ and Williams never specifies *which* history is he referring to in his work, or provide *a* history to be taken into account when questioning politics, like Berlin does. The reason behind this may be purely biographical, as Williams only started writing about liberalism later in life, but in any case the evident way in which his work suffers from the lack of historical narrative corroborates the need for a hermeneutic perspective that is intensely aware of the way in which history and philosophy are interweaved when it comes to political theory, as in Berlin's work.

2. Bernard Williams' political realism.

If Rawls' main aim is to 'generalize and carry to a higher order of abstraction'⁶ the principles underlying liberalism, Williams' efforts are directed towards bringing liberalism back down to the ground by filling it with the heavy substance of particular social, cultural and historical contexts. In Williams' view, the normative principles of liberalism are found not in a collective philosophical abstraction, but deeply rooted in the tissue that forms modern Western cultures. This is clearly stated in the posthumous collection of essays 'In the beginning was the deed',⁷ where he outlines the basic principles of what he refers to as *political realism*, a view that tries to dissociate politics from abstract moral theories, presenting history as the source of political normativity.

The main characteristic of political realism is that, unlike political moralism, it generates political principles from within the political, and not from an external moral theory,

⁵ P. Kelly, 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', in J. Floyds and M. Sears (eds.) *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 32.

⁶ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973):11.

⁷ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

like intuitionism, utilitarianism or Rawlsian liberalism do. Williams is concerned with what he considers a prevailing confusion between politics and morality in contemporary political theory. For instance, in Rawls' case, the problem is not merely giving an answer to the question of stability in terms of citizens' morality; he is giving a moral answer. This comes out in his repeated claim that the conditions of pluralism under which liberalism is possible do not represent 'a mere *modus vivendi*'.⁸ Rather, the basis of co-existence, and the qualities elicited by these conditions, include 'the highest moral powers, above all a sense of fairness'.⁹

Against this, political realism is not defined by moral powers or moral principles, but instead by the satisfaction of what Williams calls the 'basic legitimation demand' or BLD, which 'implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power to each subject'.¹⁰ Briefly put, the idea is that a state can only be legitimate if each one of its subjects agrees to its power as such. State power is legitimate when it *makes sense* to each one of its citizens (to 'MS', as Williams refers to). If the state makes sense to everyone under its rule, then it satisfies the BLD. This may sound like a deeply liberal ideal at first, seeing as it focuses on individual acceptance of power, but it need not be: any citizen could be in a situation of inequality or coerced beyond what liberal freedoms would generally allow and still recognise the state's role as legitimate – as the famous case of the contented slave illustrates.¹¹ From this perspective, it becomes clear that if the only kind of political power that makes sense to the individuals of liberal societies is that exercised by a liberal state – that is to say, one in which freedom and equality are respected first – this conclusion is not the result only of abstract rational thinking, as Rawls maintains in TJ, but instead as a result of specific historical ideological developments. By insisting on this idea, Williams's aim is to bring up the modern character of the liberal state,

⁸ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993):147

⁹ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005):2

¹⁰ *Op.Cit.*, p 3.

¹¹ K. Flikschuh, *Freedom: Contemporary Liberal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007): ch. 1.

and with it, the crucial role played by history in shaping political thought. This is why he refers to liberalism as ‘a historical fact’:¹² it is only because we are able to reflect on history that ‘we know that our and others’ convictions have to a great degree been the product of previous historical conditions, and of an obscure mixture of beliefs, passions, interests and so forth... and we would be merely naïve if we took our convictions, and those of our opponents, as simply autonomous products of moral reason rather than as another product of historical conditions’.¹³

Proof of this is, for instance, the fact that

PM has no answer in its own terms to the question of why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the questions of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European culture from the late seventeenth century onwards, and why these truths have been concealed from other people. Moralistic liberalism cannot plausibly explain, adequately to its moral pretensions, why, when, and by whom it has been accepted and rejected.¹⁴

Williams’ defence of liberalism is almost exclusively historical, as opposed to Rawls’ abstract, philosophical, argument. Liberalism is historically rooted and should be explained historically: that is why it lacks the theory of error that would be expected from any abstract philosophical doctrine. Liberalism does not tell us why did not those before us realise that liberalism was the best political solution to their problems, because it is out of the question to imagine liberalism without the context of modernity. Liberalism is not universal, at least not so in historical terms. This can be clearly observed when Williams moves the argument away

¹² G. Hawthorn, 'Introduction', *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): xiii.

¹³ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 13.

¹⁴ Op.Cit., p 9.

from abstract morality and towards the field of political legitimacy: if the only way of justifying any political position is by reference to the specific context it addresses at any given point, as the BLD maintains, then liberalism cannot be anything other than a product of our time and place. Even if this does not necessarily rule out abstract reflection, for we could argue that our time and place is characterised by a specific mind or way of thinking, too: such as the self-consciousness or reflectiveness that Williams describes and will be looked into later in this chapter, or as Collingwood's absolute presuppositions, the main justification of liberalism in Williams' view is historico-political, rather than philosophical or moral. This is why 'LEG+MODERNITY = LIBERALISM':¹⁵ we have liberalism now because 'here and now' liberalism 'makes sense'.¹⁶ Liberalism is a localised political solution that enables the state to claim legitimate power over us, and we know this precisely because we are willing to accept it. This making sense of the state is defined by our expectations of what the state can and ought to do, and these have been irrevocably shaped historically by the evolution of the political ideas that we have received. Williams acknowledges that liberalism goes one step further than simply guaranteeing the minimum conditions demanded by the BLD – that is to say, protection of the basic minimum conditions for human survival – because our expectations of what a state can do have been raised by modernity. As a result of this, history has thrown us into a situation where we face 'more stringent conditions of LEG; and non-liberal states do not now in general meet the BLD'.¹⁷ From our perspective as liberals it is difficult to make sense of illiberal states. This explains why most liberal states think it justifiable to intervene in illiberal regimes to generate conditions of liberalism, for liberalism:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 7.

Implies free institutions, ones that allow not only for free inquiry but also for diversity of life and some ethical variety. Here, however, we have to guard once again against the error, in its social version, of assuming that reflection takes up no psychological space. A society given over to “experiments in living”, in Mill’s phrase, is not one that simply increases the chances of living in the best way. It is one sort of society rather than another, and there are various forms of living that it rules out; indeed, those ruled out could include those most worth living. However, this means only that diversity and freedom of inquiry are, like confidence, some goods to be encouraged among others, not that they fail to be goods.¹⁸

The above quote provides a good insight into Williams’ assimilation of value pluralism and his awareness of the final character of conflicts of value. He is aware of the fact that promoting liberalism implies the eradication of other forms of political life – potentially, even, of some forms of life that we could imagine would be better than what liberal regimes deliver – however, utopianisms aside, from what we know about our *here and now*, liberalism appears in fact as the best alternative. This parallel between Berlin and William is loaded with meaning insofar as it also helps us understand some of the most significant differences between the two authors – those differences that highlight the ongoing significance of Berlin’s work.

At the beginning of TCL, Berlin explicitly states that ‘politics are a branch of moral philosophy’.¹⁹ It could be said that this view is not necessarily incompatible with Williams’ realism. If we assume that what Berlin meant was that *liberal politics* are a branch of moral philosophy, then this is consistent with Williams’ observation on the raised expectations of the state capacities generated by liberalism. Politics does not emerge from ethics and are not always

¹⁸ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 172.

¹⁹ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b).

related to ethics, but here, and around here, politics are effectively a branch of ethics. And still, Berlin's work stands as an extended narration of the way in which human ideals, and more specifically ethical ideals have historically shaped politics, a view that supports Williams' historicism, but to a degree also discredits his claim that politics stand separate from ethics. After all, the way in which individuals decide on the legitimacy of a political institution is a result of their self-understanding: the expectations of politics are intrinsically related to different understandings of human nature. Whether a regime is fair and legitimate or not cannot be determined without a particular conception of human nature in mind first, which has clear ethical and moral implications as chapter four has shown. This disagreement over the nature of the political is a manifestation of a broader underlying methodological difference between the two authors. As much as Williams defends the historical judgment of political claims, the way in which he spells out this argument is not as historically contextualised as one would expect. He does not seem realise that reflecting on the nature of the political as an independent realm is already a liberal exercise that does not happen independently from its context, but as a result of it. Williams' political realism is itself an example of the kind of reflections that arise within liberal settings, inherently defined by certain ethical standards as explained by Berlin. Thus, as valuable a tool for critical political reflection realism can be, its ultimate aim of separating politics from moral and ethical thought can be seriously questioned when the moral and philosophical contingency of its own arguments is understood. Just like Rawls and Berlin himself, Williams aims to produce in his work a normative claim on the second-order nature of the political. It is hard to imagine a more liberal exercise than the one dissociating politics from ethics at the base: reflecting on the aims and ends of the political, assessing the limits of the state, separating the spheres of the political and the ethical, are all liberal exercises that result from a specific historical development. Berlin's entire work is an articulation of this notion, and as such presents an impeccable example of the way in which the only effective

means to make this claim entirely visible is by weaving history and theory in its explanation. If Williams elaborated a historical narrative of the kind he himself demands in order to support his own theory of liberalism, he would probably agree with Berlin's vision of politics as a branch of ethics.

The following three sections of the chapter will look into Williams' method in order to build the argument in defence of hermeneutics in liberal theory. In particular, they will analyse closely Williams' theory of liberalism in order to show how in it he scratches the surface of the need for a hermeneutic approach to political theory, without reaching a fully articulated understanding of the issue. Whereas Berlin does not produce an explicitly articulated explanation of the need for hermeneutics in political theory *per se*, his work as a whole serves as a working example of the method that Williams only defends theoretically with his. What this thesis argues is, a bit like Oakeshott did in his work,²⁰ that political theory is fundamentally a reflection on a practice that has already taken place, and not the other way around. To this regard, Berlin's work stands as the practice upon which Williams reflects in his lucid call for the incorporation of historical narratives to political theory, and to the acceptance of the *sui generis* character of ethics. Berlin's defence of the hermeneutic method in theories of liberalism is presented heuristically, not theoretically. Moreover, some of its deeper implications escape even Williams' reflection, such as the historically contingent character of history. Thus, we find that even Williams' work can move forward by adopting Berlin's hermeneutic reading of politics. This does not only legitimate the validity of Berlin's unorthodox defence of liberalism, but it also shows the degree to which his ideas stretch much further than what has been commonly acknowledged.

²⁰ M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933); *Rationalism in Politics*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991): chs. 1-3,7 and 8 in particular.

3. The loss of ethical knowledge or the rejection of monism.

‘The destruction of the notion of truth and validity in ethics and politics, not merely objective or absolute truth, but subjective and relative truth also – truth and validity as such – with vast and indeed incalculable results’.²¹

“The modern world is marked by a peculiar level of reflectiveness”.²²

Williams’ approach to political theory stems from his radical contestation to the epistemological approach to ethical knowledge displayed by most political theory. His main contention in this regard is the widespread assumption on the possibility of objective ethical knowledge. In ethics, Williams maintains, it is no longer plausible to expect objective knowledge comparable to what we find in the sciences. At the same time, he denies that the lack of absolute abstract moral truths necessarily entails moral relativism or, in other words, the impossibility of being able to make moral judgements in general. By stating this, Williams is in fact addressing one of the biggest tensions found in Berlin’s work, namely the perpetual question of how can we accept value pluralism while avoiding a fully-fledged relativism.

We have seen throughout this thesis that Berlin addresses the issue of relativism in a similar manner. Whereas he admits that human knowledge is not stable and predictable as natural or scientific knowledge is, he also denies that ethics are entirely a matter of opinion or

²¹ I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996): 191-2.

²² B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 163.

preference.²³ That is to say, despite the fact that they are unsupported by abstract reason, ethical statements still carry a relative degree of normativity that can be publicly exposed attached to them. We can explain the reasons behind our moral choices to others with reference to our shared knowledge and experience, and we can do this in a way that is not entirely subjective. Of course, there are extremes like the ‘plumping’ that Berlin describes in his work, when we have to choose between incommensurables. However plumping tends to refer to internal dilemmas rather than political decisions, in which processes of reason-giving and public discussion are not possible. Political norms, nonetheless, may often feel very similar to plumping, as there is no final ethical knowledge. However the notion of plumping as spelled out by Berlin also reveals that there is a degree of conviction attached to moral choices of this type – public or private – that is very different to lack of preference. Even if we are not entirely sure of what is the process that leads us to choose one value, or set of values, over another, we do know that our moral choices carry a particular kind of weight that makes them final nonetheless. Even if we cannot always explain why we care, the remarkable fact is that we always care about moral choices. This is not an equivalent with standing for them blindly like fanatics, and particularly less so on the face of value pluralism, which brings a heightened awareness of the relative value of our convictions. This is what Berlin references when quoting Schumpeter’s famous statement of men being different from barbarians in that they can be ‘aware of the relative validity of one’s own choices, and still stand for them unflinchingly’.²⁴ The conundrum posed by the absolute value of moral choices within the relative set up of pluralism is the central target of liberal theory at large, and of Berlin’s, Williams’ and Rawls’ works too. Whereas Berlin does not provide an explicit answer to the question, although he does so tacitly, in a diluted and holistic fashion through his writings by showing the relevance

²³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 9.

²⁴ Op.Cit., p 242. Original quote found in J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1950): 243.

of our moral frameworks as historically established, Williams provides a strong case about the limited possibilities of philosophical thought in addressing the puzzle of ethical knowledge. Instead, Williams proposes recognising these limits and abandoning any attempts to push philosophy to do what is beyond its capabilities, replacing philosophical thought with his historical reflection when the possibilities of the former have been exhausted. Philosophical reflection can help achieve a clearer picture of the sources of ethical choices, but never to the point of providing them with a stable and objective basis like scientific knowledge does with natural phenomena. These are the limits of philosophy that Williams lays out in ‘Ethics and the limits of philosophy’.²⁵ The answer to the question of the justification of ethical choices resides in a triadic ethical reflection that combines at the same time praxis, reflection, and historical understanding: ‘the first order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas’ in one corner; the philosophical reflection on those ideas in another, and ‘the historical understanding of the origins of our ideas’ in the third.²⁶ In essence, Williams argues, just like Berlin, that historical awareness of the origins and development of our values, far from presenting them as contingent and therefore weakening their legitimacy – as argued by authors like Rorty or Skinner²⁷ – provides them instead with stronger foundations insofar as it delivers a more accurate and precise picture of their internal architecture. Williams uses this triadic process to refer to what he calls the phenomenon of *reflectiveness* characteristic of modernity: the particular characteristic of liberal societies is the constant awareness of the relative foundations of their ethical convictions in the way it had been already laid out by Berlin. In order to argue this, Williams too has to begin by accepting value pluralism as an absolute presupposition or a meta-ethical fact. In order to prove that this does not necessarily entail that our values are all relative, Williams launches a clever examination of the notion of relativism,

²⁵ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

²⁶ B. Williams, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, *Philosophy*, 75.04 (2000): 193-4.

²⁷ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Vol. 1.

which he defines as taking ‘views, outlooks, or beliefs that apparently conflict and treat them in such a way that they do not conflict: each of them turns out to be acceptable in its own place’,²⁸ and denies the possibility of doing this. Relativism means that either ‘the judgements of one group apply just to that group’, or, on the contrary, that ‘any group’s judgements must apply to everybody’.²⁹ Williams denies the possibility of relativism of value by appealing to the central the final character of conflicts of values. If value pluralism is true, and we know that it is both empirically as we experience it in our life, and also historically in the development unveiled by Berlin, none of the two scenarios posed by relativism can be accepted: chapters two and three have explained how values are never culturally-specific, as in the first scenario, and neither universally applicable as in the second. This lands us with a general rejection both of monism and of relativism. That is to say, we have to be aware of the relative validity of our choices, and yet stand unflinchingly for them. But how can we possibly keep this balance without it resulting in the *mere modus vivendi* posited by Gray?³⁰

The answer to this question resides in history. Williams argues that awareness of the limits of philosophy and the contingency of our ethical principles does not weaken our moral convictions, but strengthens them. Given that our ethical and political commitments cannot be examined from an extra-contextual point of view, history provides the best perspective possible when it comes to analysing ethical principles. This is because our moral convictions are not the direct result of abstract thinking or metaphysical reasoning, but instead the product of the long historical development of our local practices. To this degree, history provides the most accurate portrait possible of the origins and justifications behind our ethical positions. That does not mean that our ethical values are entirely unsusceptible to philosophical reflection, for that

²⁸ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Fontana, 1985): 156.

²⁹ Op.Cit., p 160.

³⁰ J. Gray, *Liberalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995b); J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a).

would be the argument of relativism, but it definitely implies that ‘there is no universal, objective, rational justification of liberalism, and our commitment is grounded in our practices rather than our moral beliefs’.³¹ History has the power of unveiling the contingency of ethical ideals, which ‘can seem to be in tension with something that our ethical ideals themselves demand, a recognition of their authority’.³² However this tension is only the result of the defining of such authority within metaphysical frameworks, as western thought has tended to do since Aristotelian times. Williams’ work in ethics is primarily relevant due to the successful case it presents for overthrowing the metaphysical paradigm of ethical thought by pointing clearly at its limitations.

Williams’ first step for overcoming the metaphysical ethical paradigm is to lay out what he calls the relativism of distance.³³ This understanding of relativism rejects the previously drawn notion of relativism, which ultimately denies clashes of values in the two ways described, and instead sets out to affirm said clashes focusing in their nuances. The first and main element of the relativism of value is an elasticated view of conflicts of value that blurs the borders between the ‘us’ and ‘the other’ constitutive of modern value theories. It argues that the ethical differences that individuals and whole cultures experience are never the result of clear-cut distinctions between entire sets of values, but rather more fluid and nuanced than that: it is often a matter of degrees of separation between our ethical views and those of others, especially seeing as ‘a fully individuable culture is at best a rare thing. Cultures, subcultures, fragments of cultures, constantly meet one another and exchange and modify practices and attitudes. Social practices could never come forward with a certificate saying that they belonged to a genuinely different culture, so that they were guaranteed immunity to alien

³¹ E. Hall, ‘Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams’, *Social Theory and Practice*, 40.4 (2014): 553.

³² B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 20-21.

³³ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 163.

judgements and reactions'.³⁴ This view is consistent with Berlin's epistemological portrait of value pluralism introduced in chapters two and three, in which it was argued that value pluralism is not necessarily about clashes of entirely different values, but rather about different ways in which we arrange and prioritise the same values in order to create with them more or less consistent moral systems. Even more importantly, the relativism of distance brings awareness of the malleability of systems of value and their historical contingency. This brings history to the centre stage, which is Williams' main point, but also Berlin's. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Berlin's fixation with the generation of a historical narrative about liberty is a way of conveying his central argument about the centrality of method in political theory. The point made by Williams with the relativism of distance is strikingly similar, although his exposition of it is considerably more explicit and methodically organised than Berlin's.

Williams argues that current understandings of ethics and of politics are a product of modernity. Just like Berlin, he also affirms that we can only support this statement historically. The narrative that we find in Williams is in essence the same as in Berlin's: they both affirm that past societies were held together by a series of ethical myths that legitimated their hierarchies by producing an illusion of ethical knowledge. However the main characteristic of modernity is that due to the growth of 'reflectiveness', from where 'there is no route back',³⁵ or since 'the decline of utopian ideas in the west',³⁶ the notion of ethical knowledge is not necessary anymore, but historically contingent. That is to say, in pre-modern times we find a metaphysical understanding of ethics underpinning the possibility or at least the expectation of objective and stable answers to questions of ethics and politics: *how should one live* as a question that can and should be answered by recourse to attainable knowledge, often thought

³⁴ Op.Cit., p 158.

³⁵ Op.Cit., p 163.

³⁶ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): 21.

of as provided by some divine or higher entity or, since the Enlightenment, discoverable by the same means as in science. The clashes of value experienced in daily life are not before modernity regarded as a constitutive element of reality, but rather as the result of flawed understandings or approaches to life that should and could be tweaked and modified until the said clashes disappear. Even though Williams does not mention it directly, he is clearly referring with this narrative to the monist as purported by Berlin. And just like Berlin does when tracing the genealogies of our current values back to the Enlightenment, Williams points directly at modernity as the point of no return for value pluralism: ‘I take it that the modern world is marked by a peculiar level of reflectiveness’.³⁷ The notion of reflectiveness is key in Williams and refers to the level of self-critical regard that allows individuals to become aware of the relative validity of their own values once the all-encompassing narratives of monism have fallen. This is the same process that Berlin traces as the abandonment of the ideals that used to be pursued socially and politically in pre-Enlightened times. In both cases, the phenomenon of reflectiveness or self-consciousness opens up a new understanding of ethics, and of the world at large.

The first major consequence of the phenomenon of the growth self-consciousness is that it dissipates the possibility of ethical knowledge as it was conceived until then. Philosophy – or analytical knowledge – cannot provide on its own all the answers to the question about how we should live, and therefore the notion of ethical knowledge is profoundly altered: ‘reflection might destroy knowledge’.³⁸ This process is observable not only during the Enlightenment onwards as a gradual deterioration of monism, but also refers to the frustrations encountered by the Oxford positivists of the 1930’s whom, as we have seen, ended up discarding the idea of ethical knowledge as nonsense. However, the fact that philosophical

³⁷ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 163.

³⁸ Op.Cit., p 167.

knowledge meets its limit in ethical knowledge does not necessarily mean that we should abandon our ethical convictions and retreat to nihilism or relativism. This is one of Williams' most expressive points: the fact that we cannot verify logically the validity of our ethical beliefs does not necessarily imply that we must abandon them, the same point that Berlin made throughout his work. Well on the contrary, being aware of the limits of philosophy aids in pointing us towards the right kind of grounding for them. In William's own words:

To say that [ethical] knowledge is destroyed in such a case is not to say that particular beliefs that once were true now cease to be true. Nor is it to say that people turn out never to have known the things they thought they knew. What it means is that these people once had beliefs of a certain kind, which were in many cases pieces of knowledge; but now, because after reflection they can no longer use concepts essential to those beliefs, they can no longer form beliefs of that kind.³⁹

This is the same process that Berlin referred to as 'the decline of utopian ideas in the west',⁴⁰ an irreversible process as it raises questions that 'are, by now, there to be raised'.⁴¹ Once the impossibility of sustaining ethical convictions philosophically has been settled, then the question that arises is one on how else to we support our ethical convictions, in spite of, or maybe precisely because of, their relative validity. Williams' answer refers to the notion of 'confidence'⁴² as a key element in our ethical choices, as opposed to knowledge or plain will.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2003): ch. 2.

⁴¹ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 164.

⁴² Op.Cit., p 169-71.

4. Confidence and human nature.

The notion of confidence as found in Williams plays a crucial role in creating awareness of the historical, cultural and sociological roots of liberalism while avoiding relativism, which as this thesis has shown was the main target of Berlin's work. However, as the following two sections will argue, by looking deep into the notion of confidence it becomes visible the extent to which Williams' project is incomplete without a historical narrative like the one found in Berlin. The notion of confidence also helps highlight the link between different epistemic notions of human nature and method in political science, another central piece of Berlin's argument. By conferring to ethical knowledge a special status, different from both philosophical and scientific knowledge, Williams is essentially making an epistemological point about human nature: he draws a picture of morality that escapes the realm of natural sciences, and like Berlin and unlike the Oxford positivists of the thirties, he emphasises the possibility of choosing confidently, and stresses the value and necessity of doing so. It is impossible to verify the truth of ethical choices in the same way in which the truth of a mathematical equation can be verified, however that does not mean that the former lack any value or significance, or even that they cannot be assessed. We still can tell when someone has acted right or wrong, or we can argue confidently for one type of politics over another one. This is done best when we understand that human nature cannot be grasped in the same precise terms as that of the composition of the universe is. In short, our own self-understanding plays a much thicker role in the determination of the answers we provide to the ultimate question of politics – how should one live – and provided that we fully understand human nature and the fact that there is not an universal answer to the question of who we are, we can then accept confidently that there is not a single answer to the question of how should one live, *but many*. This connects the dots from the loss of ethical knowledge to the understanding of human nature and finally to the

defence of value pluralism, making Berlin's argument work in a clear way. Having said this, it is now time to raise the point that what Williams does not seem fully to grasp is that this argument relies on a highly hermeneutic understanding of human nature, with the consequent need for a much more comprehensively hermeneutic approach to political theory. This point about hermeneutics will be explored in the last section of the chapter, but for now the focus will be on elaborating a bit more on the notion of confidence and its implications.

In 'Ethics and the limits of philosophy',⁴³ Williams paints a heuristic picture of ethics as a practice that changes as we make it, and not as a pre-existing, fixed set of values that we can access metaphysically.⁴⁴ This is precisely what the famous quote borrowed from Faust – 'in the beginning was the deed' – refers to: just like with political notions of legitimacy, our understandings of what constitutes an ethically acceptable practice is entirely defined after the deed has already happened. This does not necessarily mean that Williams' view of ethics is entirely a naturalistic one in purely Humean style, arguing that ethical knowledge arises naturally as it is performed, for as it has already been stated ethical knowledge is determined partly from both abstract consideration and historical reflection. Nonetheless, this affirmation rules out the possibility of grounding ethical frameworks in rational abstract reflection, as Rawls does, to the degree to which it affirms that we cannot fully comprehend how our ethical inclinations work in abstract and absolute terms – that is to say, philosophically. At most, the only thing that philosophical reflection on ethical practices can do is 'show how a given practice hangs together with other practices in a way that makes social and psychological sense

⁴³ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985)

⁴⁴ This is akin to Oakeshott's definition of political knowledge as practical knowledge, and his rejection of rationalism (see M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Liberty Press, 1991), or M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)). Ideas like these were widespread in the work of some other political theorists of the time, such as Karl Popper's or H.L.A. Hart's (see K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2011): chs. 4, 5, 9, 13 and 25 especially; and H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (London, Clarendon: 2012): 66-71, 124-136 and this dissertation aims to portray Berlin as part of a wider trend in this sense.

to us'.⁴⁵ This does not, however, lead to ethical relativism or nihilism,⁴⁶ but instead brings us closer to a better understanding and justification of ethics. This is because 'in the process of losing ethical knowledge, we may gain knowledge of other kinds, about human nature, history, what the world is actually like. We can gain knowledge about, or around, the ethical. Inside the ethical, by the same process, we may gain understanding'.⁴⁷ Thus, in becoming aware of the true nature of ethics and the limitations of philosophical reflection in helping establish the normativity of ethical principles we also achieve a clearer understanding of the internal structure of ethics. It is in this kind of knowledge, or the knowledge of the lack of knowledge, even, that our ethical confidence is rooted: since we now 'cannot claim any knowledge about the ultimate desirability of our conceptual schemes... if we are to continue to use a conceptual scheme, we need to have confidence in it'.⁴⁸ The point of confidence is not, however, to evade nihilism once that the possibility of ethical knowledge has been discarded by justifying our ethical convictions in terms of *will*. Williams rejects the idea that 'besides the intellect there can only be the will', that is to say, that once that ethical knowledge is out of the picture 'the source of ethical conviction must be a decision, to adopt certain moral principles or to live in one way rather than another'.⁴⁹ Confidence, thus, is not just shown by the making of choices, but rather by making informed and reflective choices that result from the triadic process of thought described in the previous section.

⁴⁵ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 114.

⁴⁶ W. A. Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9.4 (October 1, 2010 2010); R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975); R. Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.1 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁷ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 168.

⁴⁸ E. Hall, 'Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams', *Social Theory and Practice*, 40.4 (2014): 550.

⁴⁹ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 169.

This description of confidence is interesting since it seems to run parallel to Berlin's notion of 'plumping':⁵⁰ whereas at first glance Berlin's depiction of the process of choosing between incommensurables may come across as very similar to the notion of will described by Williams, upon closer examination it becomes obvious that Berlin's stance on the matter is far from existentialist, for it is not merely a leap of faith. Once again, it is important to understand that Williams is not taking an underdeveloped notion of plumping as outlined by Berlin and developing it further, but instead he is merely articulating in a much clearer voice what is only implicitly stated in Berlin. Once again, instead of explicitly providing a theoretical explanation of the way in which confidence comes about, why we need it and why is it so important, he shows all of this in practice telling by elaborating the constellations of political and ethical thinkers he presents throughout his history of philosophy, and lets this knowledge arise within the readers mind as she connects the dots. If ethical confidence sinks one of its legs in history and the other one in philosophical reflection, this is because Berlin had already illustrated this process for Williams. When Berlin argues that value pluralism is an empirical, meta-ethical fact of our experience, he is in fact acknowledging the level of self-reflectiveness pointed out by Williams. And just like Williams, Berlin is also reluctant to let go of the need to examine critically and reflect philosophically in the origins of our ethical and political convictions – such is his recognition of the “Power of Ideas”⁵¹ – as his own abstract theorising on notions such as pluralism and monism or the two concepts of liberty confirms. Thus, even though Berlin himself seems at times hesitant about the sources of ethical convictions, such as when he refers to himself as ‘an existentialist’⁵², or in the vagueness of his definition of plumping, his work as a whole stands as an overall affirmation of the need to ground liberalism on

⁵⁰ H. Hardy, 'Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library: Plumping', (<https://www.daysoftheyear.com/wp-content/images/hedgehog-day1-e1422787687319-804x382.jpg>, accessed 19th April 2016); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004):165; S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 103.

⁵¹ I. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000b).

⁵² S. Lukes and I. Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120 (1998): 101.

something like the notion of confidence discussed by Williams. Moreover, whereas Williams seems to be mostly inclined to favour the historic-contextual side of the argument ‘because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because history has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook something that is ours’,⁵³ Berlin presents a more balanced position that integrates closely both philosophical reflection on first-hand experience of ethics as well as historical awareness of their roots. In his work the boundaries between history and theory appear blurred, and it is for this reason that he has been severely criticised, as his method has been misread as an attempt to put the facts in service of the argument.⁵⁴ However this way of proceeding, far from being the result of academic weakness or ideological negligence is the result of a strict fidelity to *truthfulness* in political theory (understood in the sense in which Williams uses the term): a full recognition of the implications of discourse and the impossibility of separating context and theory when it comes to human knowledge. Williams’ main point is that the historical contingency of our ethical principles does not undermine their authority, but reassures them, and that the key to understanding this lies in a historical examination of our political ideals, which reveals the inexistence of metaphysical universals in ethics. In this view, to assume that our values are ‘simply revealed to us, or given to us by our own nature’ constitutes ‘not only a philosophical superstition, but a kind of weakness’.⁵⁵ This flies in the face of the demand to validate political arguments metaphysically. However admitting this without dropping the metaphysical backdrop leads to either ironic affirmations of liberalism⁵⁶, or its framing as an agonistic practice.⁵⁷ Williams’ adoption of this perspective is the result of

⁵³ B. Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', *Philosophy*, 75.04 (2000): 193.

⁵⁴ J. Dunn, 'For Services to Conversation', *Times Higher Education*, 1998; Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002a); Q. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002b).

⁵⁵ B. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 148.

⁵⁶ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵⁷ J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a).

having inherited from Berlin an understanding of ethical and political ideals as resulting from long historical developments. Even if philosophy is a necessary tool for the analysis of political principles, it cannot be expected to provide on its own ultimate answers to questions of normativity, given the historically contingent roots of ethical and political norms. Berlin makes clear throughout his works that we cannot understand and explain and justify who we are and what we value without recourse to history, and that is exactly where Williams draws the limits of philosophy in his work. When Berlin turns against the Oxford analytic philosophers and towards history, he is implicitly acknowledging that as much as we can reflect philosophically on value pluralism in order to justify liberalism, a significant part of the argument on the unavoidability of pluralism – as well as on the undesirability of trying to create monism – rests on an examination of its status as a constitutive element of modern European societies.⁵⁸ This understanding of value pluralism as underpinning our social tissue is directly related to the definition of the notion of confidence as ‘basically a social phenomenon’ by Williams, and therefore ‘the first questions that should come to mind about ethical confidence are questions of social explanation’⁵⁹, and not questions of abstract philosophical or logical coherency.

In summary, the notion of confidence found in Williams’ work highlights the enormous weight that history has in the task of unveiling and reaffirming the pivotal role that the assimilation of the notion of value pluralism has played in the configuration of the ethical schemes upon which contemporary western societies operate. By generating awareness of this notion, Williams opens the door to a fully-fledged defence of liberalism that cites its own genealogy as a strength and not a weakness, and therefore does not need a theory of error. That

⁵⁸ Judith Shklar, at whose liberalism of fear Williams pointed at as the best application of liberalism from a realist perspective, also accomplishes this point: ‘We must therefore be suspicious of ideologies of solidarity, precisely because they are so attractive to those who find liberalism emotionally unsatisfying, and who have gone on in our century to create oppressive and cruel regimes of unparalleled horror. The assumption that these offer something wholesome to the atomized citizen may or may not be true, but the political consequences are not, on the historical record, open to much doubt.’ J. Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, in Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵⁹ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 170.

is to say, since liberalism is aware of its own historical contingency it cannot claim that previous non-liberal societies were wrong in their political and ethical norms, but simply that they were not the type of societies in which liberalism would have emerged, given their historical context. Williams' portrayal of liberalism as historically contingent points once again directly at the continuing relevance of Berlin's work, built around the elaboration of a historical genealogy of value pluralism in order to support the need for liberalism in the modern world: Berlin's work presents a narrative not at all dissimilar from Williams' in this respect. In addition to this, Williams' insistence on placing ethical confidence as the central and only way of legitimising ethical principles mirrors Berlin's description of choices between incommensurables as 'plumping'. Plumping, we have seen, refers to an attempt to encapsulate both the view that all our ethical views are contingent, and at the same an energetic rejection of any suggestion of relativism. However there is a fundamental difference between Williams and Berlin in this respect, and this is what ultimately provides the key to understanding what was so relevant about Berlin's approach to political theory, even when put next to Williams who many have considered as his successor and a thinker who pushed Berlin's ideas forward. Williams, unlike Berlin, seems to miss the fact that the borders between history and philosophy are indeed blurred when it comes to political theory to the point of becoming indistinguishable. This is why political theory demands a hermeneutic approach, as demonstrated by Berlin throughout his work. The final section of the chapter will look into this in more depth.

5. Bringing hermeneutics to political theory.

Berlin integrates philosophy and history in his defence of liberalism in a way that is unlike Rawls', but also unlike Williams'. This becomes particularly clear when we compare Williams' notion of confidence with Berlin's plumping, for despite all their similarities there is a sense in

which these two notions diverge, and not without consequences. Although Williams' call for a historicist political theory is convincing, he spells out the two disciplines as fundamentally disentangled or even confronted, a viewpoint that displays a failure to fully grasp the hermeneutic texture of modernity in the complex and reflective way showcased in Berlin's works. Williams falls short of noticing the fact that philosophy and history are not standalone disciplines that can be combined in different proportions in ethical and political reflection, but that instead they are in fact interweaved to the point of being indistinguishable for political theory. Berlin, by contrast, is so aware of this fact that he makes it the backbone of all his work. In his works, this difference is revealed methodologically, and not argumentatively. That is to say, even though Williams' argument 'is meant to provide a vantage which is together normative and interpretive, both revisionist and descriptive',⁶⁰ and he effectively recognises that 'a descriptive account of the genesis of a practice can be an essential part of a normative account of the value of that same practice',⁶¹ the descriptive account of the genesis of liberalism is absent in his work. While Berlin shows without telling, providing the historical account of the genesis of liberalism as a normative argument, Williams tells without showing: he explains why any historical account of liberalism – like Berlin's – should be taken seriously as a normative argument, however he does not provide any examples of genealogies like the ones he defends in action. When writing that LEG+MODERNITY=LIBERALISM, Williams fails to notice that the full implications of this assertion can only be comprehended if the reader is already familiar with a specific narrative that settles the meaning and implications of the 'MODERNITY' section of the equation, for these are not given. Williams implicitly assumes that history is made of stable facts that will automatically validate his claim when observed, and thus that the historical narrative that supports his argument does not need to be spelled out

⁶⁰ C. Koopman, 'Bernard William's on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010): 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

in his work in order to support it. Against this, hermeneutic readings of history maintain that albeit it is true that history reflects on recorded past events, this reflection is by no means neutral or objective, but viewer-dependent, and thus always carries within an intrinsic amount of meanings that cannot be overlooked. We should not be talking about ‘history’, but about ‘histories’, and each one of them tells always a specific story that that addresses particular questions formulated within specific contexts. The particular history of value pluralism that Berlin presents throughout his essays is a construct made of many voices, formulated with the aim of answering the specific questions about the normativity of liberalism that arise within modernity. The lack of historical explanation of the meaning of ‘MODERNITY’ within Williams’ work can be explained by an omission to understand the inherently interpretative character of history. To put forward the claim that ‘philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history’,⁶² and argue for it in exclusively philosophical terms seems, at the very least, contradictory. Even if Williams’ call has managed to spark concern among contemporary liberal scholars for its inspiration of a possible retreat of political philosophy into history,⁶³ the fact that his work is spelled out in philosophical terms rather than by using a historical narrative, can hardly make philosophy seem redundant. On the other hand, it is in Berlin’s work where a call for a more historical focus in political theory is found, presenting philosophy – or at least analytic, abstract philosophy – as accessory when it comes to political theory. In Berlin’s work, philosophical reflection and historical narrative are interweaved in a way that stands almost as an illustration in practice of the sort of historical approach to political theory that Williams argued for. Williams’ work is incalculably valuable for its delimitation of ethical knowledge

⁶² B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 173.

⁶³ P. Kelly, ‘Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History’, in M. Floyd and J. Sears (eds.) *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Galston’s great summary of the realist position for a more comprehensive definition: W. A. Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9.4 (October 1, 2010).

as occupying a realm different from that of philosophy, as well as for his strong argumentation of the necessity to incorporate historical narrative into political norms. However it misses the fundamentally hermeneutic character of history or, at least, it does not highlight it sufficiently and forgets to explain *which history* in particular is the one rooting his theory of liberalism. Berlin, on the other hand, provides a careful historical narrative in support of his theory of liberalism of the sort demanded by Williams, which has an implicit portrayal of ethics as *sui generis* as the one presented by Williams, even though not as eloquently elaborated. In addition to this, Berlin's work offers a crucial insistence on the hermeneutic nature of history and the need to incorporate an awareness of this to theories of liberalism that is missed by Williams. Philosophy is just as historically conditioned as history is philosophically determined. After all, and against what the Cambridge scholars claim,⁶⁴ 'histories are products of inquiries, even if they are about real facts concerning the past',⁶⁵ This claim sits at the core of Berlin's work: he turns down analytical philosophy and retreats into history early in his career in order to answer questions about the sources of the normativity of our values. In this move he intuitively shuns conventional methodologies in history and philosophy and instead blurs their borders by operating both as an archaeologist of ideas, by trying to trace back the paths that have landed up with our current ideals, and as political philosopher, by building from those paths a new (and mostly tacit) argument in support of liberalism. This idiosyncratic approach to history and philosophy – the elaboration of constellations of authors, picked and mixed in a more or less fabricated way; the unabashed re-elaboration of historical facts and the tendency to act more like a ventriloquist than as a biographer; the constant merging of fact and interpretation until they become virtually indistinguishable – is a full-blown statement on the shared nature of

⁶⁴ 'Reading historical texts in light of how they might help solve present-day problems is, Skinner states, "to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error"' J. E. Green, 'Political Theory as Both Philosophy and History: A Defense against Methodological Militancy', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18.1 (2015):435.

⁶⁵ C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a): 18.

history and philosophy, and a call to cater for the necessity of an approach to political philosophy that takes this into account first. Berlin's methodology acts, therefore, both as an argument and an example in practice.

Political history provides normativity as much as political philosophy does, and they really cannot be understood without the other. For instance, it is true that liberalism is largely a result of specific historical developments, but it is also true that we interpret history that way due to our own embeddedness in the liberal perspective. This is the central notion of hermeneutics, which in turn provides a strong argument in favour of liberalism that is neither universal nor agonistic, as it has disposed of the metaphysical backdrop assumed by all previous moral theories, as Williams points out. The historical contingency of our arguments does not make them less valid, in the same way that our awareness of the narrative nature of history does not render it less meaningful. On the contrary, being aware of that is the main condition of modernity and the key to providing empowered defences of liberalism. If Berlin weaves constellations of authors and historical events in order to support a political argument this is because there is no other way of doing it: as human beings we do not have an external or metaphysical perspective from where to judge our normative arguments: 'in the realm of collective human action, culture, and politics, we are guided by constellations, not by the analogues of raw or theoretically-manipulated astrophysical data, and there is no real alternative to that'.⁶⁶

It is true that this realist understanding of politics is ingrained both in Berlin's and Williams' works, but only in Berlin is the argument put forward by integrating history and theory closely as part of the same discourse with the object of diverting attention to the fact that within political reflection, history and philosophy cannot be separated, or at least that this has become the case, for us, *here and now*. This essential awareness of the historical roots of

⁶⁶ R. Geuss, *A World without Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014): 184.

our ideas, and at the same time of the ideological content of historical is what truly justifies liberalism, not as an imperfect, temporary solution or an agonistic choice, but instead as a confident and informed one. If it is true that ‘the common thread which runs from Kant and Bentham down to contemporary moral theory, which is also the golden thread which gives Williams’s critique the enormous breadth that it has, consists in the refusal to fully grasp the complexity and contingency of moral life’,⁶⁷ then Berlin’s work deserves recognition for having spotted this golden thread far before Williams and for having shown how it holds together those ideals and thinkers that have shaped the European mind from the Enlightenment onwards, until reaching the liberalism of which the works of the two authors strive so passionately to make sense.

⁶⁷ C. Koopman, 'Bernard William's on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010): 8.

Conclusion

Ramin Jahanbegloo: “Do you consider your work a philosophical investigation or an historical one?”

Isaiah Berlin: “How can I distinguish?”¹

This dissertation has presented six chapters ordered in three thematic sections, all of them linked by a general claim to acknowledge the contemporary relevance of Isaiah Berlin’s political thought. The thesis has sought to acknowledge Berlin’s hermeneutic approach to political theory by claiming that this method can successfully articulate a pluralism-based defence of liberalism – whereas other existing approaches are not as comprehensively convincing.² The thesis is therefore original in that none of the existing scholarship on Berlin or liberal pluralism has explored systematically the crucial relevance that method has in this respect, nor demanded for Berlin’s hermeneutic approach to political theory the recognition as a central feature of his work that it deserves. As it has been shown throughout the thesis, most critics of Berlin approach his work either as one of theoretically naïve intellectual history or as

¹ I. Berlin and R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 1992):23.

² J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); J. Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 14.3 (1985); J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7.1 (1987); J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); J. Rawls, 'The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus', in Matravers and Pike (eds.), *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology* (Routledge, in Association with the Open University, 2003); J. Rawls and E. Kelly, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (Jun 1994); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', Refereed Paper Presented to the Australasian Political Papers Association (2003); R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); M. Nussbaum, 'Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39.1 (2011); J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); J. Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); J. Raz, 'The Role of Well-Being', *Noûs*, 38, (2004).

ideal political philosophy. The focus tends to be, thus, either on the lack of historical accuracy of his writings, or on the potential philosophical inconsistencies of his defence of liberalism. In this last respect, the relationship between value pluralism and a defence of liberalism has become the main focal point not just of the literature following Berlin's work, but of liberal political theory at large. The question is simple: if liberalism is based on an assumption of value pluralism, then how can we assert the necessity of liberalism over its political counterparts? Against this, the thesis has argued that the scope Berlin's contribution spans beyond traditional philosophical defences of liberalism such as Rawls', or their historicist antagonists as found in Williams', by providing an argument that highlights the need for a hermeneutic approach to political theory as an argumentative tool in support of liberalism. Understood in this way, his work can be taken as offering a defence of liberal pluralism that synthesises elements from both approaches, resulting in a rounder defence of liberalism. This last possibility has been consistently overlooked in political theory, and where hinted,³ it has failed to notice Berlin's work as an obvious example of this approach.

The value of this thesis resides in having produced a hermeneutic re-examination of Berlin's work that unearths its relevance as a justification of liberal pluralism rooted in a hermeneutic approach to political theory. By examining political arguments hermeneutically, Berlin offers a defence of liberalism that is flexible enough to find a way out of the familiar dead-ends its theoretical justifications tend to encounter. His focus on the development of political ideals from the Enlightenment onwards, in particular on the distinction between fact and value and the assimilation of value pluralism in the west, represents an attempt to argue for the need for liberalism. The argument is not a purely historicist one portraying liberalism

³ C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams's on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a); P. Sagar, 'From Scepticism to Liberalism? Bernard Williams, the Foundations of Liberalism and Political Realism', *Political Studies*, (2014); E. Hall, 'Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams', *Social Theory and Practice*, 40.4 (2014).

as a sort of conservatism, but instead a defence that begins by acknowledging the limits of philosophical reflection when it comes to ethical knowledge. Berlin's main argument is therefore similar to Williams when he argues that 'there is no Moral Law, but we have resources for living with that fact':⁴ far from being a nihilist or a relativist, Berlin is showing with his work how a hermeneutic reading of our political ideals ultimately provides the defence of liberalism he seeks. This approach is an invitation to understand the contingent character of liberalism as its argumentative foundation and not as a weakness that it needs to be purged of. It also transcends the division between political moralism and political realism and its associated metaphysical and historicist methodologies as outlined by the new realists,⁵ answering some calls in recent literature for a more integrated outlook that incorporates claims from both methodological camps.⁶ In this respect, and against what most of the literature maintains, Berlin should not be taken as a predecessor of the paradigmatic liberal political theorists that were to follow, in the best case, or as a historical relic, in the worst. Instead, he has to be understood as one of the most crucial liberal thinkers of our time, whose ideas constitute a fundamental piece in the building of a solid case in defence of liberal pluralism. The abiding significance of his work becomes obvious from the fact that, despite having been produced long before most ongoing debates liberalism had even started to take place, we can distil from them arguments and answers of striking relevance to some of the most pressing

⁴ B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002): 122.

⁵ R. Geuss, 'Philosophy and Real Politics', (2008); W. A. Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9.4 (2010); M. Sleat, *Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics* (2013); B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); J. N. Shklar, *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁶ C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams's on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a); P. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought', in Hayward et al. (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1999); P. Kelly, 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', in M. Floyd and J. Sears, *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

questions in current political theory. The originality of the thesis in this dissertation resides in having brought up the elements of his work that allow us to see clearly how an hermeneutic approach to political theory helps build a more comprehensive defence of liberalism.

The dissertation has divided the argument in three different thematic blocks. The first one has acted both as a methodological introduction and a biographical overview of Berlin's work. By using an exploration of the relationship of the author with its context and the way in which this has impacted his ideas as a means of drawing new meaning from it, the first chapter has showcased the interpretative hermeneutic methodology to be used throughout the thesis. This hermeneutic method is incidentally the same used by Berlin, and the one that this dissertation aims to present as an effective means for addressing questions on the normativity of liberalism. The first section of the dissertation introduced the question of method in political theory and highlighted the special significance of this issue within the historical context that surrounds Berlin's work. In particular it paid close attention to Berlin's development within the context of the Oxford of the 1930's, with its embrace of logical positivism and realism, as well as his developing interest in issues related to ethics, politics and freedom as framed by his Russian heritage. As a result of this, Berlin's early concern with finding an appropriate methodology that would allow him to address the political issues that define liberalism can be regarded as the foundational motivation of his work. Most of the literature has missed this point, save some punctual exceptions, such as the works of Cherniss or Dubnov.⁷ They both recognise the distinctive intellectual and political environment in which Berlin found himself during his formative years, and Dubnov goes even further, suggesting similarities between Berlin and some hermeneutic authors, like Newey or Dilthey. However neither of them makes of the hermeneutic interpretation of his work a central point from where to address the meta-

⁷ A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a): 1-53, 112-21; J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

ethical questions associated to liberal pluralism. In this regard this dissertation has argued that unless we understand Berlin as having developed his ideas in the intellectual context of the birth of analytic philosophy, and in the historical context of the Cold War, we cannot grasp in full the message contained in his writings, which is why most interpretations of his work do not recognise the central place that the question on methodology occupies within it. The first part of the dissertation has also focussed attention on Berlin's preoccupation with human nature and presented this as a direct consequence of his realisation of the normative implications of method in political theory. His experience of Oxford Philosophy in the 1930's inspired an early awareness of the *sui generis* nature of the human and social sciences, a preoccupation that constitutes the thematic spine of all of his works, and one we can see explicitly spelled out in his attempt to create a *magnum opus* in PIRA (especially in SVOE).⁸ This interest in method is what fuelled Berlin's turn to hermeneutics, concealed as history of ideas, as a non-philosophical method for addressing issues on ethics and politics.⁹ Berlin's case for liberalism sits upon a deep understanding of men as essentially autonomous, which is directly related to an awareness of the dangers of adopting non-hermeneutic approaches to political theory. This is learnt historically and argued hermeneutically, and can be clearly observed in Berlin's identification of philosophical or metaphysical approaches to political theory through history with monism, and his linking of these with the totalitarianisms he tries so hard to oppose in his works. However, the first section of the thesis has shown how once Berlin turns away from the Oxford Philosophers and their purely analytical approaches, first, and from metaphysics in politics, second, he finds himself in a sort of methodological no-man's land, the exit from which cannot be understood without Collingwood's influence. Berlin's contact with Collingwood as presented in this dissertation is another key point of the argument and an

⁸ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 260-66.

⁹ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981): ix.

original feature of the thesis. Even though their relationship has been noticed by some authors,¹⁰ and seriously considered by Skagestad,¹¹ none of them has explored a continuum between Collingwood and Berlin via the notion of common presuppositions. Doing this not only allows the argument of Berlin as a hermeneutic thinker to flourish, but also provides a new point of contact with the realist critique, which could add strength to Crowder's existing argument on this side.¹² Having said this, this dissertation does not portray Berlin as a realist as Crowder does, an argument laid out in chapter six, which will be summarised again below. Having set up in the first section of the thesis the reasons to understand Berlin hermeneutically, this dissertation has proceeded to present a closer analysis of the philosophical notions contained within his work.

The second section of the dissertation offered an analysis of the most relevant philosophical notions present in Berlin's work. In chapters two and three it analysed value pluralism, the pivotal notion in Berlin's thought, with the main aim of clarifying some of the most pressing questions surrounding this notion, and even more importantly with the ultimate goal of presenting it as a meta-ethical and non-normative theory. Chapter four has located and examined a neo-Kantian theory of ethics which, unlike value pluralism, is normative. By doing this the dissertation has addressed some of the most commonly addressed critiques of liberal pluralism, which tend to rely on an understanding of value pluralism as a normative theory. The problem with normative understandings of value pluralism is that they present it as a moral doctrine that needs to be justified philosophically in order for individuals to accept it and ascribe to it, just like Rawls needs to write his *Theory* in order to back up his defence of

¹⁰ J. Cherniss, 'Isaiah Berlin's Early Political Thought', in Hardy (ed.), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); J. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); A. Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012a); M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

¹¹ P. Skagestad, 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66.1 (2005).

¹² G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).

liberalism. However if Berlin is read through the lens of hermeneutics it becomes evident that the definition of value pluralism he presents is not aimed as a normative moral doctrine, but instead it appears as a second-order ethical statement. That is to say, the first two chapters of the section have argued that value pluralism only describes the status of our moral landscape, rather than producing a normative direction on how we should act about it: value pluralism does not tell us that values ought to be plural, but only makes us aware of this pluralism and its characteristics. In addition to this, some intricacies of Berlin's definition of value pluralism have also been analysed in order to bring out its descriptive and, in principle, non-normative character, such as its understanding of values as objective and finite and its focus on pluralism as the result of the different ways in which systems of values are constructed. This construction of value pluralism allows the reader to see more clearly the way in which Berlin roots his philosophy in empirical experience and then builds up to metaphysics from there, in an example of his application of hermeneutics to political theory. The examination of value pluralism also reminds the reader of Berlin's closeness with Collingwood and in particular to his notion of the absolute presuppositions of history. Berlin's work stems out of a basic identification of value pluralism as an absolute presupposition, which justifies the identification of value pluralism as descriptive and non-normative. That is to say, if we look at the development of ideas in Europe from the Enlightenment onwards as Berlin does, it becomes apparent that the assimilation of value pluralism as a central element of our ethical imaginary stands as the single most determinant factor in the development of the European mind and society, and this is what supports the normative claim for liberalism. Arguing this is not a matter of philosophical discussion and justification, but simply of hermeneutic clarification. Once value pluralism is described as non-normative most of these criticisms are weakened. The normativity of liberalism comes defined, thus, from the neo-Kantian understanding of man as essentially autonomous that chapter four uncovers. This is the theme of the chapter that explores Berlin's

humanistic ethics, which presents an openly normative argument on the need to preserve human autonomy. The central element of the argument is that the western world has been shaped since the Enlightenment by an understanding of human nature that is entirely defined by the essentially autonomous nature of human beings. The chapter explains how we know about this from the way in which values constitute themselves, supporting this claim on some of the notions introduced during the previous analysis of value pluralism. If what makes human beings truly human –what differentiates the human from the natural sciences- is the fact that they uphold values, and what makes this value true is their being freely observed by individuals, there is a normative claim attached to this understanding of human beings as value-observing creatures that are ‘essentially autonomous’.¹³ The normative character of the claim may appear to conflicting with value pluralism at first – again, this is the main charge against liberal pluralism throughout the majority of the literature – however by having set up the hermeneutic reading of Berlin’s work in the first section the critique is dismissed. In other words, the definition of individuals as essentially autonomous is not universalistic in a metaphysical sense, or monistic, but stands only as a concrete universal in the style of a Collingwoodean absolute presupposition. That is to say, we arrive at this notion via a critical examination of our past history and the development of our ideals, and not by means of abstract ideal philosophising. That is the reason why chapter four insists on the interconnectedness between methodology and epistemic notions of human nature, for the portrait of individuals as essentially autonomous provided by Berlin only avoids the threat of monism due to the methodology it assumes to argue it, and vice-versa. Berlin has provided a specific *history* of Europe – or of the West, even – in which it is clearly specified that human beings have not always been conceived as essentially autonomous as he claims it to be now. However when we look at our historical past

¹³ I. Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998b): 208.

we can understand how this notion has become the main absolute presupposition of our time, the one that we are not willing to negotiate and the one that sits as the cornerstone of our entire worldview. Like Bernard Williams, Berlin's view of ethics is concerned with the issue of consistency and coherence: ethical knowledge is often reduced to a sense 'of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what',¹⁴ of 'how a given practice hangs together with other practices in a way that makes social and psychological sense'.¹⁵ That is to say, the normativity of our ethical practices is not a matter of *truth* or *knowledge*, but instead of having that *sense of reality* that allows us to reflectively justify our ethical stances. If we examine our political development hermeneutically in the way Berlin does throughout his works it becomes clear how without a basic degree of individual autonomy guaranteed for all individuals equally our society does not *make sense*. This hermeneutic approach to ethics constitutes the middle ground between relativism and monism that Berlin set out to find at the beginning of his intellectual career. The most effective way to produce the argument in favour of liberalism is thus not philosophically or historically, but hermeneutically, and the third section of the dissertation presented a comparative argument in this direction.

The section looked at the works of John Rawls and Bernard Williams in order to provide two examples of opposed methodological approaches to theories of liberalism, with the aim of proving the relevance of method in political theory, and arguing that their defences could benefit from a more synthetic approach as presented by Berlin. The two last chapters have shown how both Williams and Rawls anchor their theories of liberalism in an admission of value pluralism. However their contrasting choice of methodology results in vastly differing understandings of the demands and expectations of liberalism. Chapter five examines Rawls' work as it is commonly regarded as a foundational and definitive text for contemporary

¹⁴ I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Viking Press, 1978a): 69.

¹⁵ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985): 114.

political liberalism, and draws some important conclusions from the way in which it compares to Berlin's. To begin with, it presents evidence of the unknown ties between the two authors, including some comments sent by Berlin to Rawls about TJ. This chapter has also shown the scope of Berlin's influence by pointing at the way in which Rawls seems to have assimilated his idea of value pluralism as a meta-ethical fact in his spelling out of what he refers to as *the fact of pluralism*.¹⁶ The central point of the chapter is to highlight the analytic grounding of Rawls' theory, and the difficulties posed by this methodological approach. Rawls' work stands as an example of a theory of liberalism that is laid out philosophically and with appeal to abstract reason, particularly when considering his reliance on notions such as the veil of ignorance or the original position.¹⁷ The social contract theory outlined in TJ assumes a universal reason that allows individuals to overcome the clashes of value presented by value pluralism just by means of abstract reflection. This idea resonates with utopianism when seen from Berlin's point of view, and Berlin tries to challenge precisely the 'central notion that reason discovers ends as well as means'.¹⁸ If value pluralism is true, then the notion of reason as being the only tool needed for us to agree on a set of ends – such as Rawls' TJ – seems at most inconsistent. The chapter argues that Rawls seems to ultimately recognise this concern as legitimate in his late shift towards a conception of liberalism as a *political doctrine*. This means the abandonment of the notion of liberalism as universal insofar as grounded in a universal capacity for reason, and instead understands it as only possible within specific cultures in which certain political values are already in place – the *democratic constitutional cultures*, as he calls them. This implies a deeper recognition of the unavoidability of clashes of values *a la* Berlin, and a portrayal of liberalism as a contingent political solution that can only be expected to work within certain contexts. This echoes Berlin's hermeneutic method with its reliance on the

¹⁶ J. Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7.1 (1987): 6.

¹⁷ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973): 118-42.

¹⁸ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 48.

general presuppositions of every historical moment as the normative rooting of political and ethical statements, providing a strong support for the main idea of the thesis.

On the other hand, chapter six has brought up Williams' realism as a theory of liberalism that presents the opposite approach than Rawls: where the latter relied heavily on abstract reason, Williams' historicist approach is as detached from metaphysical arguments as a political theory can be. The main issue with Williams' realism is, however, its seemingly oblivious attitude towards the philosophical dimension of historical narratives. His references to history as a source of political normativity are continuous, however he does not provide the specific history he is referring to. Against this, one of the main points of Berlin's work is precisely the recognition of the narrative character of history and its polyphonic nature: Berlin, like Gadamer or even Foucault,¹⁹ recognises that history is always a construct that answers specific questions. Thus, the political normativity that Williams adduces we can find in history when stating that 'LEG+MODERNITY=LIBERALISM'²⁰ is incomplete unless he provides the specific history that defines the notion of modernity providing legitimation to liberalism. The chapter highlighted the strong intellectual and biographical links existing between Williams and Berlin, and pointed out how the historical account of European values seems to fit well enough with Williams' argument to be considered as the one he has in mind at the time of writing. However, Williams' defence of realism does not sufficiently accommodate the fact that Berlin's narrative is just one possible amongst many, and this is the main difference between the two authors. This means that as much as Berlin acknowledges the historicist roots of liberalism, he cannot provide a theory of liberalism that does without philosophical reflection. Even more importantly, his theory of liberalism cannot work without being rooted in an ethical directive that is extracted precisely from the hermeneutic reading of history that

¹⁹ H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989); M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 9-10.

he performs. In particular, as chapter four has explained, Berlin maintains that the normative ideals that support liberalism are partially defined by the assimilation of neo-Kantian ideals:

the emphasis on the preservation of *the right to develop one's individual capacity*, the hatred of anything likely to derogate from it, to lower human dignity; the liberal protest against any form of despotism, however benevolent and rational, not because it diminishes human happiness but because it is intrinsically degrading, a falsification of what human relationships between equal and independent (and ideal pursuing) beings ought to be, a betrayal of *the ideal which humanity exists to fulfil*; the notion of humanity as something in the name of which rights can be claimed, crimes punished, revolutions made – this complex of values is inspired not by the utilitarian considerations or the empirical sociology of the eighteenth century but by the humanist idealism of Kant and his successors.²¹

This stance makes it hard to think of Berlin's work as supportive of a political doctrine without moral groundings of the sort heralded by Williams' realism. This is why Berlin cannot be considered a realist in the same sense as Williams, against what Crowder argues.²² Where Williams' realism points towards a liberalism of fear *à la* Shklar²³ that is mainly focused in fighting evils, Berlin makes the need for autonomy a central piece of his defence of liberalism. This assertion is hard to fit within Williams' realist critique and its assertion of a morally bare notion of politics that stands as far from philosophical reflection as possible. At the same time, the malleability of Williams' realism has allowed a number of scholars to recently drag his

²¹ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 154. My emphasis.

²² G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): 172-77.

²³ B. Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 3.

realism back to a middle ground that relies on abstract philosophical reflection more than originally admitted by Williams in order to justify itself.²⁴ This trend confirms once again the main proposal of this thesis by admitting the need to approach political theory hermeneutically where a defence of liberalism is needed. What none of the aforementioned authors seems to notice is the fact that Berlin had already offered precisely the hermeneutic approach to political theory they are calling for.

It is worth reminding the reader as we conclude of the fact that the differences between Rawls, Williams and Berlin have more to do with means than with ends. Berlin is concerned with finding ways to affirm the value of liberty *vis-à-vis* the challenges of value pluralism, Rawls tries to provide ways of finding consensus within the division it poses, and Williams places the weight of his argument in the final character of conflicts of value. However, and having said this, their divergences are not that profound, and in the last instance all three are liberal pluralists with close agendas. The reason their works have been compared in the last section is to provide a clear view of how different methodologies can affect the outcomes of political theories, even when their main arguments overlap. This comparison between the three authors has made clear the significance of Berlin's work beyond its commonly attributed role as an anteroom for political theories of liberalism by highlighting the way in which both Williams and Rawls end up converging towards a more hermeneutical method of the sort proposed by Berlin as demanded by their theories of liberalism.

The main aim of the thesis has been to provide a comprehensive defence of Berlin's work as a political theorist by claiming its hermeneutic significance, and to use this in general terms in order to call for a hermeneutic approach to liberal political theory. This defence

²⁴ P. Sagar, 'From Scepticism to Liberalism? Bernard Williams, the Foundations of Liberalism and Political Realism', *Political Studies* (2014); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Philosophy's Need for History', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64.1 (2010); C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 1.3 (2011a); E. Hall, 'Bernard Williams and the Basic Legitimation Demand: A Defence', *Political Studies*, 63.2 (2015).

responds to two general critiques of Berlin that portray him either as a bad historian, or as a political theorist whose work is not substantial enough to constitute a proper defence of liberalism. These two approaches tend to consider his work only partially: they either look at the historical dimension of his work, or at the philosophical arguments explicitly stated within it. Against this, this dissertation has presented a hermeneutic reading that integrates these two approaches and also puts Berlin's work in relation to its context. It has thus brought attention to the early intellectual development of Berlin's work in order to argue that a wider argument about methodology in the study of human knowledge or human science underlies all of his work. This was motivated by two biographical events: on the one hand his early awareness of politics and the value of freedom, as a result of his childhood experience in Russia; and on the second hand, his academic development in the context of the Oxford of the 1930's with the birth of the Oxford realism as well as his contact with R. G. Collingwood, who pointed him in the direction of the history of ideas. Within this setting, Berlin develops his work as an attempt to make a normative statement about the ethical and political need to preserve individual autonomy that is not entirely reliant on metaphysical notions, yet not solely the result of historical contingency either, or a mere assertion of relativism. After all, Berlin's main draw towards the realists was precisely a result of 'the comforting implication that goodness might be as clear, distinct and intuitively apprehensible as primary colours'²⁵ that he found in reading authors such as Moore.²⁶ If 'the central issue of political philosophy is the question 'Why should any man obey any other man or body of men?',²⁷ political philosophy demands, then, a methodology capable of grasping human nature. Berlin's work is driven by an ultimate resolution to provide his conviction of the essentially autonomous nature of man with a solid philosophical basis that would not allow metaphysical manipulation to bend it until turning it

²⁵ M. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 50.

²⁶ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

²⁷ I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006): 17.

into a loose relativism, neither become so rigid that it would pass for the dogmatic political ideologies that grew larger than individuals. In his quest to complete this task he becomes acutely aware of the particular demands that the study of human sciences has attached to it, as well as of the methodological implications of normative theorising. Berlin's work represents a lengthy exhibition of how this demand finds its match in hermeneutics. This argument runs throughout all of his works, colouring them in a way that has remain unnoticed by most of his critics and which has been the aim of this thesis to highlight.

The methodological originality of Berlin's work is worth examining insofar as it shields it from its most common critics, but more importantly because it delivers an important argument in the direction of political theories of liberalism. Berlin's interest in the Enlightenment may seem historical, but this dissertation has shown how in fact it is part of a wider hermeneutic theory of liberalism. That is to say, Berlin's tracing of the development of those ideals that compose our current moral and political scenarios – most notably the fact/value distinction that marked the Enlightenment revolutions – should not be read as driven by historical curiosity, but instead as a provision of arguments that demonstrate the need for liberalism in order to protect individual autonomy. This is because as chapters two, three and four have argued, the assimilation of value pluralism as an ineradicable component of our ethical life has attached to it a neo-Kantian understanding of human beings as 'essentially autonomous' that demands a liberal order. This reading represents a significant shift in that it challenges the common understanding of TCL as Berlin's central work, that in which his political ideals crystallise. As important as the provision of a comprehensive definition of the notion of liberty may be for liberalism, Berlin's main aim is far from that of turning negative liberty into the one and only foundational stone of liberalism. This dissertation has shown how his defence of liberalism is in fact rooted in a much broader argument that brings history into the picture as much as it does philosophical analysis. It is true that Berlin's liberalism is rooted

in a fundamental protection of liberty, but his liberty is not necessarily the reductionist negative liberty as absence of coercion that many have wanted to see. While being free is not always about self-realisation, being free is neither always about being left alone. As it was mentioned in the introduction, Berlin was fundamentally aware of the fact that the sense of belonging to a community had for men, and he is not in any case a defender of an ‘atomistic liberalism’.²⁸ This dissertation has consciously avoided the inclusion of a chapter on liberty in order to prove how Berlin’s defence of liberalism does not stem from an affirmation of the notion of negative liberty. Furthermore, in line with Joshua Cherniss’ argument, this thesis has argued for a reading of Berlin’s liberalism in which the focus on autonomy means a synthesis of the notions of positive and negative liberty. If it is true that

men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible. It is from intense preoccupation with these ends, ultimate, incommensurable... that the best moments come in the lives of individuals and peoples.²⁹

Berlin’s liberalism is nothing like the laissez-fair of the classic liberals that preceded him, or that of the neoliberals that followed. To this regard authors like Raz,³⁰ Crowder,³¹

²⁸ M. J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁹ I. Berlin, 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century', *Foreign Affairs*, 28.1 (1949a): 385.

³⁰ J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); J. Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); J. Raz, 'The Role of Well-Being', *Noûs*, 38 (2004).

³¹ G. Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies*, 42.2 (1994); G. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002); G. Crowder, 'Pluralism, Relativism and Liberalism in Isaiah Berlin', Refereed Paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association (2003); G. Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); G. Crowder and H. Hardy, *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007).

Galston³² or Nussbaum³³ are not too far off when pushing Berlin's liberalism towards a perfectionist stance. At the same time, it should be noted that this does not necessarily imply that perfectionism is the only possible interpretation of Berlin's liberalism. As it has been the main object of this dissertation to argue, Berlin's main achievement has been to put forward a robust case for the basic standing of liberalism that insists on the necessity to approach politics in a piecemeal fashion, taking the specific meaning historical and social contexts as seriously as it takes that of abstract philosophical reflection. Thus, whether Berlin's work directs us towards a more 'Enlightenment' or 'Reformation' application of liberalism³⁴ will depend on the way in which his work is read, interpreted and applied, and this flexibility is not a flaw but its major strength. This is what critics like Gray have not noticed when accusing liberalism of being, at most, an 'agonistic' theory:³⁵ liberalism cannot be of 'enduring value' unless we recognise its 'precarious' character first,³⁶ and Berlin's entire oeuvre is an effort in that direction. It is true that there is not in Berlin a theory of institutions – an explicit one at least – that he does not stop to consider the constitutional achievements of the Enlightenment in detail, as Waldron has argued,³⁷ and that his work is, when read as a text in political philosophy or in the history of ideas, full of loose ties. But addressing these kinds of criticisms against Berlin, as valid as they are, displays a misunderstanding of the main argument in his work. Berlin's contribution is valuable because it shields the first and most fundamental aspect of any theory

³² W. A. Galston, 'Two Concepts of Liberalism', *Ethics*, 105.3 (1995); W. A. Galston, 'Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 93.4 (1999); W. A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); W. A. Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³³ M. C. Nussbaum, 'Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39.1 (2011).

³⁴ W. A. Galston, 'Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism', *The Review of Politics*, 71.1 (2009).

³⁵ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995c); J. Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12.01 (1995a); J. Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

³⁶ P. Kelly, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005): 3.

³⁷ J. Waldron, 'Isaiah Berlin's Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism', *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

of liberalism – the need to look after individual autonomy first – in a way that is liberal in itself: flexible enough to accommodate the unpredictable demands of human societies, but solid enough to retain the normative character of its basic principles. His work presents a method that lights up an otherwise hidden path in the making of liberal political theory. The ‘vagueness’ of his work when it comes to the practical aspects of liberalism is intrinsic to the same flexibility he is trying to protect with it, and should be seen as an open door to the future applications of liberalism. Waldron’s accusation that Berlin overlooks the constitutional dimension of the Enlightenment is not unfounded, but he misses a point about the fact that institutional design is the product of political and moral ideals, and not the other way around. It is not without a solid theory of liberalism in place that we can judge whether the institutional contribution of the Enlightenment was of any value or not for us. And, as this dissertation has shown, we could not have the solid theory of liberalism that Berlin left us with without the reading of the philosophes he carried out too. This does not mean, however, that using Berlin’s ideas as a source from where to analyse the suitability of different institutional and political expressions of liberalism is out of place. Far from that, that seems the logical step to follow after the thesis of this dissertation has been defended. By now it should have become clear how expecting Berlin to provide a theory of liberalism in the form of a dogmatic and rigid set of political norms is obviously a mistake, and represents a deep misunderstanding of the meaning of the liberalism he wished to defend. Interpreting his texts hermeneutically, as a point of departure from where to elaborate particular political norms, is on the other hand not only an appropriate approach to his liberalism, but a necessary one.

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