

# **HISTORY, METHOD, AND PLURALISM**

## ***A Re-interpretation of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought***

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*by*

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## **Abstract of the Thesis**

In the literature on Berlin to date, two broad approaches to study his political thought can be detected. The first is the piecemeal approach, which tends to single out an element of Berlin's thought (for example, his distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty) for exposition or criticism, leaving other elements unaccounted. And the second is the holistic approach, which pays attention to the overall structure of Berlin's thought as a whole, in particular the relation between his defence for negative liberty and pluralism. This thesis is to defend the holistic approach against the piecemeal approach, but its interpretation will differ from the two representative readings, offered by Claude J. Gallipeau and John Gray, of this approach. By focusing on the relation between Berlin's historical methodology and his political arguments, this thesis argues that the doctrine of value-pluralism should be understood as Berlin's vision of the world, his empathetic approach to understanding a methodological strategy to transcend cultural difference, and his engagement with the history of ideas an enterprise to enlarge his readers' vision of human possibility so that they can come to see the fact that their own chosen forms of life are relatively valid. It begins with a reconstruction of Berlin's methodology, and by way of exploring the presuppositions in his methodology it will be argued that his methodology in fact is ethics-laden and for this reason only those who share his moral concerns would be able to implement his prescribed methodology thoroughly – in other words, those who disagree with his morality and are determined not to act on his advice would not become Berlinian liberals who would realise the relative validity of their convictions. And it concludes that Berlin's case for value-pluralism is unproven yet it may not be falsified either.



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## CHAPTER I.

### Introduction: Re-interpreting Isaiah Berlin

Isaiah Berlin occupies a curious position in the intellectual landscape of the twentieth century. Through numerous writings, broadcasts, and lectures, he established himself as a public intellectual who ardently defended individual liberty and the plurality of values. Also, he is well known as a rather old-styled man of letters who loves opera and literature, and his sophistication at dinner-table conversation even made him a legendary figure in the British establishment. By profession, nevertheless, Berlin was a political philosopher, and his reputation in the field rests chiefly upon the conceptual distinction he made between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ liberty in his 1958 Inaugural Lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford University – the script of which was published in essay form as ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ a year later and is arguably the single best known essay of political philosophy in last century.<sup>1</sup> To the general reading public, nevertheless, Berlin is known mainly as a historian of ideas with astonishing ability to enter into the minds of past thinkers and return with vivid accounts of their visions of the world. Indeed, his writings on the whole may be better classified as studies in the history of ideas rather than works of philosophy. And according to the anecdote Berlin himself was fond of circulating, he abandoned philosophy for history of ideas in 1944 after a conversation with the mathematical logician Harry Sheffer who convinced him that logic and psychology were to become the centre of philosophy – believing that he would not be able to make significant contributions to the discipline. At any rate, the vast majority of his writings have not evoked much comment from other professional philosophers who tend to take them to be Berlin’s peripheral activity of no significant implications on political philosophy. Perhaps more awkwardly, professional historians do not take them seriously either. Although Berlin is occasionally acknowledged by professional

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), .51.

historians for coining the phrase 'Counter-Enlightenment', an established category in historiography now, his name appears, if ever, more likely in the footnotes than in the text of their works.

As it seems, there is a discrepancy between Berlin the professional political philosopher and Berlin the historian of ideas. And in any case, his reputation in the field of political philosophy is still in the balance. At one extreme end, he is hailed as the most important liberal political thinker of the twentieth century. Yet at the other, he is dismissed as a historical surveyor of obscure thinkers in the past or even a mere conversationalist. No doubt this is enough to suggest that there may be an interesting biographical case to be made by reconciling the two very different representations of Berlin so as to reconstruct the true historical figure.<sup>2</sup> However, on a more profound level, a case may also be worth investigating concerning his defence of individual liberty and his studies in the history of ideas. The aim of this thesis is to explore the so far under-researched relations between these two activities that occupied much of Berlin's intellectual life, as well as their potential implications on political theorising and practice. What follows immediately is a section on Berlin's dichotomies and their ensuing debates, and central to it is the suggestion that the logical and analytic approach practised by the mainstream political philosophers is inimical to his style of thinking. Thereafter, there is a section that tries to make a case for re-reading Berlin by way of discussing the interpretations offered by John Gray and Claude J. Gallipeau, and it argues that to take Berlin's approach to politics seriously is to take his own historical consciousness seriously. The third and final section of this introductory chapter will therefore outline the method, argument, and structure of this thesis.

### **I.1. Berlin's Conceptual Dichotomies and Ensuing Debates**

As a thinker, Berlin has a penchant for making conceptual distinction, and his central ideas are presented in the form of dichotomy, such as monism and pluralism, negative

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Ignatieff's highly acclaimed biography *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988) has contributed to this already.

liberty and positive liberty, Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, hedgehogs and foxes – as well as, if Joan Cocks is right, bad nationalism and good nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these dichotomies have not received equal attention. Judged from today's literature in political philosophy, what Berlin's critics have taken most seriously is the conceptual distinction between negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty is defined by Berlin as the area one 'should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons', while positive liberty as consisting in 'being one's own master', that is to say, not as an instrument of another men's acts of will.<sup>4</sup> These two concepts are understood by Berlin to be *logically* distinct: for while the 'negative' sense of liberty is concerned with the question 'How far does government interfere with me?', the 'positive' one is with 'Who governs me?' or 'Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or to do?'.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the negative account of liberty for Berlin is more 'fundamental' than the positive one, for '[n]o doubt every interpretation of the word liberty, however unusual, must include a minimum of [...] "negative" liberty,' and his defence for negative liberty against the historically 'more dangerous' positive liberty is unequivocal.<sup>6</sup>

Since the essay's publication, political philosophers have argued vigorously over the desirability and validity of Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, as well as their relative merits as a form of political freedom. For instance, Gerald C. MacCallum contends that Berlin's binary analysis of liberty is not sound, for when one speaks of freedom what is actually referred to is not a dyadic relation – that is, 'freedom from' or 'freedom to' as implied in negative and positive accounts of liberty respectively – as he suggests; rather, it is a triadic relation in the form of '*X* is free from *Y* to do or be *Z*'.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, in disagreeing with Berlin's claim that

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.122, 131, 161.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald C. MacCallum, 'Negative and Positive Liberty' in Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 4<sup>th</sup> series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), pp.174-93.

negative liberty is the basic of all conceptions of liberty, Charles Taylor argues that a concept of liberty should be properly understood as an ‘exercise-concept and not solely an ‘opportunity-concept’ indicated by Berlin’s negative liberty. It follows that, as an exercise-concept, liberty must presuppose a measure of autonomy, for without which choosing between ends is inconceivable – for this reason the element, that is, autonomy, consigned by Berlin to positive liberty is actually basic to all conceptions of liberty.<sup>8</sup> More recently, from a very different angle, John Charvet has put forward an argument that negative liberty thus understood is a logically absurd idea. His reason is that since this kind of freedom is defined as ‘an opportunity present to an agent to do *x* or *y*’, that is, ‘[w]hether he does *x* or *y* is a matter for his determination,’ ‘[o]nce the opportunity is seized and the agent acts, he loses his freedom in the moment of exercising it;’ in other words, any actual decision thus made at any particular moment means the *end* of freedom already, and any action proceeding from that determination could not properly be described as ‘free’ – as a corollary, ‘on the negative understanding of freedom one can be said to be free only insofar as one *does not act*.’<sup>9</sup>

Whether these criticisms are valid or not is a matter to be discussed later. As things stand, Berlin’s dichotomy has been widely accepted and incorporated into today’s political discourse, and what is now hotly debated concerns chiefly the relative merits of negative and positive liberty. Meanwhile, partially as a reaction to Berlin’s ruthless attacks on positive liberty, a series of efforts have been made to challenge Berlin’s favoured negative liberty with a view to restoring positive liberty as a legitimate form of political freedom. Most notably, Quentin Skinner, the leading member of the ‘Cambridge School’ of intellectual history, has challenged Berlin’s favoured modern conception of negative liberty by reconstructing a form of civic-republicanism – basically a political design based on the idea of nondominance, or the

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty’ in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.175-93.

<sup>9</sup> See John Charvet, ‘Quentin Skinner on the Idea of Freedom’ in *Studies in Political Thought* 5. For a discussion on this argument, see Matthew H. Kramer *The Quality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.87-91.

‘third’ concept of liberty, derived from various writings in the neo-Roman tradition.<sup>10</sup> And Philip Pettit’s recent theory of freedom that attempts to fuse negative liberty and positive liberty may also be understood as a republican response to Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

However, what really inspires today’s political theorists seems to be the claim Berlin makes at the very end of ‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’ according to which:

the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.<sup>12</sup>

This is what is now generally referred to in the literature as ‘value-pluralism’, and the fact that Berlin so frequently repeats, recapitulates and at times reformulates it in his later writings and lectures has made it the *leitmotif* of his entire *oeuvre*. Thus, in his last major essay written in 1988, ‘The Pursuit of the Ideal’, Berlin states that:

There is a world of objective values. By this I mean those ends that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means. 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. [...] What is clear is that values can clash – that is why civilisations are incompatible. 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; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false.<sup>13</sup>

Judged from the literature, the current debate on Berlin’s value-pluralism centres on

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Quentin Skinner, ‘The Idea of Negative Liberty’ in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.169.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.11-12. My own emphasis.

three issues. The first is concerned with the truth-value of value pluralism, and central to it is whether values are 'incompatible' or 'incommensurable' as Berlin asserts. To be sure, the issue concerning 'incommensurability' is as old as the subject of philosophy itself and in principle can be discussed without reference to Berlin, as a number of philosophers have done so, but any concluding findings from the debate will bear on the truth-value of Berlin's thesis.<sup>14</sup> What underlies the debate today is the presumption that the thesis of the plurality of values can be proved to be false: (1) if values can be made or proved to be compatible or commensurable with a *summum bonum* or supreme value of which all other values are but its instantiations; (2) if they can be made or proved to entail each other.

In contemporary Western political philosophy, utilitarianism as a single-principle-based moral system still remains a formidable candidate for falsifying Berlin's value-pluralism, and in any case utilitarian philosophers since John Stuart Mill have made various attempts to reconcile utility with rights and liberty, often by redefining the concept of utility so as to accommodate individual rights and/or liberty.<sup>15</sup> Also, in a philosophically sophisticated manner, Ronald Dworkin has advanced an argument for the conceptual inseparability between liberty and equality: that is to say, a proper recognition of liberty necessarily entails a measure of equal concern for individuals as well as respect with liberalism – and therefore the two values most cherished by (his) liberalism are commensurable at least for the (egalitarian) liberal.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in Charles Taylor's eyes, this conceptual manoeuvre involves 'deplorable fudging which bad meta-ethical theories encourage,' and this verdict is in accordance with Berlin's remark that liberty is liberty and

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<sup>14</sup> Ruth Chang (ed.), *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). As early as in Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle have tried to solve the question concerning the unity of virtues. See, for example, Terence H. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Robert E. Goodin, *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also see John Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence* (London: Routledge, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

equality is equality, for things are what they are.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the complexity of Dworkin's argument cannot be dealt with here; suffice it to say that his question 'But why should we accept the pluralist's conceptions of values that would lead to a clash?' must be answered by the value-pluralist if they would like to prove their case.<sup>18</sup> To put it differently, if we can envisage a vision of the world where seemingly conflicting values are made to be compatible or even logically entailing each other, then why should we cling to the old vision of the world where values are in conflict? That is to say, although the value-pluralist may win a skirmish by default whenever their opponents fail to reconcile conflicting values, a definite battle can only be won by providing positive evidence for the 'plurality' of values, and they may find 'incommensurability' no less difficult to prove in the end.

The second major issue concerning value-pluralism is not with whether it is true but whether Berlin's pluralism *is* or *commits to* a form of relativism. Without doubt he is aware of this issue. Thus in his essay 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought', written with a view to answering such an accusation made by Arnaldo Monigliano, he again insists that 'pluralism – the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends – is not a form of relativism; nor, *a fortiori*, subjectivism, nor the allegedly unbridgeable differences of emotional attitude on which some modern positivists, emotivists, existentialists, nationalists and, indeed, relativistic sociologists and anthropologists found their accounts.'<sup>19</sup> The argument Berlin appeals to is based on the idea that, derived from Vico and Herder, that each culture or civilisation can be understood *from within*, and hence does not rule out the possibility of criticism. Nevertheless, Berlin's reassurance and arguments are unable to convince rationalists such as Steven Lukes, and the issue still has to be solved.<sup>20</sup> What is curious is that, first, what Berlin takes relativism to be and to mean seems to differ from that of Lukes: that is, while the former takes the point of relativism to be a

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Plurality of Goods' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers (eds) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books Press, 2001), pp.113-119.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Dworkin, 'Do Liberal Values Conflict?' in *Ibid.*, pp.73-90.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.87.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Lukes, 'Must Pluralists Be Relativists?' in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 March, 1998.



thesis that rules out the possibility of understanding and criticism, what the latter really worries about is whether a rational judgement can be made in a situation where two values or social practices come into conflict. Second, the literature on this issue does not deal with the question of ‘relative to what?’: that is to say, if value-pluralism is a form of relativism, to what are values relative then? As it seems, Lukes thinks that Berlin’s value-pluralism commits to the view that value judgements are relative to culture. But John Skorupski understands it to be the thesis that reasons for action are relative to situations.<sup>21</sup> No doubt this question is related to the application of Berlin’s value-pluralism, and that is an issue still understudied. For example, John Gray argues that Berlin’s thesis is applicable at three levels: (1) within any morality or system of code of conduct; (2) within conceptions of the good themselves; (3) between different cultures or traditions.<sup>22</sup> Yet, for George Crowder, if Berlin’s value-pluralism is to be distinguished from relativism, it should not be applicable at the cultural level.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, if one is to characterise Berlin’s value-pluralism as a form of relativism, he must specify to what values are relative and at which level – which requires an inquiry into the *reach* of Berlin’s value-pluralism.

As a matter of fact, the issue concerning the *reach* of Berlin’s value-pluralism has remained understudied, and resolving this issue will bear not only on the nature of Berlin’s value-pluralism but also on our understanding of its political implications. That is to say, the *meaning* of value-pluralism ultimately has to be determined via settling this issue. Of course, to find out the reach of Berlin’s value-pluralism one has to start from a clear grasp of what Berlin by the term ‘value’ means. Yet this is where another curiosity arises: what Berlin takes to be ‘value’ in his formulation of value-pluralism goes almost unnoticed by his critics. From the above two quotations, it is clear that Berlin by ‘value’ means those ends pursued by men for their own sakes. Note that by emphasising the agent’s own perspective and delegating the right to understand what counts as the ends of life to moral agents, Berlin’s conception of value as such runs against the traditional understanding of value in philosophy as

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<sup>21</sup> John Skorupski, *Ethical Explorations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Chapter 5.

<sup>22</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), pp.43-49.

<sup>23</sup> George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp.127-9.

conceptions of the good whose ontological basis – and hence axiological genesis – is metaphysical, if not mysterious. And it follows that issues concerning how for Berlin values come into conflict with each other, why such conflicts are inevitable and may be tragic, and in what sense they are objective must be understood and settled in the light of this conception of value.

With the truth-value and the reach of Berlin's value-pluralism undetermined, a number of commentators have managed to bracket out all the aforementioned related questions and set out on a journey of exploring the doctrine's political implications. This is the third and today's most hotly debated main issue concerning Berlin's value-pluralism, and central to it is the question as to what kind of 'political design' – to use Glen Newey's terminology – can be derived from that doctrine.<sup>24</sup> The question can be split into two sub-questions: (1) Does Berlin's value-pluralism support the liberalism with which we are now familiar in the contemporary political philosophy? (2) If not, then does it *constitute* or *provide* a foundation for a new form of liberalism? The fact that much attention is paid to the relation between value-pluralism and liberalism may be due to Berlin's own open support for liberalism, and a number of efforts have been made to construct a conceptual link between these two doctrines. Arguably the most notable attempt is John Gray's, which attributes an agonistic liberalism to Berlin. And his more recent *modus vivendi* liberalism can be seen as a further development of this line of thought.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, George Crowder has recently put forward a case for pluralist liberalism grounded on an interpretation of the doctrine of value-pluralism – which is a response to the criticisms made by Berlin and Bernard Williams in their co-authored reply to Crowder's earlier article that argues against the logical link between pluralism and liberalism.<sup>26</sup> William Galston has made attempts to connect the two doctrines at issue and even explored the

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<sup>24</sup> Glen Newey, *After Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)

<sup>25</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995); *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> George Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism' in *Political Studies* (1994), p.293-305; *Liberalism and Value pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002).

implications of value-pluralism on concrete public policies.<sup>27</sup> Also, Joseph Raz by way of an interpretation of the elusive notion ‘incommensurability’ has established a conceptual link between value-pluralism, not without his own modifications, and liberalism.<sup>28</sup> Farther away from political philosophy, Fred Dallmayr and Robert Jackson have in their different ways applied value-pluralism to pioneer a normative international relations theory.<sup>29</sup>

Now one should note that, firstly, despite the fact that Berlin himself has often emphasised that ‘pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts’, and ‘they are not *logically connected*’, for as a matter of fact ‘[t]here are liberal theories which are not pluralistic,’ mainstream political philosophers continues to take the *logical* approach to reconstruct the assumed missing link.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, almost all these efforts are made by theorists who are in one way or another *liberal*, and their attention and energy has been devoted to one and a half of Berlin’s famous dichotomies, namely, negative liberty, positive liberty and pluralism. And this concentration has left many aspects of Berlin’s writings undiscussed, not least the idea of ‘monism’ – the other half of the monism/pluralism pair. Indeed, apart from a chapter in Bhikhu Parekh’s *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, no serious attention has been paid to monism by today’s liberal thinkers.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Berlin does not say much about liberalism. However, in his 1949 essay ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, he does discuss the development of liberalism in Western Europe briefly. But there the liberal ideal is characterised by a belief in natural rights, absolute standards of truth and justice, empiricism and utilitarianism, and is – together with other ideologies such as Marxism, Communism and Fascism – grouped into the monist camp. Indeed, in the eyes of Berlin, ‘[n]o movement at first sight seems to differ more sharply from liberal reformism than does Marxism, yet the central doctrines – human perfectibility, the

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<sup>27</sup> William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996). Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Phoenix Press, 1993), p.44.

<sup>31</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), Chapter 1.

possibility of creating a harmonious society by a natural means, the belief in the compatibility (indeed the inseparability) of liberty and equality – are common to both.’<sup>32</sup> Taken together, if Berlin is consistent, then these two statements suggest that the kind of liberalism Berlin believes in is not a form of *reformism*, which is monistic in nature, and to establish the ‘missing link’ between liberalism and pluralism, we must seek the *non-logical* connections between them.

In fact, the importance of Berlin’s idea of monism is more than that. For one thing, given that his pluralism was meant to be an alternative to monism, it cannot be fully understood without taking into account what it was brought in to fight against. For another, a sufficient understanding of what counts as monism for Berlin could shed light on the kind of liberalism he believes in or envisages. Nevertheless, liberal commentators tend to assume a missing but (re-)constructible *logical* link between value-pluralism and liberalism, and the task of dealing with Berlin’s idea of monism is taken by those who bear the brunt of Berlin’s attacks – the utopian theorists who are a minority on today’s political philosopher’s community. Thus, according to Barbara Goodwin, the central debate on utopianism in the second half of the twentieth century is concerned with the relation between utopian thinking and totalitarian practice, and that is a legacy left by some of the major philosophers such as Berlin, Karl Popper, Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich Hayek who argue ‘that utopianism raised the spectre of totalitarianism: utopian thinking was symptomatic of a totalitarian mindset which was inimical to freedom,’ or, in other words, a ‘*sui generis* mode of thought inimical to liberal-democratic theory whatever its content.’<sup>33</sup> Hence, as Laurence Davis observes, ‘[to] believe the modern-day critic of utopian political thought is to believe that it is responsible for some of the worst horrors of the twentieth century among them the gulag and the concentration camp.’<sup>34</sup> Davis has taken on a group of thinkers including Berlin, Karl Popper and Leszek Kolakowski in his defence of utopian

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<sup>32</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’ in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.14.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from Laurence Davis, ‘Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia’ in Barbara Goodwin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p.57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.56-83.

theorising as a ‘vivid exercise of ethical imagination’, and in his eyes, ‘few have done as much as Berlin with such persistence and so wide an intellectual influence’ in promoting this view. Indeed, as observed by Davis, Berlin has throughout his life repeatedly exposed the monistic presuppositions in various past political thinkers, and never failed to sound the warning against the moral and political cost of monism – in his academic writings, in public lectures and during interviews, on themes ranging from the Enlightenment to the Romantic Movement, and from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution. To explain the rationale behind Berlin’s ‘immoderate [and] unqualified equation of utopianism and totalitarianism’, Davis singles out a passage from Berlin’s ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will’:

All the utopias known to us are based upon the discoverability and harmony of objectively true ends, true for all men, at all times and places. This holds of every ideal city, from Plato’s Republic and his Laws, and Zeno’s anarchist world community, and the City of the Sun of Iambulus, to the Utopias of Thomas More and Campanella, Bacon and Harrington and Fénelon. The communist societies of Mably and Morelly, the state capitalism of Saint-Simon, the Phalanstères of Fourier, the various combinations of anarchism and collectivism of Owen and Godwin, Cabet, William Morris and Chernyshevsky, Bellamy, Hertzka and others (there is no lack of them in the nineteenth century) rest on the three pillars of social optimism in the west of which I have spoken: that the central problems – the *massimi problemi* - of men are, in the end, the same throughout history; that they are in principle soluble; and that the solutions form a harmonious whole.<sup>35</sup>

From the last part of the quotation, we recognise that what is at issue here is the very enemy of Berlin’s value-pluralism, that is, *monism* – or in Davis’s preferred phrase ‘value-monism’. Indeed, to call ‘fighting against monism’ the *leitmotif* of Berlin’s intellectual life may not be an exaggeration. However, does Berlin really unqualifiedly ‘equate’ utopianism with totalitarianism? Davis seems to suggest that the logic behind Berlin’s unqualified equation of utopianism and totalitarianism is a syllogism goes like this: (1) monism leads to totalitarianism; (2) utopianism is a form of monism; (3) therefore, utopianism will lead to totalitarianism. And his own

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<sup>35</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.211.

rationale is that: if one can prove that utopianism is not necessarily a form of monism or that monistic thinking is not necessarily inherent in utopianism, then Berlin's accusation that utopianism would necessarily lead to totalitarianism is ill-grounded. Therefore, he sets out to prove this by the textual evidence he finds in the writings of a number of Utopian thinkers whose visions of society is not 'perfectionist' in nature or 'static' in character, and concludes that by 'sweeping generalisations about the necessarily relationship between utopianism and totalitarianism' Berlin himself actually engages in 'precisely the sort of ideological dogmatism [he] mistakenly ascribe[s] to the utopian.'<sup>36</sup>

Now, it should be noted that the essay in which the above quotation is found is apparently meant by Berlin to be an exposition of the monistic *mode of thinking* lying underneath a wide range of political movements in the modern age, and the point is to raise our awareness of the Romantic thinkers' contribution to our understanding of the world *via* their criticism of those who had 'the faith in universal, objective truth in matters of conduct, in the possibility of a perfect and harmonious society, wholly free from conflict or injustice or oppression – a goal for which no sacrifice can be too great if men are ever to create Condorcet's reign of truth, happiness and virtue.' Of course, the Utopians are among those being criticised, and so are many other political thinkers whose ideas are monistic in character. And one of the points in this essay is that these political ideals are those 'for which more human beings have, in our time, sacrificed themselves and others than, perhaps, for any other cause in human history.' To be sure, it is true that Berlin thinks that utopianism as a determined attempt to produce a perfect solution in human affairs commits to a form of monism. It is also true that Berlin thinks utopianism *has historically led to* and *is likely to lead to* suffering, disillusionment, and failure. However, 'has historically led' and 'likely to lead to' are very different in nature, for the former is a claim about the past, while the latter is a prediction about the future, and we should not conflate one with another.

In fact, when drawing our attention to the danger of positive liberty in his essay

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<sup>36</sup> Laurence Davis, 'Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia' in Barbara Goodwin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p.84.

‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’ Berlin also makes similar use of the historical argument. And according to that argument, the modern totalitarian regime justifies coercion by appealing to a notion of the self, and the trick is to postulate a metaphysical entity that can be said to be the coerced individual’s ‘real’ or ‘higher’ self – hence coercion of this kind is strictly speaking not a form of coercion but emancipation. The paradigm example for Berlin is Rousseau’s idea that one can be ‘forced to be free’ by the General Will: an individual when forced by the General Will, of which he himself is a part, to act in a certain way is actually acting in accordance of *his* own will and thus should be considered as free. In Berlin’s eyes, then what lies at the heart of such magical transformation or ‘sleight of hand’ is the very single idea that equates ‘what *X* would chose if he were something he is not, or at least not yet, with what *X* actually seeks and chooses’.<sup>37</sup> Note that this is also a paradigm case of positive liberty. For Berlin, however, this ‘can no doubt be perpetrated just as easily with the “negative” concept of freedom, but the “positive” conception of freedom as self-mastery [...] has, in fact, and *as a matter of history*, of doctrine and of practice, lent itself more easily to this splitting of personality in two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel.’<sup>38</sup> Again, what Berlin’s argument has established seems to be a *historical* rather than the *conceptual* relation between positive liberty and totalitarianism: that is to say, as a *contingent fact*, the positive concept of liberty is more likely than the negative concept of liberty to be combined with a holistic notion of the self (or will) into a justification for totalitarian coercion. Of course, that does not deny that Berlin thinks that positive liberty is a historically more dangerous concept of liberty. Nevertheless, that does suggest that such combination is a contingent matter – hence there is an irreducible historical dimension in Berlin’s case against positive liberty.

Indeed, in the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, where ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ is included together with three other essays, Berlin clearly states these four essays are meant to deal with the ‘vicissitudes’ of the idea of individual liberty and

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<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.133.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.134.

‘the meaning it is *given* in the writings of historians, social scientists, and writers who examine the presuppositions and methods of history or sociology.’<sup>39</sup> And that means it should not be read as a work of purely conceptual analysis or linguistic analysis of ordinary political discourse – the prevailing philosophical approach at Oxford during the period of Berlin’s writing. Yet mainstream Anglo-American political theorists and philosophers continue to adopt the *logical* or *analytic* approach to this article – as well as all other writings of Berlin. Indeed, the fact that they would try to single out one component in his entire *oeuvre* to scrutinise its conceptual content and explore its logical relations with other ideas – found either in Berlin or elsewhere – reflects just this logical-analytic approach. And that is why the other three essays, as Berlin himself observes, have evoked little comment. However, this way of reading Berlin can be costly in two related ways. The first is *exegetical*, for the neglect of the historical dimension in Berlin’s writing may result in losing or distorting the overall picture of his political thought in the light of which each of his ideas should be understood and attributing concepts or theories inimical to his own style of reasoning – hence historical injustice to Berlin as a thinker in his own right. The second concerns *methodology*, in that the fact that a historical dimension is always present in Berlin’s writings not only means that a methodology different from conceptual analysis is at work and hence demands an approach not logical-analytic in nature from the reader, but also indicates that there may be a methodological innovation, that is, a style of political reasoning through historical thinking, worth reconstructing from reading his writings.

## **I.2. Taking Berlin’s Historical Approach Seriously**

Note that the point of the previous section concerns the *nature* of the approach to Berlin’s political thought, rather than whether a synthetic approach to his writings is better than the analytic one practised by both the mainstream and minority

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<sup>39</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.ix.



commentators. For if a grand synthesis of Berlin's various political ideas is achieved by a purely logical-conceptual approach, the logically tight and neat system of thought would still be different from Berlin's own vision – although it may be a valuable contribution in its own right to the field of political philosophy. John Gray's 1995 monograph *Berlin*, which attributes an agonistic liberalism to Berlin may be best understood as an interpretation of this type.<sup>40</sup> And it still remains the most influential conjectural reconstruction of Berlin's political thought which is holistic-synthetic in its approach to the text yet logical-analytic in its nature of argument. Thus, despite his protests against the liberal project of Rawls and its ensuing industry, the fact that Berlin's value-pluralism was assumed by Gray to ground a new form of political liberalism indicates that he still shares the rationalist 'foundation' approach derived from the Enlightenment – their difference lies in that while the mainstream Anglo-American philosophers would like to bridge the missing logical link between the new doctrine of value-pluralism and their old liberalism, Gray aimed to construct a new liberalism based on Berlin's 'subversive' doctrine. Of course, that is not meant to downplay the difference between Gray's value-pluralist foundation approach and a *bona fide* monist foundation approach to political design. Nevertheless, seen from this point of view, although Gray's interpretation which leaves few of Berlin's well-known ideas and dichotomies unaccounted, he may be regarded as still working within the mainstream analytical philosophical tradition. Even a political theory as unconventional as Gray's must be intelligible in the mainstream philosophical discourse if its significance is to be recognised in by those working in the field.

No doubt, Berlin is very aware of the last point, and for him that is why methodology is important for political theory. For as early as in the first section of his essay 'Political Ideas in Twentieth Century', written in 1949 at the request of the editor of the American journal *Foreign Affairs* for its mid-century issue, Berlin argues that '[t]he *historical* approach to political ideas is inescapable'.<sup>41</sup> For him, the history of human thought is to a large degree the history of the *models* in terms of which a

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<sup>40</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.4.

field of inquiry's scope is decided, questions asked, types of technique used, and what counts evidence and eventually 'facts' determined. These models are reflected in the entire social and political outlook of an age – including 'the methods of treating the past (or the present or the future) and of idioms and catchwords, the doubts and hopes, fears and exhortations which they expressed', to study political ideas requires a prior understanding of the components of these 'ideological superstructures' in terms of which only they really make sense. In the case of political thought, it is in terms of such models that 'the development of political ideas and the conceptual apparatus of a society and of its most gifted and articulate representatives can be [understood and hence] judged.'<sup>42</sup> And what is required in practice is to study political ideas in their own contexts and to read a political thinker in his own terms. Indeed, as noted by Berlin, political vocabulary such 'freedom' or 'democracy' are 'symbols' that can be 'used – "robbed of their original value" – to cover the different and sometimes diametrically opposed notions of the new morality, in terms of the old system of values, seemed both unscrupulous and brutal.'<sup>43</sup> The reader should not take it for granted that a term would be used by different thinkers with its meanings unchanged – hence the inescapability of historical approach.

At this point, one may understand Berlin's remark to mean that the job of the historian of ideas is to record the past models or intellectual paradigms, and may take Berlin's methodological prescription to be merely a call for taking seriously the contextual particularities in which political ideas or a political thinker's ideas are embedded. And precisely that is the approach adopted by Calude J Gallipeau, who is the commentator who takes most seriously Berlin's 'historical' aspect of political thought, and his *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism*, which is the only monograph on Berlin to date that has made an attempt to explore the relations between his methodology and his defence of political liberalism.<sup>44</sup> Like Gray, Gallipeau takes a holistic-synthetic approach to Berlin's entire writings, and according to him everywhere in the political argument of Berlin can be found a historical dimension, and each element of Berlin's

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<sup>42</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp.26-27.

<sup>44</sup> Claude J. Gallipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

political argument has to be understood accordingly. And if Gallipeau is not mistaken, Berlin's commitment to the studies in philosophy, political theory and history of ideas, could be understood as follows. Given that the purpose of philosophy is to clarify and review the validity of moral ideals, and political theory is concerned with the application of morals to society, the study of the history of ideas – whose goal is to achieve self-understanding, that is, what Berlin calls 'man's highest requirement' – can just reveal the models of human nature and society inherent in those moral ideals for political philosophers to examine and question their worth as well as their validity. Taken altogether, that means Berlin was engaged in a coherent project operating at the *conceptual* (philosophical), *empirical* (historical) and *normative* (moral and political) levels at once, 'driven by the twin goals of enlightenment and liberty' – the goal of enlightenment being the attainment of a 'progress' in the objective knowledge of what men are.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the *relation* established as such only suggests that Berlin's historical studies and his defence of political liberalism should be understood as two aspects of a single project, but this will not automatically explain why such a 'panoply of models of human nature and society' would necessarily lead one to a form of self-understanding that directs him, or anyone, away from adopting, say, the utopian mode of thinking which is diagnosed by Berlin as one of the chief enemies of liberty.

Gallipeau thus suggests that: '[t]he historical element is an essential characteristic of [Berlin's] defence of political liberalism,' for 'it is the *explanatory* and *contextual* side of the defence' – it is 'explanatory' because the model of human nature and society, upon which Berlin's defence is founded, fits our knowledge of experience, and it is 'contextual' because political liberalism fits our modern social and cultural conditions.<sup>46</sup> And if his analysis is right, Berlin's model of human nature and society comprises the following presuppositions: (1) we are social and cultural beings, language users, reflective and rational, endowed with inner lives; (2) as moral beings, we have free will; (3) we are purposive, expressive and self-transforming beings; (4) today's moral condition is complex and pluralistic; (5) we live and develop

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<sup>45</sup> Claude J. Gallipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.44.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46. My own emphasis.

in specific sociological and historical circumstances; (6) we have a need to belong to particular communities. And his whole argument may boil down to this: the history of Western culture shows the prudence and adequacy of liberal constitutional principles, and Berlin's value-pluralism should be understood as the only model of man and society that truly reflects the multicultural conditions in the West today and for this reason the only viable basis of political reasoning. However, as a matter of fact, Gallipeau's explanation leaves many questions unanswered, if not unasked. Indeed, the relations between the conceptual, the empirical and the normative levels of Berlin's thought remain unclear; and above all, the issue concerning why *empirical* studies of the past would have a *normative* bearing on the future is not addressed at all. That is to say, if the past is not a closed causal network and future is really an 'open texture', why past failures would *bear on* future attempts? What is more, the interplay between the various models of human nature and the actual political movements that took place in history is also unaccounted. In particular, given that the monist model of human nature can serve as the foundation for so many different political movements that have taken place in history, why Berlin's pluralist model of men and society would lend *exclusive* support to liberalism rather than, say, conservatism or anarchism? In the end, what does Berlin's methodology really consist of, and how it is related to his favoured idea of compromise or trade-offs when value conflicts occur all remain unclear in Gallipeau's study.

In a perceptive article 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought', Paul Kelly classifies the approaches to studying the history of political thought dominant in Britain into three types: (1) the 'political theory' approach as found in the writings of a number of Oxford scholars, including Berlin and John Plamenatz; (2) the 'historicist' approach exemplified by Michael Oakeshott; (3) the 'linguistic contextualism' approach developed by a group of historians now in general collectively referred to as the Cambridge School, whose leading members are Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock and John Dunn.<sup>47</sup> According to Kelly, what the 'political

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<sup>47</sup> P. J. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought' in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.) *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (The British Academy, 1999), pp.37-62.

theory' approach aims at is to derive a coherent theory out of a body of texts. Whereas Oakeshott's 'historicism' approach intends to arrive at a hermeneutic understanding of one's own tradition, and the Cambridge School to recover what is meant by the author by putting his thought into its original context. On this account, John Gray, as observed by Kelly, is a practitioner of the Oxford 'political theory' approach. As for Gallipeau, he seems to share the same method with Gray, albeit the outcome derived from his interpretation suggests that Berlin also shares with Oakeshott in trying to understand one's own contingent historical conditions. And if that is the case, then it also appears that there is a discrepancy between the methodology pioneered by Berlin himself and that he actually practises – or probably that the line drawn by Kelly is not as clear as it seems. What is more, judged from Berlin's reason for the inescapability of historical approach – there certainly is an overlapping consensus between Berlin and the Cambridge School. This issue of course must be settled in a detailed inquiry into Berlin's methodology. Nevertheless, the following remark of Kelly's seems to catch some of the most fundamental element in Berlin's political thought: 'it is undoubtedly true that Berlin has used his *reflections* on the history of political thought to delineate the outline of a plausible political theory that can respond to the modern condition of pluralism about ultimate and incommensurable ends.'<sup>48</sup> Perhaps what is missing in Gallipeau's interpretation is the idea of 'reflection' and how it functions in Berlin's political thought.

To be sure, Kelly does not elucidate how one could use his reflections for the purpose of political reasoning. But the following remark of Berlin's provides the first step:

An eminent philosopher once remarked 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 to the logic of his arguments. For the arguments, however cogent and intellectually impressive, are, as a rule, only the outworks – the defensive weapons

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<sup>48</sup> P. J. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought' in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.) *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (The British Academy, 1999), p.51. My own emphasis.

against real and possible objections on the part of actual and potential critics and opponents.<sup>49</sup>

This is the gist of Berlin's well-known 'empathetic' approach to the study of past political thinkers, and may provide the first step. And what 'vision' refers to can be found in a passage in Berlin's another essay 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?:

'If we examine the models, paradigms, conceptual structures that govern various *outlooks*, whether consciously or not, and compare the various concepts and categories involved with respect, for example, to their internal consistency or their explanatory force, then what we are engaged upon is not psychology or sociology or logic or epistemology, but *moral or social or political theory*, or all these at once, depending on whether we confine ourselves to individuals, or to groups, or to the particular types of human arrangements that are classified as political, or deal with them all in one.'<sup>50</sup>

Taken together, these two passages seems to confirm Kelly's characterisation of Berlin's historical method as a 'political theory' approach, for what the historian of ideas must do is to grasp is the past thinker's vision which is actually his 'moral or social or political theory.' Also suggested by them is that these visions, that is, 'models, paradigms, conceptual structures' are what *govern* the outlooks of people, rather than just sets of abstract principles or ideas. What is more, if Berlin's own model of men and society is also a 'vision' in this sense, value-pluralism certainly is not just a *static* model as Gallipeau suggests. Strictly speaking, he is not wrong in thinking that Berlin's studies in the history of ideas results in a 'panoply of models of human nature and society'. But he does not grasp the implications of this 'panoply' on normative political reasoning. For what the 'panoply' amounts to in the historian's mind is a form of *knowledge* – more precisely a third-person view of the historical conditions of other people as well as oneself – and this form of knowledge no doubt would have effect on our thinking about our relations with those with other visions.

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<sup>49</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p.161. My own emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.84-85.

This *dynamic* interpretation is in accordance with the utopian theorists' understanding of Berlin's 'value-monism' as a 'mindset' or a '*sui generis* mode of thought'. If this reading is valid, then value-pluralism is a form of knowledge, a self-understanding, and a mode of self-reflection. And to take Berlin's historical approach seriously thus is to take *historical consciousness* seriously, and it follows that an inquiry into what he takes to be a sense of history and what *his own* historical consciousness amounts to is necessary for a proper understanding of value-pluralism.

### **I.3. Method, Argument and Structure**

This thesis is a re-interpretation of Berlin's political thought, and the underlying presupposition is that there is a close relation between Berlin's defence of individual liberty and his studies in the history of ideas. It adheres to the empathetic method Berlin prescribes for historians and political theorists by reading him strictly in his own terms, with a view to elucidating his vision of the world. On the whole, it follows the holistic-synthetic approach to his entire *oeuvre* as exemplified by Gray's and Gallipeau's interpretations, but it will minimise the conjectural elements and go beyond the static understanding of Berlin's value-pluralism; when appropriate, it will also involve conceptual analysis and logical reasoning. And the main argument of this thesis is that Berlin does not go to history for its own sake, but rather in order to enlarge his reader's *vision* of human possibility – which entails a recognition of the equal moral standing of those who hold values different from his own and hence their entitlement to their chosen forms of life. And central to it is the idea that value-pluralism is Berlin's own vision, a form of knowledge he believes to be objective and accessible by reading history, and hence a historical consciousness he hopes to impart his readers through writing.

The task of Chapter 2 thus is to reconstruct Berlin's overall methodology which is essentially a mixture of the idea of *Verstehen*, a form of realism, and an expressivist conception of man and society. Note that Berlin is a consistent thinker who practises what he prescribes, and therefore his methodological prescription itself serves as a

point of access to his overall methodology. For this reason, to reconstruct Berlin's methodology requires an investigation into the precise nature and scope of application of his empathetic approach which is largely derived from Giambattista Vico's idea of *fantasia* (imaginative recollection) and Johann Gottfried Herder's *Einfühlung* (feeling into). For the purpose of clarification, Berlin's notion of empathy will be compared to R. G. Collingwood's idea of re-enactment. And it will be argued, firstly, that empathy for Berlin is a critical use of imagination rather than an attempt to return to the state of mind of any past thinker and that, secondly, Berlin's Vichian approach is meant to be a methodological strategy to help us transcend cultural difference without committing to any form of Transcendental Idealism. That means, although Berlin's interpretation of Vico and Herder may appear to be within the idealist tradition – inaugurated by Benedetto Croce – which assumes the *homoiouisis* (homology) between object and knower, he has secularised their ideas and transformed the notion of empathy into a notion of analogous understanding between any two moral agents who share the same capacity to understand visions of the world different from their own. In the process of this exposition, it will also be revealed that Berlin's secularism – which has led him to reject the overall Judaeo-Christian framework of Vico's and Herder's historiographies and to transform it into a humanist historiography that abolishes the hierarchical in the landscape of human cultures – in fact is derived from Aleksandr Herzen's acute sense of reality that sees no *libretto* in history. The third section thus focuses on this realism, and it concludes this chapter by arguing that Berlin's methodology in fact is meant to reassert human agency and abolish the purpose of history.

In the light of this reconstructed methodology, Chapter 3 offers an interpretation of Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism, which is the *leitmotif* of his entire *oeuvre*, as an account of the human condition. It begins with an account of what Berlin means by the word 'value' in his formulation of value-pluralism. By way of tracing back to the expressivism and other presuppositions in his empathetic approach, this section will argue that Berlin holds a *projectivist* conception of value which is agent-relative and voluntarist in nature: that means, a value is what men pursue for its own sake – hence ultimate and absolute. And this will be understood as an integral part of his Herzenian sense of reality. Note that, in abandoning the traditional metaphysical unity of the true



and the good, this projectivist conception of value thus amounts to a redirect the perennial philosophical journey of searching for the good at the purely abstract and conceptual level back to men's actual experiences in living as free and creative moral agents. Also implied by this redirection is a transformation of our understanding of how values can be objective and how they may come into conflict with each other, including the level, the way, and the nature of such conflict. Based on this agent-relative notion of value, the second section will try to deal with the elusive concept of incommensurability by way of linking Berlin's idea of vision of the world as 'models, paradigms, and conceptual structures' to Thomas Kuhn's idea of 'paradigm' which is in accordance with Berlin's Herderian *holistic expressivism*. This will not only clarify how far value conflict for Berlin can reach and to what levels his doctrine of value-pluralism applies, but also shed light on his insistence on the objectivity of values – that is, the *inter-subjectivity* of values whose objectivity is guaranteed by men's shared understanding at the level of culture and ultimately at the level of what Berlin takes to be the common human horizon. What is more, it will be clear that Berlin's Herderian holism in fact serves as a constraints on his Herzenian projectivist conception of value, and the way they are related in fact marks how Berlin moves from empiricism to *quasi-empiricism* which is a historical consciousness with an acute sensitivity to actual human experiences. This finding paves the way for understanding Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism as the 'positive' knowledge he had in mind when deciding to leave philosophy for history of ideas – which is the theme to be discussed in the third section of this chapter. And it is hoped that by the end of this chapter, it will be clear that value-pluralism in fact is Berlin's own 'enlarged mentality' and his life-long engagement with writing intellectual history an enterprise to enlarge his reader's mentality, that is, to become a Berlinian liberal who would try to realise the relative validity of his own convictions.

Chapter 4 is meant to be an account of how exactly monism and pluralism are in conflict as two styles of reasoning. And central to this chapter is the idea that these two styles of reasoning in fact operates primarily at two different levels and hence the conflict between them should not be regarded as *numerical* with regard to the number of 'values'. It begins with a section on Berlin's reading on Marx and Marxism. Marx

is understood by Berlin as a *vision* thinker rather than an *argument* thinker, for his logical reasoning and analysis are but weapons to defend his historical materialism at the core of which is a notion of history governed by inevitable laws. And the aim of this section is to show how Berlin is related to Marx as a thinker, that is, they share many concerns (history, reality, plurality of worldviews, humanism etc.) yet in each area of concern Berlin differs from Marx considerably – hence where the real battlegrounds are in the conflict between monism and pluralism. In particular, it will be noted that both Berlin and Marx attempt to fight against illusions, that is, false consciousness, by showing the people which is the right vision of the world. Based on this, the second section argues that the meaning of monism is *the closure of political reasoning* based on an *infallibilistic* belief. That is to say, monism in the eyes of Berlin is not merely a set of premises, derived from his *analytic* insight into various *de facto* monistic worldviews in history, but a style of thinking composed by premises, a sense of reality, and a prospective vision of the world – with the *closure of reasoning* as its aspiration and pretension. With this understanding in place, the final section contrasts pluralism with monism as two styles of reasoning, and it concludes that pluralism differs from monism in a way more like that of atheism and monotheism, rather than monotheism and polytheism, for they are actually operate at two different levels of thought. Also implied by this conclusion is that, first, a definite proof of either's truth or falsity requires a common platform which is yet to emerge and the corollary of this is that, second, there is a radical choice between Berlin's *humanistic realism* and the monist's *metaphysical imagination*.

It follows that arguments for value-pluralism are but weapons to defend the vision only, and Chapter 5 sees how far Berlin can corroborate his pluralism by investigating its potential political implications – especially his arguments concerning why value-pluralism is a *truer* and more *humane* vision. The first section on value-pluralism and its alleged affinities with liberal values is based on an extensive discussion on George Crowder's criticism and Berlin's reply co-authored with Bernard Williams. And central to this section is the finding that for Berlin although value-pluralism are not 'logically connected' solely with liberal values, there is no *a priori* reason why a pluralist cannot be a liberal – given the open textural of political

options. At any rate, a choice requires a context for decision-making anyway, and that context can be an 'enlarged mentality' liberal in nature. The second section examines John Gray's reading of Berlin in detail, which reveals that the agonistic liberalism he attributes to Berlin turns on the very idea that liberalism can be regarded as a particular 'form of life' – that is to say, by the internal logic of value-pluralism that if no choice is better than others, why should liberalism be chosen? This naturally leads to a *Conservativist* position with regard to cultures, but it will be argued that this notion of liberalism runs against Berlin's own vision. Following this is an examination of Crowder's re-interpretation of Berlin which understands value-pluralism as a doctrine that can foster personal autonomy – that is, given that value-pluralism means radical choice, and a choice made that way must entail a self-understanding and upholding what one really believes and hence each decision-making is an exercise of rationality as well as autonomy. This reading then places Berlin's value-pluralism in the tradition of the Enlightenment liberalism rather than the Reformation liberalism (a distinction made by William Galston). However, it will be argued, this vision is not what Berlin really thinks and Crowder yet again misunderstands what Berlin means by value-pluralism. Following this, there is a section on what Berlin himself takes to be the political implications of the value-pluralism: the *politics of compromise*. This is discussed by way of an investigation into Berlin's favoured Zionism, which is understood as a concrete case of political compromise – between liberalism and nationalism, between personal liberty and cultural integrity. It will be argued that his Zionism is a case of 'civilised Herderian nationalism' based on cultural identity rather than ethnic identity, and that Berlin's Herzenian sense of reality that takes human life to be sacred has to be a critical moral standard (as Michael Walzer has suggested) by which all nationalisms must be evaluated. This reading then understands Berlin's liberalism as a vision of the world where each culture can flourish and each individual is entitled to exit and enter – as his favoured version of Zionism has demonstrated. This chapter ends with a conclusion on how Berlin's politics of compromise is consistent with and supported by Berlin's own empathetic approach, historical consciousness, and his Herderian holistic expressivism as well as Herzenian projectivist conception of human values. If

correct, then Berlin's value-pluralism actually contains a liberal vision of the world.

Chapter 6, the final chapter of this thesis, evaluates Berlin's contribution to political thinking. The first section is to rethink his use of historical approach. By way of replying the criticism that for Berlin's value-pluralism to be true, and liberalism to be defended, there must be a law-like conception of history: that is, as a law, all monism is an illusion and will lead to human suffering. It will argue that this is not what Berlin's concept of history means, which takes *causal* or *historical* to be essentially not law-like, and in fact Berlin's use of the historical is more subtle than these critics think. Rather, the real difficulty in his use of the historical is akin to the problems faced by Mill's distinction between the higher and the lower pleasures. Note that his liberalism means that he favours individual choice and experiments in living, and hence will not attempt to impose a particular vision of the world on people – thus the only option is to keep repeating what has been said before, i.e. the fact that values are plural. In a way, his writings on the history of ideas are meant to foster people's appreciation of this fact, yet this form of knowledge is bound to be *untransferable* and *intransitive* between people. Of course, its possibility turns on what he believes to be the human capacity to empathise, and this is the theme to be examined by the second section. Thus, by way of a discussion on the sadist whose pleasure is actually derived from his empathetic understanding of his victim's suffering, the second section tries to show that there is no *a priori* empathy that necessarily leads to an enlarged mentality, and for this reason the truth of value-pluralism could only be recognised by those who share Berlin's moral concern and are prepared to implement his empathetic approach in the way he prescribes. Indeed, unless a reader agrees to the presuppositions in Berlin's methodology, namely, the extended Kantian moral principle which demands we respect persons and their forms of life and treat other people as our own equals, he cannot become a Berlinian liberal. As it seems, this possibility alone would leave his doctrine of value-pluralism a status like Mill's own empirically tested higher pleasure. Nevertheless, that would not be able to falsify Berlin's doctrine. Rather, that means the conflict between monism and pluralism as two styles of reasoning will continue.

## CHAPTER II.

### A Reconstruction of Berlin's Methodology

This chapter goes beyond Berlin's historical approach and reconstructs the overall methodology which actually operates in his political reasoning. It begins with a section on Berlin's prescribed empathetic method derived from Vico's idea of *fantasia* (imaginative recollection) and Herder's *Einfühlung* (feeling into), and special attention is paid to how Berlin has marshalled these two kindred ideas into a distinctive historical approach of his own – grounded on a version of *Verstehen*, that is, a critical use of imagination. The second section then focuses on to what extent it may be understood as an *idealist* epistemic approach, and central to this section is the idea that empathetic understanding approach is meant to be a methodological strategy to transcend cultures and overcome differences but that by no means endorses a form of Transcendentalism. Rather, what it is really grounded on is an acute sensitivity to reality as actually experienced by men. Finally, by way of tracing Berlin's acute sense of reality to Aleksandr Herzen's radically realistic and humanistic empiricism, the third section will show that Berlin's reformulation of Vico's and Herder's notion of empathy, that is, his transformation of their Judaeo-Christian historiographies into an essentially secular version of hermeneutic historicism, is driven by this Herzenian realism which sees no *libretto* in history and takes human life as the only thing sacred. Hopefully, by the end this chapter it will be clear that Berlin's value-pluralism is in fact an extrapolation of Berlin's sense of reality.

#### II.1. Empathetic Understanding as a Critical Use of Imagination

As noted in the introductory chapter, Berlin had as early as in his 1950 article, 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,' emphasised the importance of 'historical sense' and argued for the inescapability of the *historical* approach to the student of

political ideas.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the article begins with two observations. Firstly, what constitutes ‘evidence’ and therefore what counts as the ‘facts’ in the study of history reflect the model or *paradigm* – that is, the entire ‘conceptual apparatus’ – in terms of which the past is perceived.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, ‘[t]he history of the changes of all these “models” is to a large degree the history of human thought.’<sup>4</sup> And it follows that, secondly, if distortion of the meaning of a term or a text is to be avoided, a careful contextual – both textual and historical – reading of the term is required. By the same token, the study of political ideas requires a grasp of the paradigm in terms of which they were meant to be expressing, and it is in terms of these paradigms the development of political ideas can best be judged. Indeed, one of the article’s aims is to draw the reader’s attention to the difference between *ideas* and *terminology*. As noted by Berlin, given the fact that political vocabulary, say, ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’ can be used ‘robbed of their original value’ in different contexts, or even ‘to cover the different and sometimes diametrically opposed notions,’ to understand what an idea really means requires more than knowing the semantic content of the term – which is but a ‘symbol’, as Berlin calls it - that refers to it.<sup>5</sup> That is why Berlin stresses that ‘[t]he historical approach is inescapable’ for the students of the political ideas – which is in effect a second-order historical enquiry or, in other words, a reflection upon the nature of history as an intellectual activity.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, one may wonder to what extent this historical approach is different from that of the Cambridge School now dominant in the field of intellectual history, especially the history of political thought. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Cambridge School approach is characterised by Paul Kelly as a form of ‘linguistic contextualism’, and central to this methodological position – in particular, that of Quentin Skinner, the

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.1–40.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.4. Berlin sometimes uses the term ‘paradigm’ to denote this kind of model. For instance, he uses this term to mean ‘the entire conceptual apparatus’ or ‘the very language in which we formulate empirical experience’ in his essay ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’ in Laslett, Peter and W.G. Runciman (eds.) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.4.

leading member of this school – is that ‘[t]he meaning of an author’s utterance is not best understood in terms of what the propositional content of his argument is, but rather in terms of what the author was *doing* in using language in a certain way.’<sup>7</sup> The remark Berlin makes in last paragraph seems to agree with Skinner’s method which stresses on the importance of the knowledge of linguistic context in the activity of understanding past political ideas. However, underneath this seemingly consensus lies a profound disagreement. Indeed, when interviewed by Steven Lukes, Berlin insists that what he takes the ‘history of ideas’ to be is not the same as that of the Cambridge School and in particular Quentin Skinner.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Berlin considers what Skinner does to be valuable and agrees with his idea that a historian can only truly understand past ideas when he understands ‘the political circumstances in which they are produced, whom they were directed against, whom they were in favour of, what was a consequence of what political and social development.’<sup>9</sup> However, Berlin argues that:

*the essence of the ideas* themselves does not emerge from Quentin Skinner’s historical accounts. If he were right we would not be able to understand Plato or Aristotle. [...] We don’t know what kind of society Aristotle lived in when he taught Alexander the Great, what daily life in it was like. We don’t know what his morals were: the historians, dramatists, orators, don’t provide evidence enough. Yet the ideas themselves have lasted. They have moved and excited people for more than two thousand years. If Skinner’s requirements are not met, how can this be? It can’t be that the understanding of ideas depends solely upon an adequate understanding of *context*. Knowledge of the context of course helps, the more the merrier. [...] But what I grasp about Machiavelli, even if it is incomplete, seems to me to be more important than whether Machiavelli did or did not write a ‘Mirror for Princes’ which resembled other mirrors or did not.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Kelly, ‘Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought’ in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.) *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.57.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Lukes, ‘Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes’ in *Salmagundi* No. 120 (Fall, 1988), p.94.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., my own emphasis.

Apparently, Berlin takes the dispute between himself and Skinner to concern what counts as proper understanding of a past thinker and how it is to be achieved. And this may immediately cast doubt on Paul Kelly's remark that Berlin's approach does not pay much 'overt attention to the *method* of historical enquiry.'<sup>11</sup> In any case, judged from his reply to Lukes, Berlin's disagreement with Cambridge School lies in the fact that he does not consider knowledge of the linguistic context, as well as that of the socio-political, to be *sufficient* for a proper understanding of a past thinker.

In order to further appreciate the difference between Berlin's historical approach and that of the Cambridge School, it is necessary to see how Berlin's methodological prescription for the historian is formulated. Note that, as mentioned earlier, Berlin is well known for his claim that the task of the historian is to grasp the past thinker's *vision* of the world by way of 're-enact[ing] within themselves the states of mind of men tormented by questions to which [their] theories claim to be solutions.'<sup>12</sup> This historical method is known as the empathetic understanding approach to the past, and in the eyes of Berlin it is the only proper method to study mankind. One may have noticed already that the word 're-enact' Berlin uses to describe his method sounds Collingwoodian; after all it is a term of art in Collingwood's philosophy. And indeed, this is how Collingwood explains his claim that the task of the historian is to 'think himself into an action, to discern the thought of its agent':

Suppose an historian is reading the Theodosian Code and has before him a certain edict of an emperor. Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to knowing their historical significance. In order to do that he must envisage it as the emperor envisaged it. Then he must see for himself, just as if the emperor's situation were his own, how such a situation might be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather than another; and thus he must go through the *process* which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course. Thus he is *re-enacting* in his own mind the experience of the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought' in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.) *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.51.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.170. My own emphasis.



emperor; and only in so far as he does this has he any historical knowledge, as distinct from a mere philological knowledge, of the meaning of the edict.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, Berlin's own notion of 'empathy' is derived from Vico's idea of *fantasia* (imaginative recollection) and Herder's idea of *Einfühlung* (feel into). Yet in Michael Ignatieff's highly acclaimed biography of Berlin, it is indicated that the influence of Collingwood – who once 'stood alone among Oxford philosophers in his insistently historical approach to philosophical problems' – on Berlin is significant, for the latter's interest on Vico might have been kindled by the lectures on philosophy of history given by Collingwood.<sup>14</sup> In any case, Collingwood is the foremost advocate for the idea of re-enactment in the Anglo-American philosophy, and the fact that he is the major interpreter of Vico writing in English means that Berlin cannot be unaware of his reading of Vico which is in turn profoundly influenced by the Italian idealist Benedetto Croce who towards the end of the nineteenth century rediscovered Vico as the first thinker to have grasped the 'total immanence of mind in nature.'<sup>15</sup>

As things stand, scholarly discussion of Collingwood's theory of re-enactment has taken place in aesthetics, historiography and philosophy of social science. And by contrast, Berlin's name has seldom been mentioned – if mentioned at all, it is more likely than not to be found in the footnotes rather than in the text. This is probably due to the fact that, despite his constant plea for empathetic approach to history of ideas, Berlin himself does not offer a detailed theoretical account of this method – which may be what Paul Kelly's aforementioned remark really means. What is more, the availability of other sophisticated formulations of empathy – for example, Wilhelm Dilthey's ideas of *Nachfühlen* (re-feel) and *Nacherleben* (re-experience), Max Weber's notions of *Verstehen* (really understand), and more recently what is now known as 'simulation theory' in philosophy of mind – almost guarantees the

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<sup>13</sup> R.G.Collingwood, *The idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961 [1946]), p.283. My emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), p.58.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Sandra Rudnick Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the New Science between Modern and Postmodernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.38.

continuation of the neglect of Berlin's methodology in its own right and hence its significance in his overall political thought.<sup>16</sup> Of course, this thesis should refrain from discussing these theories of empathy and concentrate on how Berlin's own Vichian empathetic approach may be understood. Yet, as indicated by Ignatieff's biographical note mentioned earlier, one may wonder to what extent Berlin's himself has followed the idealist tradition in his interpretation of Vico. Or, more importantly, given that Berlin's own methodology is formulated through his reconstruction of Vico's *fantasia* and Herder's *Einfühlung*, one must ask whether his own historical methodology commits to a form of idealism. This is precisely an issue raised in Sandra Rudnick Luft's recent major study on Vico's philosophy. And if she is correct, Berlin's interpretation of Vico is right within the idealist tradition of reading that assumes the *homoiousis* or homology between object and knower. We leave Luft's criticism to the next section of this chapter, what the rest of this section aims at is to reconstruct Berlin's empathetic approach to understanding the past as a critical use of imagination, whose aim is to arrive at a true understanding of the past rather than a metaphysical identification between two temporally separated minds – the past thinker's and the historian's.

To begin with, it is necessary to take a closer look at Berlin's interpretation of Vico's idea of *fantasia*, which in Berlin's rephrase is 'the capacity for imaginatively "entering" worlds different from our own, or perhaps even any experience that differs from the most familiar'. It should be noted that, as revealed by his autobiographical essay 'My Intellectual Path', Berlin interprets Vico's *fantasia* in the light of Herder's *Einfühlung* or, again in Berlin's words, the 'capacity to conceive the life of an entire society, to "feel oneself into" its mode of thought, speech, feeling' – and probably vice versa.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as pointed out by Marnie Hughes-Warrington, although Herder does

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (eds), *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 1998) and Hans Herbert Kögler and Karsten R. Stueber (eds.), *Empathy and Agency: The Problems of Understanding in the Human Sciences* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp.52, 18; Isaiah Berlin, 'My Intellectual Path' in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2001), pp.7-8.

often urge his readers to ‘enter the century, the region, the entire history – empathise with or ‘feel oneself into’ [*sich einfühlen*] every part of it’, there is no textual evidence that Herder connects his idea with the ability of imagination.<sup>18</sup> To understand *fantasia* and *Einfühlung* together as a unified historical method thus is purely Berlin’s own interpretative move. And in any event, Berlin understands them together as making an *epistemological* claim that proper knowledge of the past must take the form of internal understanding by entering into people’s minds with the aid of imagination. The following is a famous passage from Vico’s masterpiece *New Science* used by Berlin, as well as many others, to expound Vico’s idea of *fantasia*:

[I]n this night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all questions: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore *to be found* within the *modifications* of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, he alone knows: and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know.<sup>19</sup>

As one can see, this passage in principle allows for the following two readings: (1) to understand the world of a civil society is to reveal the organising principles of the modification of its people’s mind or the society’s, that is to say, a general mentality or mindset; (2) to understand the world of a civil society is to be identical with its people’s modifications of mind. And these two readings, as a matter of fact, have very different metaphysical assumptions and epistemological implications. To borrow the distinction made by Brian Fay between *interpretation* and *re-enactment*, we may thus regard (1) as an attempt of interpretation – ‘an *explicatory process* in which acts are situated within relevant social and intentional contexts, [i.e.] the agent’s cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “How Good an Historian Shall I Be?: R.G. Collingwood, *The Historical Imagination and Education*” (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), p.51.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico: Philosophical Ideas’ in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.46. My own emphasis.

world' and hence this is 'not a psychological process at all', for it does not necessarily involve (*re-*)*experiencing* the conscious thoughts which went through the mind of the agent but to decipher what the agent was doing in behaving in a particular manner; by contrast, (2) is essentially an attempt of re-enactment – that is to say, 'a *psychological process* of identification in which historians and social scientists re-experience the thought processes which went through the minds of agents as they performed various actions'.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, these two ways of reading would lead to very different theoretical account of empathetic understanding and will have radically divergent implications on the way a historical approach based on it operates in practice. At any rate, if (1) is what Vico really means, then the science to be built on it would not be as 'new' as he claims to be, nor would it be as one of the 'boldest' methodological innovations as Berlin extols, for the requirements may be met by other historical methods.

Judged from Berlin's writings, his reading of Vico falls into the second type. To explain, what he grasped in Vico's passage quoted above is the last two sentences referring to the ancient Jewish idea that God as the creator of the universe alone can have true knowledge of the whole world including men as his creatures.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, for Berlin, what is at the core of Vico's 'boldest' methodology is the epistemology as expressed in the latter's famous formula '*Verum et factum convertuntur*' or 'the true and the made are convertible'. If Berlin is right, central to this *verum/factum* principle is a concept of knowledge, upon which Vico envisages a 'new' science is to be built. To appreciate this, Gilbert Ryle's classification of human knowledge into two types – namely, 'knowing-that' and 'knowing-how' – may be helpful.<sup>22</sup> For instance, knowing that 'Berlin was born in the Baltic city of Riga in 1909' belongs to the first type of knowledge, while actually knowing how to ride a bicycle is typical of the second. According to Berlin's interpretation, what is implied by Vico's *fantasia* is yet another kind of knowledge, for it is neither derived from knowledge from 'outside', as found in natural sciences whose object of inquiry is the physical world, nor acquired

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.141.

<sup>21</sup> Emanuel L. Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Gaimbattista Vico* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), p.17.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson House, 1949), pp.27-32.

through training as a skill.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it is ‘an intimate knowledge *per causas*’, that is to say, knowledge ‘from within’; and on this view, to truly know something is thus ‘not merely to be able to describe it, or analyse it into its component parts’ but ‘to understand how it came into being – its genesis, its growth – and that its essence consists in coming to be what it is.’<sup>24</sup>

One may have noted that what is at work in Vico’s epistemology as such, strictly speaking, is no longer the Jewish *verum/factum* principle’s in its original sense – i.e. the idea that God who creates the world alone can truly know the world, and man who does not create the world for the same reason does not have the capacity to attain true understanding of the world *unless* he receives God’s revelation. Nor is it a re-iteration of the principle’s early modern sense according to which man as created by God in His image must to a certain extent share God’s rationality and therefore in principle can attain true understanding of the workings of the natural world which operates on God’s rational principles – which is an epistemological view even acceptable to early modern scientists. Rather, what is at work in Vico’s new science is the *verum/factum* principle’s in the sense that, just like God who alone knows His own created world, man can truly know only human institutions. Admittedly, it is not clear whether Berlin’s Vico aims to raise man to a place where he is the god in his own world. But there is no doubt that Vico’s historical methodology re-asserts man’s agency as a creative being. Indeed, if Berlin’s interpretation is correct, Vico tries to turn the old Judeo-Christian principle into an argument for an *expressivist* account of society:

According to Vico, our lives and activities collectively and individually are expressions of our attempts to survive, satisfy our desires, understand each other and the past out of which we emerge. A utilitarian interpretation of the most essential human activities is misleading. They are, in the first place, purely *expressive*: to sing, to dance, to worship, to speak, to fight, and the institutions which embody these activities, comprise a *vision* of the world. Language, religious rites, myths, laws, social, religious, juridical institutions, are forms of self- expression, of wishing to convey what one is and strives

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<sup>23</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico’s Concept of Knowledge’ in *Against the Current* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.117.

<sup>24</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘One of the Boldest Innovators’ in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.55.

for: they obey *intelligible patterns*, and for that reason it is possible to reconstruct the life of other societies, even those remote in time and place and utterly primitive, by asking oneself what kind of framework of human ideas, feelings, acts could have generated the poetry, the monuments, the mythology which were their natural expression.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, this is what Berlin takes to be the first articulated concept of ‘culture’ in Western intellectual history, which he attributes to Vico. And central to this concept is the following two points: (1) human activities are essentially *expressive* and consequently social institutions are embodiments of such expressions; (2) there exists an intelligible pattern in all these activities and institutions which are in principle *traceable*. This summary does not refer to the Judaeo-Christian principle for justification, but it relies on the idea that ‘man-made’ social institutions have their own internal ‘human’ logic which is intelligible to men, and these organising principles are just what the historian must find in his empathetic mental navigation. If this interpretation is correct, then Vico’s great discovery turns out to be a new foundation for humane studies ‘which viewed social evolution from “inside” by a species of empathetic insight, for which the establishment of texts or dates by scientific criticism was a *necessary*, but not a *sufficient*, condition’ for true knowledge concerning human affairs.<sup>26</sup>

It follows that, on Vico’s epistemological view, ‘men [are] able to understand their own history in a fashion different from and [...] superior to what in which they understood the works of nature,’ and true knowledge strictly speaking is empathetic knowledge which is attainable *only* via man’s unique capacity for imaginative insight and reconstruction.<sup>27</sup> If this is correct, knowledge derived from an act of *fantasia* in fact is not a form of knowledge inferior to scientific knowledge, but rather a form of knowledge that is even more, to use Descartes’ term of art, ‘incorrigible’ than natural

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<sup>25</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.246-7.

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’, in *Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.248. My own emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘One of the Boldest Innovators’ in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.55..

science – that means, the kind of new ‘science’ vaunted by the conceited Newtonians who conceive of ‘knowledge’ solely in scientific terms remains chimerical. In the eyes of Berlin, Vico’s use of an ancient epistemological principle that forecloses the possibility of men achieving true knowledge to challenge the prevailing Newtonian paradigm yet justify a ground for attaining the Greek ideal of *episteme* in the sphere of human history, is truly bold. Understood in the context of the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, that is, the European-wide controversy during Vico’s time between the Renaissance humanists and the seventeenth-century scientific-minded thinkers over the relative merits of ancient learning (the classics) and modern learning (science and philosophy), Vico’s new science may be regarded as a methodological compromise. For, as a matter of fact, it accepts the scientific methodologies of new learning yet does not dismiss ancient learning as a source of knowledge. And at any rate, the fact that Vico should have called the form of knowledge to be derived by his method as *New Science* suggests that he is concerned with its ‘scientific’ status.

In any event, Vico does make use of new scientific method when appropriate. Indeed, as a philologist by profession, he has faith in that ‘[b]y tracing the history of words we can trace the altered attitude towards, the sense of, the things that the words denote, the part that they played in the lives of those whom we seek to comprehend,’ and he often appeals to etymological evidence for justifying his historical claims.<sup>28</sup> For instance, this is how he establishes that ‘the story that the Romans borrowed the Twelve Tables (the original Roman code of laws) from the Athens of Solon’s day cannot be true.’<sup>29</sup> He argues that, first of all, it was not possible for the barbarous tribes of early Rome to have known where the civilised Athens were, let alone (the value of) their code. Even if that was possible, ‘they could not have translated Attic words into idiomatic Latin without a trace of Greek influence on it, or used, for example, such a word as *auctoritas*, for which no Greek equivalent existed.’<sup>30</sup> It follows that the Romans and the Greeks could not have shared the same vision of the

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<sup>28</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘One of the Boldest Innovators’ in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.62.

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Sciences and the Humanities’ in *Against the Current* (London : Pimlico, 1997), p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

world, and hence the Romans could not have borrowed the Twelve Tables, and for this reason the Twelve Tables belong uniquely to its own culture and cannot be reproduced in a different cultural context – so do myths, poetry, laws and many other institutions. As one can see, this case study suggests that it is by restoring the original meaning of the metaphors, images, similes of the archaic world (which is a necessary condition for Vichian *Verstehen*) that the seemingly ‘impossible’ task ‘to transpose oneself into a condition where one can begin to have some inkling of what the world must have looked like to those who expressed themselves in this fashion’ could become a ‘credible’ one.<sup>31</sup> Also, it demonstrates that Vico *fantasia* is very different from the ‘timeless’, ‘quasi-mystical act of literal self-identification with another mind and age of which Collingwood evidently thought himself capable,’ for what is really attempted is knowledge from within, that is, the vision of past people as seen by themselves rather than a mental state.<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Berlin confesses that his understanding of Vico’s *fantasia* became clear only when he encountered Heder’s idea of *Einfühlung*. And for this reason an account of what Berlin takes the Vichian historical approach to be must end in his reading of Herder. Of course, there are overlapping areas in Vico’s and Herder’s accounts, and on the whole Berlin interprets these two thinkers in a way rather similar. Thus, to avoid repetition, the rest of this section will point out only two features of Herder’s thought which may further our understanding of Berlin’s own historical approach: namely, *semantic holism* and *holistic expressivism*. To begin with, it may be helpful to take a look at Berlin’s summary of Herder’s idea of *Einfühlung* as follows:

To grasp what a belief, a piece of ritual, a myth, a poem or a linguistic usage meant to a Homeric Greek, a Livonian peasant, an ancient Hebrew, and American Indian, *what part it played in his life*, was for [him] to be able not merely to give a scientific or common-sense explanation, but to give a *reason* for or *justification* of the activity in question, or at least to go a long way towards this. For to explain human experiences or

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<sup>31</sup> Such understanding can only be achieved by means of what Vico calls ‘credible impossibilities’. See Isaiah Berlin, ‘One of the Boldest Innovators’ in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.61.

<sup>32</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico: Philosophical Ideas’ in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.119.



attitudes is to be able to transpose oneself by *sympathetic imagination* into the situation of the human beings who are to be 'explained'; and this amounts to understanding and communicating the *coherence* of a particular way of life, feeling, action; and thereby the validity of the given act or action, *the part it plays in the life and outlook* which are 'natural' in the situation.<sup>33</sup>

This passage has affinities with Berlin's account of Vico's idea of *fantasia*, not least the assumption that a given way of life has internal coherence or internal logic. However, Herder's expressivism – or 'expressionism' in Berlin's own term – is less explicit than its holism in this passage, but it is evident enough.<sup>34</sup> And what that implies is that to understand a particular human activity or institution is to 'grasp the patterns of life *'in terms of which alone* such groups are to be defined' or, in other words, 'to see how it could be viewed as it was viewed, assessed as it was assessed, valued as it was valued, in a given context by a particular culture or tradition.'<sup>35</sup>

As noted by Charles Taylor, Herder's holistic expressivism is an application of his *semantic holism*, according to which a word can only be understood in terms of the web of semantic units in which it is a part.<sup>36</sup> In fact, given Herder's identification of action with thought and activities with language, which is a principle he upholds throughout his life, the transition from semantic holism to holistic expressivism is not difficult but rather inevitable, for to grasp the meaning of an action thus amounts to grasp the reason or justification for that which can only be expressed in language.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as stressed by Herder, '[i]f it is true that we cannot think without thoughts and that we learn to think through words: then language gives the whole of human

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<sup>33</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 369. My own emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> To follow Charles Taylor and John Gray, this thesis adopts the term 'expressivism'.

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in *Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.389, 395.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, 'The Importance of Herder' in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.79-99.

<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in *Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 386.

knowledge its limits and outline.’<sup>38</sup> Or, to put it differently, if thinking can only be conducted in language, then language is the limit of thought or the boundary of the conceptual world. And that is why Herder argued that ‘in [language] dwells [an] entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul.’<sup>39</sup> When applied to activities and social institutions, this semantic holism means that an act of human behaviour is a concrete embodiment of an intended expression whose significance (that is, meaning or value) is culturally embedded and therefore can only be understood as a reason or purpose for acting. And if this holism is right, then ‘the entire network of belief and behaviour that binds men to one another can be explained only in terms of common, public symbolism, in particular by language’ – which means that an act of empathetic understanding must take language seriously.<sup>40</sup>

Thus understood, Berlin’s Vichian attempt is not an act of gambling in the dark but an enterprise beginning with a scientifically-rigorous etymological effort. That is to say, this historical approach to understanding the past is not meant to ignore the author’s intention, and the purpose of it is not to construct what Paul Kelly describes as an ‘artificially-constructed’ argument.<sup>41</sup> Rather, as a historical methodology, this Vichian approach is a critical use of imagination aimed at reconstructing what a past thinker actually intended to argue and the vision he envisaged – which on Berlin’s judgement is what Cambridge School historical approach really attempts to uncover, or what an understanding of the past thinker’s ‘authorial intention’ is all about. From this it follows that Berlin’s approach in fact does not oppose but rather accommodates a moderate form of the linguistic-contextualist methodology advocated by Skinner. For this reason, the real difference between the Vichian and the Cambridge School method is that the former sees the latter to be satisfying merely the *necessary* condition of true historical understanding. That is, knowledge of linguistic context for Berlin is useful only to the extent that it serves as a tool for a historian to identify the

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted from Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.381.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., my own emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., my own emphasis.

relevant ideas with which a given past thinker was actually concerned, so as not to be misled by his terminology, but it will never be, no matter how detailed, sufficient to grasp the thinker's vision of the world – the real aim of any attempt to understand the past thinker. In short, unlike Skinner for whom true historical understanding of a thinker consists in retrieving the thinker's intention through analysing linguistic context (which may further require knowledge of its social and political context), Berlin takes a proper study of the past to be a rigorously executed Vichian mental navigation guided by relevant knowledge of the linguistic-historical context.

On this reading, the nature of what Vico and Herder take to be true knowledge is not timeless or analytic but *genetic* and *historical*. For as the object of knowing now is the world of civil society created by men in history, the resulting knowledge in fact is an understanding of what and why men have achieved in the past. If this is valid, what the empathetic approach arrives at is strictly speaking a form of *self-understanding* – or, in other words, a *historical consciousness*. Moreover, if Berlin's own empathetic approach is to be understood in this way, then the task of a Berlinian historian is not only to reconstruct past models of men and society but also to foster a historical consciousness through the *experience of* entering into the mind of a past thinker. Of course, this does not deny the fact that once this understanding is put into words, it inevitably has to take the form of verbal description of what the empathetically understood modifications of mind or models of men and society are like. But that does suggest that Gallipeau's reading of Berlin's engagement with the studies in the history of ideas as an enterprise of uncovering merely what Collingwood has called 'absolute presuppositions' does not catch the significance of the *practical* implication of Berlin's historical approach on the historian's mind.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, although Berlin's historical approach does, to use Ignatieff's words, '[stride] right into the citadel of a thinker's assumptions, seizing the ruling concept and ignoring the earthworks of qualification and elaboration,' and return with 'highly abstract' ideas, true understanding of these past ideas only occurs when they actually have an effect

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<sup>42</sup> Claude J. Gallipeau, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.26.

on those who try to understand them.<sup>43</sup> Thus Berlin concludes that ‘unless we have the knowledge and imagination to transpose ourselves into states of mind dominated by the now discarded or obsolescent model, the thoughts and actions that had them at their centre will remain opaque to us’ – that is why he insists that ‘failure to perform this difficult operation [is what] marks much of the history of ideas, and turns it into either a superficial literary exercise, or a *dead catalogue* of strange, at times almost incomprehensible, errors and confusions.’<sup>44</sup>

The practical aspect of Berlin’s historical methodology is significant in two ways. Firstly, it means that his studies in the history of ideas must be understood accordingly, that is, as Berlin’s descriptions of his own empathetic experience, for that in a way lays down a requirement for his readers who try to grasp his vision of the world. Despite the fact that Berlin is widely regarded as a practitioner of his own empathetic method *par excellence*, the fact that he teaches the method *by demonstration* is no less widely ignored by his commentators, including Kelly who fails to see that an ‘overt attention’ to methodology can take the form of meticulously executed demonstration rather than theoretical explanation. Yet, the failure to see this point seems to have led many critics and followers alike to read Berlin in a way that is inimical to his own style of reasoning. Secondly, this practical nature no doubt has implications for the way Berlin’s doctrine of value-pluralism is grounded, as well as how his engagement with history of ideas is related to his defence of individual liberty. Studies of Berlin’s political thought to date generally focus on his value-pluralism as a doctrine, that is, as a theoretical account of human values, rather than as a vision of world or historical consciousness derived from his empathetic reading of past human history. However, this way of reading Berlin seems to have missed the *self-implicating* nature of his methodology on the side on the historian, and therefore the important link between his studies in the history of ideas and his political thought – not least his defence of individual liberty. In a way, this thesis is meant to redress the neglect of this self-implicating nature of Berlin’s methodological prescriptions for historians, with a view

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), p.203.

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p.85. My own emphasis.

to reconstructing the relations between history and politics implicit in his formulation of value-pluralism. Yet what it is necessary for the rest of this chapter to do is to clarify Berlin's methodology further. And that requires us to address Luft's criticism of Berlin's interpretation of Vico as well as Berlin's own historical approach.

## II.2. A Transcendental Strategy without Transcendental Idealism

According to Luft, Berlin's reading of Vico fails to notice the radical nature of the *verum/factum* principle and mistakes its metaphysical point about 'the *ontological* power of linguistic construction' to be a rather powerless epistemological claim that does not go beyond what she calls 'Platonic idealism', i.e. the idea of true knowledge as an understanding of the causal principles pertaining to human thinking.<sup>45</sup> In other words, in Luft's judgement, Berlin's interpretation does not sufficiently appreciate the 'corporeal' nature of human making or 'the materiality and temporality' of human creation.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, if her diagnosis is correct, the root of Berlin's mistake lies in his following the idealist tradition inaugurated by Croce and upheld by Collingwood which tends to attribute an absolute distinction between inner and outer life to the *verum/factum* principle, and understanding Vico's *fantasia* as a form of imagination aiming to arrive at a true knowledge of the 'inner' of the object whose *subjectivity* is ensured by the divide. Or, to put it differently, Berlin fabricates an epistemological problem first by setting up a false divide between past mental worlds and today's minds, and then offers a transcendental strategy to overcome this pseudo-problem. Note that Luft's point is not that Vico is not committed to idealism. Rather, it is that by attributing Platonic idealism to Vico Berlin has downplayed the latter's radical (linguistic) idealism, that is to say, the ontological implication of the *verum/factum* principle's original Judeo-Christian sense Luft herself endeavours to recover – i.e. the theological doctrine that the creation of the world is the embodiment God's *word*, as

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<sup>45</sup> Sandra Rudnick Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the New Science between Modern and Postmodernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.41.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp.39-41.

expressed in the very beginning of the Gospel according to St John. Indeed, Luft admits that Berlin at some points comes close to grasping Vico's radical message, such as when he quotes approvingly Vico's statement that 'languages create minds, not minds language.' Nevertheless, the fact that Berlin regards Vico as a modern, rational thinker leads him to believe that to take this point too seriously would reduce human history to a record of myths or imagined realities and destroy 'all distinction between history as a rational discipline and mythical thinking' – for that amounts to saying that 'our historical consciousness, even in our sophisticated, self-consciousness, civilised condition, may be no more than the *vision* which belongs to the particular stage that we have reached: itself a kind of *myth*, the myth of the civilised.'<sup>47</sup>

Of course, Luft is not unaware of Berlin's intention to rid Vico's *fantasia* of its idealist metaphysical baggage by substituting imagination for *cognitive* activity – for that is precisely why the idea has been rendered into a critical use of imagination. One should note that at this moment it might be futile to point to Berlin's aforementioned statement that Vico's *fantasia* differs greatly from the 'quasi-mystical act of literal self-identification with another mind and age of which Collingwood evidently thought himself capable' – which is 'only one, deeply *metaphysical*, form, for which some authority may be sought in Vico's text', not least 'Croce and Gentile (and the peculiar variant advocated by their English follower, R. G. Collingwood).'<sup>48</sup> For Luft's pre-emptive reply is that in so far as Berlin's interpretation relies on the absolute division between inner life and outer life and assumes a *homoiouisis* between humans and the 'inner' of the object, he would have committed Vico to a form of Idealism.<sup>49</sup> By implication, what is more, if Berlin's own idea of empathy is to be understood in this way, then his approach for the same reason presupposes idealism and in any event his empathetic approach is a functional equivalent of Idealist Transcendentalism – to help an agent transcend the subjectivity ensured by the radical division implied by Berlin's own irreducible idealism. As it seems, a more effective reply must be one which can

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted from Sandra Rudnick Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the New Science between Modern and Postmodernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.41.

<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that alternative reading of Collingwood's theory of re-enactment is not ruled out.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.40.

show either that Berlin's own historical approach does not depend on an absolute distinction between inner and outer life to formulate his empathetic approach, or that a belief in a *homoiousis* between the object to be known and the knower does not necessarily imply a form of idealism. This section precisely argues that Berlin's thinking style is deeply rooted in a form of realism rather than idealism and his empathetic method involves to an acute sensitivity to the actual human experience.

To begin with, one should agree with Luft's observation that empathy in Berlin's thought is a 'functional equivalent' of Idealist Transcendentalism. For as a matter of fact this historical approach is meant to function as a methodological strategy to *transcend* cultural differences and overcome difficulties arising from the temporal or spatial distance between the object to be known and the knower. However, this may not be able to warrant her claim that Berlin implicitly holds a form of 'transcendentalism' in the strictly idealist sense of the term. To explain, first of all, it is necessary to point out that the 'absolute distinction' Luft discerns in Berlin's historical methodology in fact applies to the temporal separateness between the past and the present, and such division seems to be hardly disputable. Indeed, for one to think about the past at all, one must uphold this distinction – which in fact can be considered to be the 'founding principle of history'.<sup>50</sup> Of course, this does not gainsay the fact that the past is in a sense constitutive of the present or that our knowledge of the present is necessarily shaped by our knowledge of the past. For what is at issue here is not *the past as known to us* but *past events*. And it is in this sense that Berlin's division may be said to be 'absolute'. What is more, given that what Berlin always has in mind as the object to be known is the past thinker's ideas, the division he really makes strictly speaking is one between the historian's mind and the past thinker's thought or vision of the world whose subjectivity is inevitable as implied by the very idea of 'the past'. That is to say, the *homoiousis* between object and knower in the case of Berlin's historical methodology in effect does not refer to the metaphysically extravagant relation between a past *state of affairs* and the present *mental state* of the historian as Hegelian or Collingwoodian idealism seems to imply.

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<sup>50</sup> Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.4.

To this point, Luft may reply that even so the ideas or visions to be grasped by a Berlinian historian still remain as if they are metaphysical entities above and over in the air. And she may point to some of Berlin's remarks 'central ideas, [or] the great ideas which have occupied minds in the Western world, have a certain *life of their own*' – which after all is one of the marks that distinguishes Berlin from the Cambridge School and no doubt is reminiscent of a form of Platonic idealism.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, as argued by William Dray, who probably has done more than anyone else to rid Collingwood of his metaphysical extravagance, thinking essentially is an *activity*, rather than a mere 'object' for contemplation or a 'flow of consciousness' to be recorded or even a 'spectacle' to be watched. And what this implies is that an attempt to understand past thinkers' ideas must engage with *those* ideas; that is to say, we cannot discover what a past idea was without at the same time *re-thinking* it.<sup>52</sup> As it seems, when applied to the sphere of ideas, there is a good reason why a historian must adopt the empathetic approach. And to do so is no more mysterious than the fact that one can learn ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '. Admittedly, to interpret Collingwood in this way is to confine the application of his theory of re-enactment to the sphere of thought, and this is certainly much narrower than it was meant to be – in any event, Collingwood would like it to be applicable to aesthetic experience. However, Dray's point seems to fill up the gap left by Berlin's formulation of empathy. For, as the object to be understood is the ideas, there is good reason that one must go through the process of thinking through the mind of the past thinker – yet the process in reality must take place in the historian's own mind. There is no mystery here. What Berlin's historical approach ultimately relies on is, once again, the *cognitive* power shared by all men, rather than the kind of Platonic metaphysics Luft has attributed to Berlin – unless ideas and numbers categorically must be regarded as Platonic entities and mathematics a branch of metaphysics. From this it follows that what a Berlinian historian must do is to *rethink* the worldview as envisaged by the thinker studied, rather than to time-travel back to any past state of affairs, and what he really 'entering into' is but the

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<sup>51</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Phoenix Press, 1993). p.25.

<sup>52</sup> William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment – R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.55.



*reconstructed* vision (of the world of past thinkers) in his own mind, not the minds of past thinkers – hence no metaphysical identification between object and knower is entailed in Berlin's empathetic approach.

Since Luft is aware of Berlin's intention to interpret Vico's *fantasia* in cognitive terms, it is not clear why she should have interpreted Berlin's historical approach as a metaphysics-laden theory of mind. More importantly, if this reading is correct, what is really presupposed by Berlin's own historical methodology is a *common humanity*, i.e. our 'capacity for imaginatively "entering" worlds different from our own, or perhaps even any experience that differs from the most familiar,' rather than the possibility of *literally* entering into such worlds long gone in history.<sup>53</sup> Thus interpreted, instead of idealism, what Berlin really endorses is a form of empiricism. This empiricism is rooted in *human experience* and does not need to go far to look for evidence. Indeed, Berlin once illustrates Vico's *fantasia* by pointing to the fact that '[i]f I can *introspect* and *explain* my own conduct in terms of purpose, then I can do this also in the case of others, for in the very process of communication I assume them to be creatures like myself.'<sup>54</sup> Unmistakably the possibility of empathy as Berlin understands it is grounded upon an empirical fact rather than any metaphysical contemplation. In fact, the same point can be found in his neglected essay 'From Hope and Fear Set Free' where he argues as follows:

It seems to me that I can, at times, though perhaps not always, place myself, as it were, at an *outside vantage-point*, and contemplate myself as if I were another human being, and calculate the chances of my sticking to my present resolution with almost the same degree of detachment and reliability as I should have if I were judging the case of someone else with all the impartiality that I could muster.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Vico: Philosophical Ideas' in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp.52.

<sup>54</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'One of the Boldest Innovators in the History of Human Thought' in *The Power of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.59.

<sup>55</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'From Hope and Fear Set Free' in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.107.

As a matter of fact, this passage highlights the fact that man can always reflect upon his own thoughts and behaviour from an 'outside vantage-point' as if he is third person. And Berlin's intention here apparently is to establish the possibility of entering into the minds of others by pointing to the fact that *self-reflection* is possible. Thus, rather paradoxically, for Berlin what makes *analogous* understanding between men possible is men's faculty to see themselves from outside. Against this, one may complain that this amounts to saying that what makes *internal* knowledge possible is the availability of an *external* perspective to observe oneself, and it surely flies in the face of the fact that while in the case of self-reflection one can appeal to memory, an act of entering into the mind of others does not enjoy such monopoly of access. In other words, the difference between empathy and self-reflection is too great to validate Berlin's use of this analogy. To support Berlin, one may reply that if self-reflection is meant to be as objective as possible, it must not rely on purely subjective memory because memory is not always reliable as it is subject to decay, re-interpretation or even manipulation. Rather, it must also rely on sources that are also open to other people. At any rate, in the case of studying the history of ideas where ideas are clearly written down in words, a thinker's writings are as good as memory. Of course, the issue concerning whether human memory is reliable as a source of self-understanding is a controversial one as relevant scientific investigation still goes on today, and obviously this thesis should not pretend to be able to pronounce a final verdict. However, it should be pointed out that the validity of Berlin's empathetic approach ultimately lies not in the theoretical study of human mind or memory but the practical implementation of this method. Or, to put it differently, the validity of this approach as a historical method in the end must be settled in the field of history of ideas. Berlin understands this point very well, and the fact that he again and again tries to enter the minds of past thinkers and return with vivid accounts of their visions of the world may be regarded as an attempt to prove this by demonstration. In any event, for Berlin empathetic understanding is no more difficult or mysterious than self-reflection.

More importantly, what is also revealed by the above quotation is an important feature of Berlin's *ars cogito* or style of reasoning: taking men's actual experience as

the starting point of his philosophical inquiry. Probably this may be understood as an acute sensitivity to what is actually experienced by men and a strong aversion to any metaphysical contemplation when it comes to moral and political affairs. At any rate, his style of reasoning operates predominantly at the empirical level rather than the metaphysical, and that may be the reason why he never loses sight of reality as experienced by men, even when he is engaged with big metaphysical issues. Indeed, that is how he refutes A. J. Ayer's *phenomenalism*. Note that phenomenalism is the monistic view that all empirical statements can be translated into statements, on one-to-one basis, about our own personal experiences (i.e. mental appearances). If it is correct, then 'each of us starts alone with his or her own sense-data, which we then have to use in prodigious feats of construction in order to avoid solipsism.'<sup>56</sup> And at the heart of the debate around this view is the question whether all our knowledge of the world in it could be reduced to our knowledge of our own experiences which are basically the totality of our own sense-data. According to David Pears, Berlin's argument against phenomenalism can be summarised as a single question: 'If physical objects really could be reduced to sense-data, then unobserved physical objects with observed effects would be sets of possible sense-data causing sets of actual sense-data. But how could a mere *possibility* cause anything *actual*?<sup>57</sup> Or, to paraphrase, if hypothetical statements about sense-data are nothing but pure descriptions of our dispositions as perceivers rather than the objects perceived empirically, then the phenomenalist owes us an account about how anything could possess nothing but dispositional properties. What is more, as Berlin reminds David Pears, if Ayer's phenomenalism is true, then a friend behind a rock would amount to nothing but our own possible sense-data, and we should not believe even about the existence of his body behind the rock. However, we should not forget about the fact that he also has a mind and a point of view from which it is *we* who have disappeared behind the rock.'<sup>58</sup> As one can see, if we are to accept phenomenalism as true, we are logically bound to

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<sup>56</sup> David Pears, 'Philosophy and the History of Philosophy' in Edna Margalit and Avishai Margalit (eds.) *Isaiah Berlin – A Celebration* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), p.32.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp.33-4. My own emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> This is a story told by David Pears.

believe that even we, ourselves, are but a possible sense-data in the eyes of others – which amounts to a belief in that a set of possible sense-data can be connected by virtually nothing but another set of possible sense-data. For Berlin, that simply flies in the face of the empirical world actually experienced by men, and he is not prepared to accept such a metaphysical doctrine.

For Berlin, the crux of the matter is what is to connect the sense-data into a coherent whole if the subject of those data is to be eliminated from the picture, and Berlin's point is actually that there is no reason to disregard the world as we actually experience it. Admittedly, this is reminiscent of Dr Samuel Johnson's rather naïve version of realism expressed by his indignantly kicking a rock to prove the absurdity of Bishop Berkeley's idealism. Yet it is this realism that prevents Berlin from losing sight of men's actual experience behind all philosophical analysis – the concrete conditions that makes a philosophical question possible in the first place. Once again, what is implied by Berlin's refutation of phenomenism as a metaphysical theory is that his style of thinking is characterised by an acute sense of reality at the common sense level, and we can expect how he would respond to Descartes' doubt about our own existence. In fact, this sensitivity to the background conditions of a philosophical question can be expressed in a more sophisticated way; for instance, as found in Herder's view on the origin of language. Note that the origin of language was an issue hotly debated in his time, and central to the debate was the question: 'How did language emerge in the history of mankind?' And among the more famous proposed answers to it were Johann Peter Süssmilch's theological claim that language was instructed by God, Condillac's evolutionary claim that language in fact developed from animal cries, and Rousseau's psychological argument that language emerged out of the human need to articulate emotions and desires.<sup>59</sup> However, Herder entered the debate by pointing to the circularity in all these three claims. In the case of Süssmilch, argues Herder, it is circular that mankind without language can understand God's instruction – for that requires a *prior* capacity to think or reason that can only take place in language. Similarly, Condillac's claim presupposes that men prior to the

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<sup>59</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p.54.

emergence of language were able to *recognise* a syllable as a ‘word’, yet that can only occur in a linguistic context. And Rousseau’s thesis also fails to take into account of what is required for an utterance to be a ‘word’. As one can see, Herder’s argument relies on the idea of *Besonnenheit* (‘reflection’) – or, in Charles Taylor’s paraphrase, the capacity ‘to grasp something *as* what it is’.<sup>60</sup> This idea suggests that if the first syllable uttered by a man was meant to be a word, he must have been in a linguistic frame of mind already, and whoever understands such an utterance correctly – whether it was made in the form of divine instruction or in the form of animal cry – must be in the same mental state, too; for otherwise their interaction, if at all, would not be a case of ‘communication’. True, even if such an utterance was meant to be a symbol designating something else, both parties must have been able to operate with signals or at least, to borrow Heidegger’s terminology, capable of ‘as-structure of understanding’ – that is to say, they must have been ‘linguistic’ already.<sup>61</sup> Süssmilch, Condillac and Rousseau seem to be unaware of what is really necessary for linguistic communication and missed the difference between an utterance and a ‘word’.

Of course, that does not mean that Berlin would have accepted Herder’s own solution to end such circularity by appealing to God for help and offering an a-temporal or non-evolutionist argument for the origin of language. Nor does it imply that Berlin would accept entirely Herder’s holistic view of language, according to which ‘words’ logically cannot come into existence individually in a pre-linguistic word, so as to make room for arguing that language can only come into existence as a network of meaningful words altogether at one time – as a gift from God. Indeed, Berlin is a secular thinker who never shies away from admitting to being ‘tone-deaf’ when it comes to religion, and this is where he must part ways with Herder.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, I leave that to the next section, and suffice it to say that Herder’s criticism of other theories of the origin of language provides a way for us to appreciate Berlin’s sensitivity to the background conditions of a philosophical issue.

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (1995), p.103.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p.55.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now: The Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.214.

To bear this understanding in mind, let us return to Luft's criticism for the last time. We can now see that her attribution of a variant of Idealism to Berlin seems to have glossed over the fundamental difference between a methodological strategy to overcome temporal and geographical distance and Transcendental Idealism. Although it is true that Berlin means his empathetic approach to *transcend* cultural barriers, which are human constructs, what Luft means by 'transcendentalism' aims to transcend the world known to creatures like ourselves so as to arrive at true knowledge of the world of ultimate reality – or, to rephrase by Kant's terminology, to transcend the world of *phenomena* (appearance) and attain knowledge of the world of *noumena* (things-in-themselves) – and hence cannot apply to Berlin's methodology. In other words, Berlin's strategy is essentially operative *in* the realm of *phenomena* rather than *between* the two realms, and this alone means that Berlin's Vichian methodology differs greatly from the kind of idealism Luft has in mind. Indeed, the fact that Berlin takes Vico's *verum/factum* principle to imply that the sole object of true knowledge is men's created world, rather than the postulated world of ultimate reality, means that the Transcendental Idealist's traditional pairing of *phenomena* with *doxa* (opinions or beliefs) and *noumena* with *episteme* does not apply to Berlin's Vico.

At this point, one may reply that Berlin's Vichian method at least presupposes an epistemological position that preserves the *phenomena/noumena* distinction upheld by the Idealist – only recast as the division between the human world of civil institutions and the natural world. Nevertheless, this line of thought will not work. For one thing, by incorporating men's constructed world to the realm of true knowledge Berlin does not suggest that *episteme* does not pertain to the natural world. Rather, his point is that, when studying the mankind, internal understanding is the more appropriate form of knowledge – not that the *sole* object of true knowledge is human constructs or that all other forms of knowledge fall into the category of *doxa*. In fact, this is where Berlin parts company with Vico; that is, while Berlin shares with Vico the idea that what is made by one man can be truly understood by another, he does not think that whatever is intelligible must be made by them. Indeed, for Berlin, there exists more than one *kind* of true knowledge, and as far as studying the mankind is concerned only empathetic understanding can result in *relevant* true knowledge. For another, the

metaphysical distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is inapplicable to Berlin's vision of the world. In any event, the very idea of postulating a more real world outside our empirical one is inimical to Berlin's empiricist worldview, and he rejects metaphysics as a guide to our moral and political reasoning. Nevertheless, that does not mean the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* is not preserved in Berlin's empiricist vision of the world. First of all, given the non-existence of *noumena*, anyone who claims to have attained the true knowledge of the 'real' world different from our empirical one has in effect mistaken an instance of *doxa* to be *episteme*. Secondly, and perhaps more paradoxically, an empathetic understanding of those false beliefs in fact is a form of *episteme*, for that is the *true* understanding of the metaphysician's visions of the world. Taken together, these two ways of making sense of the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* also suggest that there can be many *visions* of the *noumena*, which are all instances of *doxa* meant to be believed as *episteme*, yet this situation does not rule out the possibility of an accurate account of the reality of it. Or, to put it differently, the fact that the human condition is characterised by the non-existence of *noumena* and the existence of various visions of 'the real world' does not mean that a description that corresponds to the reality of this condition is impossible.

In the final analysis, Berlin does not subscribe to Kant's transcendentalism which postulates a world of ultimate reality different from the one actually experienced by men, nor should it be seen as a form of Neo-Kantianism that abolishes the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*. His Vichian empathetic method in fact is meant to be a strategy to transcend cultural difference without committing to any form of Idealism. What is more, by pairing *episteme* with the sphere of human affairs and *noumena* with *doxa* Berlin's methodology not only implies that there can be numerous visions of the world vying against each other for the status of the true knowledge of *noumena*, but it also suggests the possibility of a true account of this human situation. In fact, Chapter 3 interprets Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism as a true account of such human condition. Nevertheless, before turning to this important issue, there remains another aspect of Berlin's thought which should be dealt with here because it is an integral part of his methodology and to some extent the whole of his value-pluralism hinges

on this element. It is time to turn to consider Berlin's sense of reality.

### II.3. Reclaiming Human Agency and Abolishing the Purpose of History

To begin with, it should be noted that every political vision harbours an idea of how the world really is today and how it may be changed tomorrow, and to a considerable extent whether it can be realised eventually depends on how it fits in with social reality. In the case of Berlin's thought, it has been argued that his style of reasoning is characterised by an acute sensitivity to men's actual experiences as well as a strong aversion to applying metaphysics to the sphere of human affairs. Now, it must be made clear that these two features are in fact two aspects of Berlin's *realism* – or, to use his term of art, 'sense of reality.' This much-neglected concept of Berlin's is a recurrent theme in his early writings, especially those related to Russian thinkers such as Leo Tolstoy and Aleksandr Herzen.<sup>63</sup> As we shall see, Berlin's sense of reality is mainly derived from his life-time intellectual 'hero', the Russian radical thinker Herzen.<sup>64</sup> This section is meant to clarify Berlin's Herzenian realism further by way of discussing how he applies his historiography to the broader sphere of human affairs. In a way, that amounts to tracing how Berlin has managed to move from cultural pluralism at the methodological level to the moral and political level or, more specifically, from an argument concerning how to properly study the past to a case for an equal treatment of cultures and human beings. And central to this section is the argument that Berlin intends to carry what he has established in his historical methodology to the sphere of human affairs, so as to abolish the purpose of history and reclaim human agency. Of course, this suggests that politics for Berlin is very close to history, or at least his vision of politics is related to his historiography. And, hopefully, by the end of this section it will be clear that his doctrine of value-pluralism

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<sup>63</sup> See 'The Sense of Reality, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements', 'Realism in Politics, and 'The Concept of Scientific History'.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Brodsky, 'Isaiah Berlin: A Tribute' in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Avishai Margalit (eds.) *Isaiah Berlin – A Celebration* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), p.213.



is already implicit in his historical methodology.

The first thing to say is that Berlin's interpretation of Vico and Herder has exhibited the significance of the idea of 'a sense of reality' already. It takes two forms. On the one hand, Berlin explicitly discusses this idea in his reconstruction of Vico's and Herder's historical thought. On the other hand, more implicitly, the fact that Berlin does not take everything they believe on board means that Berlin himself has his own sense of reality whereby Vico's and Herder's ideas are to be evaluated accordingly. Obviously, a satisfactory clarification of Berlin's sense of reality should include both what he explicitly says about the idea as well as how it actually operates in his navigation in other's thought. For the sake of argument, however, it may be worthwhile dealing with his account of the idea first, so that we can have a general idea of what he takes to be a 'sense of reality,' and the convenient point of departure seems to be the fact that he takes the avoidance of anachronism to be the core of his Vichian methodology, for as a matter of fact that is the primary aim of an empathetic attempt. To be sure, to avoid anachronism is an idea as old as the discipline of history itself, and few would disagree that there is more to discredit a historian than accusing him of anachronism. Yet, if Berlin's reading is correct, Vico tries to incorporate a moral sense into the idea's original meaning. Note that the word 'anachronism' by definition refers to the mistake of placing something in the wrong historical period, and that is a notion basically related to time. In any event, it is in this dictionary sense that Vico's aforementioned case against the claim that the Romans borrowed the Twelve Tables from the Athens of Solon's day is to be chiefly understood. And no doubt the Cambridge School approach as discussed earlier would have no objection to this understanding. However, Vico's idea of anachronism implies that to *judge* a culture of the past by today's standards is also an instance of this type of mistake. If so, anachronism is not merely a mistake related to time but rather a moral one. Indeed, partly as a corollary of Vico's expressivism, according to which each culture has its own internal logic and hence an understanding of it must involve an exposition of its organising social principles as such, to criticise a particular culture by another's logic is to make a mistake no less serious than misplacing an historical event in time.

Clearly, what is at work in Vico's argument against anachronism is his cultural

pluralism, that is to say, the doctrine that '[e]very culture expresses its own collective experience, [and] each step on the ladder of human development has its own equally authentic means of expression.'<sup>65</sup> And indeed, without such insistence on the *equality* of each culture as a ladder of human development, he cannot attribute any instance of judging another culture by one's own standards as a case of anachronism. In fact, any historian who sets out to undergo a Vichian empathetic navigation must presuppose this, and that seems to be what Herder intends to imply as well when he emphatically declares that 'Every culture has its own unique *Schwerpunkt* ('centre of gravity'), and unless we grasp it we cannot understand its character or value.'<sup>66</sup> That means, given that for Herder whatever is expressive of men's genuine nature – either individually as personality or collectively as a culture or *Volksggeist* (folk spirit) – is valid, there is every reason for him to exercise the capacity to enter into the minds of these people in order to understand them. In other words, what this doctrine of authenticity implies is that all cultures are unique, and for this reason alone the historian of ideas must carry out an act of *Einfühlung* if true understanding of those cultures is to be attained. This position is unmistakably a *methodological* cultural pluralism. Indeed, if culture is what provides the *meaning* and *significance* of an individual's actions, what can be expected to be a proper understanding of such actions must reveal how they may appear to be 'natural' in the light of the whole web of concepts and beliefs. In other words, since they can only be evaluated according to the web's own internal standards, to criticise them otherwise would be an act of 'anachronism'. Thus understood, cultural pluralism is the logical implication of Vico and Herder's argument against anachronism, and it is this cultural pluralism that underlies the method of empathetic understanding. From this we can infer that part of what Berlin considers to be a historian's sense of reality is the sensitivity to the reality of each individual culture's particularities, and from this *particularism* we can further infer that Berlin's realism must include a sense of *cultural diversity as the human reality*. When applied to the field of history, this suggests that cultures across time and space should be understood

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<sup>65</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The Counter-Enlightenment' in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.247.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

*in their own terms* and *for their own sake*. And that is precisely what Berlin takes to be the reason why Herder would have ‘rejected the absolute criteria of *progress* then fashionable in Paris: no culture is a mere means towards another; every human achievement, every human society is to be judged by its own internal standards.’<sup>67</sup>

Thus understood, the Vichian historical method is necessitated by the reality of the human condition, and surely this understanding of anachronism is related to Vico and Herder’s holistic expressivist model of man and society as explained earlier. Now, it should be noted that this is not the only way the idea of anachronism is understood by Berlin. Note that, as mentioned earlier, Herder’s holistic expressivism as discussed earlier is derived from his semantic holism. This view in fact implies – to use Andrew Bowie’s phrase – the ‘two-edged nature’ of language: (1) language is a means by which a culture symbolises its identity and binds its members to each other as a social group; (2) those who cannot speak a particular language are to be excluded from the community it forms.<sup>68</sup> In fact, this two-edged nature of language is what distinguishes Herder’s *Einfühlung* from Vico’s *fantasia* in an important way. Their difference can best be seen in the way Herder and Vico understand the idea of ‘belonging’. In the case of Vico, the idea of ‘belonging’ is predominantly a *historiographical* concept. As understood by Berlin, what Vico emphasises is that it is only when we have acquired knowledge of what the essence of a particular age or culture consists in can we say that some one is ‘typical of’ or ‘belonging to’ this age or that culture. That is, unless we have grasped the essence of the Age of Enlightenment, we cannot justifiably label someone, say, Voltaire, as ‘a great Enlightenment thinker’. And what is implied by this idea of ‘belonging’ is that it would be *anachronistic* to understand a thinker belonging to *X* age as a *Y* thinker, for that will only generate false knowledge. In the case of Herder, however, the idea of belonging to a particular culture is meant to be an *anthropological* thesis based on an account of human psychology. To explain, what the two-edged nature of language implied by Herder’s semantic holism is that men’s language is at once expressive of

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<sup>67</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.254.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 51.

and constitutive of their own culture, and can build a person's *identity*. That means, for one thing, no man can be an island, unless he abandons the use of language – hence thinking entirely. And for another, it is men's nature to seek a 'sense of belonging' and only a culture can gratify this need. That is to say, for Herder, man has the natural desire to 'belong to' a culture, without which his acts of behaviour could not be intelligible, and can be happier when living with members of his own culture, in particular speaking the same language. Understood in this way, the two-edged nature of language also means that learning a language is the key not only to understanding another culture but also to acquiring a cultural identity, and that is what keeps alive the hope for cross-cultural understanding – or, more specifically, to go beyond one's own culture and understand another 'from within.' No doubt, the primacy of language in Herder's holistic expressivism reveals an important anthropological or sociological fact with epistemological implications. And it is in this Herderian sense that a situation where a historian wrongly recognises a person's group identity may also be regarded as case of anachronism.

Undeniably, Berlin's interpretation significantly downplays the Christian framework in Vico's and Herder's historical thought. As mentioned earlier, Berlin is a secular thinker who would not accept Herder's theological solution to the problem concerning the origin of language, and it is thus not surprising that he should have grasped the point of Herder's doctrine of authenticity to be abolishing the distinction between 'explanation and justification, reference to causes and to purposes, [or] to the visible and the invisible, statements of fact and their assessment in terms of the historical standards of value relevant to them.'<sup>69</sup> And that is why Berlin would have praised Herder for being among 'one of the originators of the *secular* doctrine of the unity of fact and value, theory and practice, "is" and "ought", intellectual judgement and emotional commitment, thought and action.'<sup>70</sup> For that amounts to a reverse of the relation between fact and value as traditionally understood by Christians who see what is 'valuable' to be 'valued' by God, because what is authentic now is real and

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p.51.

<sup>70</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 369. My own emphasis.

good, and all human institutions are 'valuable' and 'valid' in their own right. Surely this is consistent with Berlin's reading and appraisal of Vico. On the other hand, as also mentioned earlier, Berlin is aware of the Christian influence on Vico's historical methodology, but he considers that what is most original in the latter's thought, not least his use of the ancient Judeo-Christian *verum/factum* principle, is when his ideas are read in anthropological rather than theological terms. Thus, Berlin rejects Vico's talk of 'stages of human development' which suggests a cyclical view of human history, and interprets the term 'modifications' in the passage quoted above concerning the *verum/factuam* principle as 'what we should mean by the stages of the growth, or of the range or direction, of human thought, imagination, will, feeling' – rather than the retrievable past mental states as implied by the Idealist's account.<sup>71</sup> By the same secular sense of reality, he objects to Vico's account of human history as an 'orderly procession' of 'ever deepening types of apprehension of the world' guided by Providence, according to which 'in the individual and society alike, phase follows phase not haphazardly (as the Epicureans thought), nor in a sequence of mechanical causes or effects (as the Stoics taught), but as stages in the pursuit of an intelligible purpose.'<sup>72</sup>

However, Vico's approach to studying the past as a matter of fact is related to his philosophy of history which is again theological in nature. What enables Vico to talk of each culture as a unique whole, or each nation's history as a self-contained process of undergoing the cycle of *corsi* (advance) and *ricorsi* (regression), is his belief in Providence – for, after all, this cyclical view of human history suggests that human societies change non-randomly, and each phase of them is a unique part with characteristics appropriate – in the eyes of God – to their location in human history as a process of transformation. Similarly, but probably more evidently, divine help is also evoked by Herder to establish his doctrine of authenticity, for as a matter of fact it is through God's eyes that each culture is good in itself and hence not a primitive stage of its successor. Without the idea of Providence, it is difficult for Herder to talk

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<sup>71</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Vico: Philosophical Ideas' in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.47.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

of each phase of human history as ‘good’, for there is no ground for him to judge so – or, to use John Milbank’s words, to affirm ‘a progress purely *within* the good, not from evil to good.’<sup>73</sup> Clearly, the methodological cultural pluralism Berlin attributes to Vico and Herder has transformed the nature and the theoretical ground of their methodology – which inevitably gives the impression of reading past thinkers in his own terms rather than the thinker’s. Indeed, as Antonio Pérez-Ramos complains, Berlin has translated the Italian word ‘*ritruovare*’ as ‘to be found’ so as to ground a theory of empathy as analogous understanding on Vico’s remark (discussed in the first section of this chapter) that ‘the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore *to be found* within the *modifications* of our own human mind’, yet the word in fact means ‘to find again’ rather than ‘to be found’.<sup>74</sup> When read in correct translation, according to Pérez-Ramos, the very passage of Vico taken by Berlin to imply a cognitive theory of empathy in fact implies that ‘the human mind is *posited* by Vico as containing in its present and civilised stage all the patterns of thought that it has deployed or projected into the surrounding world, first in the process of humanisation and then in the setting-up of the multifarious panoply of human institutions, social structures and political systems.’<sup>75</sup> And that means Vico’s thesis is metaphysical, concerning the relation between human mind and past events, rather than the cognitive theory of empathy as reconstructed by Berlin. Once again Berlin seems to have reconstructed Vico’s and Herder’s vision of the world in a way that the resulting outlook can adapt to today’s secular, scientific world.

If so, one may even infer that a vision of politics derived through Berlinian empathetic understanding of a past thinker *in practice* falls into what Paul Kelly has described as an ‘artificially-reconstructed argument’ discussed earlier – despite the theory of it as formulated by Berlin suggesting otherwise. Nevertheless, a more charitable understanding of Berlin’s interpretation is possible. That is to say, instead

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<sup>73</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.173.

<sup>74</sup> Antonio Pérez-Ramos, ‘Giambattista Vico’ in Stuart Brown (ed.) *British Philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 340-1. My own emphasis.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

of seeing his reconstruction as a practical contradiction with his own methodological prescription, we can view his interpretation as conducted on what Donald Davidson calls the principle of charity.<sup>76</sup> Note that, as a principle of interpretation, it holds that when interpreting a speaker of foreign language, one should *ceteris paribus* refrain from ascribing false beliefs to the speaker. This charity is surely exhibited in the way Berlin interprets Vico and Herder's thought. What is more, as this way of interpreting inevitably reveals the interpreter's own sense of reality, Berlin's secularised cultural pluralism in fact reveals not only Vico and Herder's view of human history but also his own secular sense of reality with regard to human history, that is, his own disbelief in history as an 'uninterrupted progress' moving from ignorance to knowledge, from cruelty to kindness, from slavery to freedom, or in short from misery to happiness.<sup>77</sup> In effect, this sense of history amounts to abolishing the purpose of history, for it virtually prevents the talk of human history as a drama with a single plot whereby all different acts are connected and whose meaning explained. Here we have come a long way to the point where we can begin to realise why Herzen is held by Berlin as his life-long intellectual hero. Note that Berlin has been reported to have converted to the Realism of G. E. Moore and John Cook Wilson in his undergraduate years at Oxford.<sup>78</sup> And he has evidently been influenced by British Empiricism and Oxford Realism to some extent – that is, respectively, the epistemological position that our knowledge is mainly derived from our experience through the traditional five senses, and the belief that the external world is independent of human observers. Also, if Stuart Hampshire's judgement is right, Berlin is subconsciously a Humean empiricist whose 'thinking and writing is aware of the ample, generous, humorous and seductive figure of David Hume smiling in the background.'<sup>79</sup> This thesis does not deny that Berlin's thought

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<sup>76</sup> Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>77</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p.35.

<sup>78</sup> Cherniss, J. & Hardy, H. 'Isaiah Berlin', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2005 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.Stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/berlin/>>.

<sup>79</sup> Stuart Hampshire, 'Nationism' in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Avishai Margalit (eds.), *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.129.

exhibits all these influence. However, it will argue that underlying all these features of Berlin's thought is his Herzenian sense of reality, and everywhere in his political thought we can find Herzen smiling in the background. And what follows in this section is meant to show how this Herzenian realism not only has enabled Berlin to reject the Christian framework of Vico and Herder's cultural pluralism and therefore resist the temptation of macro-historical understanding of history altogether, but also has helped him to reassert men's place in history as moral and creative agents.

To see this, the best place to begin with might be the following two remarks recorded during Jahanbegloo's interview with Berlin: according to Berlin himself, he is 'not a philosopher of history in the proper sense,' and his considerations on history can be summarised as a rejection of 'a *libretto* of history' – a phrase used by Herzen.<sup>80</sup> These two remarks clearly are two sides of one and the same coin, for what a proper 'philosopher of history' means here is someone who conceives of history as 'a play with a theme created by God or Nature' such as Marx and Hegel, or someone who claims to have discovered pattern in history such as Spengler and Toynbee.<sup>81</sup> On this account, Vico as a discoverer of the cyclical pattern of history is a philosopher of history; so is Herder who does not reject the ultimate purpose of history as laid down by God. In fact, Berlin sometimes uses the term 'historiosophy' to refer to such grand narrative that accounts for history as a whole as a drama endowed with a particular meaning and whose direction can be predicted accordingly.<sup>82</sup> This is what Berlin understands as philosophy of history, which is often conducted by way of adopting a bird's-eye view of history – for such purpose Christian theology has long served as source of inspiration – and sometimes with a view to constructing models of history or deriving historical laws. By contrast to these philosophies of history, history is a *sui generis* intellectual activity whose goal is to account for a historical event as it really was, as a *de facto* instance of contingency or even emergency, without assuming such

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<sup>80</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p.34.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The Concept of Scientific History', *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.119.



omniscient perspective and without inferring a 'hidden' meaning of that event from other faraway events or history as a whole. For Berlin, history thus resembles a skill or gift more than it does factual knowledge but is not identical with either, and as an activity it does not preclude making judgements or exercising one's common sense – and for this reason alone it cannot be subsumed under science. In any event, he sees himself as a historian of ideas rather than a philosopher of history, and for that matter he effectively sides with Herzen rather than Vico and Herder. In other words, it is this Herzenian realism that has led Berlin to remain a historian of ideas but not a proper philosopher of history. And his secular sense of reality in fact is a logical consequence of accepting Herzen's historiography.

Now, with Berlin's Herzenian sense of history in place, the rest of this section makes clear yet another aspect of Berlin's realism: that is, the moral dimension of his Herzenian sense of reality. To see this, it is necessary to return to Berlin's reading of Vico and Herder. As we have seen, what Berlin takes to be 'anachronism' is not confined to its dictionary sense and has an *anthropological* dimension. Judged from the text, what is most crucial in Vico and Herder's broadly understood notion of anachronism as interpreted by Berlin probably is that it has gone beyond its purely historiographical concern and become a moral and political concept. According to Berlin, anachronism in practice tends to take the form of placing something in history in one's own age, and such practice has been criticised by Vico as 'national vanity' or 'philosophical vanity.'<sup>83</sup> What characterises this kind of mistake is the tendency to judge past cultures by the measuring-rods of *one's own* civilisation, and what seems to be mistaken in this form of anachronism is the very act of assuming one's own age to be the timeless standard against which all other historical periods have to be measured. In the same spirit, Herder talks of the mistake of 'cultural arrogance.' The rationale behind that is similar to Vico's: it is historically unjust to judge other cultures by the standards of one's own culture. One should note that while the 'other' in Vico's case is a historical period separated from one temporally, in Herder's case it refers mainly to

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<sup>83</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.85.

those cultures separated from one geographically or, more specifically, *linguistically* – given that a culture for Herder is a linguistic community. Nevertheless, they can both be understood as a form of, in contemporary political vocabulary, *ethnocentrism*. At any rate, that is how Berlin interprets Vico and Herder; and the use of terms such as ‘vanity’ and ‘arrogance’ – which denote value judgement or even moral criticism – in effect reflects his own judgement. Therefore, while Berlin’s Vico tends to argue for *fantasia* to be a historical method justified on epistemological grounds, and his Herder seems to mean *Einfühlung* to be the proper way of understanding the past or foreign cultures on the grounds of both epistemology and human psychology (i.e. men’s natural ‘sense of belonging’), the fact that Berlin takes seriously either versions of justifications means that his own methodology has not only the epistemological but also an ethical dimension. That is to say, to leave aside the issue whether or not Berlin is accurate in his interpretation of Vico and Herder, it is clear by now that he intends to apply the purely historiographical idea, anachronism, to the way we treat others as well as their cultures.

As one can see, Berlin relies on the idea of *mistreatment* to make his theoretical move from the need to guard against anachronism in history to a general argument against ethnocentrism. Or, to put it in another way, the rationale is that if *historical injustice* is to be avoided, no historian should refrain from making the ‘appalling effort of trying to adjust one’s vision to the archaic world’ and ‘see it through deeply unfamiliar *spectacles*’.<sup>84</sup> Yet, admittedly, the theoretical transition involved may not be as straightforward as Berlin takes it to be. For as a matter of fact, unless a proxy for evaluating our attitudes towards the other has been assumed beforehand, that is to say, the principle of treating others as one’s own equals, the *historiographical* imperative can hardly be turned into a *moral/political* imperative as such. Judged from the text, that seems to be exactly what Berlin takes for granted. And in any case, implicit in his interpretation of Vico and Herder can be found the moral claim that it is *wrong* to judge other people or cultures by our own cultural standards or to impose our own

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<sup>84</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico: Philosophical Ideas’ in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.119.

culture's moral and political ideals on another society. The rationale behind this appears to be as follows: if it is wrong to judge a past thinker or a past culture in terms of today's concepts and categories, then *by analogy* we should not try to judge another culture today by our own culture's standards. Of course, this analogy is not a perfect one. For one thing, while it is widely agreed that the task of the historian is to *understand* the past, there is no such convenient consensus on the issue of dealing with the other; and even if such consensus exists, that does not mean we must view other cultures as our equals. For another, while in history as an intellectual inquiry of the past, to misplace a past thinker or an event in time is an uncontroversial case of mistreatment (of the thinker or event), in the activity of dealing with another cultures or people from those cultures there is no such consensus. Indeed, sometimes we may have to subject a culture to criticism; and in principle we can agree with Berlin that true understanding of a culture requires an act of empathy but go on to argue that a culture thus understood is wrong and inferior to our own, because the first is basically an epistemological issue and the second a moral one. For this analogy to work, as it seems, Berlin virtually abolishes the distinction between past and present, the very principle on which history as a branch of human studies is founded in the first place. And that involves regarding the past thinker as no different from today's thinkers, that is, as human beings who deserve our equal respect – hence treating other cultures and their people as inferior to one's own is a case of mistreatment.

Given that Berlin considers anachronism and ethnocentrism as two major forms of violating the sense of reality, it means that his sense of reality is moral in nature. Thus understood, no matter whether Berlin is right or not in attributing this moralised idea of anachronism to Vico and Herder, it is unmistakable that his own historical approach is *a methodology out of ethics*, that is, out of an ethics of equality at the core of which is the respect for others as one's own equals – and it is clear that without such respect the empathetic approach could not have been implemented in the first place. In this regard, Berlin's historical methodology seems to be no less bold than Vico's new science, for its real point is that, when it comes to the study of the mankind, moral concerns must come before scientific interests. Now, it must be pointed out that this moral dimension is in fact the other side of Berlin's Herzenian

view of history as a series of accidents. Indeed, as observed by Paul Kelly, Berlin's 'political theory' approach to the studies in the history of ideas presupposes *human agency* on the side of the past thinker to be studied.<sup>85</sup> Such a presupposition is of a piece with Berlin's Herzenian view of history. That is to say, Herzen's idea of history as a series of accidents without a *libretto* is a logical consequence of his concept of man as a free and creative moral agent. Of course, as argued in the first section of this chapter, Vico also holds this view and it is also consistent with Herder's expressivism. Nevertheless, Herzen's idea is more radical than Vico's and Herder's, for it is a secular idea of man free from Christian notion of human will; at any rate, inasmuch as Vico and Herder relies on a the idea of Providence or God's perspective to construct their historical views, their notion of human agency is a compromised version. More importantly, this concept of man implies that no one should be subjected to the will of others and hence each individual must be respected as an end rather than a means. And it is this concept of man that provides the necessary conceptual step for Berlin to carry the idea of empathy from the level of methodology to the level of politics – in other words, to transform a historiographical imperative into a moral/political imperative.

Thus understood, in a way like Vico's revolt against the prevailing Newtonian worldview, Berlin's historical method that asserts human agency and abolishes the purpose of history is a quiet revolt against our scientific age's tendency to view human beings as if they – or at least their thought and action – are caused by external factors. And he manages to do so by relying on his Herzenian view of history based on a notion of human agency. No doubt Berlin's Herzenian realism as such, which is secular, humanistic and ethics-laden in nature, is of great political import and bears on Berlin's defence of individual freedom. Nevertheless, we leave this issue to Chapter 5 of this thesis, and what is of immediate concern now is how this Herzenian realism bears on Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism. It is time to return to interpret Berlin's value-pluralism as a true account of the human condition in the light of the following

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<sup>85</sup> P. J. Kelly, 'Contextual and Non-Contextual Histories of Political Thought' in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.) *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (The British Academy, 1999), pp.37-62.

three elements in Berlin's thought uncovered in this chapter, namely, the Herzenian notion of human agency, Herderian holistic expressivism, and the self-implicating nature of the Vichian empathetic approach to understanding.

## CHAPTER III.

### The Meaning of Berlin's Value-Pluralism

This chapter aims to offer a reading of Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism in the light of his methodology reconstructed in the previous chapter. The first section deals with Berlin's Herzenian projectivist conception of value implicit in his reading of Vico's *verum/factum* principle. This agent-relative, voluntarist nature of what Berlin means by 'value' when arguing for the plurality of values is still largely neglected by many of commentators on Berlin's political thought. Yet it has serious implications on how his doctrine of value-pluralism can be understood as well as the liberalism he supports. Followed by that is a section dealing with the issue concerning how far for Berlin value-conflict can reach in the sphere of human life. Central to it is an account of the elusive notion of incommensurability by way of drawing an analogy between Thomas Kuhn's well-known notion of 'paradigm' and the holistic expressivism Berlin attributes to Herder. With the understanding of what Berlin means by 'value' and the idea of 'incommensurability' in place, this chapter will go on to interpret Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism as a historical-anthropological truth, i.e. as a description of the real human conditions actually experienced by men. And finally, this chapter will conclude by a section on the nature of value-pluralism, in particular what has been presupposed in its transition from a description of human reality to a normative doctrine. It is hoped that by the end of this chapter it will be clear that Berlin's value-pluralism is closely linked to his Vichian approach to studying the history of political ideas, and should be better understood as a *vision* of the world derived from an enlarged mentality through his understanding of the vicissitude of cultural history.

#### III.1. Berlin's Herzenian Conception of Value

The first thing to be noted about Berlin's value-pluralism is that, despite the fact that

Berlin is famous for his doctrine of value-pluralism, what he means by the term ‘value’ has yet to be understood in his own terms. As noted in the introductory chapter of this thesis, commentators on Berlin in general take the idea of ‘value’ in his claim for ‘the plurality of values’ to be an abstract, universal concept – or at any rate a kind self-sufficient object which has a particular internal structure or configuration, that is, with a set of definite *properties*, out there to be grasped in general terms. Judged from the literature, debate on the doctrine centres around Berlin’s claim that values are sometimes ‘incompatible’ or even ‘incommensurable’, and the strategy often taken by his critics to counter this claim is to define or, more specifically, *reconceptualise* two values which are said to be in conflict in a way that they can *entail* each other or be entailed by a greater value-concept. To take the most frequently discussed case Berlin and his critics often use to illustrate their points, the conflict between ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’, those who do not agree with Berlin tend to assume that once these two allegedly conflicting value-concepts are understood – or more specifically, *reconceptualised* – in a way that they *logically entail* one another or one *prevails* over the other, their *prima facie* incompatibility should then be deemed to be falsified. Or, if they can be conceptually subsumed under a *summum bonum* or supreme value, of which the *prima facie* conflicting values are in fact two different instantiations, then they are not incommensurable and hence Berlin is wrong. Judged from the literature related to this issue, liberal political philosophers tend to adopt the first strategy, and the argument Ronald Dworkin has recently advanced for the conceptual inseparability between liberty and equality – not without the latter as the sovereign virtue though – clearly is one of the most robust attempts. Whereas, Utilitarian thinkers still remain the most formidable representative of those who adopt the second strategy.<sup>1</sup>

However, that does not seem to be what Berlin’s use of the term ‘value’ suggests, nor would that fit in his account of the pervasiveness of value-conflicts in the human world. Indeed, throughout his entire *oeuvre* he seems to use ‘ends of life’ and ‘values’ interchangeably. And clearly that is what is indicated by one of the most frequently quoted statements made by Berlin, the very passage used in Chapter 1 to introduce his

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

doctrine of value-pluralism: ‘the *ends* of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.’<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, what counts as ‘ends of men’ is still unclear. Yet in a passage from his early essay ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, we found him arguing that:

Injustice, poverty, slavery, ignorance – these may be cured by reform or revolution. But 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*, guaranteed neither to change nor to stand still – it is through the absorbed individual or collective pursuit of these, unplanned and at times without wholly adequate technical equipment, *more often than not without conscious hope of success*, still less of the approbation of the official auditor, that the best moments come in the lives of individuals and peoples.<sup>3</sup>

With hindsight, we know that this was Berlin’s earliest statement of value-pluralism, written in 1949, a decade earlier than his inaugural lecture on the two concepts of liberty. But more importantly, it suggests that the term ‘value’ in Berlin’s use is meant to refer to those positive goals people live by, and the phrase ‘without conscious hope of success’ provides a way to understanding what Berlin means by saying that human values are ‘ultimate’ and pursued by people *for their own sake, to which other things are means*. In other words, the term ‘value’ is not meant by Berlin to be, in Gilbert Ryle’s terminology, a ‘success word.’ Rather, it allows for the possibility of failure, and for this reason what it refers to is akin to ‘experiments in living’ – an idea Berlin has rediscovered in John Stuart Mill’s writings.<sup>4</sup> What is more, it also implies that the purpose of fighting against evils is to make room, or create a social condition, for men to pursue their positive goals – in other words, fighting against evils is but a *means* to pursuing values which are *ends* in themselves and hence ultimate.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.169.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.39-40.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’ in *Ibid.*, p.188.



To be sure, Berlin's acute awareness of the concrete background conditions of philosophical analysis as discussed in last chapter is again at work here. Indeed, the point of the quotation in question is that without the existence of the *valuing subject*, that is, human beings, there are no values. If this is true, then human values are what men *project* onto the world rather than, so to speak, a piece of furniture of the world. One may term this way of understanding value as a 'projectivist' conception of value. Surely that is consistent with the secularised version of the ancient Judaeo-Christian *verum/factum* principle Berlin attributes to Vico, according to which all cultural institutions are human constructs – or in other words, human beings are the creator of their social world, including morality and values. And by endorsing this projectivism, Berlin appears to declare his adherence to the Romantic assertion that 'it cannot be that values, namely aims or ends which human beings strive for, are *outside* us, whether in nature or in God, because if they were outside us, and if their intensity determined our actions, then we should be slaves to them – it would be an extremely sublime form of slavery, but slavery nevertheless.'<sup>5</sup> However, as disclosed by Berlin himself to his interviewer Jahanbgloo, it is – again – through Herzen that he learnt that values are human *creations* and what that means morally.<sup>6</sup> In any event, Berlin judges Herzen to be 'one of the earliest of those who, perhaps influenced by Romantic theories, thought that we did not discover values but *created* them, and that *the purpose of life was life itself*.'<sup>7</sup> And that means, on the one hand, life has no purpose beyond itself and, on the other, no values can be said to be higher than men and hence no men can be sacrificed in the name of a higher values unless he himself has so chosen and is prepared to die for it. According to Berlin, no one who expressed this before Herzen had ever stated it in such clear terms. And if Herzen is right, then the perennial question 'what is the purpose of life?' is a meaningless one, for there is no such 'purpose' out there to be 'discovered'. That is to say, given that 'purpose' entails human beings who conceive purposes, the fact that life is a process of living rather than an object or a thing means that the term 'purpose' does not apply to it anyway. Or,

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p.72. My own emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Ramin Jahanbgloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: ), p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

to put it differently, '[v]alues are not stars in some moral heaven, they are *internal*, they are what human beings freely choose to live for, to fight for, to die for' – in short, human values are *ontologically* dependent upon the valuing subject.<sup>8</sup>

Judged from Berlin's writing, this projectivist concept of value is also what he takes to be Kant's fundamental lesson that *men are ends in themselves*. And indeed, according to Berlin, Kant's contribution to the formation of the Romantic movement is his idea that '[a] value is *made* a value – at least a duty, a goal transcending desire and inclination, is so made – by human choice and not by some *intrinsic* quality in itself, out there.'<sup>9</sup> If Berlin's interpretation is correct, then Kant's ethics is rooted in a *voluntarist* theory of value that links value to the moral agent's *will* – that is to say, the moral worth of a particular value lies in being recognised by an agent who wills it to be realised universally, i.e. by all moral agents. If so, the Kantian doctrine generally referred to as 'respect for persons' in philosophy must then be understood as a moral demand based on a view of personal autonomy according to which '[t]o be unsalvageable, to be free, is therefore to commit yourself freely to some kind of moral values.'<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there is the possibility that Berlin has read Herzen into Kant. In any event, this way of reading has been criticised, for instance by David Cooper, as one that 'grotesquely distorts Kant's position.'<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Kant's position, as indicated by his law of the 'categorical imperative' – i.e. act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will it to be a universal law – seems to be that a commitment to morality must take place prior to an act of such willing.<sup>12</sup> In other words, instead of affirming the unity of *valuation* and *valuableness*, Kant in effect places an *agent-neutral* – and hence external – requirement for what counts as a moral value: that is to say, for a goal of life to become a 'value' it must possess in the first place an *intrinsic* quality which cannot be generated by an agent's choice or will alone.

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p.72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> David Cooper, *The Measures of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.69.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1949), sec. 4:421 / 88.

Berlin's voluntarist reading of Kant thus seems to contradict Kant's philosophical position in this regard. On the other hand, it has been pointed out by Hans Joas that as a matter of history '[t]he realm of values is formulated in opposition to Kant, who denied the moral world all empirical character and de-realised the phenomenal world, and in opposition to Hegel, who subjected the moral world to the dictates of the logic of the historical process' – by 'those who cling to the belief that it is possible to defend the metaphysical unity of the true and the good.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, '[t]he philosophy of value has its genesis at precisely that point where faith is lost in the historicizing variants of a way of thinking that asserts the identity of the true and the good.'<sup>14</sup> In the light of this finding, therefore, to attribute a Post-Kantian conception of value that asserts the unity of the true and the good, is and ought, or valuation and valuableness, as Berlin has done, seems to have perpetrated anachronism.

To be sure, when Kant spoke of the 'absolute value' of men, of their status as ends in themselves, the term 'value' was used in the context of criticising utilitarian line of thought which is logically open to the possibility of sacrificing a man's life for the sake of greater utility – that is to say, in the sense of 'not to be used as a means' rather than 'an intrinsic good.' Indeed, if 'value' means 'intrinsic good', then Kant's doctrine of respect for persons as ends in themselves would imply the bizarre idea that the greater the world's population the better the world's moral state. It follows that what Kant had in mind as 'value' here was not what is generally used in the analytic tradition of philosophy, including the existing literature on Berlin's value-pluralism, nor was that meant to denote the sense Berlin uses – that is, 'ends of life' – to argue for value-pluralism. Rather, what it means is human life's 'sacredness' – in the secular sense of the term. From this point of view, Berlin's association of Kant's doctrine with Herzen's idea that no human life should be sacrificed on 'the altars of abstractions', namely, abstract ideas such as 'nation, church, party, class, progress, the forces of history,' seems to be an interpretative move not as illegitimate as it appears.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, this reading makes best sense within a secular worldview. And again we can see that it

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p.21. My own emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.16.

is Berlin's anthropocentric Herzenian realism that has secularised Kant's ethics. No doubt, Kant's own ambivalence towards the Christian worldview, according to which God's love is the ground of all human values, also contributes to Berlin's secular reading. Of course, that does not gainsay that the fact Kant sometimes spoke of values as if they have a 'being' higher than other existents, including the valuing subject, but the point is: if they can only be discovered by man through rational reasoning, i.e. not through divine revelation (but arguably divine revelation also requires rational interpretation), then there is attached to this understanding of human value an ineradicable reference to the valuing subject. In other words, moral values for Kant are *ontologically* not entirely independent upon the valuing subject. When rendered in secular terms, that is to say, Kantian ethics suggests that human values pertain to the sphere of humanity rather than to the fabric of the ultimate reality, and for this reason they must have come into existence by human creation – or, to put it differently, they are *projected* onto the world by human will. What is more, given the absence of God, to be moral is initiated by man's will alone, and whether a *de facto* 'valued' or 'willed' course of action is to be admitted into this Kantian 'kingdom of ends' ultimately turns on whether it would be so valued by all moral agents, morality on this account strictly speaking is what mankind voluntarily imposes on themselves. From this secular point of view, Berlin is not wrong in attributing projectivism and voluntarism to Kant.

Probably, it must be admitted now, what critics find more 'grotesque' in Berlin's reading of Kant is the fact that the doctrine of 'categorical imperative' is understood solely in terms of personal autonomy, which is a form of positive liberty in Berlin's own definition. This is interesting in two ways. The first concerns is whether this is a correct reading of Kant. And the second, more relevant to the purpose of this thesis, is related to whether Berlin by associating autonomy with the projectivist conception of value has unwittingly established a conceptual link between 'respect for persons' and what he considers to be a 'value' – which unavoidably has bearing on how Berlin's own theory of value is related to positive liberty and how his defence for negative liberty against positive liberty is to be understood. To deal with Berlin's interpretation of Kant first, it must be pointed out at this moment that the doctrine of 'categorical imperative' does imply a conception of moral freedom whose realisation entails an

expression of personal autonomy: that is, one is morally free when his will is open to, and determined by, practical reason. On the other hand, according to William Galston, that does not rule out expression of negative liberty either, for it also means 'we're externally free to the extent that we're not constrained by other human beings in the pursuit of our individual purposes.'<sup>16</sup> If Galston is right, then we must admit that Berlin is wrong in this regard. What is even more interesting, however, is that Kant's conception of value, which according to Berlin is projectivist and voluntarist in nature, in effect expresses the agent's personal autonomy – at the very least his unconstrained will to act always on moral intent within a rational and deliberative state of mind. By implication, that seems to suggest that what Berlin considers to be a 'value' is also open to a 'positive' embodiment. However, we leave this important issue to be dealt with later when we discuss Berlin's conceptual distinction between negative and positive liberty, it suffices to say that, firstly, Berlin's own conception of value in any event accords considerable importance to man's *free will*. And secondly, there exists a major difference between Berlin's conception of value and Kant's: while whatever pursued by man for its own sake would be recognised by Berlin as a 'value' or a 'positive goal', for Kant only those which are also willed by the agent to be applicable to the whole mankind without exception would be counted as a value. In other words, while Kant defined the boundaries of his imagined moral kingdom clearly, that is, a valued entity must be universal in order to become a valid 'moral' value, Berlin does not lay down this 'universality' requirement for a positive goal to become a 'value' of moral significance. Indeed, what is clear so far is that Berlin considers human beings to be essentially free and creative moral agents, yet if there is no further relevant criteria provided by him, the boundaries of 'morality' would remain unclear in the end – surely a potential cost very high for a normative theory of political philosophy.

In fact, the prospect for a clear-cut sphere of morality in Berlin does not seem promising, especially when the following two major implications of his conception of value are taken into account. The first concerns the projectivist conception's defining

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<sup>16</sup> William Galston, 'Kant's Practical Philosophy' in Ronald Beiner and William James Booth (eds.), *Kant and Political Philosophy – The Contemporary Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.219.

nature: given that this Herzenian conception of value takes *de facto* human experience to be the point of departure for theorising value, Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism grounded on it could not have been a metaphysical theory of values or the good as Michael Lessnoff, among others, has understood.<sup>17</sup> And that means any attribution of a liberal politics based on such a 'pluralist metaphysics' to Berlin is bound to distort what he intends to argue as well as to bring into his value-pluralism a number of theoretical difficulties which in fact are alien to his system of thought. For instance, as well be argued in next chapter, Berlin is not faced by difficulties concerning how values come into existence in the first place, nor does he have to give an account of how *de facto* values pursued by moral agents relate to the ultimate reality of the good which is supposed to be universal and abstract. As a matter of fact, Berlin's Herzenian conception of value does not carry the metaphysical luggage that presupposes the identity of the true and the good. In fact, one may even say that in a sense it is meant to do away with just that, for on this account the question concerning whether the good is (identical to) the true is inapplicable here, for there is no 'intrinsic' quality to be found – what Kant and his followers have sought for long – in a human-created value or in an agent's chosen ends of life. In defining 'value' as 'ends men strive for,' that is to say, Berlin has not only transformed the philosophical issue of the ontology of values from a *metaphysical* question into an *empirical* one – and accordingly the question 'What is a value?' from a *normative* philosophical issue into a *descriptive* or even anthropological one – but also switched our perspective from the external to the internal, that is to say, from the *third-person* to the *first-person*. This shift in point of view in effect affirms once again our capacity to reflect upon ourselves and to see others as our own equals – i.e. what makes empathy as analogous understanding a real possibility, as discussed in last chapter. For this reason, this Herzenian conception of value can be said to be premised on our *self-knowledge* by way of reflection as a moral agent. What is more, since it involves seeing others as moral and creative agents equal to oneself, this conception of value in fact implies a respect for others as

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<sup>17</sup> Michael H. Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p.222.

persons. It follows that, Berlin's conception of value is in effect of a piece with his historical approach, and indeed what underlies both of these two elements of his methodology is his faith in men's capacity to reflect on themselves as moral agents.

Despite the fact that Berlin's conception of value is free from those problems associated with the attempt to ground value on metaphysics, his way of understanding human value generates new kinds of problem. To explain, as Lessnoff has complained already, Berlin 'endorses, indiscriminately, a plurality of conflicting "values", "ideals", "ends" and "goals", without any sense that the differences between these concepts might be important.'<sup>18</sup> If this section is right so far, then what Berlin has in mind when he speaks of the conflict between values is the conflicting 'positive goals of life', 'ends of life', or 'ideals of life' – as he indeed uses them interchangeably with the term 'value'. However, although this clarification of terminology sheds light on the question 'What does a value consist *in*?' to some extent, what an instance of 'value' consists *of* is still vague. Consequently, we are left unclear about what exactly are in conflict when values come into conflict with each other. This situation is complicated further by Berlin's talk of the 'embodiment' – or 'incarnation' as used in his early writings – of human values. The idea of 'embodiment' is important in that it reveals not only how Berlin considers the relation between value and action, but also what he takes to be required of an agent when he professes to be acting in the name of a value. On the whole, this idea denotes Berlin's acceptance of Herder's identification of 'is' and 'ought'. From this perspective, one may regard a value as a *practical reason*. And that in a way helps Berlin evade the question troubling the 'metaphysical' approach to value: why should we have to act on moral values even if they exist? However, this idea also means that a value-concept such as 'liberty' or 'equality' in principle allows for more than one embodiment or more than one way of embodying. In other words, there exists a distance between any value-concept and what counts its realisation – that is to say, between *value-referent* and *value-reference*. This distance constitutes a space where the agent has freedom to choose *which way* or *by what* – be it a course of

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<sup>18</sup> Michael H. Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p.222.

action, institution, or even attitude, as Berlin once suggests – he intends to embody his chosen value, and will generate difficulties for the observer to ascertain what value is being embodied.<sup>19</sup> For example, ‘liberty’ may be *said to be* embodied by fighting off an enemy, by a process of decolonisation, or by going or not going to the polls. Thus, there is no single way of embodying a given value, and sometimes new ways have to be created to suit new circumstances. What is more, given the possibility of failure, that is, an agent can pursue a value ‘without conscious hope of success’ on Berlin’s account, it appears to be impossible to tell what value has been pursued by an agent in the case of a failed attempt. It follows that the relation between a given value and its embodiment in fact is not conceptual but *interpretative*. And that also means that if there is no better way for determining the relation between value-referent and value-reference, then *authorial intention* is the only thing we can appeal to when deciding what or which value is being embodied in any instance of value embodiment. Yet that amounts to according the valuing subject the ultimate right to determine the content of value and that runs the risk of leaving the agent to decide the boundaries of morality for himself – after all that is what he projects onto the world.

At this point, we begin to see how Berlin’s Herzenian projectivist conception of value may bear on the issue of morality. Nevertheless, there is yet another difficulty that arises mainly from the voluntarism inherent in the Herzenian conception. Central to it is the worry that Berlin by understanding value to be what moral agents would pursue for its own sake has effectively assigned the normative source of values to the valuing subject alone, and that surely runs the risk of granting each single individual the right to retreat from his value commitments at any time. If this is the case, it follows that whenever the agent is confronted with a situation of value conflict he can always *voluntarily* relinquish one of the conflicting values and therefore escape the dilemma. That is to say, there is always a way out of value conflict; in other words, tragic conflict – a feature of human value Berlin often refers to when formulating his value-pluralism – in effect can be avoided in one way or another. As it seems, on

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<sup>19</sup> Berlin talks about how attitudes embody values in his essay ‘The Pursuit of the Ideal’ in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.12.



Berlin's account, the moral agents can take the strategy to exit from value conflict, at least some forms of value conflict; hence value conflict is not as inescapable as he suggests. Undeniably, this is an unpleasant implication for Berlin's overall moral and political philosophy. Unless it can be established that there are some values whose normativity does not reside in the individual's consent, that is to say, they demand action from all moral agents even when they do not give consent to their moral authority, Berlin's talk of tragic conflict seems to make no sense. What is more, if the *plurality* of values is to be premised on the fact that there exists more than one value demanding embodiment, then in principle we can reject any value's moral command at will or decide to recognise just one supreme value. This voluntarism in Berlin's conception of value seems to threaten one of the key tenets of his value-pluralism – the tragic conflict of value – and generates an internal tension within the doctrine.

However, it is vital to point out that the voluntarism in Berlin's conception of value does not suggest that values are necessarily individualistic and subjective, and that certainly would place constraints on an agent's strategy to escape from tragic conflict. Indeed, one should not forget that values are for Berlin objective. If so, then an agent in fact cannot always retreat from moral dilemma involving conflicting values *at will*. To deal with this important issue of course requires a full account of how human values can be objective under Berlin's vision of the world. The rest of this section tries to pave the way for that by discussing Berlin's idea of objectivity first. To begin with, note that Berlin is aware of more than one notion of 'objectivity', and his point is that different notions suit different spheres of human affairs and to apply one only suitable for a particular sphere to another is to violate the sense of reality. He calls this type of violation as 'false analogy', and in his judgement it is no less harmful than anachronism, especially when it comes to politics. The paradigm case Berlin has in mind is the concept of scientific history, which according to him is grounded upon 'a false analogy of *objectivity* with some among the more exact of the natural sciences.'<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, he regards history as a *sui generis* intellectual activity involving practical judgement but no construction of models or hypotheses. It

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<sup>20</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.89.

implies that the historian does not share with the scientist's idea of objectivity. Indeed, for Berlin, to be objective in natural science requires that 'methods and criteria of a less or more precisely defined kind are being used with scrupulous care; and that evidence, arguments, conclusions are formulated in the special terminology invented or employed for the special purpose of each science, and that there is no intrusion (or almost none) of irrelevant considerations or concepts or categories.'<sup>21</sup> By contrast, to see whether a historian is objective or not is to ask whether the historian is biased, in the sense that whether 'proper methods of weighing evidence have been too far ignored; or [...] what are normally called facts have been overlooked or suppressed or perverted; or [...] evidence normally accepted as sufficient to account for the acts of one individual or society is, for no good reason, ignored in some other case similar in all relevant respects; or [...] canons of interpretation are arbitrarily altered from case to case, that is, without consistency or principle.'<sup>22</sup> In short, the objectivity in history has nothing to do with scientific instruments measurement but means exactly the same as in our daily language, and to apply the idea of objectivity in natural science to history therefore is a misapplication rooted in false analogy, a failure to understand *what fits what* and *what can and cannot be done*. The question is: what conception of objectivity for Berlin is appropriate for the sphere of morality?

The crux of the matter lies in the second sentence in the passage quoted above to illustrate Berlin's projectivism, according to which men pursue positive goals not just individually but also collectively. What is at work here is of course Berlin's holistic expressivism discussed in the previous chapter, derived from Herder and, to a lesser extent, Vico. Until now, his projectivist conception of value has been characterised by the primacy of the valuing subject's voluntary consent, that is, the *normative* sources of value reside not in the intrinsic quality of such values but each moral agent, it seems that Berlin should endorse value subjectivism rather than objectivism, if he is to remain consistent. Nevertheless, one should not forget that he also holds to a holistic expressionism, and when the Herzenian conception of value is read together

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<sup>21</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.91.

with this Herderian doctrine, the voluntarism inherent in the former in fact is not as subjectivist as it seems and, more importantly, does not have to imply a form of subjectivism. No doubt, what serves as the constraints here is the 'holistic' nature of the Herderian expressivism. It is holistic in the sense that the meaning of a given act performed by an agent must be understood in the context of the whole web of social practices, in the way similar to a word's meaning is defined by the whole language to which it belongs. However, that does not suggest that a deliberate break of the social rules governing the web is not possible. Indeed, one should not conflate 'holism' with untrammelled 'collectivism' here. At any rate, in the case of Berlin, the holism he derives from Herder only means that, in a way analogous to how a word's meaning must be established by reference to the whole vocabulary of the language it belongs, a particular action must also be understood in the light of the web of social practice it belongs to. Similarly, in a way a new word comes into existence within the vocabulary of a language, novel acts of behaviour can be made by free and creative moral agents, only that the meaning and significance of them should be determined by reference to the old social practices. That is to say, Herderian holistic expressivism does not preclude what Mill calls 'experiments in living', and the possibility for the agent to assign a new meaning to an old pattern of behaviour is not ruled out either. Rather, it provides the context whereby a particular creative expression is meaningful.

From this it follows that the Herzenian conception of value which is marked by agent-relativity does not contradict the Herderian expressivism. Rather, they together suggest a model of men and society where an individual must belong to a group yet remain a free and creative moral agent. In other words, the selfhood of the agent within Berlin's Herderian-Herzenian vision of the world is – to borrow the idea made famous by contemporary communitarian thinkers – an 'embedded self', for his self-identify is inseparable from the group or culture he belongs to. To return to the issue of objectivity, that means human values created by agents within the social framework they belong to can not be purely subjective, for they are in fact regulated by the rules of the framework and hence 'objective facts' which can be traced by anyone who knows their way in the web of social rules. On the other hand, this interpretation seems to confirm John Gray's reading that the idea of objectivity held by Berlin can

best be understood in terms of Wittgenstein's famous notion of *publicness* in his philosophy of language – which is, as observed by Charles Taylor, a later version of Herder's linguistic holism.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, if this is Berlin's idea of moral values, this notion of objectivity, as also suggested by Gray, implies a variant of *moral realism*: internal realism, that is, the meta-ethical position according to which 'the elements in the world of value, though they are historical creations – forms of activity, such as science or art, forms of life, such as friendship or romantic love – are nevertheless independent subject-matters, in respect of which our beliefs may be true or false.'<sup>24</sup> In the light of this holism, thus, despite that Berlin holds an agent-relative conception of value, the content of value is not any individual's own 'preference' or 'interest' but rather the ends of life also intelligible to others as worth pursuing for their own sake.

However, although the Herderian holism enables Berlin to make sense of value objectivity, this way of understanding value, paradoxically, gives the impression of *cultural relativism*. Indeed, for one thing, even though values can now be said to be objective, their objectivity strictly speaking is ensured by a particular web of social practice and hence relative to the culture or society to which a given value belongs. For another, even if a value can be 'public' in Wittgenstein's sense, the value is public only to the extent that it is intelligible *exclusively* to those who share with the agent the same culture and hence remains subjective in a sense. In other words, in a way analogous to the two-edged nature of Herder's linguistic holism as noted in the previous chapter, Berlin's holistic expressivism means that a given value's symbolic of significance is only 'public' to those who share the culture in which it is found but 'private' to those who do not. It follows that there is an ineradicably subjectiveness in this understanding of objectivity; and for this reason this notion of objectivity may be termed as 'inter-subjectivity'. This is surely a controversial conception of objectivity. Indeed, one may even find it baffling that Berlin would have appealed to this idea that values are *relative to* a culture to reassure his critics that value-pluralism is not a form of relativism in the first place.

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<sup>23</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.72; Charles Taylor, 'The importance of Herder' in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.77-99.

<sup>24</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.72.

As noted in the introductory chapter of this thesis, relativism is a key issue in the literature on Berlin. Indeed, he has been criticised for endorsing cultural relativism and his value-pluralism has been read by many as cultural relativism. Before we start to investigate this issue, however, one thing deserves our initial attention here: judged from the dialogue between Berlin and those who have accused him of relativism, despite their use of the same term, they do not seem to share the same understanding of the nature and hence see the threat of relativism quite differently. That is to say, relativism for Berlin implies the impossibility of cross-cultural *understanding* rather than criticism. At any rate it is in this sense that his statement that the label of relativism has been attached erroneously to the eighteenth-century thinkers, in particular Herder and Vico, should be understood.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, his critics seem to understand relativism to be implying that no *criticism* of other cultures should be made. That means, Berlin is concerned with the epistemological but his critics the normative. To put it differently, Berlin takes relativism to be radical subjectivism or even solipsism, so that he points to the possibility of penetrating into the other's mind via empathetic understanding as a way of refuting the relativist's claim. Whereas, his critics see any attempt to explain values or actions by reference to the rationale behind them to be relativistic in nature, fearing that would virtually *rationalise* all behaviours, including apparently irrational ones; therefore, they see Berlin's idea that justifications for values *as a matter of fact* are – not as principle should be – culturally embedded as a rationalistic threat of *explaining away* some culture's 'irrational' particularities. Yet, the reality is that Berlin and his critics have different worries and do not really address each other's concerns (which highlights the necessity of reading a thinker in his own terms). More importantly, it must be pointed out that Berlin by arguing for the need to understand how an act is rationalised by the agent in his own terms does not forsake the cross-cultural criticism, only that it must be based on proper understanding – for otherwise it would result in injustice.

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<sup>25</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), pp.77-78.

In any event, for Berlin, what he argues is cultural pluralism rather than cultural relativism, and as a matter of fact he would agree with his critics that cross-cultural criticism is possible. In his essay 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', the following clarification is found, this time *à la* Vico, to clarify the vision he believes, according to which:

This vision of a society is conveyed by everything that its members do and think and feel – expressed and embodied in the kinds of words, the forms of language that they use, the images, the metaphors, the forms of worship, the institutions that they generate, which embody and convey their image of reality and of their place in it; by which they live these visions differ with each successive *social whole* – each has its own gifts, values, modes of creation, *incommensurable* with one another: each must be understood in its won terms – *understood, not necessarily evaluated*.<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, the phrase 'social whole' denotes Vico's embryonic concept of culture, and this passage is but one of Berlin's many formulations of cultural pluralism. More importantly, it states that a holistic-expressivist vision of the world as such does not preclude cross-cultural evaluation. Of course, Berlin's critics may not be satisfied, for this statement sounds more like a manifesto than an argument, and how a given social whole is to be evaluated remains unclear; indeed, even if they could agree with Berlin that a proper understanding is necessary prior to criticism, there is the question: what standards we can use to criticise? In any event, we still have to ask: how could Berlin, on the one hand, distinguish cultural pluralism from cultural relativism and, on the other, distinguish himself from his critics who by no means agree with his vision of the world and tend to believe that there is an absolutely objective *a prioristic* vantage-point from which all cultures can be judged. In fact, the answer to this question is implicit in the passage: Berlin's pluralistic vision itself is meant to be a *vision of reality* and to serve as a evaluative vantage-point to evaluate. The rest of this chapter is to explain just that, and the next section deals with the idea of incommensurability.

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<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.9. My own emphasis.

### III.2. Incommensurability and the Reach of Value Conflict

By origin, the concept of ‘incommensurability’ is a mathematical one, first recorded in the discussions of Pythagoras’s theorem, referring to a situation where the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is not equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides: for instance, when its three sides are 6 cm, 7 cm and 8 cm; whereas the three sides of a right-angled triangle whose lengths being 3 cm, 4 cm and 5 cm are commensurable. The most famous rediscovery of it in contemporary philosophy was made by Thomas Kuhn to explain his notion of ‘paradigm’ in his 1962 seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which in its turn inaugurated a paradigm shift in the field of intellectual history.<sup>27</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, ‘incommensurability’ is a term of art in Berlin’s formulation of value-pluralism, and has been one of the central ones in the literature on the doctrine of value-pluralism. In fact, it has become a philosophical idea in its own right so intriguing that many of its today’s exponents, mainly working in meta-ethics, have assumed it to be a new idea without bothering to mention what it was meant by its progenitor in the field. At any rate, in what remains the most authoritative collection of papers on the idea’s meta-ethical relevance, its editor Ruth Chang begins her introductory chapter by dismissing Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability as ‘inapplicable’ for moral and political philosophy and adopts instead Joseph Raz’s account as the starting-point.<sup>28</sup> As things stand, thus, the idea of incommensurability in the literature on value-pluralism is often understood in terms of his ‘intransitivity’ thesis: ‘[t]wo valuable options are incommensurable if (1) neither is better than the other, and (2) there is (or could be) another option which is better than one but is not better than the other’— hence, incommensurability implies a

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> There is another way of understanding this mathematical idea. See Ruth Chang (ed.)

*Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 1.

breakdown of *transitivity* between values.<sup>29</sup> And more recently, Raz has added an ‘incomparability’ thesis to the literature, according to which incommensurable values are goods belonging to different ‘genres’, like novels and war movies, and therefore cannot be compared.<sup>30</sup> And, as one can expect, this will soon be applied to illustrate Berlin’s value-pluralism – although that may not change John Gray’s reading, also by way of Raz’s earlier thesis, that radical choice between incommensurable values for Berlin means that ‘[w]hat one loses is of a different kind from what one gains.’<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, Berlin does not define what he means by ‘incommensurability’ when he phrases the term to restate his value-pluralism in his later writings; for this reason, to offer an interpretation of what that idea may mean must involve reconstruction. This section does not challenge the application of Raz’s thesis to Berlin’s value-pluralism. Nevertheless, it will break away the Razian tradition by reading Berlin in the light of Kuhn’s ‘paradigm’ thesis. The primary reason is that, on the one hand, reading Berlin in Razian terms still leaves the *source* of value incommensurability unclear and, on the other, Berlin’s writing does have affinities with Kuhn’s thesis. In any event, his terminology bears resemblance to Kuhn’s language. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Berlin uses the term ‘paradigm’ in his 1961 essay ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, a year before *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published, to illustrate his idea of ‘model’, ‘conceptual structure’ that govern various *outlooks* or *visions* of society – an idea to which he has since the early fifties tried to draw attention of the student of political ideas. Perhaps more importantly, his Herderian holistic expressivism lends itself to the Kuhnian understanding of incommensurability anyway; after all, that is an application of Wittgenstein’s metaphor of ‘language-game’ which, as noted earlier, is a later version of Herder’s linguistic holism – which unmistakably is what the phrase ‘social whole’ means in the passage quoted towards the end of last section. The task of this section is to highlight the area where Kuhn’s understanding of incommensurability may bear on Berlin’s value-pluralism, and in

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.325; ‘Mixing Values’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (1991), pp. 83-100.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Raz, ‘Mixing Values’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (1991), pp. 83-100.

<sup>31</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 52.



particular on the issues concerning the objectivity of value, the inevitability of conflict, the nature of radical choice and the ensuing tragic loss of value. All these issues will be considered in turn. To proceed, a brief account of Kuhn's thesis is necessary.

According to Kuhn, the history of science consists of two kinds of episode: normal science and revolutionary science. What 'normal science' refers to is a period when scientific research is governed by certain assumptions and theories about the nature of the world and what counts the central problems of the area of research, and a set of rules and procedures, together with a few 'exemplars' (perfect cases), regulating the conduction of experiments – that is, a *paradigm*. A paradigm thus is what the community of scientists uncritically accept as their outlook or *modus operandi*, which functions as a 'disciplinary matrix' for the production of scientific knowledge. It follows that, as suggested by Kuhn, *what counts* as scientific facts are nothing but the claims by the élite of the community of scientists working under a particular paradigm; for this reason *scientific facts* can be said to be 'manufactured' in the laboratory by those who conduct experiments and observations under that scientific paradigm. To use a fashionable phrase, scientific facts for Kuhn are 'socially constructed'.<sup>32</sup> During the normal science episode, phenomena contradictory to the standard theories of the paradigm may occur but tend to be explained away as 'anomalies'. When anomalies accumulate to an unacceptable number, however, the paradigm would be challenged and eventually come to a state of crisis. Note that while a paradigm may provide standards for evaluating recalcitrant theories internally, it provides no rules for the evaluation of competing paradigms seeking to take its place. Consequently, science research would enter what Kuhn calls 'revolutionary science' episode, and there certainly exist elements of intellectual anarchy in this period. Indeed, as suggested by Kuhn, as there are no facts *simpliciter*, and the standards of rationality are also *relative to* a paradigm, rather than absolute, there can be no 'the facts' or 'the rational principle' to which we can appeal so as to make a choice between recalcitrant scientific theories. In other words, science at this stage is no less *political* than politics,

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

because paradigms are *incommensurable* with each other, and the only way to settle the dispute between two paradigms seems to be via social persuasion. Precisely, this is how Kuhn concludes the second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which reminds us of the situation of radical choice Berlin has in mind:

There is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision. In this sense it is the community of specialists rather than its individual members that makes the effective decision.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, the old paradigm would be overthrown and replaced by a new scientific paradigm – that is to say, science progresses in history by revolutions. Examples of scientific revolutions given by Kuhn include the triumph of the Copernicus's heliocentric model of the solar system over the Ptolemy's geocentric universe, the arrival of Newton's mechanics, the discovery of oxygen and the end of phlogiston, the advance of Darwin's theory of natural selection, and the replacement of classical physics by Einstein's relativity theory and later on quantum mechanics. Each example represents a change in the whole conceptual scheme, hence a *paradigm shift*, and each paradigm shift necessarily involves institutional resistance, manoeuvred by those scientists still loyal to the old paradigm, to the new paradigm – in a way not dissimilar to political revolution.

At the heart of Kuhn's two-episode model of scientific history is the very idea of incommensurability. Indeed, were paradigms commensurable, in the sense that it is possible to say which of two competing paradigms is better, then a radical choice between them would not occur and the progress of science would take the form of a continuous process of evolution rather than a series of revolutions. As it seems, there are for Kuhn two sources of incommensurability: (1) *meaning incommensurability*, or the fact that the meaning of the terms used in the recalcitrant theories or paradigms are not the same; (2) *standards incommensurability*, that is, the fact that standards for

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), p.200.

comparing and evaluating competitive theories are paradigm relative. It should be noted that, although these two sources are related, they are two logically different claims and operate at different levels. More specifically, while meaning incommensurability entails standards incommensurability, the reverse entailment may not hold.<sup>34</sup> To explain, at the core of meaning incommensurability is the claim that a theoretical term derives its meaning from the theory in which it plays a part; in other words, the meaning of a theoretical term is *theory-laden*. For example, both Newton and Einstein use the term ‘mass’, but since their laws of motion are different (while Newton recognises only one quantity of mass, Einstein recognises two, rest mass and relativistic mass), what their terms really refer to cannot be the same. What is at issue in this case is not just meaning variance, which in principle can be rectified once their references are clarified. Rather, what causes problems is the fact that the meaning of their *observations* is also theory-laden, but there exists not a single theory-interdependent observation language that can be used to express the observational consequences of two recalcitrant theories in a way not coloured by either of them yet comprehensible to both theories’ practitioners. Given that each theorist is working within a web of theory, it follows that no theorists from different paradigms would be able to find a *neutral language* for mutual communication, and for that reason they are strictly speaking unable to disagree. As a corollary, meaning incommensurability entails standards incommensurability. However, it is possible for an individual to have understood the meaning of a theoretical term used in another paradigm, yet still find himself unable to judge which paradigm is closer to the truth. Hence, standards incommensurability does not entail meaning incommensurability.

What underlies the asymmetry between meaning incommensurability and standards incommensurability, as observed by Alexander Bird, seems to be this: a theoretical term has a *sense* which determines its *reference*, and the sense of such a term in turn depends on the *whole* of the theory it is a part – in other words, ‘the

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<sup>34</sup> Paul O’Grady, *Relativism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002), pp. 157-8. Ian Hacking has suggested three kinds of incommensurability: topic incommensurability, disassociation incommensurability, and meaning incommensurability; for details see his *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.67.

theory amounts to one *big description* of its intended reference.’<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Kuhn, both the sense and reference of a theoretical term are theory-laden, and for this reason they are necessarily *paradigm-embedded*. Apparently, what is at work here is a holistic account of the relation between theoretical terms and theories, and a holistic account of the relation between theory and paradigm (that is, a paradigm is a web of theories). It follows that what generates the incommensurability between two paradigms is the breakdown of cross-paradigmatic evaluation, due to the absence of neutral standards for evaluating their relative merits at the macro-level, not meaning variance at the *term-to-term* micro-level, for the latter is logically dependent on the former. Thus understood, a paradigm functions like what Berlin calls ‘social wholes’ in the earlier passage quoted, or Wittgenstein’s idea of language-game, and incommensurability denotes not only the absence of a neutral language between recalcitrant scientific communities, but also the *untranslatability* between their languages. Also suggested by this holistic nature of paradigm is that scientists working under different paradigms in fact live in ‘different worlds’, with incommensurable worldviews.

As it seems, Kuhn’s social-historical account of scientific change lends itself to a strongly relativistic reading, and many rationalists – in particular, Popperians – have regarded it as a paradigm case of relativism.<sup>36</sup> Kuhn is certainly very aware of this problem and he always repudiated the relativist label. His solution is to offer an account of what counts as a good scientific theory, identifying the following five characteristics or, as he later on calls, values: accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity and fruitfulness.<sup>37</sup> Kuhn’s theoretical strategy is clear. These five values serve as the very standards by which both intra-paradigmatic and cross-paradigmatic disputes are

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Bird, *Philosophy of Science* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p.279.

<sup>36</sup> Kuhn’s account is, at least partially, meant to be an attack on Popper’s rationalistic account of the scientific community.

<sup>37</sup> For details see Thomas S. Kuhn, ‘Objectivity, Value Judgement and Theory Choice’ in *The Essential Tension* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977); ‘Reflections on my Critics’ in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.261.

to be solved. Meanwhile, since the source of incommensurability is understood here as a lack of a neutral language, they are also the functional equivalent of the very neutral language which *transcends* recalcitrant paradigms. Nevertheless, Kuhn's transcendental strategy faces two severe difficulties. Firstly, if a concept as basic as what counts as 'fact' is essentially contested in science, there is little reason to assume that a consensus on those characteristics could exist among the community of scientists. Secondly, even if they agree on their existence, there is still a question with regard to which of any two, say, simplicity or accuracy, is more important when they come into conflict with each other. Yet a mere possibility of ranking suggests that a paradigmatic 'good scientific theory' is possible – which would defeat the very *political* conditions of scientific research on which Kuhn has relied for making his case for the two-episode model of scientific history. Nevertheless, whether Kuhn may be able to solve these two difficulties is not of our concern. For what is relevant here is how Kuhn's idea of incommensurability and paradigm bear on our understanding of the doctrine of value-pluralism.

To begin with, on Kuhn's account, a 'paradigm' is a *modus operandi* rather than a set of concepts and categories, and that has three implications for Berlin's idea of 'a vision of a society'. To explain, firstly, note that the idea of 'vision' in principle can lend itself to two logically distinct but not mutually exclusive readings. Under a *static* reading, by the idea of 'a vision of a society' Berlin is making the now platitudinous claim that behind each political theory there is a set of assumptions or a model of men and society, rather like how the aforementioned Collingwood's 'absolute principles' has traditionally been understood. This appears to be how the term 'model' denotes in Gallipeau's study on Berlin, according to which history for the latter is displays a 'panoply of models of human nature and society,' resulting in a theoretical model composed by a set of six principles (see Chapter 1). Nevertheless, under a dynamic reading of the term, a vision of a society is an outlook, a *modus operandi* or a style of thinking. The task of the historian thus is to try to experience the rich textual of life actually experienced by men in the past. No doubt, this is consistent with Berlin's historical methodology. But more importantly, that also means Berlin's *own* vision of the world is not meant to be understood as a set of abstract concepts and categories

from which a given political design can be logically derived but rather a style of reasoning. Of course, that does not deny that a vision can be verbally summarised into a theoretical model. However, to do just that is to miss this point of Berlin's argument. Secondly, given a vision of the world is meant to be *a vision of reality* – just like each scientific paradigm is to replace the old one – to challenge all other visions of the world. Of course, whether his pluralistic vision can replace the old ones is a question that can only be answered when the vision is fully understood and thus should be dealt with in the concluding chapter of this thesis. What is more important is that, thirdly, Kuhn's idea of paradigm also implies that incommensurability means that conflict between two paradigms runs into every level of the sphere they govern. In other words, from the meaning of a term to what counts as a fact or evidence, and ultimately to what the universe is supposed to be like – a cross-paradigmatic incommensurability means that conflict in meaning and significance of a given event in effect reaches every level of the incommensurable paradigms. This implication has a serious bearing on Berlin's value-pluralism and, in particular, its application.

A few concrete cases involving two incommensurable 'social wholes' may be useful to illustrate this point. For example, we can say that Christianity and Buddhism are two incommensurable – to use Berlin's terminology – visions of the world. Indeed, one is a theistic and the other an atheistic religion: while Christianity believes in one single creator of the universe, the Almighty God, Buddhism recognises no such creator. From this difference in the vision of the universe, there follows a different conception of man: while in Christianity a man as a creature by God in His image can never become God, in Buddhism every man has the chance to transform himself into a Buddha. Therefore, for a Christian, the meaning of life is to follow Jesus the Lord in every way who is 'the way, the truth, and the life', believing that his blood has shed men from all sins and has restored the bridge between God and man after the Fall. Whereas, for a Buddhist, the meaning of life strictly speaking is a notion inapplicable, for life is an endless cycle of suffering which can only be escaped by shedding all concerns and desires so as to achieve true freedom. Of course, Christianity also values freedom, but what the word 'freedom' refers to is a will that is fully in line with God's will. Beyond any doubt, Berlin would agree that Christianity and Buddhism are two

incommensurable paradigms. From this brief account, it is clear that even when ‘God’ and ‘Buddha’ can be said to be two deities, there is no way to think that they refer to the same thing – after all, what counts as ‘man’ is also radically different in these two religions. Indeed, they differ even in the idea of what counts as ‘truth’. There surely are areas where there is no meaning variance at the term-to-term micro-level, but arguable they would not be what really matters in these two religions. Thus, there is a sense that they are incommensurable at all levels.

It follows that under Berlin’s pluralistic vision discussed at the end of last section, what a man pursues as values may be said to be ‘incommensurable’ with another man’s values – if their pursuits take place within two incommensurable paradigms. To rephrase, that means, cultural pluralism implies that ‘values’ can be incommensurable with each other. Surely, this is Herder’s holism, both linguistic and anthropological, revisited: the source of value incommensurability lies in the fact that values are embedded in two different paradigms, mainly because each valuing subject belongs to a particular social whole. In this way, from the discussion of Berlin’s cultural pluralism we have arrived at his doctrine of value-pluralism. Now, we are in a position to address John Gray’s concern that it is not clear what the term ‘value’ for Berlin designates, that is, as ‘goods, options, virtues, whole conceptions of the good or entire cultural traditions or forms of life.’<sup>38</sup> That is, the term designates all these at the same time, for they are but ‘values’ – in Berlin’s Herzenain sense – embodied at different levels of human life. Read under the Kuhnian notion of incommensurability, Berlin’s idea that there is a plurality of values is of a piece with his cultural pluralism: value-pluralism is a doctrine that there exists a plurality of *forms of life* which may take the form of, individually, a life project, or, collectively, culture – and some of which may come to be incommensurable with each other. Given Berlin’s acceptance of Herder’s faith in the inseparability of action and thought, that also means that each actual instance of incommensurability in fact is a conflict between different conceptions of the good life, that is to say, a conflict of vision of the life.

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<sup>38</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 49.

In fact, this reading, although by a different route, confirms Gray's finding that Berlin's pluralism has three levels of application: (1) 'within any morality or code of conduct such as ours, there will arise conflicts among the ultimate values of that morality, which neither theoretical nor practical reasoning about them can resolve;' (2) 'each of these goods or values is internally complex and inherently pluralistic, containing conflicting elements, some of which are constitutive incommensurables;' (3) 'different cultural forms will generate different moralities and values, containing many overlapping features, no doubt, but also specifying different, find incommensurable, excellences, virtues and conceptions of the good'<sup>39</sup> For the sake of convenience, we may label them as the *intra-systematic*, the *intra-conceptual*, and the *cross-cultural* level respectively. The cross-cultural level should be clear by now. The intra-conceptual level is implied by the difference in the conception of freedom under Christianity and Buddhism. However, it must be reminded that Berlin does not take 'values' to be the conception of the abstract universal, culturally disembedded idea of the 'good'. As for the first level of value conflict, to illustrate, we may consider the three dominant secular moral traditions in the West: Kantian ethics, and Utilitarianism. Each of these two moralities prescribes a form of life as the good life. For a Kantian, to lead a good life is to live an autonomous and act only if the action is to be morally applicable to all men. For a Utilitarian, to act is to seek pleasure, and thus to have a good life is to pursue a form of life with maximised – amount or kinds of – pleasures. By traditional understanding of these two moralities, they are two incommensurables, because they cannot combine to form a coherent grand system without transforming or even distorting the meanings of their constitutive key terms. For instance, to define the meaning of Kantian autonomy as utility in a classic utilitarian sense is impossible – even if that is possible, the significance of it would be very different. It follows that value conflict in the form of incommensurability applies to the Western liberal democracies as well.

Steven Lukes has complained that 'Berlin took over, too uncritically, Herder's unremittingly holistic view of cultures,' and 'never asked to what extent cultures are

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<sup>39</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 43.



always clusters or assemblages of heterogeneous elements of varying origins.’<sup>40</sup> That is to say, there is, if there ever were, no *bona fide* Christian or Buddhist societies today; and to this one may add that there never exists a Kantian or Utilitarian closed society. Nevertheless, it is not clear how that works against Berlin’s overall argument. To explain, suppose that an agent who finds moral authority (as a result of upbringing) in all the Christian, Kantian and Utilitarian moral traditions, is now faced with a situation concerning whether she is to undergo an abortion. After deliberation, she finds that abortion is the best Utilitarian course of action, but that surely conflicts both the Kantian principle of respect for persons (suppose that an embryo is a ‘person’) and God’s commandment ‘not to kill’. In the end, she finds not just different ‘oughts’, but even an action can be performed for different reasons – that is, the oughts whose meanings are relative to moralities and radically different. Clearly, this situation can only arise from a society with ‘heterogeneous elements of varying origins’ – which seems to support rather than undermine Berlin’s case for value-pluralism. Lukes may reply that the agent is unlucky to have been brought up in that way, and at any rate no rational human beings would endorse three moralities at the same time. However, that would fly in the face of the reality. For one thing, so-called ‘Western culture’ is characterised by all these three moral traditions, and such people do exist. Indeed, it is even not difficult to find one who would like to believe in both Darwinian evolutionary theory and Christianity. The human reality is after all, to use Berlin’s favourite saying, a crooked timber out of which no straight things was ever made.<sup>41</sup> For another, to straighten out this situation, it is necessary for the agent to reject, or for the Western society to rule out, at least two of the three moralities – yet either case would result in what Berlin calls ‘tragic loss of value’. Indeed, the three moralities are all highly valued, and to eliminate any of them from society is to preclude the agent pursuing various forms of life – hence ‘values’ in Berlin’s terminology. In any event, to ask the agent to do so amounts to asking him to act immorally – after all, that requires him to act against his *own* morality.

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Lukes, ‘An Unfashionable Fox’ in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.39.

In fact, given Berlin's concept of man as an essentially free and creative moral agent, human affairs for him are by default in the moral sphere. On this account, culture as a life-world must be moral in nature. That is to say, what Berlin takes to be a 'culture' in effect is a – to borrow Samuel Fleischacker's term – 'moral posit', i.e. a system of norms prescribing how one should live.<sup>42</sup> This moral view of culture seems to have the advantage of being able to distinguish one culture from another; indeed, what makes one distinct from another is its vision of the good life, rather than travellers' tale or other myths.<sup>43</sup> It enables Berlin to recognise that modern societies are clusters of heterogeneous elements of varying cultural origins – and hence the likelihood for an agent to grow up in a web of incommensurable outlooks of life. Also, that strengthens Berlin's claim about the objectivity of value. Indeed, precisely because morality is not just a matter of personal choice, tragic value conflict within an individual's breast may sometimes occur, and there is no easy way to escape. Given that culture denotes membership and the agent's self-understanding is embedded in the *narrative* of the community, a conflict of this kind may mean that he is faced with a question concerning *what kind of person* he would like to be (seen as) or which community in the society he is to side with privately or publicly. Sometimes that means the agent is to be thrown into a kind of existentialist angst, as evidenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's pupil who was faced with a dilemma between joining the war against Germany or staying at home taking care of his unhealthy mother – a famous case Berlin also uses to illustrate his point.<sup>44</sup> In any event, a multicultural society is a society characterised by, to use Richard Bellamy's phrase, 'divided loyalties'.<sup>45</sup> That means a choice of this kind for an agent with a multicultural upbringing – a divided society writ small, so to speak – can be very painful. Indeed, in the case of Berlin, his Russian-British- Jewish background means that he must have undergone a radical

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Fleischacker, *The Ethics of Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 137-43.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), pp.35-36.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism: Towards a politics of compromise* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.1.

choice akin to Hamlet's difficult question. Under Berlin's pluralistic vision of the world, thus, intra- personal and inter-personal conflicts are guaranteed by the fact that values in its various forms of embodiment can come into conflict. This is so only because values are objective; for this reason, value conflicts are objective. In the final analysis, the objectivity of value ultimately does not depend on the inter-subjectivity implied by the Herderian holistic expressivism; rather, that depends on the fact that they are 'moral' values.

However, that would not stop Lukes from accusing Berlin of relativism. In fact, he recognises three senses of objectivity in Berlin's value-pluralism. Firstly, it may mean that 'the limits to the range of recognisably human values are *objectively set*;' in other words, 'the variety is finite, and the limits are fixed by objective facts of human nature (and the empirical possibilities of social organisation).'<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Berlin may believe that 'the fact of *value conflict* is objective,' in that people do experience moral dilemmas and find either option in it both constraining and inescapable, that is, cannot be wished or explained away.<sup>47</sup> Thirdly, value-pluralism may be understood as a claim that values distinctive of cultures or ages are 'not mere psychological, but *objective facts*', for 'they are realised in *rule-governed* social practices and embodied in cultural objects, and in this sense confront individuals as external and constraining.'<sup>48</sup> Here, it must be clear that we have dealt with the second and the third sense of objectivity in Berlin's value-pluralism by now. As for the first, that is what Berlin does often insist but do not give us the list. Probably he cannot give a full list anyway. Given his idea of man as a free and creative agent, a *fixed* constellation of such values will preclude man's future creation of values – hence self-defeating for the purpose of his value- pluralism. Nevertheless, a formal constraint is placed by Berlin on the scope of human values: for an action to be recognised as a 'human' value, it must be intelligible to other human beings. And from the perspective of humanity, that means, no matter how creative a value pursuit is, it must fall within the

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<sup>46</sup> Steven Lukes, 'Must Pluralists Be Relativists?' in *Liberals and Cannibals* (London: Verso, 2003), pp.103-4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.104

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.104.

limits of human understanding. This idea of *intelligibility* defines and limits the scope of what can count as values, and it is in this sense they are ‘objectively set’ and bound to be limited in number – for human intelligibility cannot be stretched too far. How effective this second-order ‘common humanity’ restricts the range of first-order human values still remains to be seen – which is an issue to be dealt with in the concluding chapter of this thesis. The point here, however, is that for Lukes even if all these senses of objectivity are valid, value-pluralism is still a form of relativism. Indeed, one may argue that even though Berlin’s vision recognises the objective nature of moralities, his idea of values as objective *primarily* relative to particular morality still makes him a moral relativist.

Apparently, Berlin and Lukes do not share the same idea of ethical objectivity. To see their difference, it may be helpful to introduce the distinction Jonathan Dancy makes between the *knowledge-oriented* approach and the *understanding-oriented* approach to objectivity.<sup>49</sup> According to this account, the knowledge-oriented approach is characterised by its assumption of an objective moral reason *to seek validation* from a perspective with fewer peculiarities than our own so that it does not affect the way we view the world. Berlin’s critics, including Lukes, seem to take this approach, for they presuppose the existence of an *aprioristic* transcendental objective morality by reference to which all human cultures may be evaluated. By contrast, what the understanding-oriented approach requires is merely ‘a putatively objective moral reason *to survive reflection* on the relation between our world and ourselves,’ without demanding ‘either validation or even merely tolerance from creatures relevantly different from ourselves.’<sup>50</sup> And it seems that Berlin’s notion of objectivity falls into this category. These two notions of objectivity differ from each other in two major ways. The first is related to whether there can be an *aprioristic* absolutely objective vantage-point, and the second the point of encountering other cultures.

To be sure, what is at stake here is the central tenet of Berlin’s value-pluralism: there exists a *plurality* of values. By now, it should be clear that that statement

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<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.153.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

means is not just a claim about there is more than one value such as ‘liberty’, ‘equality’ and ‘justice’ existing in the world; rather, it claims that there is a plurality of *forms of life* worth pursuing for their own sake – of which some are incommensurable with each other, and the meaning and significance of those aforementioned value concepts are relative to incommensurable paradigms. Indeed, if the doctrine of value-pluralism asserts only the first claim, it would be philosophically less interesting for as a matter of that no one would seriously argue against the existence of ‘liberty’, ‘equality’, and ‘justice’ as dominant values in the modern liberal democracies. What makes Berlin’s point philosophically profound thus is that when incommensurable value systems come into conflict, we cannot appeal to any of them to settle the dispute. Indeed, since values for Berlin are not independent Leibnizian *monads* but culturally embedded pursuits, a plurality of incommensurable values means a plurality of value paradigms. Yet, the other side of the coin means that no one is outside the territory of culture and for that matter *de facto* social wholes, such as Western, Chinese and Japanese cultures or Christian, Islamic, Buddhist religions or other secular forms – just like scientist must work within a particular scientific paradigm. The corollary thus is that a conflict involving two incommensurable paradigms would throw us into a situation analogous to what Kuhn describes as ‘theory-choice’ in science: no ‘neutral algorithm’ for making decision. In other words, no culture is not a historical construct, and no morality can transcend its own *historical* conditions. To evaluate a culture by another’s standards is to commit ethnocentrism – which is, as explained in the previous chapter, a form of moral anachronism in the eyes of Berlin.

At this point, one may begin to see the relation between Berlin’s value-pluralism and his Vichian approach which is, as argued in Chapter 2, an ethics-laden historical methodology. Indeed, just like the Vichian method must operate with the assumption that the subject to be understood is a free moral agent deserving our respect, Berlin’s cultural pluralism also accord an equal status to all cultures. Probably it is inevitable anyway, for his projectivist conception of value, as made clear in the previous section, also harbours a Kantian element, and his cultural pluralism is but an application of his Kantian respect to the realm of culture, which, given Berlin’s Herderian holism, is human ‘value’ *writ large*. In any event, Berlin’s value-pluralism shares with the same

ethical concern with his Vichian historical methodology; they are essentially a moral response to the anthropological-historical reality of cultural diversity. By granting that all cultures are equally valid expressions of our common humanity, Berlin can take an encounter with another culture to be an opportunity to enhance our self-understanding as humans; for this reason, a culture which differs greatly from our own should prompt ourselves to reflect upon our own culture – hence to survive such reflection is the ensuing task. Indeed, that seems to be what Berlin really means by his concluding statement in his famous inaugural lecture:

‘To realise the *relative validity* of one’s convictions,’ said an admirable writer of our time, ‘and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.’ To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.<sup>51</sup>

By contrast, those who have accused Berlin of relativism obviously do not extend the use of the charity principle this far. For them, the fact of diversity poses a single question: which of them is the *valid* one? It implies that there can only be a right form of life – at least the possibility of a *trans-historical* vantage-point from which all cultures – including the their own, if they are consistent – can be evaluated. Berlin’s critics thus seem to see the point of encountering the other to be seeking validation for either one’s own or other’s culture. Despite that they tend to take what their culture highly values to be the standards for criticism, they truly believe that their ‘liberal democratic’ values are the objective moral reason. In other words, they do not adopt the ‘Western’ culture as the only form of life against which others should be measured simply because it is *their own*; rather, they consider it to be a *universally valid* value template. Their rationale seems to go like this: given the knowledge of the universally valid moral standard, there is no need to seek truth in other cultures, and it follows

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<sup>51</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.172. My own emphasis.

that on encountering a culture which falls short of the standard one should criticise this form of life.

If this analysis based on a Kuhnian reading of Berlin's value-pluralism is correct, then the contrast between Berlin and his critics who have accused him of relativism in fact lies in their difference in seeing what counts as a proper response to the human reality of cultural diversity. No doubt, this difference marks only one of the many ways value-pluralism and monism can conflict with each other; after all, they represent two paradigms in moral and political philosophy. However, before we move on to give a full account of the conflict between pluralism and monism, we have to ask: given that a trans-historical vantage-point is ruled out by Berlin, what can we rely on for cross-cultural criticism – a possibility he insists on for distinguishing himself from the relativist? The answer seems to be a 'historical' vantage-point. The next section is to explain Berlin's value-pluralism as a form of historical knowledge.

### **III.3. Value-Pluralism as Berlin's Enlarged Mentality**

As one may have noticed already, the 'historical' nature of the doctrine of value-pluralism is ensured by the way it is derived by Berlin: that is, from his empathetic reading of the history of human culture. Towards the end of last section, it is argued that Berlin's value-pluralism and historical approach share the same Kantian ethical concern. Now, it must be pointed out that this does not exhaust their close relation. To see this, a return to the passage quoted towards the end of last section may be helpful. In that passage, Berlin argues that one should 'realise the relative validity of his own convictions.' What is also implied is that such an attitude in fact can only be generated by a duly performed act of empathetic understanding. That means, unless one has entered successfully the minds of his fellow human beings as prescribed by Berlin, he would not be able to find their convictions as equally valid as his own, and the occasion that he must reflect on his own beliefs and stand for them unflinchingly would not arise in the first place. This confirms our reading in the previous chapter that Berlin's Vichian method is a *self-implicating* historical methodology. But more

importantly that also implies that the ‘plurality’ of values thus established is essentially a form of *historical reflection* on the human condition in history, rather than any metaphysical speculation or philosophical reasoning about the ultimate nature of reality.

To see the last point from a different angle, a return to the anecdote mentioned earlier concerning Berlin’s abandoning philosophy for the history of ideas in 1944 may be useful. According to the version he was fond of circulating, his decision was made as a result of his belief that he would not be able to make significant contributions to the discipline. Nevertheless, a more serious and relevant reason can be found in Michael Ignatieff’s biography of Berlin: the decision was actually made sometime after the conversation – on a transatlantic flight to London this time – when he ‘began to see pure philosophy as a field like criticism or poetry, in which it was not possible to add to the store of positive human knowledge’, and came to the conclusion that he would opt for a field where he could hope to know more at the end of life than when he had begun.<sup>52</sup> This reason not only suggests that, philosophy at the time during the reign of Oxford’s ‘analysis of ordinary language’ for Berlin was at best a form of critique, but also implies that he takes history to be a branch of human intellectual endeavour that can produce ‘positive’ knowledge. Probably that is how we should understand his doctrine of value-pluralism. Until now, it has basically been understood as an account of the human condition. Nevertheless, as indicated by F. M. Barnard in his authoritative study on Herder, despite the fact that *Einfühlung* unavoidably entails an element of subjective judgement Herder’s historical method does not foreclose ‘objectively valid findings or the possibility of attaining what Kant has called an “enlarged mentality”’.<sup>53</sup> And by implication, Berlin’s own empathetic understanding approach derived in part from Herder may result in the same kind of knowledge. In fact, this thesis argues that Berlin’s historical findings via empathy should better be understood as an ‘objectively valid’ account of this kind, and his doctrine of value-pluralism a form of Kantian enlarged mentality. The rest of this

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p.131.

<sup>53</sup> F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (McGill: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), p.7.



section will try to explain how Berlin's value-pluralism can be understood as his own enlarged mentality through historical reflection, and central to this section's contention is that Berlin's declaration of vocation as a historian of ideas in fact is made with a view to enlarging his reader's vision of human possibilities. And it is hoped that by the end of this section it will be clear that the doctrine of value-pluralism itself is a *positive knowledge* providing a historical vantage-point for cross-cultural evaluation.

To begin with, a closer look at the idea of 'enlarged mentality' is necessary now. The following passage in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is where the idea is found:

The following Maxims of common human Understanding do not properly come in here, as parts of the Critique of Taste; but yet they may serve to elucidate its fundamental propositions. They are: (1) to think for oneself; (2) to put ourselves in thought in the place of every one else; (3) always to think consistently. The first is the maxim of *unprejudiced* thought; the second of *enlarged thought*; the third of *consecutive* thought. The first is the maxim of a Reason never *passive*. The tendency to such passivity, and therefore to heteronomy of the Reason, is called *prejudice*; and the greatest prejudice of all is to represent nature as not subject to the rules that the Understanding places at its basis by means of its own essential law, i.e. is *superstition*. Deliverance from superstition is called *enlightenment*; because although this name belongs to deliverance from prejudices in general, yet superstition specially (*in sensu eminenti*) deserves to be called a prejudice. For the blindness in which superstition places us, which it even imposes on us as an obligation, makes the need of being guided by others, and the consequent passive state of our Reason, peculiarly noticeable. As regards the second maxim of the mind, we are other wise wont to call him limited (*borne*, the opposite of enlarged) whose talents attain to no great uses (especially as regards intensity). But here we are not speaking of the faculty of cognition, but of the *mode of thought* which makes a purposive uses thereof. However small may be the area or the degree to which a man's natural gifts reach, yet it indicates a man of *enlarged mentality* if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgement, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by pacing himself at the standpoint of others). [...] We may say that the first of these

maxims is the maxim of Understanding, the second of Judgement, and the third of Reason.<sup>54</sup>

By origin, the idea of ‘enlarged mentality’ is used by Kant to illustrate the possibility of objective aesthetic judgement that respects the beauty of the particular in its uniqueness. It is introduced as a ‘mode of thought’, rather than a faculty of cognition, to contrast a limited mentality or a narrow mind that is confined to subjective opinions. And the affinity between this second maxim and Berlin’s idea of empathy is obvious; indeed, as noted in Chapter 2, empathy is possible for Berlin because we are capable of placing ourselves at an outside vantage-point and contemplate ourselves as if we were others. However, it must be emphasised that the phrase ‘universal standpoint’ is inapplicable to Berlin unless it denotes an *inter-subjective* standpoint derived from an act of empathetic understanding of various *de facto* subjective points of view *actually* held by individuals, and how ‘universal’ a standpoint can be attained by placing oneself in thought in the place of others still remains to be seen.

To be sure, given that the three maxims are used by Kant to elucidate his notion of *sensus communis*, that is, the ‘common human understanding’, the term ‘universal’ allows for an ‘inter-subjective’ interpretation. Indeed, immediately before the passage quoted above, he has argued for the necessity of including into what goes by the name of *sensus communis* ‘the Idea of a *communal* sense, i.e. of a faculty of judgement, which in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men; in order as it were to compare its judgement with the *collective Reason of humanity*.’<sup>55</sup> By building on this notion, Hannah Arendt thus offers an account of how enlarged mentality can serve as a key method of reflection enabling the agent to move from the particular to the universal – or the *general*, in her preferred translation of *allgemein*.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in her article ‘The Crisis in Culture’ she writes:

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<sup>54</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), trans. J. H. Bernard, (London: Macmillan, 1914), pp.171-2. The phrase ‘enlarged mentality’ was originally translated as ‘enlarged thought’.

<sup>55</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), op. cit., p.170. My emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvest, 1982), p.71.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, however, Kant insisted upon a different way of thinking, for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one's own self, but which consisted of being able to "think in the place of everybody else" and which he therefore called an "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*). The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgment derives its specific validity.<sup>57</sup>

For Arendt, what makes an enlarged mentality possible is Kant's idea that men are 'universally communicable', that is, the potential for agreement between individuals – which assigns the source of validity to the collective agreement of the moral agents, with the phrase '*sensus communis*' understood as a 'community sense'.<sup>58</sup> However, that may deprive Kant's idea of the ability to transcend the world of appearance, and therefore generate an unbridgeable gap between the universal and the Transcendental. Indeed, in her *Life of the Mind*, Arendt argues:

the withdrawal of judgement is obviously very different from the withdrawal of the philosopher. It does not leave the world of appearances but retires from active involvement in it to a privileged position in order to contemplate the whole. Moreover... [the] spectators are members of an audience and therefore quite unlike the philosopher who begins his *bios theoretikos* by leaving the company of his fellow-men and their uncertain opinions ... hence the spectator's verdict, while impartial ... is not independent of the view of others – on the contrary, according to Kant, an 'enlarged mentality' has to take them into account. The spectators, although disengaged from the particularity characteristic of the actor, are not solitary.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture'; quoted from Mitchell Abulafia *Cosmopolitan Self* (Urbanan, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.37.

<sup>58</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), op. cit., p.173.

<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, *Thinking* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p.94. Quoted from Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.131.

Read together with Kant's third maxim, they imply: Reason dictates the 'consistency' between an individual and his fellowmen – and hence the identity of the private and the public. Hence, an enlarged mentality is characterised by being able 'to "see" [through] the eyes of the mind', i.e., to see the whole that gives meaning to the particulars.'<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, by adopting this inter-subjective reading of Kant, Arendt does not want to forsake the idea of universality altogether. Thus, she goes on to argue that a man of an enlarged mentality in politics is an actor who would 'take [his] bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.'<sup>61</sup> What Arendt means by the phrase 'not the actuality' is not clear. Probably that is a caveat that, although we may not attain it, we must aspire to do so, for that is what an enlarged mentality consists in. In any case, under her vision of the world, there is a virtual community of world spectators whose mode of thought goes beyond their own historical particularities, and as long as we think for ourselves – as required by Kant's first maxim – we have participated in this mentality. Arendt no doubt sees the ideal of world spectator applicable to all communities and operative as a standard for cross-cultural criticism. In the end, Kant's idea of *sensus communis* for her is a sense 'common' to all human beings who would think for themselves, and the conceivability of an enlarged mentality is ensured by universal communicability at the level of human species.

Despite its exhibited appreciation for human plurality, Arendt's Kantian ideal of 'enlarged mentality' goes against the grain of Berlin's thought. To explain, first of all, although Berlin would agree with Arendt that a thinker should not leave the company of his fellow-men, he would not accept her way of moving from the particular to the general. For one thing, Arendt's idea implies the possibility of a *public culture* that is always right: whenever the private is not 'consistent' with the public, the private is wrong. That probably catches the essence of what Kant means by 'the collective Reason of humanity.' But then we only have to admit that Berlin does not share Kant's (idea of) enlarged mentality. For another, Arendt's notion of 'generality' seems

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<sup>60</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.68.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72,

too ‘universal’ for Berlin’s pluralistic vision of the world under which there is a variety of incommensurable social wholes but no ‘common currency’ whereby conflicts are to be settled can be found. Secondly, a Cosmopolitan self with a mind so enlarged that it must include the vantage-points of *all* flies in the face of human reality – even if that makes sense, only God has such omniscient perspective. A view from everywhere is no less logically incoherent and practically unattainable than a view from nowhere. What is more, given that many vantage-points are embodied as historical construct, i.e. culture, Arendt’s world spectator in effect differs little from the ‘omniscient observer’ Berlin rejects outright.<sup>62</sup> In any event, Berlin’s empathetic understanding approach is to transcend cultural differences and derive ‘historical’ knowledge of other forms of life, not to achieve a trans-historical vantage-point. Seen from this perspective, Arendt in fact adopts the knowledge-oriented approach to objectivity, not the understanding-oriented approach. Thirdly, as a matter of fact, Berlin rejects the possibility of a single right answer to questions concerning human affairs, which forecloses the possibility of a grand narrative of human life at both the level of human species and the level of particular culture is not compatible with this Cosmopolitan political philosophy Arendt has derived from Kant. In any event, Cosmopolitanism for Berlin ‘is the shedding of all that makes one most human, most oneself’ – which as a theory does not do justice to cultural particularities.<sup>63</sup> Arendt’s reading of Kant places him among the French *philosophes*, the strand of Enlightenment which Berlin’s cultural pluralism is meant to challenge.

In fact, a better way to make sense of how Berlin’s thought can be understood in the light of Kant’s idea of enlarged mentality is the doctrine of value-pluralism. In his ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, he writes after citing approvingly Kant’s remark that no straight thing was ever made out of the crooked timber of humanity:

What the age calls for is not (as we are so often told) more faith, or stronger leadership, or more scientific organisation. Rather is it the opposite – less Messianic ardour, more *enlightened* scepticism, more toleration of idiosyncrasies, more frequent *ad hoc*

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<sup>62</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.186.

<sup>63</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Counter-Enlightenment’ in *Against the Current* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.12.

measures to achieve aims in a foreseeable future, more room for the attainment of their personal ends by individuals and by minorities whose tastes and beliefs find (whether rightly or wrongly must not matter) little response among the majority. [...] Above all, it must be realised that the kinds of problems which this or that method of education or system of scientific or religious or social organisation is guaranteed to solve are not *eo facto* the only central questions of human life.<sup>64</sup>

To be sure, this passage is found right before Berlin's earliest formulation of value-pluralism discussed in the first section of this chapter. And, as already discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of this thesis respectively, central to this essay's argument is the inescapability of the historical approach to political ideas and the importance of 'historical sense'. It is clear that what this 'enlightened scepticism' refers to is a mind characterised by an awareness of the plurality of values, and the way to cultivate this mentality is to raise one's own historical sense by making empathetic efforts to understand values different from one's own. Now, two things can be inferred from all this: the first is that value-pluralism is the accumulative 'positive' knowledge Berlin had in mind when he decided to leave philosophy for history of ideas, and the second is that the doctrine of value-pluralism can be understood as an account of Berlin's own mentality *enlarged* by way of entering into the mindsets of various thinkers and cultures. Note that the process of *enlarging* one's mentality is endless, for the future is open and humans may create new forms of life. Yet once it is established that there is more than one form of life worth pursuing for its own sake, the ensuing efforts would only reinforce the truth of value-pluralism. It follows that, instead of transcending all the historical particularities so as to arrive at a higher ground from which one can see the whole that gives the meaning of each single particular, Berlin's historical method is transcendental only in the sense that it leads its practitioner to reflect upon his own historical condition and in this way acquire an enlightened mind characterised by a sceptical attitude towards all monistic beliefs, not least one's own – which, as it were, is in line with Kant's idea that 'Deliverance from superstition is called *enlightenment*' found in the passage quoted above.

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<sup>64</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.40. My emphasis

Thus understood, it is not surprising that Berlin would have engaged with the writing of the history of ideas throughout his life. For the point is to enlarge the mind of others so as to understand that what we value for its own sake is only one among many human values and does not enjoy the privilege of being the only correct one. It follows that what distinguishes Berlin from Arendt is that while the latter believes that putting oneself in thought in the place of everyone and thinking consistently can lead to the knowledge of the general and hence the universal, the former never loses sight of the fact that by shifting to another stance on the same plane, because each culture is a *historical* construct, one does not then land on a higher trans-historical ground. That is to say, if we enter into the mind of a Christian and get a Christian vision of the world and then enter into the mind of a Buddhist and get a Buddhist vision of the world, we will not then acquire a view that combines them a single coherent grand vision of the world but rather a *Gestalt*-psychology experience.<sup>65</sup> That means, reflection on human plurality does not lead to a discovery of timeless universal truth, for the universals are not *given* but *searched out* by historical thinking. In the eyes of Berlin, Kant's distinction between deductive and inductive types of statement lends support to the division in our approach to study the sphere of human affairs and the natural world, and hence two different notions of objectivity – rather than a synthesis of ethics and science. Thus, although he praises Kant as an Enlightenment thinker who 'rightly held that mere deduction cannot add to our knowledge either of things or of persons, and does not answer those questions, or solve those puzzles, which seem characteristically philosophical,' he rejects his *aprioristic* approach to deal with moral and political issues.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, for Berlin, to think is '[t]o comprehend and contrast and classify and arrange, to see in pattern of lesser or greater complexity', and what is there to be thought about is things which are historical constructs.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Raz observes the same point in his *The Practice of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.54.

<sup>66</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The Philosophers of the Enlightenment' in *The Power of ideas* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p.48.

<sup>67</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.2.

If this analysis of Berlin's value-pluralism is correct, then the doctrine of value-pluralism provides a historical vantage-point for criticising forms of life or political programmes which are not pluralistic, i.e. monistic, in nature. Of course, that does not mean the doctrine is not free from problems. Indeed, as one may have noticed, the 'plurality' of values thus established strictly speaking is *granted* rather than *proved*. That is to say, instead of introducing a metaphysical claim about the ontology of values, Berlin appeals to a *moral* reason, i.e. respect for persons and their pursuits, to argue for value-pluralism. Yet this way of establishing the plurality of values relies on a positive recognition from *de facto* human moral experience, not least moral dilemmas, and in order to agree with Berlin, one must follow Berlin's way of reading. Nevertheless, I leave these difficulties to the final chapter of this thesis, and we still have to see if there are reasons why monistic mode of thought should not be adopted. The next chapter will deal with the conflict between value-pluralism and monism.



## CHAPTER IV.

### The Quarrel between One and Many

It was, I think, Bertrand Russell – Mill’s godson – who remarked somewhere that the deepest convictions of philosophers are seldom contained in their formal arguments: *fundamental beliefs, comprehensive views of life*, are like citadels which must be guarded against the enemy. Philosophers expend their intellectual power in arguments and although the reasons they find, and the logic that they use, may be complex, ingenious, and formidable, they are defensive weapons; the inner fortress itself – the vision of life for the sake of which the war is being waged – will, as a rule, turn out to be relatively simple and unsophisticated.

- Isaiah Berlin, ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’<sup>1</sup>

With Berlin’s value-pluralism understood as a mode of thought, this chapter aims to offer an account of how it differs from what he means by the term ‘monism’, whose nature has largely been neglected and often misapprehended in the literature related to the debate between pluralism and monism. It begins with a clarification of what Berlin takes ‘monism’ to be by way of analysing his reading of Marx as the arch-monist of the modern political thought, in particular the Hegelian vision of the world inherent in the historical materialism attributed to him. Based on that clarification, this chapter will present a general account of monism as a mode of thought to which Berlin’s value-pluralism is meant to be an alternative, arguing that at the core of monism is not what is now known as ‘value monism’ but infallibilism. That is to say, monism in the eyes of Berlin is not merely a set of premises, derived from Berlin’s *analytic* insight into various *de facto* monistic worldviews in history, but a style of thinking composed by premises, a sense of reality, and a prospective vision of the world – with the *closure of reasoning* as its aspiration and pretension. With this understanding in place, the final section contrasts pluralism with monism as two styles of reasoning, and concludes that pluralism differs from monism in a way more like that of atheism and monotheism, than monotheism and polytheism, for they in fact operate at two different levels of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 200.

#### IV.1. Berlin on Marxism as a Case of Monism

Berlin's *Karl Marx*, published in 1939, was his first book, as well as his first attempt at empathetic reconstruction of a past political thinker. Berlin's reading of Marx is relevant here for two reasons. Firstly, in representing Marx as the arch-monist in the modern world it discloses what Berlin thinks about monism. Given that pluralism is advanced to challenge monism, how we understand monism bears on how we appreciate Berlin's pluralistic vision of politics. Secondly, as an embodiment of Berlin's historical approach to studying the history political thought, it serves as a case where this methodology can be evaluated – that is to say, in the light of the extent it enhances our understanding of Marx. Moreover, as argued in Chapter 2, Berlin's approach bears on the way he thinks we should confront individuals from other cultures, how feasible and effective this methodological prescription can be applied to the political sphere turns on our evaluation of this approach. However, this section deals mainly with the issue concerned with the first reason, aiming at a clear account of in what ways in which Marxism is a form of monism. Although it will also touch on the affinities between Berlin and Marx as historians of ideas, as well as the difference between Berlin's Marx and G. A. Cohen's, they are discussed here only to the extent that they shed light on the meaning of monism. A full treatment of these issues is to be left to the next chapter, in which Berlin's contribution to political thought will be assessed in the light of how far Berlin's a-historical 'History of Ideas' approach serves as an effective way of political reasoning.

It is widely agreed that central to Marx's thought is what has been known as *historical materialism*. As a matter of fact, however, when Marx touches on the theme he constantly uses the phrase 'materialist conception of history', and he does not elaborate a theory of history in a single writing.<sup>2</sup> This fact alone means that the meaning of this well-known theory is to be left to his serious reader's interpretation or

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<sup>2</sup> David McLellan, for example, in his classic *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction* (New York: Harper, 1971)(p.123.) argues that the fact that Marx does not use the term historical materialism indicates that this conception of history is meant to be an approach to history, useful as a method to understanding history, rather than a systematic philosophy of history.

reconstruction. Berlin's own reading of Marx is, as he admitted later, 'perhaps too deeply influenced by the classical interpretations of Engles, Plekhanov, Mehring'.<sup>3</sup> And it is probably even safe to say that his interpretation is largely inspired by the writings of Plekhanov in particular, the father of Russian Marxism who, in Berlin's judgement, is 'perfectly right' in interpreting it as a 'monistic conception of history'.<sup>4</sup> However, Duncan Kelly's judgement that it is Plekhanov's 'half-positivist', 'half-Darwinian' interpretation of Marx that influences Berlin's own understanding has to be qualified.<sup>5</sup> For one thing, what Berlin really says is that the fact that 'the total ignorance or neglect of the philosophical content in Marx's *The German Ideology* by his immediate followers led to an exclusive emphasis on the historical and economic aspects' is what has been 'responsible for the clear, half-positivist, half-Darwinian interpretation of Marx's thought, which we owe mainly to Kautsky, Plekhanov, and above all to Engles – a tradition that has decisively influenced both the theory and the practice of the movement which goes by Marx's name.'<sup>6</sup> For another, as it suggests, although Berlin's reading of Marx is influenced by the orthodox Marxists, he is aware of the fact that the Marxism they advocate is not the same as what – and *how* – Marx has argued for. As often said by Berlin, ideas have a life of their own. For this reason we should not hastily equate Marx's thought to Marxism.

It follows that in reading Marx, Berlin is aware of the distinction between Marx the man and Marx the thinker, as well as between Marx the thinker and Marx the revolutionary as understood by his orthodox disciples. In a sense, the task of Berlin's sympathetic yet critical biography is to unveil the covert relations between Marx the thinker and Marx the man. For instance, the fact that Marx sides with the proletarian class was partially due to his shying away from his Jewish identity, which for him is a 'personal stigma': instead of accepting his particularity, that is to say, he opted for a

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Marxism and the international in the nineteenth century' in *The Sense of Reality* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p.119.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan Kelly, 'The political thought of Isaiah Berlin' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2002, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.90.

universal class which in his own judgement was destined to win the worldwide class warfare. As far as historical materialism is concerned, one piece of biographical information revealed by Berlin is of particular importance: Marx himself does not regard the doctrine as a ‘new’ philosophical system – that means, the theory was already there in a sense.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is not new, as Berlin endeavours to make clear, because the framework of it is ‘undeviatingly Hegelian’.<sup>8</sup> Of course, that is not to say Marx is not a historical materialist and hence not a monist thinker. Rather, that means Marx the thinker is actually a philosopher subtler than popularly understood by the revolutionaries who claim to be his orthodox followers. In other words, Marx is indeed a monist, whose monism goes beyond the vulgar monist’s understanding – hence the arch-monist in modern time.

To begin with, it may be helpful to make clear what could be meant by Berlin’s remark that the orthodox account of historical materialism is ‘half-positivist’ and ‘half-Darwinian’. This is an issue Berlin does not dwell on, but the remark made by Engels at Marx’s graveside, also recorded in Berlin’s biography, serves as a short answer to it: ‘Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history’.<sup>9</sup> However, a fuller answer requires a longer treatment. First of all, Berlin by the term ‘positivism’ here refers to Comtian positivism, that is, the philosophical system or method elaborated by the nineteenth-century French sociologist Auguste Comte – not the verificationist Vienna circle and their Anglo-American disciples like A. J. Ayer and Rudolf Carnap. It is strictly empiricist in outlook and determines to do science without metaphysical speculation, accepting only sense experience as the object of human knowledge, as well as its sole criterion. This is how Berlin characterises positivism:

If only we could find a series of natural laws connecting at one end, the biographical and

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.89.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.90.

<sup>9</sup> David McLellan (ed) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 20002), p.167.

Quoted from David Boucher and Paul Kelly (eds.), *Political Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.434. See also Isaiah Berlin’s *Karl Marx* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)(London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.103.

physiological states and processes of human beings, with, at the other, the equally observable patterns of their conduct – their social attitudes in the wider sense – and so establish a coherent system of regularities, deducible from a comparatively small number of general laws (as Newton had so triumphantly done in physics) we should have in our hands a science of human behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

It follows that if historical materialism is ‘positivist’ in any sense, then it has to share this scientific outlook and takes the task of historians to be the discovery of ‘historical laws’ comparable to that of natural sciences. This is indeed the attitude held by many orthodox Marxists, at least in their rhetoric. To be sure, a theory of history would not be ‘monistic’ in virtue of being ‘scientific’ in outlook – unless it also claims that the scientific method is the only appropriate methodology for dealing with history or for the study of mankind. Whether this is the methodological position the orthodox Marxist advocates is an issue that cannot be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that Berlin himself would agree to this use of labelling if they hold to such *methodological monism* whose aim is to translate historical narratives into scientific propositions. Nevertheless, what makes this historical materialism most fitting to claim the name of a ‘monistic’ conception of history is its implied view of human history as a *single-directional* process. As claimed by many Marxists, not least the communists, the march of history is dictated by laws with ‘iron necessity’ from feudalism through capitalism to communism which is the final stage of humanity. For Berlin, this is a Darwinian evolutionary theory applied to the whole history of human society: by transforming the idea of the genetic competition for perpetuation into a *class* struggles or a worldwide contest between *forms* of society for survival. In a way like natural selection, which dictates that only some members of a given species (or certain species) could perpetuate, History alone decides which *class* or which *form* of society would win the class warfare. On this view, the whole human condition is reduced to this dilemma: ‘if you know in what direction the world process is working, you can either identify yourself with it or not; if you do not, if you fight it, you thereby

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Concept of Scientific History’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.19.

compass your own certain destruction, being necessarily defeated by the forwards advance of history.’<sup>11</sup> Thus, to identify oneself with the bourgeoisie amounts to choosing a class bound (by the iron laws of history) to be destroyed; for the same reason, to advocate for capitalism is to side with an economic system destined to be overthrown. To believe in Marxism therefore is to believe in a *linear* – and hence, a *monistic* – conception of history. So much for the clear, half-positivist and half-Darwinian orthodox historical materialism.

As will be argued, this account as such could not exhaust what Berlin means by ‘monism’ when he attributes it to historical materialism. To be sure, if anything is added by Berlin’s *Karl Marx* to the orthodox account, it is his exposition of the philosophical framework underlying Marxism’s claim ‘that the history of humanity is a single, non-repetitive process, which obeys discoverable laws’ – which is not only a Darwinian/Hegelian philosophy of history but also a teleological account of history with scientific pretensions.<sup>12</sup> Of course, conceiving of human history as a one-way progress does not automatically make it a ‘Hegelian’ conception, for its prototype can be found as early as in St. Augustine’s mammoth *City of God*, which attempts to make sense of human history ‘retrospectively’ from the standpoint of history’s *telos*, i.e. the end or the purpose of the final cause.<sup>13</sup> And clearly the philosophical roots of Hegelianism can be found in Christian theology which spells out not only the *telos* of history but also a salvation programme. Nevertheless, Hegelianism distinguishes itself from Augustinism in a few crucial ways. First, while the history of God in St. Augustine can in principle be separated from that of men, history in Hegel is the biography of God – or, on a secular reading, the self-realisation process of the Idea, the functional equivalent of what in St. Augustine’s writing occupied by God – which unifies the stories of all beings into a coherent grand narrative. Second, on either a religious or secular reading, Hegel’s history is unequivocally a career of Freedom, unlike the Augustinian four-staged Creation–Fall–Resurrection–Final Judgement sequence

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.90.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Levine, *Engaging Political Philosophy: From Hobbes to Rawls* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.224.

whose ultimate *end* is men's reunion with God. Third, Hegel treats historical events as embodiments of abstract ideas, and history as a whole but a phenomenology which could become absolutely *real* only when it reaches the final stage of its progression governed by the laws of necessity – which, given the implied idealist notion of *degree of reality*, is absolutely unconceivable (otherwise blasphemous) in St. Augustine's world where the history begins with God's presence. The rest of this section is to argue that it is the fact that historical materialism is analogous to Hegelianism in all these three respects that leads Berlin to read it in Hegelian terms. The question concerning in what sense this conception of history is 'monistic' will be dealt with accordingly.

To proceed, however, we should first clarify a crucial way Marxism differs from Hegelianism; either the agent in the career of Freedom postulated in the latter is construed as the human mind or the superhuman spirit. It can be encapsulated in the well-known metaphor that Marx by his historical materialism turns Hegel on his head. It begins with Marx's criticism of religion, which is where his earliest expression of the concept of 'ideology' is to be found. Following Ludwig Feuerbach, who had done more than anyone else in bringing to light the fact that God is created by man in his own image rather than the other way round, Marx regards religion as 'the opium of the people', and rejects it outright as a form of 'false consciousness' or 'organised illusion'. This secularism immediately marks its departure from the theological face of Hegelianism which understands history as the biography of God. For Marx, Hegel is wrong in postulating an impalpable metaphysical being and attributing everything to its unobservable activity, just like the way the believing Christian attributes all events to the activity of God – which succeeds 'only at the cost of explaining nothing, of declaring the answer to be a mystery impenetrable to normal human faculties.'<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, moving beyond Feuerbach's position that sees men as beings of flesh and blood who are powerless individuals at the mercy of external forces, Marx advances a conception of human nature that recognises man's essence as his capacity of self-transformation through labour and the history of humanity as 'man's effort to

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.91.

realise himself fully,' 'striving to escape from being the plaything of forces that seem at once mysterious, arbitrary and irresistible,' so as 'to attain mastery of them and of himself, which is freedom.'<sup>15</sup> History is no longer the career of the Idea or human thought at the most abstract level. Rather, it is the career of men of flesh and blood who collectively change their own world through production *by* men and *for* men. Therefore, Marxism also differs from or even stands antithetical to the Idealist face of Hegelianism. In a way, Marx has transformed Hegelianism into a 'real humanist' philosophical anthropology – free from Hegelian metaphysics, in particular the world-historical substance.<sup>16</sup>

In Berlin's judgement, however, this is only a partial success. The central Hegelian conception still remains at the basis of Marx's historical materialism: this philosophical anthropology merely transposes Hegelianism into 'semi-empirical' terms.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, it is not truly empirical. It is metaphysics in science's clothing. The same verdict can also be found in Berlin's later essay 'Marxism in the Nineteenth Century', published in 1964, in which the whole edifice of Marxism is understood to have rested upon a 'metaphysical foundation which is by no means self-evident, a vast assumption which Marx took over from Hegel and classical philosophy.'<sup>18</sup> One of the clearest expressions of what Berlin means by 'metaphysical' here can be found in the following passage from his celebrated essay 'Historical Inevitability':

The notion that history obeys laws, whether natural or supernatural, that every event of human life is an element in a necessary pattern, has deep *metaphysical* origins: infatuation with the natural sciences feeds this stream, but is not its sole nor, indeed, its principal source. In the first place, there is the *teleological* outlook whose roots reach back to the beginning of human thought... In this cosmology the world of men (and, in some versions, of the entire universe) is *a single all-inclusive hierarchy*; so that to explain why each ingredient of it is as it is, and where, and when it is, and does what it does, is *eo ipso* to say what its goal is, how far it successfully fulfils it, and what are the

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<sup>15</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.93.

<sup>16</sup> David McLellan (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.145.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Marxism in the Nineteenth Century' in *The Sense of Reality* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p.119.



relations of co-ordination and subordination between the goals of the various goal-pursuing entities in the harmonious pyramid which they collectively form. If this is a true picture of reality, then historical explanation, like every other form of explanation, must consist, above all, of the attribution to individuals, groups, nations, species, of their proper place in a *universal pattern*.<sup>19</sup>

This passage deals with what Berlin, following Karl Popper, calls ‘historicism’ – a term coined by the latter to mean ‘an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the “rhythms” or the “patterns”, the “laws” or the “trends” that underlie the evolution of history.’<sup>20</sup> Certainly, it applies to Marxism, which in the eyes of Berlin and Popper is a paradigmatic case of historicism in the post-war era – the time when their criticisms of Marxism were written.

To be sure, metaphysics has traditionally been regarded as the most abstract and sometimes even ‘high-falutin’ part of philosophy.<sup>21</sup> As a branch of human enquiry, it attempts to investigate the nature of *ultimate reality* by asking questions such as ‘What the world is made of?’, ‘What really exists?’ and ‘What is the essence of things?’. However, it distinguishes itself from physics probably not as much in its subject matter as its *method*, which – judged from its history– is *speculative* in nature. At any rate, questions of this type once found capable of empirical solution will be absorbed into the field of science. However, the exact nature of metaphysics, as with its validity and usefulness, has always been disputed. For, as a matter of fact, there is more than one conception of what counts the metaphysical. Now it should be noted that, as with the *teleological* outlook that constitutes historicism’s metaphysical basis, teleological style of thinking is what Berlin takes to be Marxism’s vast Hegelian assumption. Indeed, throughout Berlin’s reading of Marxism, the term ‘metaphysical’ has been reserved to refer to two *prima facie* unrelated but actually closely connected

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<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.51-2. My own emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.3.

<sup>21</sup> D.W. Hamlyn, ‘Metaphysics’ in Ted Honderich (ed.)(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.590.

teleological explanations of human nature and the development of human history: the first argues that the *telos* of men as permanently 'seek[ing] after peace, not war, harmony, not discord, unity, not multiplicity,' and the second that the *telos* of human history as the actualisation of a perfect society in which 'all human ends are, in principle, harmonisable and capable of satisfaction.'<sup>22</sup>

According to Berlin, Marx believes that the *telos* of men *coincides* with the *telos* of history. And this coincidence is what he grasps as the core of historical materialism. On this account, given the conception of human nature, strife and conflicts between human beings are essentially *pathological*, occurring in the abnormal historical stage, which are bound to vanish in history when they attain their 'true humanity'. What is most striking in this vision of history without doubt is its implied message that all pre-communist stages are not as *real* as the stage of communism. In other words, the true history of humanity will only begin with the arrival of communism. For Berlin, this is evidence of Marx's residual idealist element, derived from Hegelian metaphysics rather than Darwinian evolutionary theory. What is more, it is 'directly opposed to every form of Social Darwinism.'<sup>23</sup> To explain, it should be noted that the pre-communist stages can be said to be 'pathological' only by reference to the *telos* of men plus that of history – which is not postulated by the Darwinian evolutionary theorist, for whom history is but a process of ceaseless survival contest. On the other hand, Marx's vision of the human society in the last stage of history, characterised by the absence of 'even the sheer variety and incompatibility of human wants and ideals,' is no doubt incompatible with the implied innate aggressiveness within the Darwinian conception of human nature, 'for that destroys the very possibility of a seamless harmony, a complete unity of wholly rational beings leading lives of frictionless co-operation towards universally accepted and harmonious ends'. In any event, Marx's concept of human nature, as mentioned earlier, is antithetical to that of Darwinism or even Social Darwinism. What Berlin has grasped as Marxism's defining nature here is its projected last stage of history. No doubt this utopian vision

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<sup>22</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Marxism in the Nineteenth Century' in *The Sense of Reality* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p.120.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.121.

of the world is envisaged by Marx within his overall vision of history, involving a single all-inclusive hierarchy, a pattern of human development, with its claim to universality. In examining the monistic nature of historical materialism, the crux of the matter therefore lies not merely in its commitment to an irreversible *one-way* direction of development and hence monistic in being a 'single-line' account of history, but in its implying a single hierarchy, postulating a single best form of human society, asserting a universal pattern of development – hence a socio-political monism, a *utopian* vision.

To explain, in a Darwinian vision of the world, those who succeed in the struggle for survival are the strongest, in the sense of being the most adaptive to the environment, but that does not mean they are the *best* in moral sense. Indeed, Nietzsche's outcry that the strongest is not necessarily the noble is still resounding. Marxist vision of the world, however, seems to imply the *identity* of *is* and *ought*. Berlin observes that Marx does not, unlike Hume and Kant, explicitly draw a distinction between 'what is' and 'what ought to be' – rather, they find their unity in Marx's idea that 'all one's judgements are conditioned by practical activity in a given social milieu which, in its turn, are functions of the stage reached by one's class in its historical evolution.'<sup>24</sup> What is implied by this unity of *is* and *ought* is that the only trans-social – and *empirical* – criterion to assess a particular moral system is to see whether it 'discords with the historical process – the collective progressive activity of men – [whether] it assists it or thwarts it, will survive or will inevitably perish.'<sup>25</sup> What is more, the metaphysical link between human essence and history also gives Marx a Hegelian conception of rationality and freedom. Since history progresses according to laws of necessity, to resist its development deliberately is not only to refuse what is real and what is human, but also to choose servitude voluntarily and behave irrationally.<sup>26</sup> Here, such irrationality lies not in its futility but its running against the laws of human development. According to Berlin, that is exactly how

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<sup>24</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.114.

Marx's idea that the path to freedom entails knowledge of historical necessity.<sup>27</sup> And what underlies this attitude is precisely 'the Hegelian view of rationality as entailing knowledge of the laws of necessity.' As one can see, Marx in a philosophically ingenious way combines metaphysical speculation and empiricism, unifies the *descriptive* and the *prescriptive*, and renders historical explanation to be conditional upon the ontology of history. Also clear is that, against the orthodox 'half-positivist', 'half-Darwinian' reading, historical materialism thus understood is *neither* Darwinian *nor* positivist – for strictly speaking it is, to recall Berlin's term, 'semi-empirical'. Precisely that is Marx's philosophical monism – which is no doubt derived from the Hegelian metaphysical framework of history.

Indeed, to recall what makes a linear conception of history Hegelian, as opposed to Augustinian is, first, it addresses to the *totality* of all events in time, i.e. the past, the present and, most importantly, the future. Second, it also tells a history of humanity as a history of *freedom* – or emancipation, in Marx's own term – which is possible only from a point of view with the knowledge of the totality of human experience. Third, by treating history as a phenomenology, it commits itself to a view of *degrees of reality*. Marx's historical materialism as interpreted by Berlin falls squarely within the Hegelian framework. And what follows from such teleological theory of history can be summarised as this: humanity is an attainment, freedom a rational achievement, rationality obedience to laws of necessity, and reality a state of affairs yet to come. Exactly this is the Hegelian vision of the world Berlin attributes to Marx's historical materialism. And what makes historical materialism 'metaphysical' is its commitment to the Hegelian teleological conception of the *ontology* of history.

However, Allen W. Wood in his *Karl Marx* argues that many, presumably including Berlin's, 'caricatures and misguided criticisms' of historical materialism come from the 'usually hazy' recognition that it involves teleological thinking, together with various misconceptions about the idea of teleology.<sup>28</sup> According to him, instead of necessarily involving the idea that some events may have temporally later

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.115.

<sup>28</sup> Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 105.

events as their efficient causes, teleological explanation can proceed ‘in terms of the (already existing) persistent tendency of a system to achieve a certain result or move in a certain direction,’ without the need of evoking the ‘intentions of a human or superhuman agent.’<sup>29</sup> Thus, in a way analogous to Darwinian evolutionary theory’s relying on biological tendency to account for its explanandum, teleological explanation can operate only on the basis of materialistic conception of causation. Indeed, for Wood, that is exactly what Marx and Engels mean by the ‘materialism’ in their historical materialism. And it does not involve what Berlin often attributes to the metaphysical approach: ‘to explain the knowable in terms of the unknowable.’<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, G. A. Cohen has in his *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, widely regarded as the inaugural work of Analytical Marxism, reconstructed Marx’s historical materialism as a theory of *technological determinism* free from any metaphysical jargon. He does so by mainly relying on his reading of the following passage, also cited by Berlin in full in his *Karl Marx*, found in Marx’s preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859:

In the social production of their life which men carry on, they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The *totality* of these relations of production is due to the *economic* structure of society – the real foundation on which legal and political superstructures arise, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life *conditions* the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that *determines* their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that *determines* their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production, these relations turn into fetters. Then comes an epoch of social revolution. With the change of economic foundation the entire, immense superstructure is sooner or later transformed. But in considering such transformations the distinction should always be made between the material

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 105-6.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p. 91.

transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined *with the precision of natural science*, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical – in short the ideological – forms in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out.<sup>31</sup>

Note that the famous 1859 Preface, which is called by Marx the ‘guiding thread’ of his life’s work right before this passage, has been generally regarded as a ‘concise and decisive’ statement of Marxism.<sup>32</sup> And for many the scientific outlook expressed towards the end of the passage, clearly in the Comtian positivist spirit, is evidence of Marx’s commitment to scientific analysis of course society. For Cohen, this materialist explanation of society is a clear statement of ‘technological determinism’. And what is claimed by it is actually the view that society’s ‘base’ or economic structure, consisting of the ‘forces’ of production (i.e. the state of technology) and the ‘relations of production’ (i.e. class relations as defined in terms of ownership of the means of production), *determines* its ‘superstructure’ of the state, religion, law and morality. If right, then Berlin would be wrong in his ‘economic determinist’ reading of Marxism as implying that the supposedly observable laws that govern the progress of history are – strictly speaking – *economic* laws.

Whether Wood and Cohen are right in their implicit criticisms of Berlin is beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that, yes, historical materialism can be interpreted or reconstructed – as Wood and Cohen have done respectively – as a non-metaphysical theory or even a purely scientific one. But that is not the point. For one thing, Wood’s Darwinian notion of teleology still points at a direction of human development, which when stretched too far may turn into a methodological monism, and Cohen’s theory of technological determinism is definitely monistic in character, for it not only subscribes to determinism but also, by grasping one aspect of human experience, attempts to explain the whole of the rest human experience. For another, more importantly, the question now becomes: would a historical materialism grown

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<sup>31</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p. 96-7. My own emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted from Jonathan Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.52.

out of its original Hegelian framework still be a recognisable Marxist theory? Wood's Marxism as a scientific analysis of human development can hardly address the issue of history's direction at the level of either class or society (as an economic system) as a whole, in particular. On the other hand, as with his piecemeal approach that leaves out the grand world-historical vision, Cohen's functionalist interpretation of economic structure renders historical materialism powerless in telling us the future direction of history – yet a vision of history with power to prophesise or forecast is a salient or even the defining feature of Marxism.

Cohen, a former student of Berlin, is certainly right in judging that 'Isaiah would not be interested in the theoretical problems of historical materialism [such as]: what are relations of production? how, exactly, are they explained by productive forces? what belongs in the superstructure, and what falls outside it? And so on.'<sup>33</sup> For what Berlin is really interested is to expose the monistic vision in Marx, the very Hegelian teleological mode of thought. For reasons explained already in Chapter 2 and 3, such vision can only be exposed by an empathetic approach, which requires the reader to take its subject's writings as a whole. Yet this vision is so important that, as Marcus Roberts provocatively argues in his study on Analytical Marxism, 'once Hegel was pronounced a "dead dog", then (classical) Marxism was incapable of surviving as a distinctive research programme'.<sup>34</sup> Hence, while recognising that the versions developed by Wood and Cohen are theoretically robust in their own right, it seems to be fitting to conclude with Berlin's remark: 'Marx's immediate successors tended to minimise Hegel's influence upon him; but his vision of the world crumbles and yields only isolated insights if, in the effort to represent him as he conceived himself, as the rigorous, severely factual social scientist, the great unifying, necessary pattern in terms of which he thought, is left out or whittled down.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> G. A. Cohen, 'Isaiah's Marx, and Mine' in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Avishai Margalit (eds.) *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), p.117.

<sup>34</sup> Marcus Roberts, *Analytical Marxism: A Critique* (London: Verso, 1996), p.222.

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), pp.98-99.

## IV.2. Monism as a Style of Reasoning

With hindsight, the commission to write a book on Marx turned out to be Berlin's first opportunity to develop his monism/pluralism conceptual dichotomy. And the monistic vision Berlin attributes to Marx becomes the very mode of thought which he is to caution his readers and audience against throughout his life. Indeed, Berlin's writings on the history of ideas can be read as a genealogy of monism and pluralism. However, instead of recounting what Berlin has written on these thinkers, this section links what is commonly understood as 'monism' to Berlin's another famous dichotomy, the foxes and the hedgehogs, so as to make a case for understanding monism as a Weberian ideal-type of *ars cogito* (i.e. mode of thought or style of reasoning). Certainly how monism is understood bears on the way that Berlin's doctrine of pluralism should be understood, and how it may come into conflict with monism, as well as their respective political implications. To say the least, since pluralism is advanced as the alternative to monism, the fact that the latter is meant to be a vision suggests that the former is its antithetical style of reasoning rather than a set of premises from which a political design can be logically derived. Nevertheless, I leave the issue concerning the way and at what levels monism may come into conflict with pluralism to the next section, this section aims to expose the very nature of monism as a vision, and will argue that the meaning of political monism is the *closure of political reasoning*.

To begin with, by the term 'monism' Berlin often refers to the following three premises:

- (a) that to all genuine questions there is one true answer and one only, all others being deviations from the truth and therefore false, and that this applies to questions of conduct and feeling, that is, to practice, as well as to questions of theory or observation – to questions of value no less than to those of fact;
- (b) that the true answers to such questions are in principle knowable;
- (c) that these true answers cannot clash with one another, for one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another; that together these answers must form a harmonious whole; according to some they form a logical system each ingredient of which logically entails and is entailed by all the other elements; according to others the relationship is that of parts to a whole, or, at the very least, of complete compatibility



of each element with all the others.<sup>36</sup>

As it seems, what makes this set of premises ‘monistic’ is the first that postulates a single answer to questions concerning both human affairs and the natural world, and the third according to which all true answers will form a single grand narrative of the world free from internal contradictions. According to Berlin, they are ‘the three pillars of the Western intellectual tradition’ which dates back to the golden era of Greek philosophy, running through the Christian Middle Ages to the Enlightenment Age and well into the twentieth-century. And the essence of it is probably best captured by Berlin’s *jigsaw puzzle* metaphor, for what they altogether amounts to is ‘the idea of the world and of human society as a single intelligible structure.’<sup>37</sup> This is exactly what Berlin in his essay ‘Marxism in the Nineteenth Century’ attributes to Marx, and for this reason Marx is right in the mainstream of the western intellectual tradition. Indeed, Berlin regards Marx as an Enlightenment thinker, albeit in an extreme form, and at any rate this seems to be what the former derives from his entering into the latter’s mind. If that is what Berlin’s empathetic historical approach really amounts to, then Michael Ignatieff certainly is right in understanding it as a Collingwoodian project of exposing the ‘absolute presuppositions’ in past thinkers, and therefore correct in describing it as ‘high abstraction and grand synthesis’.<sup>38</sup>

From the literature on Berlin, however, it is the third premise above, generally referred to as ‘value monism,’ that has caught the commentators’ attention. Much energy in contemporary political philosophy has been devoted to *vindicating* the truth of it by trying to reconcile values, notably ‘equality’ and ‘liberty’, by combining them into a grand political theory or subsuming one into the other. What underlies such attempts is clearly the idea that as long as human values can be (re-)defined so as to become compatible with or even logically entail each other, this premise is then a reality rather than what Berlin suggests as an illusion – hence value pluralism is false.

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<sup>36</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.555.

<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, in Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (eds), *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico), p.312-3.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p.203.

Nevertheless, this narrow understanding of Berlin's monism is limiting in that, first, it distorts the *point* of what Berlin means by 'monism' and hence 'pluralism', and as a corollary, second, it underestimates Berlin's criticism of monism. More specifically, Berlin's point is not whether an attempt as such can be successful (for it definitely can), but that no matter how that is achieved, by logic or by conceiving a part-whole relation, it is a monistic *style of reasoning*. That is to say, neither the *possibility* of such redefinitions nor the resultant *number* of values is what Berlin's criticism is directed at. Indeed, even a political theory recognising *two* conflicting values as the ultimate ends of humanity, could still be a monistic vision if their conflicts are explained away by reference to a grand theoretical framework – which for Berlin amounts to a 'Procrustean programme' to adjust the reality to suit the theory.

To explain, it is time to introduce another conceptual dichotomy made famous by Berlin – the distinction between the hedgehogs and the foxes. The metaphor is taken from the Greek poet Archilochus's remark that 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' In Berlin's usage, the hedgehogs are thinkers who 'relate everything to a single central *vision*, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.' By contrast, the foxes are those thinkers 'who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle.'<sup>39</sup> Of course, whether Berlin's usage exhausts Archilochus's remark is an interesting of its own right. But what is concerned here is whether this dichotomy can be understood as a parallel distinction to that between the monist and the pluralist.

As observed by Steven Lukes, Berlin writes on history of ideas with a view to 'exposing the moral and political costs of adopting the hedgehogs' limited vision, while exploring the world-views of thinkers he recognised as fellow foxes.'<sup>40</sup> As one of the monists most sympathetic with Berlin the pluralist, Lukes is certainly right in

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<sup>39</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (Mentor Books, New American Library, 1957), p.3.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Lukes, 'An Unfashionable Fox' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2001), p.43.

this observation. But his typology of the hedgehogs seems to go against what last section has established. It lists four main species of the genus: namely, the positivist, the universalist, the rationalist, and the monist. Lukes singles out Marx as what Berlin takes to be the representative of the *positivist* hedgehog – not without a dissenting opinion on the verdict though. The reason is clear: Marx according to Berlin has taken most seriously Auguste Comte’s programme of turning history into a science and made the ‘bravest, if one of the least successful, attempts to discover general laws which govern historical evolution.’ The most notable *universalist* (or, as Lukes prefers, uniformitarian) hedgehogs include Hume, Locke, and Voltaire who have respectively claimed that ‘mankind is much the same in all times and places,’ ‘Vertues and Vices... for the most part are much the same everywhere,’ and ‘morality is the same in all civilised nations.’<sup>41</sup> The third type of hedgehog, the *rationalist*, refers mainly to the *philosophes* who believed, again in Berlin’s words cited by Lukes, that ‘the true, the only true, ends that all wise men sought at all times – in art, in thought, in morals and manners’ were ‘timeless and universal, known to all reasonable men’ and that ‘the light of the truth, *lumen naturalis*, is everywhere and always the same, even if men were often too wicked or stupid or weak to discover it, or if they did, to lead their lives by its radiance.’<sup>42</sup> The last type of hedgehog in Lukes’s typology, the monist, is certainly the most interesting classification among the four. They are thinkers whose central preoccupation is characterised by the ‘*philosophia perennis*’, holding ‘the old perennial belief in the possibility of realising ultimate harmony.’<sup>43</sup> On Lukes’s reading, that is to say, they are monists in virtue of their commitment to the belief that ‘all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.’<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Lukes, p.49. Originally from Isaiah Berlin, ‘Giambattista Vico and Cultural History’ in Henry Hardy (ed.) *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p.52.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted from Steven Lukes, ‘An Unfashionable Fox’ in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2001), p.51.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.51.

To be sure, Lukes's typology serves as valuable groundwork for anyone who intends to reconstruct Berlin's genealogy of the monist. However, it is after all a typology drawn by a monist – which is a label Lukes himself is happy to accept.<sup>45</sup> Apparently, what Lukes takes to be (the core of) Berlin's monism is the third of the set of premises aforementioned. But the focus on it ignores the other two premises that are always higher on the Berlin's list. The consequence is that it misunderstands what monism means for Berlin, as well as its nature: a *vision*, not merely a set of premises. At this point, it may be helpful to return to Berlin's neglected essay 'Political Ideas in Twentieth Century', where his earliest argument for the inescapability of the historical approach is found. In this essay Berlin argues that it is in terms of the political outlooks or 'ideological superstructure' – i.e. 'the methods of treating the past (or the present or the future) and of idioms and catchwords, the doubts and hopes, fears and exhortations which they expressed' – 'the development of political ideas and the conceptual apparatus of a society and of its most gifted and articulate representatives can be *judged*.'<sup>46</sup> Immediately suggested by this is the idea that whether a political thinker is *original* or not is to be judged solely by the vision he presented. And indeed, this is how Berlin considers Marx as a thinker in history. As he states in his interview with Lukes, what is original in Marx the thinker are the three ideas he introduced: namely, the influence of technology on culture, 'international company' (or, capitalism was going to become an international phenomenon), and class warfare.<sup>47</sup> And to the third Berlin adds that class can be more helpful if the term 'class' can be understood as *a way of living* rather than a position in the productive process. This addition means not only that Marx's view about class warfare for Berlin is clearly too narrow, in the sense of exaggerating the importance of *economic* elements in society, but also that a better way of accounting for class warfare is to see it as a conflict of ways of living, that is, as a *value* conflict – with the term 'value' here is not understood as what it is defined in Marx's idea of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>46</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.4.

<sup>47</sup> Steven Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes' in *Salmagundi* No. 120 (Fall, 1988), p. 71.

‘surplus value’ but in terms of the idea of ‘ideological superstructure’ which is popularised by Marx but for Berlin is Vico’s genuinely ‘original’ idea of *culture* in a new dress.

What is also suggested by Berlin’s criterion for assessing a political thinker is that what a vision as such consists of is very much the flesh of thought rather than its skeleton, the logic. Indeed, in Berlin’s judgement, although Marx is not a great original thinker, he is a formidable synthesiser who has marshalled various already existing concepts into a grand theory. And it is the fact that Marx’s central vision is very rich in content and innovative as a synthesis that makes Berlin label him as a ‘vision thinker’ – rather than an ‘argument thinker’ – whose arguments are meant to defend his ‘fundamental beliefs’ and ‘comprehensive views of life’. To recall, as the previous section has established, Marx for Berlin is a thinker who *at the same time* is a self-styled positivist who believes in a scientific discovery of historical laws, a reductionist who reduces all forms of human experiences into economic one’s, a universalist who takes human nature to be one and the same across cultures (albeit not timeless), a rationalist who defines reason as an act of identifying oneself with the direction of history, and a utopian whose projected vision of the world is one where conflicts of values would not occur. And what makes him an arch-monist precisely lies in Marx’s, to paraphrase Berlin’s definition of hedgehog, relating everything to the single central Hegelian *vision*, the teleological system more or less coherent or articulate, in terms of which he understands, thinks and feels – a *single, universal*, organising principle in terms of which alone *all* that he says has significance. If this paraphrase is acceptable, then what Berlin takes as Marx’s monistic vision is actually the hedgehog vision of the world. That is to say, instead of a set of premises, what Berlin has been fighting against is a vision, the monistic *ars cogito*. The corollary thus is this: monism is a style of reasoning, a mode of thought. What is more, monism in its deeper sense is not about the number of values (for Marx clearly thinks that human needs and class interests are plural), but about whether there can be a postulated grand theory which subsumes all *prima facie* conflicting values into a coherent system.

It follows that Berlin’s understanding of monism is not as narrow as Lukes’s, nor

is it as highly abstract as Ignatieff has suggested. Nevertheless, what this *style of reasoning* consists of and consists in has yet to be clarified. To deal with the first question, note that in daily usage of the term, a ‘vision’ is a metaphor associated with the visual. Its importance in theorising the political has been observed, for example, by Sheldon S. Wolin, whose *Politics and Vision* argues that ‘political philosophy constitutes a form of “seeing” political phenomena and that the way in which the phenomena will be visualised depends in large measure on where the viewers “stand”’.<sup>48</sup> It distinguishes two senses of vision: first, the common use of the term as referring to ‘an act of perception’, aiming at ‘a descriptive report about an object or an event’; second, an act of imagination, ‘as when one talks about an aesthetic vision or a religious vision,’ in which ‘it is the imaginative, not the descriptive, element that is uppermost.’<sup>49</sup> Wolin also notes that the first type of vision, commonly associated with ‘objective’ scientific observation, has proved to involve the imagination, especially in the construction of scientific theories. As a result, any claim to objective reportage of what is ‘really’ there has lost credibility in science, let alone in the field of politics. It follows that in constructing their political theories, philosophers – Wolin cites Spinoza – ‘conceive of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be.’ Hence, there is always a discrepancy between what men really are and what men are supposed to be – which suggests a *space* not only for political theorising, but for political envisaging. For sure, Wolin’s emphasis on the visual aspect of vision of course catches a great deal of what actually happens in political theorising. And such characterisation seems in line with Gallipeau’s understanding of Berlin’s writings on the history of ideas as a project of presenting ‘a *panoply* of models of human nature and society’ – to be *seen*, so to speak.

On the other hand, ‘vision’ has been understood as a ‘pre-analytic cognitive act’ or, in Thomas Sowell’s words, ‘what we sense or feel before we have constructed any systematic reasoning that could be called a theory, much less deduced any specific consequences as hypotheses to be tested against evidence’ – in short, it is ‘our sense

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<sup>48</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

of how the world works.’<sup>50</sup> As a matter of fact, this way of understanding a ‘vision’ differs from Wolin’s as well as Gallipeau’s, for their characterisations of ‘vision’ rely very much on the metaphor of seeing. But it seems to fit in very well with what Berlin has called ‘a sense of reality’, as explained in Chapter 2. Indeed, the very Herzenian sense of reality Berlin endorses, to which he once referred to as *Oxford Realism*, is none other than a sense of how the world actually works.<sup>51</sup> And arguably what evokes Berlin’s criticism of Marx most is the latter’s idealistic conception of history as phenomenology (the details of which will be discussed in the next section), which no doubt violates Berlin’s Herzenian realism. Meanwhile, as implicit in Chapter 3, Berlin’s holistic account of ‘model’ as a conceptual structure or paradigm suggests that, apart from the term’s association with the visual, what is at the core of it is its *cognitive* aspect – which not only organises an individual’s thought and attitudes towards his own life-world, but also supplies him with elements that constitutes his self-identity. A model indeed serves as a ‘pre-analytic cognitive act’. Thus, if what Berlin calls the vision of a thinker can also be understood along with what he calls a model of a culture or society, then Sowell’s characterisation of vision seems to be rather appropriate as a guide to Berlin’s unclarified terminology.

In order to do justice to the rich texture of what Berlin calls a vision, this section takes an eclectic approach by taking into consideration all the three senses of ‘vision’. Therefore, for the sake of argument, a vision can be artificially divided into three dimensions: (a) the *premise* about human nature; (b) the *prospective vision* the world could become; (c) a *sense of reality* with regard to how the world actually works, operating as the cognitive dimension linking (a) and (b). It has to be emphasised that these three ‘dimensions’ are so called because they in reality interact with each other during the process of reasoning. The premise dimension, for example, may be what a sense of reality can start with, while the vision of the best possible society is the natural – relative to the sense of reality – is the projection, also governed by the sense of reality, of the premise. Alternatively, one may start from a desirable possible world

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p.1.

<sup>51</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1991), p.153.

and work back, with the exercise of the sense of reality, to see what political measures should be taken or even how much 'human nature', if defined as malleable, should be transformed. The point is that they together constitute a 'political vision'. On this conjectural reading, and therefore Berlin's idea that '[i]f we examine the models, paradigms, conceptual structures that govern various *outlooks* ... then what we are engaged upon is not psychology or sociology or logic or epistemology, but *moral or social or political theory*, or all these at once,' is not an reiteration of the truism that underneath any political theory a particular conception of human nature can be found.<sup>52</sup> Nor is it meant to be a plea for examining whether a particular political theory can be *logically* derived from that conception of human nature. As a historian of ideas, Berlin is surely only too aware of the fact that political thinkers who had made their marks in history often engaged in the activity of theory-building in this rational manner. But what really interests him is the various visions of life lying behind not only those political theories formulated with logical rigour, but also various cultures whose 'political theory' in this sense are not formulated – and for this reason cannot be grasped – in such analytic manner. Indeed, that is Berlin's reason for advocating that the empathy approach of understanding the past political thought is 'inescapable', as noted in Chapter 2. And this surely marks a difference between Berlin and many of his followers who attempt to derive a clearly formulated *theory* from a political thinker's writings, or a political design from Berlin's pluralism, rendering the internal logic of such a vision at once too neat and tidy.

To turn to the question of what monism *consists in* for Berlin, it may be convenient to start with the criticism from those who has felt being under attack by Berlin. As observed by Barbara Goodwin, the central debate about utopianism in the second half of the twentieth century is concerned with the relation between utopian thinking and totalitarian practice, and that is a legacy left by those philosophers such as Berlin, Popper, Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich Hayek who have argued 'that utopianism raised the spectre of totalitarianism: utopian thinking was symptomatic of a totalitarian mindset which was inimical to freedom,' or, in other words, a '*sui*

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<sup>52</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp.84-85.



*generis* mode of thought inimical to liberal-democratic theory whatever its content.’<sup>53</sup> Also, according to Laurence Davis, ‘[to] believe the modern-day critic of utopian political thought is to believe that it is responsible for some of the worst horrors of the twentieth century among them the gulag and the concentration camp.’<sup>54</sup> In his eyes, ‘few have done as much as Berlin with such persistence and so wide an intellectual influence’ in promoting this view. And in order to expose the rationale behind Berlin’s ‘immoderate [and] unqualified *equation* of utopianism and totalitarianism’, Davis has singled out a passage from his ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will’:

All the utopias known to us are based upon the discoverability and harmony of objectively true ends, true for all men, at all times and places. This holds of every ideal city, from Plato’s Republic and his Laws, and Zeno’s anarchist world community, and the City of the Sun of Iambulus, to the Utopias of Thomas More and Campanella, Bacon and Harrington and Fénelon. The communist societies of Mably and Morelly, the state capitalism of Saint-Simon, the Phalanstères of Fourier, the various combinations of anarchism and collectivism of Owen and Godwin, Cabet, William Morris and Chernyshevsky, Bellamy, Hertzka and others (there is no lack of them in the nineteenth century) rest on the three pillars of social optimism in the west of which I have spoken: that the central problems – the *massimi problemi* - of men are, in the end, the same throughout history; that they are in principle soluble; and that the solutions form a harmonious whole.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly the last part of the quotation is Berlin’s formulation of monism. And for sure, Goodwin is right in observing that Berlin means monism to be a ‘mindset’ or a ‘*sui generis* mode of thought’, and Davis is also correct in noting that Berlin has never failed to sound the warning against the moral and political cost of the utopian style of reasoning – indeed, judged from Berlin’s writings, public lectures as well as interviews, to describe ‘fighting against monism’ as the leitmotif of his intellectual life may not be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, there is a serious question: does Berlin,

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted from Laurence Davis, ‘Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia’ in Barbara Goodwin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p.57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp.56-83.

<sup>55</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.211.

as many believe, really unqualifiedly equate utopianism with totalitarianism? As it seems, Davis thinks that the logic behind Berlin's 'immoderate' and 'unqualified' equation of utopianism and totalitarianism is the following syllogism: (1) monism leads to totalitarianism; (2) utopianism is a form of monism; (3) therefore, utopianism will lead to totalitarianism. And his own rationale goes like this: if one can prove that *either* utopianism is not necessarily a form of monism *or* that monistic thinking is not necessarily inherent in utopianism, then Berlin's accusation that utopianism *necessarily* leads to totalitarianism is ill-grounded. Davis thus tries to falsify Berlin's claim by appealing to various texts written by those utopian thinkers whose visions of society is neither 'perfectionist' nor 'static' in nature, and concludes that Berlin, by 'sweeping generalisations about the necessarily relationship between utopianism and totalitarianism,' has himself engaged in 'precisely the sort of *ideological dogmatism* [he] mistakenly ascribed to the utopian.'<sup>56</sup> Of course, 'ideological dogmatism' here refers to the so-called 'Cold War liberalism', of which Berlin is surely a participant.<sup>57</sup>

The crux of the matter apparently lies in the second premise of the syllogism, concerning whether utopianism is a form of monism – which can be understood as an issue concerning the characterisation of utopianism. As a matter of fact, Berlin thinks so. As indicated by the essay from which the above quotation is taken, Berlin understands utopianism to be 'the faith in universal, objective truth in matters of conduct, in the possibility of a perfect and harmonious society, wholly free from conflict or injustice or oppression,' and the task of the essay is to raise our awareness of the danger of this style of reasoning. To use the terminology established in the discussion of the three dimensions of monism, the prospective view of a harmonious society free from conflicts fits in with the third item in the set of monism's premises. On the other hand, if the term 'perfect' here is to be understood as the best human form of society, then, the fact that the term is used as a superlative means that underlying a utopian theory is an implicit claim to *singularity* and *universality*, in the

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<sup>56</sup> Laurence Davis, 'Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia' in Barbara Goodwin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p.84. My own emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> See Duncan Kelly, 'The Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2002, p.44.

sense of being the only fully adequate political solution applicable to all human beings in the world. These two features alone, it seems, should explain why Berlin considers utopian effort as such a form of monism already. Nevertheless, that would ignore another significant feature of utopianism Berlin intends to expose: *infallibilism*. Note that utopianism is understood by Berlin as a ‘faith’, that is to say, as a political vision built upon an unshakable epistemological belief about its own truth status. At this point, the significance of the first two items in the set of monistic premises become evident. To recall, what the first premise amounts to is an assumption of the universality of questions, and the singularity of true answers, while the second an assertion of the discoverability of such answers. Taken together, they mean that any one claiming to have an answer to such questions is claiming that he has found *the* answers – and surely the *massimi problemi* beforehand. And this answer is meant to be the one and only right answer. In other words, monism claims not only the knowable nature of the world, but also the attainment of such knowledge. From this it follows that, although we may agree with Davis that utopianism does not necessarily involve ‘perfectionism’ asserting the singularity of the best form of man, nor does it have to attribute a static nature to that society, inasmuch as it is a theory advocating for a particular form of human society as a perfect or the best, even merely meant to be a ‘vivid exercise of ethical imagination’, it is essentially a monistic mode of thought – an attempt to reach an infallible epistemological foundation.<sup>58</sup> What Berlin sees, that is to say, as the defining feature in utopianism, or monism in general, is this inherent *infallibilist mindset*.

On Berlin’s account, utopianism thus is not merely a style of reasoning searching for the postulated one and only one best form of human society. Rather, it must be emphasised here, what it amounts to is, in Berlin’s term, a ‘messianic’ political vision: the utopian vision is telling us what the perfect human society is like from a vantage-point only assessable by those who *have attained* the true knowledge already. Or, in Marx’s case, he teaches us the good news about the communist society as a

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<sup>58</sup> Laurence Davis, ‘Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia’ in Barbara Goodwin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Utopia* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p.57.

prophet – retrospectively, that is to say. From this it follows that the *point* of monism is *the closure of reasoning*. The hedgehogs are all alike in their infallibilism, and they are different only in their justification for their faith – either guaranteed by prophets, God himself, the sacred scriptures, Revelation, and the church, or by reason, logic, science, or even History as laws of necessity or as a superhuman agent. Of course, the way a monist justifies his infallibilism bears on how his vision is to conflict with that of Berlin’s pluralism. But that is a matter to be dealt with in the next section. At the moment, suffice it to say that what is at the core of monism is its cognitive dimension, the sense of reality, for that is what regulates the proceeding and justifies the content, as well as the premise, of this style of reasoning. As a matter of fact, that differs greatly from the conventional reading that treats the set of monism’s premises as a piece of analysis of monism and for this reason neglects what they amount to as a whole. As illustrated by Lukes’s reading, a positivist is said to be a hedgehog, on the grounds that he holds a scientific conception of history, while a monist is understood as a thinker believing in the compatibility or commensurability of values. However, if the ‘vision’ reading of monism is right, then the positivist is a monist who has an unshakable faith in the scientific method as the only way of formulating a question as well as the only path to its right answer, while a monist is actually anyone whose mindset is characterised by this infallibilism, regardless of the number of values he would like to pursue, for in any event he must rank them in an unchallengeable hierarchy or defines them in a way no conflict is to occur – either way for Berlin this is an exercise of the monistic style of reasoning. In short, the ‘oneness’ that defines monism lies in its faith in the *singularity* of the true answer.

On the other hand, if this reading is correct in characterising utopianism as a political monism, then Davis’ aim to vindicate Berlin’s ‘immoderate’ and ‘unqualified’ equation of utopianism and totalitarianism failed. But that does not automatically dismiss the widely held impression that Berlin commits to a ‘broad equation of Marxism, monism and totalitarianism.’<sup>59</sup> As it seems, this issue makes

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<sup>59</sup> See Duncan Kelly, ‘The Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin’ in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2002, p.44.

sense only when the term ‘equation’ is loosely understood as either ‘the same as’ or ‘a kind of’ rather than as exact as what the symbol ‘=’ implies in mathematics. Nor does it really suggest the kind of transitivity found in the logical sorites ‘If all  $As = B$ , and all  $Bs = C$ , then all  $As = C$ ’. What Berlin’s critics think is that his writings can be boiled down to a simple claim as follows: Marxism and totalitarianism are two forms of monism, and they have caused much of the political terror in the twentieth-century; therefore we should not subscribe to monism. Also, they believe that Berlin argues that monism *necessarily leads to* political terrors or totalitarianism. As a matter of fact, all these statements make sense only when the key terms are not clarified. In particular, the issue of *characterisation* of monism is not distinguished from that of *historical explanation* of totalitarianism, there seems to be a vague notion of *causation* running through the critics’ rationale. Nevertheless, as there is a parallel question concerning whether Berlin equates positive liberty with totalitarianism or whether he thinks that positive liberty would necessarily lead to political terrors, this issue is to be left to Chapter 6 when all these questions will be dealt with in full. Here, suffice it to say that the ‘mindset’ interpretation of monism means that a political practice, say, totalitarianism, may be found to harbour monism in its thought, but that does not mean it is monism that *causes* totalitarianism, nor does it suggest that it is monism that *logically leads to* or *historically leads to* totalitarianism – for monism is a *characterisation* of the style of reasoning of that political practice. Second, given infallibilism as the defining nature of monism, this style of reasoning is dangerous in that what justifies its unshakable beliefs can also be appealed to justify a policy, which is formulated according to its content of belief, that may cause suffering for the people – for they are but those poor who are ignorant of the truth. Third, as a corollary, monism is a style of reasoning *aiming at* the single right solution, but any fleshed-out political theory or political practice, if monistic in Berlin’s sense, is actually an *apocalypse* – at the same time an act of proclaiming the irrelevance of further political reasoning. Hence, as Berlin comments on Spinoza’s monism, the point of politics is *government* – which is the hedgehog’s concept of politics.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1991), p.

### IV.3. A Conflict between Two Visions of the World

What is the good of passing from one untenable position to another, of seeking justification always on the same plane?

- Samuel Beckett

With monism understood as a style of reasoning with built-in infallibilism, we are now ready to appreciate the significance of Berlin's 1962 essay 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?'. As William E. Connolly has noted, the word 'still' in the title speaks volumes.<sup>61</sup> That essay was published in the heyday of a new paradigm, behaviourism – which took a *reductivist* stance to the study of politics. Such a scientific approach was so dominant in the field that Peter Laslett had announced the death – 'at any rate for the time being' – of political theory six years earlier.<sup>62</sup> As explained in the first section of this chapter, reductionism is a form of monism, i.e. methodological monism. As a school of psychology, best elaborated by B. F. Skinner, behaviorism assumes that knowledge of the external (e.g. physiological) states as the key to understanding political behaviour, without the need for making reference to mental events or internal psychological processes, let alone the values, of political agents. On the whole, it sees the world of human affairs functioning in a way not dissimilar to the physical world, obeying the laws of nature. That is to say, it is a 'scientific' sense of reality. It projects a vision of human life which is highly rationalistic or even mechanical, and demands that the scientific method be the *only* appropriate way of understanding all human activities, of which politics is certainly a part – and for the same reason political theory, together with its *normative* concepts, does not seem to have a role to play in political science. Against this background,

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<sup>61</sup> William E. Connolly, 'Politics and Vision' in Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (eds.) *Democracy and Vision* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.5.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 1<sup>st</sup> series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p.vii.

Berlin's essay is meant to 'carve out a specific *domain* for political theory.'<sup>63</sup> Clearly, by asking whether political theory 'still' exists, Berlin actually intends to challenge this vision of the world where the explanatory importance of the ultimate ends, that is, political values, for which men have been fighting (each other) throughout history receive no proper recognition. Also clear is that for Berlin what is at stake in his battle against the monistic style of reasoning is not only the life and death of *political theory*, but also the way *politics* can be conducted.

Judged from the literature, the fact that infallibilism is at the core of monism seems to go largely unnoticed. Nevertheless, Berlin's concern with this issue is evident as early as in his 1949 essay 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century'. Indeed, towards the conclusion, before the earliest formulation of his pluralism and his projectionist concept of value (discussed in Chapter 3.1), he argues against the possibility of reconciling personal freedom with society's need for organisation and welfare as follows:

The dilemma is logically insoluble: we cannot sacrifice either freedom or the organisation needed for its defence, or a minimum standard of welfare. The way out must therefore lie in some logically untidy, flexible, and even ambiguous *compromise*. Every situation calls for its own specific policy, since out of the crooked timber of humanity, as Kant once remarked, no straight thing was ever made. ... We must submit to authority not because it is *infallible*, but only for strictly and openly utilitarian reasons, as a necessary expedient. Since no solution can be guaranteed against error, no disposition is final. And therefore a loose texture and *toleration* of a minimum of inefficiency, even a degree of indulgence in idle talk, idle curiosity, aimless pursuit of this or that without authorisation – 'conspicuous waste' itself – may allow more spontaneous, individual variation (for which the individual must in the end assume full responsibility), and will always be worth more than the neatest and most delicately fashioned imposed pattern. Above all, it must be realised that the kinds of problems which this or that method of education or system of scientific or religious or social organisation is guaranteed to solve are not *eo facto* the only central questions of human life.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> William E. Connolly, 'Politics and Vision' in Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (eds.) *Democracy and Vision* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.39-40.

Given the way monism is understood, it seems natural to intuitively expect that Berlin would offer an anti-fallibilist mode of thought as an alternative to monism. And this intuition seems to be correct. As one can see, this rich passage is Berlin's statement of the point of pluralism. It involves not only the ideas now widely discussed in the literature, that is, value conflict and negative liberty (for individuals and minorities in this case), but also a cluster of ideas central to Berlin's political thought as a whole but so far underdiscussed, namely, compromise, particularism (every situation calls for an *ad hoc* measure), scepticism, toleration, and fallibilism. As it seems, what runs throughout this passage is a tone of *scepticism*, as expressed by Berlin's caution against the danger of the Messianic grand project – in other words, monism – to search for the final solution to any moral and political issue. Such a sceptical attitude is the corollary of Berlin's implicit *fallibilism*, which is the basis for his favoured *ad hoc* practical approach to moral and political matters – and is no doubt in accordance with his historical methodology.

What is confirmed by this passage is that, on the one hand, our earlier reading of Berlin's transformation of Vichian's methodology for studying the past into an approach applicable to both the past thinkers and today's mankind as a whole; and on the other, our reading that what counts for Berlin as the point of monism is infallibilism. What is striking, however, is that this passage is meant to be a criticism of the welfare state found in contemporary liberal democracies. Berlin has earlier in the same article classified mid-nineteenth-century liberalism as a form of political monism, whose philosophical foundation is diagnosed by him as obscure and self-contradictory, for it embraced 'rights' as 'the absolute standards of truth and justice' and at the same time upheld empiricism and utilitarianism - the former by nature recognises no 'absolute' truth and the latter guarantees no individual rights.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, according to his analysis, what underlies the policy-making of modern welfare-state liberal democracies is an idea of human progress, based upon a 'gloomy, false, and ultimately degraded' conception of human 'needs' – which is 'therapeutic' in nature, 'resting on denial of the

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<sup>65</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.12.



rational and productive nature of all, or even the majority of, men.’<sup>66</sup> In Berlin’s eyes, such policies are surely beneficent and serve as ‘a great moral asset to an age and a country’, but its tendency ‘to assimilate all men’s primary needs to those that are capable of being met by these measures in effect is tantamount to ‘the reduction of all questions and aspirations to dislocations which the expert can set right’ – which is what is left for *politics*, coinciding with the very concept of politics – government – in monism established in last section.<sup>67</sup> As a result, the liberalism practised in welfare democracies for Berlin shares with a variety of political ideologies, surely including Marxism, a common style of reasoning: monism.

Two things suggested by the passage are of particular importance here. The first is that a sceptical attitude is built to Berlin’s pluralism as a style of reasoning, which is a form of fallibilism which he implicitly endorses. And the second is that Berlin’s defence of negative liberty, if it is read as an argument for liberalism at all, it must be – if he is consistent, of course – a form of liberalism free from the monistic therapeutic tendency. The first issue is concerned with Berlin’s pluralism as a style of political reasoning, and the second its substantial political implications. The rest of this section focuses on the first issue, while leaving the second to the next chapter. To begin with, it should be noted that there is another theoretical approach in the field of political philosophy today that is also often termed as ‘value pluralism’. Nevertheless, what it refers to is strictly the *descriptive thesis* of the diversity of values rather than the *meta-ethical thesis* advocated by Berlin: the first is meant to be a *descriptive* thesis and the second a *normative* thesis. John Dewey, for instance, is understood by Isaac Levi as a ‘value pluralist’ in this sense. The reason is that, as opposed to the utilitarians who postulate a single standard of value by which the utility of all human conducts are to be measured, Dewey ‘saw in the diversity of values which men seek to promote the occasion of conflicts analogous to the difficulties prompting those “real and living doubts” which Charles Peirce had claimed to be the occasion of serious scientific

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp.34-35.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.35.

inquiry.’<sup>68</sup> If Levi is right, Dewey recognises the diversity of values as state of affairs, and treats value conflicts as a *practical* problem to be solved in a rational fashion – which is the core of the pragmatism of Peirce and Dewey. At any rate that is the approach Levi himself takes. However, despite its recognition of the plurality of value, Deweyian value pluralism differs from that of Berlin. What is more, as a mode of thought it is closer to monism rather than Berlinian pluralism.

To be sure, the descriptive thesis is not new at all, for this observation is as old as the Western intellectual tradition itself, and arguably it is one on which that Greek philosophy thrived. Indeed, as early as the age of pre-Socratic philosophy, the plurality of possible value systems has led the Sophist to believe that they are but matters of convention and hence what is right and what is wrong are relative to value systems. And it is against this relativism that Socrates begins his philosophising career. The initial approach taken by Socrates is linguistic-analytical in character, asking *prima facie* definitional questions regarding axiological concepts in the form of ‘What is *x*-ness (e.g. justice)?’ but soon becomes metaphysical, for the answer it seeks is not a linguistic account of the essence of a concept but an account of the *ontology* of its reference. On this account, to be really *x* is to be *x* in a way ‘independent of both the viewpoint of the judger and the circumstances of the object.’<sup>69</sup> Hence true knowledge as an answer to Socratic questions as such demands nothing less than a metaphysical epistemology. Surely what underlies this approach is the faith in the *discoverability* and *singularity* of the right answers to questions concerning human values – monism. This monistic premise no doubt is also evident in Levi’s Deweyian value pluralism. What is more, the Deweyian shares with both Socrates and Plato the monistic *problem-solving* attitude towards questions concerning human values: they are different merely in that while the former sees the diversity of value systems as a *practical* problem to be solved in a rational way, the latter regard it as a *philosophical* problem to be solved at the conceptual level.

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<sup>68</sup> Isaac Levi, *The Covenant of Reason: Rationality and the Commitments of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.218.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas P. White, ‘Plato’s metaphysical epistemology’ in Richard Kraut (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.292.

It follows that Deweyian value-pluralists are hedgehogs in fox's clothing. And what these false friends of Berlin's value-pluralism intend to achieve is to construct a single grand framework under which value conflicts are recognised and *solved*. Their prospective political visions may not be constructed based on a single value which alone is regarded as intrinsically valuable such as that found in the hard-line monism of classic utilitarianism, but their mode of thought is definitely the monistic style of reasoning. In any case, that is the way Berlin sees John Rawls' theory of justice.<sup>70</sup> According to the statement found in his conversation with Lukes, the fact that Rawls 'thinks that it's possible to have a just framework where different moralities can all be fitted together into a just framework' makes his project differs profoundly from Berlin's value pluralism that sees *compromise* or *trade-off*, as stated in the quotation discussed earlier, as the only way out of value conflicts.<sup>71</sup> For one thing, the abstract approach of Rawls' theory has led Berlin to doubt whether the problems regarding *who* formulates the rules of justice and *how* are these rules to be discovered can be solved in the first place.<sup>72</sup> Rawls' idea of the 'original position' cannot be an answer to them because it presupposes a universally valid conception of rationality, if not a model of man with that conception of rationality. Nor can the idea of 'overlapping consensus' be regarded as an answer because empirical evidence goes against the possibility of finding that. That is to say, if to be carried out as a social experiment, it is seems unable to find even the starting-point, for the solution to the practical matter of finding the universally agreed 'reasonable persons' to take part in the project may be indefinitely delayed – until such consensus is reached, which in turn requires another overlapping consensus on what counts as 'reasonable'. Hence Rawls' liberal enterprise at best remains what Jean Hampton terms a 'hypothetical' social contract theory – and an unfalsifiable one.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes' in *Salmagundi* No. 120 (Fall, 1988), p.112.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Jean Hampton, 'Contract and Consent' in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds.) *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp.379-393.

More importantly, Berlin's idea of compromise differs from Rawls' theory in that while the latter grants the value of justice the privilege to adjudicate any case of value conflict, or to trump all other values if the case involves the value of justice, the former recognises no such value hierarchy and hence does not intend to solve any value conflict in a way that a value involved in it would be in any sense *defeated*. To recall, as illustrated by the case of Sartre's student discussed in Chapter 3, what makes a value conflict is 'tragic' is the moral agent's *felt* obligation to perform at the same time two conflicting courses of action. The reason is that an obligation of this kind is unable to be *explained away* in any rational way. That is to say, even if the agent can find a way to rationalise his own choice between the two, he would not feel that his duty to perform the other course of action is then released. In other words, doing a right thing would not cancel out his felt inability to perform the other – a feeling of as if having done a 'wrong' thing. Within Berlin's vision of the world, no such defeat is possible, for a value not chosen to be embodied to the full in any value conflict is to remain as valid, obligatory and compelling as the chosen one. None of the values involved in a conflict is inferior, for each of them is an ultimate value in its own right and pursued for its own sake. That is why value choice is understood by Berlin as a case of 'plumping' between two equally valuable ones – and hence tragic.

To be sure, that values are regarded as 'equal' in this sense is what distinguishes Berlin's value pluralism from the versions of Dewey as well as Rawls. There seems to be a contrast between the Deweyian version which intends to solve a value conflict in a purely rational way, and the Rawlsian one by way of hypothetical reasoning. But they are actually the same in presupposing that a moral conflict of this kind can be solved by *deliberation* at the *reflective* level and that a felt moral obligation can be explained away in this rational fashion. Nevertheless, Levi's remark that 'in sharp contrast to Dewey, the presence of value conflict is not conceived [by Berlin] to be the occasion for inquiry and deliberation' must be qualified.<sup>74</sup> That is to say, the presence of conflict for Berlin in fact calls for *practical compromise*, which may also involve

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<sup>74</sup> Isaac Levi, *The Covenant of Reason: Rationality and the Commitments of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.219.

deliberation from both parties in conflict, rather than theoretical refinement. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that Berlin holds a sense of reality quite different from that of either the Deweyian or Rawlsian political philosophers. As argued earlier, Berlin's sense of reality is a form of *empiricism* that takes solely human *experience* to be what is 'real' in the practical dealings with persons. This empiricism means that *moral* experience of value conflict is the *empirical* aspect of human experience that should not be, to use Bernard Williams' words, 'ironed out' within the framework of a single coherent ethical system.<sup>75</sup> Undoubtedly Berlin takes a very firm stance in this regard, and in his eyes even Rawls' project, arguably more attentive to the diversity of values as a state of affairs than many other forms of political monism, still is a theory detached from the reality. Indeed, insomuch as one who sees the diversity of values as an occasion of looking for the right way of explaining the inescapable conflict away, either by taking a metaphysical approach (as found in Platonism and Hegelianism) or a rationalist approach (such as that of Dewey's anti-metaphysical pragmatism), or by constructing a grand coherent narrative (as exemplified by Christian theology, Marx's historical materialism, and Rawls' neo-contractarian theory), or even by redefining key axiological concepts to make them compatible with or entailing each other so as to circumvent value conflict, he is a false friend of Berlin – namely, a hedgehog in fox's clothing. For ultimately they see the diversity of values as a 'problem' to be overcome or explained away at the conceptual level, rather than, as argued by Berlin, a human condition to be *tolerated*.

Thus understood, the contrast between monism and pluralism as two styles of political reasoning appears to be analogous to that between theism and atheism rather than that between monotheism and polytheism. As argued in the previous section, the contrast between monism and pluralism is essentially related to whether our knowledge with regard to human affairs is infallible or not, and the *number* of ultimate human values to be recognised is but a secondary issue. That is to say, a monist approach may recognise only a single value, such as in the case of classic utilitarianism. But it can also take a number of such 'ultimate' values to form a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

coherent political theory, as those hedgehogs in fox's clothing have done. Now it should be emphasised that the contrast between Berlin's pluralism and monism is not analogous to the difference between monotheism and polytheism, but to that between atheism and theism. The reason is as follows: first, in a way similar to the burden of proving the existence of God/gods placed upon both of these two forms of theism, either form of monism at issue here is faced with the difficulty of vindicating their *agent-neutral* conceptions of value. In other words, the uncunning hedgehogs and the hedgehogs in fox's clothing are under the same burden of proof: to prove how a value can come into *existence* in that way as well as why a value of this kind is *valuable* independent of agent's pursuit. Their difference merely lies in that while the many-valued monist have to prove that *one* or *some* of their values are more fundamental – if not more valuable – than the rest, the single-valued monist has to demonstrate why there is *one and only one* intrinsically valuable value. Second, by contrast, the fact that Berlin's projectivist conception of value sees the axiological foundation of a value in the *de facto* pursuit of men as free moral agents, that is, assigning the source of what makes a human end intrinsically valuable to actual human experience, means that the burden of proof on him consists in how to justify the implied *quasi-naturalism* (as indicated in Chapter 3) in his conception of value – without the need to resort to a metaphysical or abstract non-agent-related theory of intrinsic value. Third, from these two it follows that Berlin's pluralism differs from monism in that they are two styles of reasoning operating on different planes of thought: the former operates on the *empirical* level, and the latter on the *conceptual* (broadly understood) level. As a matter of fact, this is the most fundamental difference between the fox's approach and that of the hedgehog therefore. And the crux of the matter of course is Berlin's anti-metaphysical sense of reality – which is what enables him to resist the temptation to move across Plato's 'dividing line' of cognition to attempt at a rationalistic solution to value conflicts at the metaphysical or conceptual levels.<sup>76</sup>

To recapitulate, the presence of value conflict for Berlin is a perpetual human reality to be tolerated, but for the monist, enemies and false friends alike, it is a

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<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Republic*, ed. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 509dff.

problem capable of a rational solution. And what underlies such difference in attitude towards the same state of affairs is the profound divergence in their sense of reality which is responsible for their taking different approaches to the *empirical* and *non-empirical* planes respectively. However, that does not mean *rationality* is ruled out from Berlin's vision of human world. Indeed, Berlin's commitment to the empirical is inseparable from his idea of reason. To explain, during Jahanbegloo's interview with him, Berlin emphasises that he has never said that he didn't believe in 'reason' – only finding it difficult to understand the sort of reason meant by some philosophers, which is for them 'a kind of a magical eye, which sees *non-empirical* universal truths' or even 'an immediate perception of the eternal truth of certain norms.'<sup>77</sup> For Berlin, the question of how norms and values can be rationally justified is a bogus one. For 'the norms don't need justification, it is they which justify the rest, because they are basic.'<sup>78</sup> Rather, what one should ask is 'How these norms are known to us?' And the answer given by Berlin is this: 'One just finds that one's form of life presupposes certain concepts, categories and beliefs. That's a "*de facto*" statement, not "*de jure*". You can say that every civilisation distinguishes between good and bad, between true and false. From that it does follow that this is virtually a universal fact about mankind; but not an *a priori* form of rational knowledge.'<sup>79</sup> As a matter of fact, this remark is consistent with Berlin's understanding of a form of life as a 'paradigm' as explicated in Chapter 3. On this view, a norm or value makes sense only within the axiological network such as a form of life or a culture in which it is found. This sets a direction for reason to proceed, for that means the rational approach to justification must take place within a value system. Nevertheless, it does not imply that justification is not open to external criticism. As argued already, Berlin's value-pluralism differs from relativism in that it sets a limit to the *number* of human values and at the same time places a formal constraint, that is, *intelligibility*, on what can be counted as a value. Read together with Berlin's remark cited here, this constrained concept of man as free

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<sup>77</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p. 113. My own emphasis.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

and creative moral agent, the premise of his value-pluralist vision, seems to suggest that his concept of man is related to our actual understanding of what it is to be human. In other words, Berlin's concept of human nature is meant to be a quasi-empirical account of what men really are rather than a normative one prescribing what men should be like. Note that an idea of human nature by definition is applicable to all human beings, Berlin thereby endorses a form of universalism, albeit *de facto* in nature and leaving open the content of man's choice. Indeed, as clearly stated in the remark, a universal fact about mankind can be derived from the observation of human condition. Thus universalism is not essentially antithetical to pluralism, for it only becomes a monistic element of thought when putting on a '*de jure*' face. From this it follows that what is ruled out from Berlin's value-pluralist vision is the monist's normative and rationalist conception of human nature, rather than the idea of rationality or human nature, or even universalism – indeed, they are all intertwined with Berlin's empirical approach to human values. And the corollary of it is that a form of life has to fall within the *de facto* range of intelligible human endeavour in order to be recognised as legitimate and should be judged and criticised accordingly – arguably this form of 'external' criticism is, strictly speaking, a form of *internal* criticism from *within* the perspective of humanity.

At this point, we may agree with Lukes's labelling Berlin as an 'unfashionable fox' who has 'remained staunchly loyal to his early empiricist outlook', never 'troubled by post-empiricist philosophies of science or the hermeneutic circle' or 'attracted to anything like social constructionism' and 'the various varieties of subjectivism and emotivism in ethics or in later years by existentialism', and surely 'show[ing] no sympathy for those contemporary post-Nietzschean, postmodernist foxes.'<sup>80</sup> What the 'early empiricist outlook' stands for, according to Lukes, is well summarised by Stuart Hampshire's description of Berlin as 'a convinced and calm empiricist, who insist[s] that the stuff of our day-to-day experience, whether in personal experience or in politics, is the true stuff of reality' and takes 'the furniture of

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<sup>80</sup> Steven Lukes, 'An Unfashionable Fox' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2001), p.56.



the world, both the natural and the social furniture, medium-sized objects on a human scale, to be entirely real and to exist more or less as we perceive them.’<sup>81</sup> This interpretation of Berlin’s empiricism confirms our earlier reading of Berlin’s Herzenian sense of reality. Indeed, although it is true that Berlin often describes himself as an ‘empiricist’, what he means by the term is a *realist* attitude towards the human experience of the world. Also, it is in this sense that he describes Feuerbach – whose idea of man as a being of ‘blood and flesh’ certainly had influenced Berlin’s hero, Herzen – as an empiricist.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, this strand of empiricism differs considerably from that of Hume who according to Hampshire is Berlin’s kindred spirit, if not hidden source. For one thing, whether Hume’s empiricism should be characterised as a form of scepticism or, more mildly, as a form of fallibilism is an issue yet to be settled. Berlin, as suggested by the paragraph cited in the beginning of this section, is committed to fallibilism and believes in the possibility of knowledge about man – only not in the presumptuous positivist sense.<sup>83</sup> For another, as indicated in Chapter 3, Berlin is committed to a form of *naturalism* which as a matter of fact goes against the grains of Hume’s Fork by deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’: indeed, the plurality of value is not meant by Berlin merely as a state of affairs but also as a political *ideal*. Nevertheless, what helps him to bridge the logical gulf is, again, the Herzenian sense of reality that takes human beings as real as they are, whose life should not be sacrificed ‘in the name of some bloodless dogma.’<sup>84</sup> Indeed, here Berlin is echoing Herzen’s discovery of a new form of human sacrifice – ‘of living human beings on the altars of abstractions.’<sup>85</sup> Without this Herzenian humanism, Berlin may not have been able to have implicitly extended the Kantian doctrine of ‘respect for persons’ into a doctrine of respect for forms of life which are *de facto*

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<sup>81</sup> Originally quoted in *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>82</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (4th ed.) (London: Fontana Press, 1978), p.57; see also Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p.131.

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, Robert Fogelin, *Hume’s Scepticism in the Treatises of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

<sup>84</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, p.7??

<sup>85</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Pursuit of the ideal’ in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p.16.

chosen and valued by persons who under no circumstance be treated as a means to an end. More likely than not, it can herefore, the person who always smiles behind Berlin when he is writing is not Hume as Hampshire has suggested, but Herzen – whose sense of reality is the very strand of ‘empiricism’ Berlin has endorsed throughout his life fighting against monism.

Thus, despite the fact that his historical approach is basically a methodology derived from Vico’s hermeneutic historicism, the Herderian expressivist model of man and society he endorses is congenial to social constructionism, and the resultant holistic ‘paradigm’ account of human values is formulated ahead of the Kuhnian paradigm shift, Berlin with this Herzenian sense of reality remains an unfashionable believer in rationality and the objectivity of human values, and opposes relativism, subjectivism and emotivism in ethics. However, although Lukes is right in saying that Berlin has never shown sympathy to Nietzsche, the suggestion he often makes that Nietzsche is a fox who had a century ahead of Berlin formulated the doctrine of value-pluralism should be qualified.<sup>86</sup> True, Nietzsche argued for a form of value-pluralism. But it differs from Berlin’s at various levels. At the level of premise, while Berlin sees man as essentially free and creative *moral* agent, Nietzsche did not share this essentially ethical account of human nature. In terms of sense of reality, note that humanity for Nietzsche is something to be overcome, which is in sharp contrast to Berlin’s Herzenian humanism which sees the world undeviatingly *within* the perspective of humanity – indeed without which rational and external criticism of a form of life can not take place. As a result, Berlin’s vision of life no doubt is all too human and ethical in the eyes of Nietzsche, for whom life is essentially a work of art and the presence of value conflict is something to be *celebrated* – or promoted, so that one can leave the ‘herd’ by defying the morality of his own society and then stamp one’s own unique personality on the world.<sup>87</sup> But in the eyes of Berlin, as implied by his essay ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will’, such an *expressionist* vision of life

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<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Steven Lukes, ‘Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes’ in *Salmagundi* No. 120 (Fall, 1988), p102.

<sup>87</sup> See, for instance, Frederick Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996).

is a case of the ‘extravagances of romantic irrationalism’ based on the ‘fallacy that life is, or can be made, a work of art.’<sup>88</sup> As a matter of fact, Berlin’s and Nietzsche’s style of reasoning differ fundamentally from each other. On the one hand, as with those hedgehogs in fox’s clothing, Nietzsche’s theory attempts to ground a normative theory on a non-empirical foundation: their difference merely lies in the fact that while the former appeal to metaphysics or grand (historical) narratives or redefinitions of key concepts, the latter engages with applying an aesthetic model to the moral and political spheres. They differ only in the fact that while the hedgehogs take the metaphysical to be real, Nietzsche took the aesthetic. But both the metaphysical and the aesthetic one to Berlin’s sense of reality are merely *metaphorical*, and thus both the hedgehogs and Nietzsche the fox, as Lukes has labelled, have distorted the reality as actually experienced by men. On the other, as Nietzsche’s vision of post-human life is meant to be a normative account of life, prescribing a single way to live, that is, to be come an ‘*overman*’ (overman), his ideal is not dissimilar to the monist’s *perfectionism*. Of course, one may reply that in so far as he leaves open for the overman to develop his own form of life, Nietzsche remains a true fox rather than a hedgehog in fox’s clothing, and hence his value pluralism is closer to Berlin’s than monism. However, that may make Nietzsche’s theory rather similar to John Stuart Mill’s liberalism when read as a perfectionist version, and as a result render the contrast between Nietzsche’s pluralism and monism into the difference between monotheism and polytheism, for in so far as it is a form of perfectionism, it implies the closure of reasoning – and if it does not, then it is difficult to see how the preferred ‘overman’ form of life is the better, let alone the best, one.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, even if that is meant to be an aesthetic judgement, Nietzsche still has to demonstrate why *his* taste is better than others’ – which is a very difficult task for a thinker who does not

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<sup>88</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.580.

<sup>89</sup> For the relation between Nietzsche and liberalism, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a perfectionist interpretation of John Stuart Mill’s liberalism, see Isaiah Berlin’s ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’ in *Four Essay on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.173-206.

believe in objectivity or truth.

Once again whether a thinker is a real fox or not depends on whether he commits to infallibilism and on what basis he attempts to ground a normative theory. And once again Berlin's style of reasoning operate on a plane different from that of Nietzsche. By now it should be clear that Berlin's pluralism as a political approach differs from all the aforementioned hedgehogs and fox, if Nietzsche is one, in that he proceeds his argument undeviatingly on the empirical level, from the perspective of humanity, and within the sphere of morality. The whole process of Berlin's reasoning is animated by his Herzenian sense of reality which sets up a framework for Berlin to move from an 'is' to an 'ought' on the same plane: from the diversity of value as a state of affairs to the diversity of value as a moral and political ideal. Note that this framework is 'quasi-naturalistic' in nature, in the sense that, first, given his conception of man as free and creative moral agent, and his sense of reality's emphasis on the human (moral, given the human nature) experience, Berlin's move as such actually takes place *within* the sphere of morality – hence no magic is involved. The presence of value conflict is the *natural consequence* of men's acting as free and creative agents, a state of affairs to be tolerated, rather than a problem to be solved or something to be celebrated. And value-pluralism becomes an ideal for Berlin only when this natural human condition is oppressed by unnatural political measures backed by an infallibilist justification which distorts the reality of human experience. Second, given his belief that 'political theory is a branch of moral philosophy, which starts from the discovery, or application, of moral notions in the sphere of political relations' as stated in his 'Two Concepts of Liberty', the move is actually an *extrapolation* of the moral consideration to the political on the same plane, which is empirical and ethical in nature – hence no *cross-sphere* or *metaphorical* reasoning is involved.<sup>90</sup> The crux of the matter is this: the political for Berlin is essentially ethical. As a corollary, the point of politics is not 'government' as believed by the monist or 'expressionism of will' as declared by some Romantic thinkers, but 'compromises' or 'trade-offs' between conflicting ends of life.

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<sup>90</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.120.

To conclude, what this chapter has established is that the real difference between Berlin's pluralism and monism as two doctrines of human value lies not in the number of values but in their attitudes towards the diversity of values as a state of affairs. And the contrast between monism and Berlin's pluralism as two distinctive approaches to politics lies in their divergence on the issue concerning which level and sphere of thought should be prioritised to be the appropriate plane for arguing about politics. If this reading is correct, then Berlin's fox-style of reasoning actually differs from the style of reasoning practised by the hedgehogs, masked or unmasked, in a way like atheism differs from theism rather than polytheism from monotheism, for they basically operate on different planes, involving considerations from different levels of thought as well as justifications from different epistemological stances. Against the monist approaches based upon various forms of infallibilism, ranging from Plato's metaphysics to Rawls' liberal project, Berlin's pluralism should thus be understood as a challenge based upon a *de facto* approach combined with fallibilism. And Berlin's pluralism as a challenge against monism is well encapsulated in Beckett's remark in the epigraph: what is the good of passing from one untenable position to another, of seeking justification always on the same plane? In this sense, Berlin the unfashionable fox is not only iconoclastic but also – to use John Gray's word – 'subversive'.<sup>91</sup> As a political thinker has to be judged in terms of the political ideas and conceptual apparatus he has developed, as argued by Berlin himself, his achievement as a political thinker is eventually to be evaluated by the extent to which his political approach, and his arguments for his vision, stand against monism as an alternative. Of course, such evaluation has to take place when a clear exposition of his political vision is in place. The next chapter deals with the issue of the relation between Berlin's value-pluralism and liberalism, by way of explicating how his *de facto* approach is related to politics in practice, and how he extrapolates the moral considerations from personal relations to political institutions on the same plane. And the issue of evaluation is to be left to the conclusion of this thesis, Chapter 6.

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<sup>91</sup> John Gray, Berlin (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.5.

## CHAPTER V.

### Political Implications of Value-Pluralism

Judged from the literature on Berlin's value-pluralism today, the issue concerning its political implications has caught most of the attention of political theorists, who tend to assume that there is a logical link between the doctrine and liberalism, and a number of attempts have been made to expose or construct such a link. If the analysis of Berlin's value-pluralism in the previous chapter is correct, the doctrine is formulated only with an attitude towards other people and cultures which is ethical in nature. No doubt that has political implications. This chapter deals with some of the most notable of these attempts in the light of what has been established by this thesis as Berlin's value-pluralism. It begins with a section discussing George Crowder's article 'Pluralism and Liberalism' which argues against any logical relations between value-pluralism and liberal values, published in 1994 in *Political Studies* together with a reply co-authored by Berlin and Bernard Williams.<sup>1</sup> Following this is a discussion of the attempts made by John Gray who has attributed an *agonistic liberalism* to Berlin and, again, Crowder who after a decade of rethinking has done an about-turn over the same issue and advanced a pluralistic case for liberalism based on the idea that the radical nature of choice implied by value-pluralism lends support to the value of personal autonomy and therefore the Enlightenment strand of liberalism. The third section takes a different approach to this issue and deals with Joan Cocks' criticism of Berlin's thought on nationalism and his involvement with Zionism. It is hoped that by the end of this chapter it will be clear that any logical approach to understanding the relation between Berlin's value-pluralism and his support for liberalism is not a profitable one, for the key to this issue lies in the fact that value-pluralism is meant to cultivate an enlarged mentality whose internal normativity and practical implications are distinctively 'liberal.'

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<sup>1</sup> George Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism' in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, pp.293-305.

## V.1. Pluralism and its Alleged Affinities with Liberal Values

Crowder's article mentioned earlier is meant to sever all the alleged logical relations between liberalism and what he calls 'meta-ethical pluralism', that is, 'a thesis about the nature of value, the idea that values cannot be reduced to any single hierarchy or frictionless system, but are on the contrary irreducibly multiple and permanently liable to come into conflict with one another.'<sup>2</sup> Its chief intention is not to undermine either pluralism or liberalism, but to argue against the view that 'to accept the truth of meta-ethical pluralism is to have a *reason* to embrace liberalism' or, in other words, '[t]o recognise the plurality of values is to have a reason to the valuing of *X*, which is a good best advanced by the institutions of liberalism.'<sup>3</sup> According to Crowder, the following two-staged reasoning is the line of thinking taken by all claims for the link between pluralism and liberalism: 'first, from the supposed truth of pluralism to the valuing of *X*; secondly, from the value of *X* to the desirability of liberalism.'<sup>4</sup> And his article considers the following six candidates for the value *X* in turn: tolerance, choice, humaneness, diversity, truthfulness, and personal autonomy. This section begins with what Crowder takes to be the simplest way to move from pluralism to liberalism, that is, the argument from tolerance, and the aim is to expose his overall strategy in this criticism. Based on that exposition, the second part of this section then focuses on the two arguments Crowder attributes to Berlin, namely, the argument from choice and the argument from humaneness. The aim here is not to forge a logical link between value-pluralism and liberalism but rather to give an account of how these they may be understood in the light of the reconstruction of Berlin's vision in the previous chapter.

To begin with, it may be helpful to analyse Crowder's strategy first. As noted by Berlin and Williams in their reply, his strategy involves '[reducing] all arguments for the link between pluralism and liberalism to the same argumentation structure as follows: (i) pluralism supports, promotes, favours etc. some value *X*; (ii) *X* is central

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<sup>2</sup> George Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism' in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.293.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to, supports, or at least is favoured by, liberalism.’<sup>5</sup> More specifically, his aim is (a) to falsify the idea that by accepting that there is a range of conflicting values we must then recognise a higher-order value that supports liberalism and (b) to falsify the idea that priority can be accorded to one among many incommensurable values. And his overall strategic rationale is that: if it can be proved that pluralism by its own nature should not *privilege* a particular one *among* incommensurable values that is *uniquely related to* liberalism, then the alleged link between pluralism and liberalism does not exist. Or, to put it more schematically: pluralism is a thesis about the existence of a plurality of conflicting values *x, y, z...*, and hence to prioritise any of them is logically self-contradictory.

The first argument for the link between value-pluralism and liberalism Crowder considers can best illustrate Crowder’s strategy. This is the argument from tolerance he attributes to Steven Lukes, maintaining that in so far as there can not be ‘uniquely determinate solutions rationally compelling upon all’ it is unreasonable ‘for the state to impose any single solution on some of its citizens.’<sup>6</sup> If Crowder is right, central to Lukes’s argument is that: ‘[i]f goods are multiple, then so must be *legitimate* forms of the good life or (to avoid that monistic formulating) ways of living;’ or, ‘[o]nce we recognise the *validity* of all these different good lives, we must see that it makes no sense to impose any of them on people to the exclusion of other good lives’ – hence ‘we must see that it is rational to be tolerant.’<sup>7</sup> Put differently, ‘[i]f ‘values are plural, then they must be *equally valuable*, hence deserving of equal respect.’<sup>8</sup> Thus, a duty of tolerating forms of life from one’s own – the central commitment of liberalism – is called for by the fact that all forms of life are, so to speak, on a *moral par*. According to Crowder, however, this argument has an internal contradiction: this line of thought relies heavily on the speaking of incommensurable goods as possessing ‘equal value’, that is to say, the source of normativity within the demand for equal respect lies in

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism: a Reply’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.307.

<sup>6</sup> George Crowder, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.296.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, my own emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.296-7.



their being equally valuable, yet that runs directly against the very notion of value incommensurability which rules out the possibility of a *common currency* for making comparisons between values, for this way of talking about the equality of goods *in value* presupposes the availability of a common scale for weighing goods. For this reason, Crowder concludes that Lukes's argument from tolerance makes no sense, and even if it does, 'it would not follow that those who have to choose among such goods ought not to discriminate in favour of any one good to the exclusion of others.'<sup>9</sup>

Whether this is what Lukes really believes is not a matter of concern here. It is clear that Berlin does not think incommensurable values are equal in the sense of possessing 'equal value'. As argued in Chapter 3, a value for Berlin is a positive goal of life pursued by man for its own sake, and two conflicting values are 'equal' only in the sense of being felt by the agent as *equally inescapable* – hence 'absolute' – moral or practical imperatives. That is to say, values are different in *quality* rather than in quantity and for this reason cannot be weighed in the way Crowder suggests; indeed, only a monist who postulates a single *summum bonum* by which all human values are to be measured against would speak of the equality of values in that way. As we can see, Berlin's value-pluralism, when read in the monist's terms rather than his own, can become a thesis about the plurality of 'equally weighed' values. Unsurprisingly, in their reply to Crowder's article, Berlin and Williams agree with its author and reject the argument attributed to Lukes. What is more interesting is the reason they give: '[t]here are no doubt connections between pluralism and tolerance' – only not as simple as presented by Crowder.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, they do not clarify what these connections may be. Yet, during his conversation with Jahanbegloo, Berlin makes an unequivocal statement as follows: 'Pluralism *entails* that ... room must be made for a life in which some values may turn out to be incompatible, so that if destructive conflict is to be avoided compromises have to be effected, and a minimum degree of *toleration*, however reluctant, becomes indispensable.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> George Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism' in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.297.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, 'Pluralism and Liberalism: a Reply' in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.306.

<sup>11</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), p.44.

To be sure, what Berlin means by ‘toleration’ should not be taken to be identical with the idea of tolerance traditionally understood by liberals. To explain, as noted by Berlin in his essay ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’, tolerance ‘implies a certain *disrespect*’: that is, ‘I tolerate your absurd beliefs and your foolish acts, though I know them to be absurd and foolish.’<sup>12</sup> According to this essay, Mill would have agreed with this idea of toleration, for he ‘believed that to hold an opinion deeply is to throw our feelings into it’ and ‘preferred this to cold temperaments and opinions.’<sup>13</sup> That is to say, if Berlin is right, Mill asked us not necessarily to respect the views of others but merely to try to understand and tolerate them – ‘without tolerance the conditions for rational criticism, rational condemnation, are destroyed’ yet to understand is not necessarily to forgive. As a matter of historical fact, this disrespect is characteristic of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and the mentality behind it is this: the other side is to be tolerated because we know they are wrong and deprived of the capacity to know the truth, but God (or Reason), as we know for sure, is on our side. In this traditional account, to tolerate is to bear with the other’s *fallibility*, if not outright ignorance. However, Berlin’s point is that Mill’s argument for tolerance ‘is plausible *only* on the assumption ... that human knowledge was in principle never complete, and always fallible; that there was no single, universally visible, truth; that each man, each nation, each civilisation might take its own road towards its own goal, not necessarily harmonious with those of others; that men are altered, and the truths in which they believe are altered, by new experiences and their own actions – what he calls “experiments in living”.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, the proper theoretical underpinning of toleration for Berlin is value-pluralism. Nevertheless, as argued in last chapter, if the doctrine is grounded on a *respect* for other people’s values as equally valid as one’s own, this traditional idea of toleration does not fit in Berlin’s thought very well.

The crux of the matter lies in the self-implicating nature of the idea of fallibility: that is, if a thinker is consistent, his belief in the fallibility of human knowledge must

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’ in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.184. My own emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.188.

apply to his own convictions as well. Probably that is what Berlin means by ‘sceptical respect’ when he argues that Mill prefers it to indifference or cynicism. Indeed, when asked by Lukes why tolerance is appropriate in a liberal society, Berlin simply replies that: ‘Because all human ends are ends.’<sup>15</sup> That is to say, other people’s values are to be tolerated because they are as no less ‘rational’ than our own – for they can also be justified by reference to the agent’s own (chosen) vision of the human life. Note that, for Berlin, rationality is nothing but the ‘capacity to give reasons for what you do’ – i.e. giving reasons in terms of the ends you pursue – and the concept of ‘rational end’ or ‘rational purpose’ does not make sense at all, for ‘ends are ends’ and are nothing else. It follows that courses of actions must be deemed as ‘rational’ as long as it is in accordance with the broader value system, be it a life project or culture, in which they are embedded. Clearly Berlin adopts an instrumental conception of rationality here: that is, rationality pertains to the deliberation about the means to an end. And the corollary of it is that although whether a choice between two courses of actions is rational can be judged by reference to the overall form of life or culture, a choice between two values cannot, for they themselves are two *ends* rather than means. Berlin thus insists that: ‘a rational end which everybody else talks about – a rational purpose which is a well-known philosophical concept (it has existed since Plato’s day) – is to me not intelligible.’<sup>16</sup> In short, we should tolerate other people’s values, because they are not less rational than our own – rather than because these people are ‘ignorant’ or still kept in dark from the light of reason.

What follows from the previous two paragraphs is that toleration for Berlin is justified on the grounds of value-pluralism as an inescapable feature of the human condition rather than the Enlightenment faith in the convergence on a universal civilisation. In effect, Berlin’s idea of tolerance has virtually transformed the justificatory foundation of one of the central values of liberalism, and it also means that the kind of liberalism Berlin supports is not the liberalism that is the intellectual descendent of the Enlightenment. And that may have serious implications for the issue

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<sup>15</sup> Steven Lukes, ‘Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes’ in *Salmagundi*, No. 120 (Fall, 1988), p.117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

concerning what kind of, to use Glen Newey's phrase, 'political design' Berlin's value-pluralism can offer – which is a topic to be discussed in the next section.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, to return to the issue concerning value-pluralism's relation with toleration, it seems that Crowder's reason for dismissing Luke's argument from tolerance as a non-starter is inapplicable to Berlin's version of the toleration argument. Indeed, instead of relying on the 'equal value' of incommensurable goods, Berlin's idea of toleration is justified on the grounds that a pluralist is a man of enlarged mentality who knows the relative validity of his own convictions and hence must respect others' chosen form of life. Here, one may reply on behalf of Crowder that this line of thinking still prioritises the value of toleration, which is but one among many values. Nevertheless, that only works at a very abstract level when 'toleration' is considered as one value among many, but not in the case of Berlin's value-pluralism. As noted in the previous chapter, Berlin makes a distinction between what he calls the 'negative goals' associated with men's fighting against evils, the idea of tolerance should not be understood to be a 'value' in a strictly Berlinian sense, for it is meant to be a negative goal – i.e. to avoid the occurrence of conflict at the social level – rather than an end in itself. In other words, when read in Berlin's own terms, tolerance is not one 'form of life' among others but rather a means to ensure a social condition where the pursuit of positive goals of life is possible. As a matter of fact, Berlin's way of arguing for tolerance does not prioritise any of the rival values or commit the logical contradiction Crowder identifies in Luke's argument – on the contrary, only a consistent thinker would apply the idea of human fallibility to his own beliefs.

In his attack on the argument from choice he attributes to Berlin, Crowder on the whole continues the same way of reading so inimical to Berlin's style of reasoning. To explain, Crowder understands the argument from choice as follows:

When people realise that they must sometimes make hard choices among incommensurable values, they are appropriately led to "place immense value upon the

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<sup>17</sup> Glen Newey, *After Politics: The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.94.

freedom to choose; for if they had the assurance that ... no ends pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the necessity and agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance of the freedom to choose.”<sup>18</sup>

The words in italics are taken from Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts of Liberty.’ And according to Crowder, this argument is at once ‘indirect’, ‘ambitious’ and ‘unconvincing’.<sup>19</sup> It is indirect because it merely ‘presents us with a claim about what things would be like if pluralism were *not* admitted to be true.’ It is ambitious in that it implies that *only* with a recognition of value-pluralism can we have ‘reason’ to value freedom of choice – i.e., monism cannot do so. As for why it is unconvincing, Crowder explains by introducing a distinction between two senses of choice: ‘rationally underdetermined choice’ among incommensurables and ‘choice in general’. And his point is that the monist would only exclude the possibility of making rationally underdetermined choices but not more mundane choices in general – a convenient example would be the situation when a utilitarian has to decide which course of action is the right one that brings the greatest amount of utility. That is to say, choice of this kind is not barred from the monistic vision of the world, and for this reason pluralism is not the only theoretical position that can acknowledge the value of choice.

Crowder thus suggests that Berlin would better mount a less ambitious but more direct argument as follows: ‘to allow the truth of pluralism is to have a *reason* to value freedom of choice.’<sup>20</sup> However, he does not explain whether that is a necessary or sufficient reason, for his real intention is to argue that even this more modest move is illegitimate. The reason is that, firstly, the fact that choice is *inescapable* as implied by pluralism does not make it *valuable*. Indeed, given that a choice between conflicting values necessarily involves sacrifice, ‘why should that painful choice be regarded as cause for celebration?’<sup>21</sup> Crowder does not rule out the ‘symbolic’ worth of these choices, but he insists that Berlin then could only argue ‘that to acknowledge the truth

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<sup>18</sup> George Crowder, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.297. The words in italics are from Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty*, p.168.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.297.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.298.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

of pluralism is to recognise human beings as choosers by necessity and that this is to acknowledge an aspect of *human dignity* – merely one among many, that is to say.<sup>22</sup> However, according to Crowder, although pluralism may thus justify the freedom to ‘rationally underdetermined choice’, it tells us nothing about why we should value the more mundane choices that liberalism also cherishes. Secondly, the fact that pluralism implies the inescapability of choice means that by logic it cannot tell us which of the incommensurable values should be chosen; that is to say, to privilege *x* among equally ultimate values *x*, *y*, *z* is to violate the ‘open-endedness’ of pluralism – for this reason freedom of choice should not be privileged.<sup>23</sup> In short, the internal logic of pluralism dictates that the pluralist is barred from moving from pluralism to liberalism by way of any particular value.

To deal with the issue of inevitability first, the first thing to say is that Crowder’s reformulation of Berlin’s ‘argument from choice’ is questionable. First of all, judged from the context, the sentences Crowder takes from Berlin’s inauguration lecture were meant to highlight the reality of freedom and the illusion of determinism, presenting us with a choice between two visions of human life. In a way, it is Berlin’s penchant for dichotomy applied to the issue of human free will. That means, compatibilism for Berlin is not an option at all – indeed, his point is that even if compatibilism is true, men are still free in a morally and politically relevant way. Note that what is at stake here is our moral responsibility as free agents. For Berlin we are either not free or free and hence *responsible* for our actions, and to abandon this vision of man amounts to giving up talking about moral responsibility altogether. It follows that, instead of an argument from choice based on the inevitability of choice as suggested by Crowder, this is meant to be a vindication of human freedom, for what is at issue here is not the value ‘choice’ but the sense of ‘human reality.’ In other words, Berlin’s intention was not to privilege ‘choice’ as a sovereign value but rather to argue that the world as we ordinarily experience it – ‘one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute’ – is the only true vision of the human

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<sup>22</sup> George Crowder, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p. 298. My emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.299.

reality, and hence to seek refuge in any theory which denies the necessity of choice is to act in a morally irresponsible way.<sup>24</sup> It follows that, instead of arguing for choice as an intrinsic good on the grounds that choices are inevitable, Berlin's point in drawing our attention to their inevitability is that *freedom* to choose is a human reality – or in his own words, 'an inescapable characteristic of the human condition' that 'gives its value to freedom as Acton had conceived of it – as an end in itself, and not as a temporary need.'<sup>25</sup> Clearly, rather than trying to move from pluralism to liberalism by way of an argument from 'choice', what Berlin intends to do by the sentences Crowder cites is to affirm the reality of freedom and why it is valued by men as an end in itself.

Note that to say that Berlin's point is about freedom rather than choice is not just a matter of naming; rather, it has bearings on the way one may move from pluralism to liberalism as well as how the issue of open-endedness brought forward by Crowder can be settled. To explain, it must be made clear that the doctrine of value-pluralism is meant by Berlin not only as an anthropological truth about human values but also a normative account of what the world should be like. That is to say, he tries to explain the human reality and prescribe for the mankind by the value-pluralist vision at the same time. This two-fold purpose means that the doctrine is in effect a form of *quasi-naturalism*. In fact, it is in the light of this quasi-naturalistic nature that Berlin's idea that inevitability of choice has led men to place immense value on the freedom to choose must be understood. But, more importantly, it means that what makes value-pluralism as a reality possible is to be regarded as its *source of normativity*. To see this, consider the following remark Berlin makes towards the end of his 'Two Concepts of Liberty':

Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a *truer* and *more humane* ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least, recognise the fact that human

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<sup>24</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.168.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.169.

goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, pluralism for Berlin entails a measure of negative liberty. And what that means is that without negative liberty a vision of the world in which various forms of life co-exist with one another would remain as a *conceptual truth* but could not be realised as a *social fact*. In other words, negative liberty, i.e. freedom to choose one's own way of living, is what sustains a world characterised by the plurality of values. Or, conversely, the truth of pluralism can only be embodied by freedom to choose. Also implied is that if inevitability of choice is a human reality, then to change it by suppressing the required freedom to choose is to embark on an enterprise of defying our humanity or what makes us 'human' – and for this reason any attempt to explain away choices and their associated responsibility amounts to, to use Berlin's own metaphor, 'throw[ing] a metaphysical blanket over either self-deceit or deliberate hypocrisy.'<sup>27</sup>

If the above analysis is right, then Berlin's sentences cited by Crowder are meant to affirm not just the radical choices associated with incommensurable values but also the 'choice in general' mentioned earlier. This affirmation is of a piece with Berlin's idea of man as a free and creative agent implied by his Vichian historical methodology. More importantly, that means, against Crowder's judgement, Berlin's pluralism is not so open-ended that no value can be accorded with special importance: as a doctrine, it has some internal normative constituents which to some extent regulate the direction a man who recognises the truth of it can go in concrete situations – that is, no consistent pluralist can affirm freedom to choose as an anthropological fact yet deny its due consideration in normative reasoning. Also implied is that Berlin does not follow the two-staged logical argumentation suggested by Crowder's analysis of the former's strategy as trying to move from pluralism to a liberal value so as to arrive at liberalism. What is more, given Berlin's idea that men are either free or determined, this argument in effect is a *direct* rather than indirect argument for personal liberty. On the other hand, Berlin's quasi-naturalism implies that freedom in its negative form is not

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<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.171.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



to be cherished as a ‘symbolic value’ in Crowder’s sense but rather as a necessary aspect of humanity or what for Berlin counts as a moral agent: to deny the exercise of freedom to choose is to deny the expression of humanity. The crux of the matter is that at the core of Berlin’s value-pluralism is freedom to choose rather than rational indeterminacy of choice between incommensurables as Crowder understands. In other words, pluralism does not preclude the possibility of rational choice – in the sense that such choice is made in accordance with the agent’s chosen project of life or any value system in larger scale – the only sense of rationality Berlin can recognise. Indeed, if we bear Berlin’s Herzenian realism in mind when reading him, value-pluralism is not an abstract doctrine but a vision of the life under which a value-pluralist as a man of blood and flesh must think in a particular way – and it is in this sense that value-pluralism can also be understood as a style of reasoning. We can also begin to see why Berlin would give negative liberty preference over positive liberty here. But it must be emphasised that, although the exercise of freedom to choose signifies more than a symbolic value, it is not meant by Berlin as a value that trumps all other values. Rather, more modestly, the fact that freedom for him can come into conflict with other values (such as equality) means that each value has a reason to be duly considered but no one is to be regarded as always the most important one regardless of the context – and *being truer to humanity* is just the very reason why it is a value in Berlin’s sense. Indeed, the normative source of freedom as an end of life worth pursuing for its own sake does not *by itself* negate the normative sources inherent in all other values.

In fact, more likely than not, only those prone to this way of reasoning would think that an argument from pluralism to liberalism must be established *if and only if* pluralism can be said to *logically* support a liberal value *to the exclusion of all other* values – hence liberalism to the exclusion of all other isms. Precisely this line of thinking is evident in Crowder’s rationale behind his criticism of the argument from humanity or humaneness he attributes to Berlin. Thus, according to Crowder, Berlin’s belief that ‘the plurality of values provides a background against which the ideal of personal liberty is a more “humane ideal”’ fails because its open-ended nature not only gives no exclusive support to humaneness as one among many values but also

leaves us no more reason to choose humaneness than to choose a conflicting value.<sup>28</sup> What is more, Crowder goes on, this argument cannot be ‘salvaged by the addition of certain empirical observations’ either, for as a matter of fact, there is more to human nature than the characteristics Berlin considers to be what human nature consists in – such as unpredictable self-transformation and resentment of constraints.<sup>29</sup> That means, we in principle can construct ‘a picture of human beings as essentially imitative and conformist, as lovers of habit and routine’ – hence to single out these characteristics as the defining feature of humanity is ‘arbitrary’.<sup>30</sup> For Crowder, thus, to say that our choices must be ‘human choice’ is to say very little; after all, human experiences have demonstrated that deciding against liberty is also a human possibility – otherwise there would not be a need to argue for liberty in the first place. Hence, he concludes that Berlin’s argument at best shows that humaneness and liberty are ‘always among the things that people value’, only two ‘universal values’ among many, but does not establish a case that we ought to prefer them to other competitors.

To be sure, Crowder’s criticism relies on the idea that by its open-ended nature value-pluralism could not privilege any particular value as well as the use of the term ‘human’ and ‘humane’ as interchangeable ideas. However, what counts as within the sphere of humanity and what counts as humane are two distinct ideas, and either of them can constitute a ‘value’ in strictly Berlinian sense, for they are not meant to be an ideal men pursued for its own sake. On the other hand, what counts as within the sphere of humanity and what counts as humaneness are of course related, but they are two distinct ideas operating at different levels. Judged from Berlin’s writing, the idea of humaneness serves as a *moral standard* by which all political ideals, practices or systems are to be evaluated. And his intention is to make a contrast between the humaneness of those based on negative liberty and the inhumaneness of those based on positive liberty. Whereas, Berlin’s idea of man as an essentially free moral agent is meant to be a true account of the human condition. Of course, one can construct a much bleaker human nature and hence a vision of the life characterised by, say,

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<sup>28</sup> George Crowder, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p.299.

<sup>29</sup> George Crowder, ‘Pluralism and Liberalism’ in *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, p. 299.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

brutishness or slavishness or even the fear of freedom. But their difference is a conflict between two visions vying for the status of *truth*, that is, being the only correct account of the human condition. As seen by Berlin, the inevitability of choice is sufficient to establish the truth of his free vision of human life and the falseness of the deterministic vision of men, and the onus is on those who have to prove that our experience of freedom is actually an illusion. Whether his argument is convincing or not is another issue to be discussed later. What is important here is that, in Berlin's vision of the human life, whether an action is to be regarded as within the sphere of humanity is an issue to be decided by reference to its intelligibility, yet whether such an intelligible human action is humane or inhuman depends on whether it 'deprive[s] men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life.'<sup>31</sup>

With 'humanity' and 'humaneness' distinguished from each other as two distinct concepts, Crowder's criticism based on the idea that to say that our choices or actions are 'human' is to say very little and hardly weakens Berlin's argument that political (which must be human) practises, if they are to be in harmony with the vision of men as free and creative moral agents, must be humane. In other words, Crowder's point that 'it is "humanly" possible to decide against liberty' may not count as evidence against Berlin's idea of men as essentially free agents. The crux of the matter is that the freedom to choose must exist *prior to* all human actions as a *precondition* – including an act of rejecting one's own freedom. That is, paradoxically, such actions negate such freedom as much as they affirm it. To recall, as established in Chapter 2, Berlin has an unfailing awareness of the *background conditions* for philosophical inquiry. This awareness must have led him to see what should exist *prior to* an act of rejecting personal liberty by an agent. Admittedly, deciding against liberty is a human possibility, of which Berlin must be aware when he argues for the reality of moral responsibility, but such a life strategy for him amounts to a self-imposed illusion and hence, against Crowder's intention, cannot falsify his pluralistic vision of men as the

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<sup>31</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.171.

right account of the human condition under which men as free moral agents enjoy ‘a measure of negative liberty’ – nor is it sufficient to refute Berlin’s vision as a more humane ideal. Once again, Crowder’s discussion on the argument from humanity only demonstrates how uncongenial his strategy is to Berlin’s style of reasoning and hence the nature of pluralism either as an account of the human condition or as an approach to politics.

More importantly, however, as one may have gathered, what prevents Crowder from grasping the nature of Berlin’s value-pluralism is his idea of what a relation between pluralism and liberalism should be like if a pluralistic case for liberalism is to be made. Judged from their debate, it is clear that whilst such a case for Crowder must be made when it can be proved that pluralism logically leads to liberalism and nothing but liberalism, Berlin and Williams thinks that in so far as liberalism can be said to be a legitimate option for the pluralist such a case is deemed to be justified. Probably what lies behind all this is the fact that Berlin is a pluralist but Crowder is a monist. Indeed, just like his taking a rational choice between incommensurable values to be a choice for one to the exclusion of other goods, Crowder assumes that a pluralist case for liberalism must be made to the exclusion of all other isms. This way of thinking is inimical to the pluralist for whom a rational choice can be made by reference to one’s chosen form of life and therefore the choice for liberal values can be rational so long as liberalism is his chosen form of life. In other words, for a pluralist, in so far as he is *not barred from* choosing liberal values, a case for liberalism can be made. Berlin is a consistent pluralist thinker. A rational choice is a choice made with a *reason*, not according to any abstract idea of rationality that is for him not intelligible. Indeed, as argued by Berlin and Williams in their reply, what counts as the proper reason or priority rule to be appealed to in a case is determined by its concrete particularities. To apply this idea to the issue of the relation between value-pluralism and liberalism, that means so long as a pluralist has good reasons to choose liberalism, a pluralistic case for liberalism can be defended. If the earlier analysis is correct, a Berlinian pluralist has at least two reasons for adopting liberalism: the need for tolerance is one, and the precondition of negative freedom is another – both are the central ‘liberal’ values. Yet, as argued early on in this section, Berlin has reworked the foundation of the idea of

toleration and therefore his favoured form of liberalism cannot be today's mainstream liberalism which is a legacy of the Enlightenment, what kind of liberalism he favours is still an issue that requires investigation. This is the issue for the rest of this chapter, and the next section looks at the two most notable such attempts made by Crowder and Gray.

## V.2. Value-Pluralism and Liberal Political Design

*The distance from the theocrat to the mystic, and from the mystic to the nihilist is smaller than that from the butterfly to the larva, from the larva to the chrysalis, from the chrysalis to the butterfly.*

– Albert Sorel<sup>32</sup>

The subject matter of this section is the examination of three attempts to construct the link between Berlin's pluralism and liberalism. It is to begin with the case advanced by John Gray, who via a non-liberal interpretation of value-pluralism has attributed a species of *agonistic liberalism* to Berlin. This will be followed by a discussion of George Crowder's criticism of Gray's case and his own second attempt at the same issue, which has resulted in a distinctive *value-pluralistic liberalism* – a form of Enlightenment liberalism characterised by an emphasis on personal autonomy or even positive freedom. The intention of this section is not to offer yet another possible linkage of Berlinian value-pluralism and liberalism. Rather, it is to question the very idea of postulating a relation between pluralism and a particular political design. And in the end it argues that while Gray's conjectural reconstruction and Crowder's pluralist case for liberal universalism are of value in themselves, neither is what Berlin has in mind when he says that he supports liberalism.

To begin with Gray's case for agonistic liberalism, the first formulation of it is found in his article 'Berlin's agonistic liberalism', published in 1991 – a year before

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<sup>32</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.478.

Crowder's discussed in the previous section.<sup>33</sup> As a matter of fact, the link between value-pluralism and liberalism is assumed by Gray, whose intention at this stage is to demonstrate that: if Berlin's pluralism is true, the only defensible version of liberalism is 'an agonistic liberalism, a stoic liberalism of loss and tragedy'.<sup>34</sup> What makes this form of liberalism 'agonistic' clearly lies in its acknowledging of 'the irreducible diversity of rivalrous goods, *including negative and positive liberties*', as well as the loss and tragedy resulting from making such radical choices between these goods.<sup>35</sup> If Gray right, then 'in founding the value of freedom in the opportunity it gives us of navigating among incommensurable options and forms of living, Berlin at the same time cuts the ground from under those doctrinal or fundamentalist liberalisms – the liberalism of Nozick or Hayek no less than of Rawls or Ackerman – which suppose that the incommensurability of moral and political life, and of liberty itself, can be smoothed away by the application of some theory, or tamed by some talismanic formula.'<sup>36</sup> It follows that, Berlinian agonistic liberalism is essentially *anti-doctrinal* and *anti-fundamentalist*, and inasmuch as it is meant to protect the *freedom to choose*, without which choice-making would be impossible, it is a variant of 'liberalism'. To recall, throughout his article arguing against the logical link between pluralism and liberalism Crowder relies on the idea that pluralism implies the impossibility of reasonably favouring a particular (let alone any liberal) value. Gray's rationale at this stage also focuses on the internal logic of value-pluralism – but at the intra-value level between two different conceptions of liberty. In other words, while Crowder's article discussed earlier concentrates on the inter-value level, the reach of value-pluralism for Gray runs so deep that the liberalism it supports does not privilege either negative or positive forms of liberty. This difference in understanding the reach of value-pluralism, as will be argued shortly, marks the central disagreement between Crowder and Gray. Suffice it to say that the salient feature of the agonistic liberalism attributed

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<sup>33</sup> John Gray, 'Berlin's agonistic liberalism' in *Post-Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 1993), first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 1991.

<sup>34</sup> John Gray, 'Berlin's agonistic liberalism' in *Post-Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.67.

<sup>35</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.145.

<sup>36</sup> John Gray, 'Berlin's agonistic liberalism' in *Post-Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.67.

to Berlin by Gray at this point is the *agon* or contest between conceptions of value as well as between incommensurable values.

Crowder has labelled this formulation of Berlinian agonistic liberalism as Gray's early 'subjectivist' reading which 'appeals to those passages in which Berlin appears to say that choices among incommensurables must be non-rational.'<sup>37</sup> And he has also observed that Gray modifies this interpretation in his later monograph *Isaiah Berlin* and offers a conservative 'contextualist' argument for the linkage between Berlin's pluralism and liberalism, *via* a reconstruction of the three main strands of argument he found in Berlin's writings. The first of them is Berlin's argument for the value of negative liberty, which is understood by Gray as 'a constitutive component of human self-creation' – 'not merely or even primarily as an aspect of rational autonomy, but as a *condition* whereby human beings constitute themselves in all the diversity of identities in which they are to be found.'<sup>38</sup> In this regard, value-pluralism can be said to support liberalism 'in that it is by the choices protected by negative freedom that we negotiate our way among incommensurable values.'<sup>39</sup> This interpretation seems to be in accordance with our previous reading that Berlin's value-pluralism implies the necessity of freedom to choose as a natural human condition. However, it cannot be overemphasised that what is really supported by value-pluralism at this point is negative liberty as a condition for 'self-creation by choice-making *among good and evils*' only, not yet a fully-fledged liberalism.<sup>40</sup> The second main strand of argument found by Gray is that, given that pluralism implies a plurality of goods which can be combined in various ways, 'no political authority can have *good reason* to impose any particular combination of them on any of its citizens.'<sup>41</sup> This argument relies on the negative aspect of Berlin's doctrine of pluralism – that is, if pluralism is true, then no rational justification can be made for a state to impose a particular package of values on its citizen – and hence it strictly

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<sup>37</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.150.

<sup>38</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.143.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143.

<sup>40</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.143.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144.

speaking only serves as a negative support for liberalism. That is to say, value-pluralism can support any form of politics that does not subscribe to value-monism, including conservatism or even anarchism. Indeed, as suggested by Berlin's reply to Crowder's article discussed earlier, it is compatible with but does not give exclusive support to liberalism. What is more, as Berlin often emphasises, not all liberals are pluralists. Indeed, they more likely than not are monism's fellow travellers, as indicated in his essay 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century' discussed earlier.

Finally, the third possible linkage between pluralism and liberalism according to Gray is argued as follows: as a corollary of the second, 'the authoritarian denial of freedom presupposes the denial of the *truth* of value-pluralism' – or, in the words of Bernard Williams quoted by Gray, '[the liberal] society expresses more than any other does a true understanding of the pluralistic nature of values.'<sup>42</sup> What is implied by this, as Gray himself notes, is that: 'authoritarian or illiberal societies or regimes are committed necessarily to denying the genuineness or validity of the values they suppress or disfavour; and that liberal societies are ones in which the truth of value-pluralism is accepted and celebrated.'<sup>43</sup> That is to say, what some non-liberal or illiberal regimes necessarily subscribe to is a *false* account of human values. Once more, this amounts to a negative support for liberalism, and it seems to be in line with what this thesis so far has established. As a matter of fact, this is a cogent argument and it is compatible with the reading of Chapter 4 concerning the enemies of pluralism. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the previous section, textual evidence suggests that, firstly, it is value-pluralism as a vision of life, together with its implied degree of negative freedom, that is said by Berlin to be a *truer* and *more humane* account of human condition: in other words, the existence of negative liberty is a built-in feature of Berlin's pluralistic vision, and for this reason there is no *logical* gap to be bridged between value-pluralism and negative liberty. And, that means, Berlin himself does not argue for a liberal political design by way of the value 'truth'. Secondly, although it is true that pluralism is meant to be an alternative to the

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<sup>42</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.145.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



monistic vision of life, Berlin himself does not think that any non-monistic political system is equal to liberalism.

In fact, Gray is not unaware of the last two points, and for this reason he admits that his interpretation of Berlin is a conjectural reconstruction that goes beyond Berlin's own argument. If Gray's reasoning is sound, what follows from these three reconstructed linkages is the emergence of a form of liberalism, which presupposes no single overarching standard or higher-order value, that in his judgement is 'the most profoundly deliberated, and most powerfully defended, in our time, or, perhaps, in any time,' diverging 'radically from those that have dominated political philosophy in the post-war world, and indeed since J.S.Mill, in many important respects' – most notably the political liberalism advocated by John Rawls based on a particular conception of justice.<sup>44</sup> At this point, Gray's modification may appear to be little different from his initial 'subjectivist' formulation of agonistic liberalism that recognises the limitation of reason and affirms the reality of radical choices. However, it should be noted that what makes this liberalism 'agonistic' has subtly shifted from its focus on the plurality at the intra-value level to the plurality at the level of forms of life. Crowder may have gone too far in saying that 'the message of pluralism [for Gray at this stage] is that liberalism is an "agonistic" form of politics, that is, that liberal values are always in competition with others on an equal footing rather than always superior.'<sup>45</sup> At least some non-liberal cultures in Gray's eyes are on a moral par with liberalism.

The crux of the matter lies in the fact that this modified version of agonistic liberalism sees liberalism as a form of life among many. Note that Gray's rationale is akin to the strategy employed by Crowder as explained in the previous section: since pluralism implies the plurality of equally valid forms of life, liberalism *as a form of life* by logic could not enjoy universal validity and hence should not be granted any privilege. Gray argues for this case by considering three counter-claims against each of the three links between pluralism and liberalism. First of all, to the claim that an authoritarian regime imposing a particular axiological system on its citizens would

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<sup>44</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.145.

<sup>45</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.149.

violate the truth of value-pluralism would be violated by any, it can be argued, according to Gray, that this is only true of those ‘which ground themselves on the Western universalist premises that the truth of value-pluralism demonises,’ such as Marxist, Christian or Muslim societies, but would not be true of those *particularistic* illiberal cultures rooted in, say, Hindu, Shinto or Orthodox Jewish doctrine, ‘which seek simply to preserve a local way of life, make none of the universal claims that value-pluralism subverts.’<sup>46</sup> Indeed, as Gray goes on to argue, the worthwhile forms of life these societies harbour would be compromised or even destroyed by the exercise of freedom of choice. This leads naturally to the second counter-argument: given that liberalism is now justified on the pluralist ground that it allows for more genuine values to be embodied, a world where both liberal and illiberal cultures co-exist would express the truth of value-pluralism more than a world where only liberal societies exist and equally worthwhile illiberal forms of life perish. In other words, if it is illegitimate for any government to impose a particular package of values on its citizens, then it is also illegitimate for the human world as a whole to allow only the liberal package to flourish. Finally, according to Gray, the argument for liberalism may at this stage ‘fall back on the first of the three chains of reasoning – that which holds that, if values are truly incommensurable, then there can never be good reason to justify imposing any particular ranking of them on anyone. Yet it can be replied by noting that a particularistic illiberal regime does not mean the ranking of incommensurable values to be ‘uniquely rational’ or a ‘better’ one. What is more, again, such a regime can be defended on the ground that ‘it is a ranking embedded in, and necessary for the survival of, a particular way of life that is itself worthwhile, and that this ranking, and the way of life it supports would be imperilled by the unimpeded exercise of choice.’<sup>47</sup>

In short, these counter-claims amount to this: the truth of value-pluralism implies that some illiberal cultures – where various worthwhile forms of life can only survive – that claim no universal validity for their axiological configurations, in terms

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<sup>46</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.151.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153,

of either preferred values or ranking, may possess equal right to flourish like liberal societies which represent but *a* form of life among many. Two things are noteworthy here. The first is that ‘the first of the three chains of reasoning’ above at which the third counter-claim is directed is not the same as the first strand of argument from pluralism to liberalism discussed earlier, that is, to quote Gray’s words in full, ‘[v]alue-pluralism supports liberalism in that it is by the choices protected by negative freedom that we negotiate our way among incommensurable values.’ Nevertheless, although the third ‘counter-claim’ can stand in its own right, the original first linkage that sees negative liberty as a *condition* for choice-making – which is a *universal* claim about human condition – remains intact. To leave a full discussion of this issue to the next section, it suffices to say that this may be extended into an argument for liberal universalism. The second is that, Gray’s modified case for ‘agonistic liberalism’ at this stage seems to involve, first, reasoning logically from value-pluralism to a form of politics whose nature must accord with the ‘agonistic’ relations between incommensurable values and, second, reasoning by way of considering the constraints set by pluralism itself. With this two-staged reasoning, thus, comes a corresponding change in the meaning of the term ‘agonistic’ – which now refers to the *status* of liberalism as a form of life competing with other equally valid forms of life.

As a matter of fact, this is the *internal logic* of value-pluralism applied at the level concerning the conflict between forms of life. Instead of referring solely to a vision of liberal politics featured by value conflicts, Gray’s term ‘agonistic’ at this stage also implies a *self-understanding* of this form of liberalism as justified in a particular context of cultural tradition. That is to say, agonistic liberalism, strictly speaking, is a variant of liberalism whose traditional claim to universalism is *qualified* by the fact that the reach of incommensurability runs into forms of life and liberalism is just one among many of them, a *locally* justified form of life. Indeed, as Gray states, ‘in our historical circumstances [...] it may be true that the universal minimum requirements of morality have the best chance of being met under liberal institutions,’ but its validity cannot be applied to a social context which does not prize freedom to

choose – for this reason this is a *contextualist* argument for liberalism.<sup>48</sup> To be sure, his argument as such is advanced partly as a response to criticism against his subjectivist reading that stresses on pluralism's *internal logic*, and partly as his further criticism of today's mainstream liberal theories. Gray thus answers the criticism of subjectivism by way of allowing choice-making to be reasonable under pluralism – that is, a reasonable choice can be made by reference to the general patterns of life in which the agent believes. Thus, the argument for liberalism itself should be understood as a case of reasonable choice, with the modern socio-economic conditions in the West as the background condition for decision-making – the validity derived in this way of course is confined to the Western tradition itself. It follows that Berlin's political vision at the global level thus is one characterised by the coexistence of both liberal and illiberal regimes in the world.

In a way, Gray's reconstruction can be understood as an embodiment of the *deconstructionist* approach to the text advocated by the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida, which involves a 'double reading' that first gives a rigorous and scholarly reconstruction of a text and then arrives at an interpretation 'where the text is levered open through the location of "blind spots"' and hence the internal contradiction exposed.<sup>49</sup> What the 'blind spots' in Berlin's case for liberalism means surely is the very internal logic of pluralism: values are plural and no one is more valid than the others. And without doubt Gray is apt at exploring the tension that exists between the *particularism* implied by pluralism and the *universalism* endorsed implicitly by classic liberalism and explicitly by today's mainstream liberal thinkers. In fact, this is a continuation of what is indicated in Gray's earlier article 'Berlin's Agonistic Liberalism', in which he has perceived 'a tension between the idea of a common human nature and the idea of human self-creation and self-transformation.'<sup>50</sup> That is to say, the fact of our common humanity as creative moral agents itself defeats the Enlightenment hope for an eventual convergence of liberal values or form of life.

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<sup>48</sup> John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p.155.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Critchley, 'A luminous critical and synthetic intelligence' in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 12 November 2004.

<sup>50</sup> John Gray, *Post-Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.68.

To bear this in mind, agonistic liberalism can be understood as a compromise, a way out of the tension, by sacrificing the universalism that Gray has found claimed by all variants of liberalism before Berlin.<sup>51</sup> If Berlin is consistent, that means, he can only support liberalism as a particular worthwhile form of politics without universalist pretension.

Apparently, Gray's whole interpretation of Berlin only works when, firstly, the logic of pluralism thus understood must reach from intra-conceptual level to the level concerning forms of life or even cultures and, secondly, liberalism can be considered to be a form of life. It is precisely the first assumption of Gray that is what Crowder now rejects. Note that central to Crowder's early criticism against all attempts to link pluralism and liberalism is the very internal logic of value-pluralism. It is true that while Crowder's strategy then assumed that pluralism by logic prevents us from making *reasonable* choices among incommensurables, Gray's approach, on the one hand, acknowledges the possibility of such reasonable choices within a particular social context and, on the other, admits the limitations of this way of justification. But their real difference lies mainly in that while the latter attempts to explore the internal logic of pluralism at the level of intrinsic goods, the former is meant to extend the strategy to the level of political culture or forms of political life.

Naturally, Crowder is only too aware of the rationale behind Gray's 'anti-liberal' interpretation of Berlin's value-pluralism. What is surprising is that he now turns his back on this line of reasoning and argues that Berlin's value-pluralism, if understood properly, actually logically lead to, rather than undermining, a *liberal universalism* – which is the central thesis of his recently published, in 2004, monograph *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*.<sup>52</sup> To be sure, Crowder's complete about-face is a result of his eventual acceptance of the central points made by Berlin and Williams in their reply as discussed in last section: that is, reasonable choices among incommensurable values are possible. It should be noted that what Crowder really disagrees with Gray about at this point is not so much on whether liberalism is a *particular* form of life as

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<sup>51</sup> John Gray, *Liberalism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

on whether this form of life should be *universalised*. The crux of the matter lies in what counts as the concrete situation for making such a reasonable choice. As indicated, Gray's agonistic liberalism may be understood as a case of reasonable choice within the context of Western cultural tradition. For Crowder, however, a rational choice for liberalism can be made based on the context of common humanity, that is, the human world as a whole. His strategy now is meant 'to find principles for reasoned choice *within* the concept of pluralism itself', and the first principle thus found is this: there exists a range of universal values, a 'common moral horizon', or a 'central core' of human values.<sup>53</sup> According to Crowder, without this notion of universal values, there would be nothing to separate Berlin's pluralism from cultural relativism.<sup>54</sup> Yet textual evidence does suggest that Berlin holds such a notion, and that is why he always emphasises that pluralism is not relativism. Crowder thus concludes that the internal logic of pluralism is not that none of the competing values can be prioritised but that there is a 'minimal universal morality'.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, this discovery of a minimal universal morality is what marks Crowder's new reading of Berlin's value-pluralism from his earlier one. Nevertheless, one should note that a few shared moral values implied by the idea of common moral horizon is not the same as a universal morality. In fact, Berlin's historical methodology suggests otherwise: the meaning and significance of a value is relative to cultures or forms of life which are 'moral posits' – even the idea of universal human right means different things for different people at different times.<sup>56</sup> Thus, to translate the idea of common humanity into a full-fledged universal morality risks narrowing the range of values the Berlinian pluralist would like to allow for embodiment. At any rate, the more the idea of common humanity is made to become a universal morality, the fewer forms of life are to be deemed as moral – and that would curtail our ability to create values as free moral agents as well. However, by invoking an Aristotelian teleological account of

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<sup>53</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.151, 154.

<sup>56</sup> For details, see for example Micheline R. Isahy, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (California: The University of California Press, 2004).

human beings, Crowder is determined to flesh out Berlin's idea of common humanity. More specifically, he relies on Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen's idea of a good life for a human begin as requiring 'the possession of real capacities to exercise certain essential "human functions"' to read Berlin's value-pluralism in Aristotelian terms.<sup>57</sup> Crowder does not detail these real capacities but he does argue, *a la* Aristotle, that to think rationally is what makes a man really human – at least as opposed to all other animals. To be sure, Crowder is not unaware of Berlin's 'more characteristic view ... that universal values should be conceived *empirically*, as what people happen to want rather than as components of a human essence or *telos*: "there are values that a great many human beings in the vast majority of places and situations, at almost all times, do in fact hold in common"' – yet he also notes that this view is qualified by Berlin as '*quasi*-empirical, because concepts and categories that dominate life over a large portion (even if not the whole) of recorded history are difficult, and in practice impossible, to think away'.<sup>58</sup> Crowder thus judges that Berlin's better view is to be found in the latter's remark that 'the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies' – in a way, the 'inconsistency' between these two views serves for Crowder as a licence to take either and therefore downplay Berlin's Herzenian *projectivism* discussed earlier.<sup>59</sup>

On Crowder's reading, the notion of universal values thus is what stops Berlin's pluralism from collapsing into a form of relativism. For him, the view Berlin finds in Vico and Herder amounts to cultural relativism which 'conflicts with his commitment to human rights and liberalism, and [hence] is incompatible with his notion of moral universals and cross-cultural empathetic understanding'.<sup>60</sup> True, the very possibility of cross-cultural understanding indicated by Berlin's empathetic approach implies that cultures, despite their enormous differences, must share '*points of commonality* at the level of generic human purposes and interests'.<sup>61</sup> This way of reading is significant in

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<sup>57</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.155.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133. My own emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.133.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

two ways. On the one hand, although the distinction between pluralism and relativism at this stage still ‘looks more formal than substantial’, Crowder deems it sufficient to conclude that Gray is mistaken in thinking that the logic of incommensurability could reach the level of cultures.<sup>62</sup> And from this it also follows that Gray’s formulation of agonistic liberalism is mistaken, for it assumes that, first, ‘to value a diversity of forms of life is to value a diversity of political regimes’ and, second, ‘the diversity to which pluralists are committed is principally a diversity of cultures or ways of life.’<sup>63</sup> On the other, this Aristotelian reading indicates that Berlin’s insistence that reasonable choice is not barred by pluralism is understood as a view of practical reasoning not dissimilar to Aristotle’s account of *phronēsis*.<sup>64</sup> To explain, note that for any practical reasoning to take place a context is required. The idea of a minimal universal morality, not just values, Crowder finds in Berlin thus can serve as the basis for making rational – though still radical – choice between incommensurable values, as well as between forms of life. In a way, the Aristotelianisation of Berlin’s pluralism enables him to circumvent the logic of incommensurability that he originally thought insurmountable by way of postulating a single common humanity as the context for practical reasoning, against which all human cultures have to be measured. What is more, by transforming the fragmentary human cultural scene into a single human horizon, Crowder’s about-face amounts to more than going back on his earlier view that rational choice is prevented by value-pluralism. Rather, he is now prepared to argue that rational choice under value-pluralism is not just possible but *required* by what underpins this doctrine.

On the whole, it is this Aristotelian reading that paves the way for Crowder to make his case for liberal liberalism. Now that the reach of incommensurability is barred from reaching the levels of cultures, and the notion of universal human morality is in place, he intends to justify liberalism by appealing to a set of arguments that leads to negative support and positive support of liberalism. The negative support from value-pluralism is that, according to Crowder, to recognise the reality of value

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<sup>62</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.134.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.157-158.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.134, 141.



incommensurability implied by pluralism ‘is to rule out views like classical Marxism and anarchism as utopian and to commend more realistic positions which accept and accommodate imperfection and conflict.’<sup>65</sup> To be sure, this anti-utopian view is his second principle derived from value-pluralism, next to the existence of universal values, and at the core of it is ‘moral and political *imperfectability*’.<sup>66</sup> And for him liberalism is a political form that acknowledges this truth. Of course, he is aware of the fact that liberalism is only one of those realistic positions, and both conservatism and the *modus vivendi* political approach are qualified candidates. To make a definite, positive case for liberal universalism, thus, Crowder advances the argument that liberalism has a strong claim to be ‘the best political vehicle for the *diversity of goods*’ and to be ‘the best political container for *reasonable disagreement* concerning the good life.’<sup>67</sup>

Note that the first part of the claim is not the familiar argument from diversity in the discussion of Gray. The difference between Crowder and Gray with regard to the reach of value incommensurability has led to a further disagreement here. For one thing, while Gray also thinks that liberalism can be argued for by way of the argument from diversity, what he thinks of as worth defending is the diversity of forms of life or even cultures rather than the ‘goods’ in Crowder’s case. For another, Crowder’s referring to value as ‘goods’ deviates from Berlin’s idea of values as ‘what is pursued by men for its own sake’. For sure, this is the consequence of Crowder’s exegetical strategy of downplaying the Herzenian element in Berlin discussed earlier. However, this amounts to no less than a transformation of the doctrine of value-pluralism into an argument for the plurality of abstract values – that is, ‘intrinsic goods’ as traditionally understood in moral philosophy which, as discussed in Chapter 3 already, tend to be referred to as a kind of thing – rather than the plurality of culturally-embedded, agent-centred values. As a matter of fact, Crowder has to rely on this understanding of value to read Berlin in Aristotelian terms so as to pave the way for his second positive argument that sees disagreements over different *ranking* of *basic human goods* – and

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<sup>65</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.156.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.156, 159. My own emphasis.

only this kind of disagreement – as reasonable. And this is just the beginning of his deviation from Berlin's value-pluralism.

With values understood as basic goods in place, Crowder now is in the position to argue that 'conceptions of the good may be thought of as schemes for ranking basic human goods across a generality of cases' and therefore 'if at least some basic goods are incommensurable, then many such general rankings will *prima facie* reasonable, and many will be equally reasonable.'<sup>68</sup> For Crowder, this argument is 'in essence a restatement and extension of Berlin's anti-utopian view,' and it in effect '[brings] out more explicitly the them of infeasible conflict that was only implicitly in Berlin's account.'<sup>69</sup> If this interpretation is right, then both conservatism and the *modus vivendi* political approach are now disqualified as a candidate for a value-pluralistic polity. The reason is that fact that the conservative can only respond to value conflicts by appealing to 'the authority of local tradition or a unitary conception of the good' rather than acknowledging them as reasonable disagreements is a violation of the truth of value-pluralism in this regard. Recall Gray's first counter-claim against the linkage between pluralism and traditional non-agonistic liberalism, that is, while illiberal societies that claim universal validity for themselves should be ruled out by pluralism, some of those which do not should be allowed to flourish; if Crowder is right then these particularistic cultures should not be deemed as legitimate variations, for they do not recognise the reasonable disagreement – that is, relative to those values allowed by each culture – within their cultures. And if the ultimate aim the *modus vivendi* device, as it seems to be so in Gray's version, is to protect these illiberal cultures, then it should also be ruled out as a political option for the same reason. Moreover, the very fact that *modus vivendi* political approach ranks peaceful co-existence between cultures or forms of life higher than individual freedom – as proved by the Munich Agreement which for Crowder amounted to 'a net reduction in the ends open to the Czechs' – means that it is not a form of liberalism in the first place.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.159.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

At this point, one may reply to Crowder that the provision of *the right to exit* the group is a practical way out of the illiberal cultures. However, Crowder would reject this strategy on the grounds that the very nature of these cultures' value configurations runs against the truth of pluralism. Indeed, his belief in a 'universal' morality means that *all* men individually and collectively alike must be subjected to the same moral standard without exception. What is more, his point now is that Berlin's pluralism that recognises radical choice between incommensurable values can provide a ground for a form of liberalism based on the idea of *autonomy* rather than the idea of *diversity*. To see the difference, it is time to introduce the distinction William Galston makes in his *Liberal Pluralism* between two types of liberalism in history: the Enlightenment form and the Reformation form of liberalism.<sup>71</sup> According to him, at the core of the Enlightenment liberalism is the idea of 'liberation through reason from externally imposed authority' – i.e., reason is the prime source of authority.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, the Reformation liberals commit to the value of diversity as well as the strategy 'to deal with the political consequences of religious differences in the wake of divisions within Christendom' through these four measures: (1) to divide the whole community into smaller, homogeneous political units; (2) to restore homogeneity through coercive imposition; (3) to restore homogeneity through rationalisation of tradition-encrusted religious particularities into a unitary religion of reason – which was the hope of Spinoza and Thomas Jefferson, and constitutes the fundamental difference between the Enlightenment mentality and the Reformation project; (4) to accept diversity as a fact of life and manage it through mutual toleration, which is crucial for development of liberalism.<sup>73</sup> If Galston's reading is correct, Berlin is a Reformation-type of liberal who embraces diversity as an 'intrinsic value.' And his own position is on the Reformation side, defending what he calls *expressive liberty*, the expression of one's identify with 'the organising principle of a group' through negative liberty, as opposed to *civic liberty* advocated by the Enlightenment liberals.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.24-5.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp.27, 54.

As a matter of fact, Galston subscribes to an argument from diversity. However, it differs from Gray's support for the diversity of both individual and collective forms of life mainly in that it recognises the importance of the right to exit the group in which one is born. That is to say, although Galston places an immense value on the diversity of forms of life which embody the values of particular cultural groups, he considers as no less important the choice to identify himself with or to opt out of such communities. Indeed, the illiberal but worthwhile cultures Gray's *modus vivendi* would protect more likely than not would take coercive measures against their internal dissidents if they were to flourish. Galston argues that Gray's argument relies on the flexible sense of the term 'worthwhile'. And if he is right, then a culture some of whose members 'do not experience it as worthwhile and can articulate their discontent in terms consistent with value pluralism' would at least put its 'worth' in doubt – at any rate, for these dissidents that form of life is not 'worthwhile' for them.<sup>75</sup> Thus he concludes his book with a paragraph as follows:

In short, while liberal pluralism rejects state promotion of individual autonomy as an intrinsic good, there is a form of liberty that is a higher-order liberal pluralist political good: namely, individuals' right of exit from groups and associations that make up civil society. Securing this liberty will require affirmative state protections against oppression carried out by groups against their members.<sup>76</sup>

To be sure, Crowder is aware of the distinction between the two forms of liberalism when he argues that Berlin's value-pluralism can support the Enlightenment form of liberalism, and he has rightly pointed out that the two forms of liberalism differ from each other most crucially in their view concerning what counts as the appropriate attitudes to non-liberal minority groups within the liberal state: 'the reformation view being more hands-off and the Enlightenment view more interventionist.'<sup>77</sup> However, Crowder seems to be unaware of the significance of the difference between Galston's tolerance-based liberalism and Gray's agonistic liberalism. He argues that '[Galston]

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<sup>75</sup> William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.57.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>77</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.162.

in effect endorses the point [he] made earlier against Gray: that if value diversity is to be promoted, then it should be promoted not only among political regimes but *within* them too' – without noticing the limited application of the argument from diversity allowed by Gray.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, Galston's Reformation-style of liberalism is rejected by Crowder for the reason that its 'uncritical acceptance of illiberal cultural practices, such as patriarchy and censorship, seems to be at odds with Berlin's concern for the negative liberty of the individual'.<sup>79</sup> To refrain from speculating about his unfounded equation, Crowder does not reject what he takes to be Galston and Gray's argument from diversity because he considers 'diversity' as unimportant; rather, the reason is this: '[p]luralist diversity translates into cultural diversity only to the extent that cultures themselves promote a *diversity of goods*'.<sup>80</sup> In other words, liberalism for him is expressive of diversity, but only in the form of reasonable disagreements over the ranking of the universal basic values whereby cultures must be evaluated – and condemned. On his reading of Berlin's value-pluralism, both Gray's defence for the diversity of political regimes and that of Galston for the diversity of cultures with exit have gone too far anyway.

Given Crowder's theoretical objective, he has to confine the diversity at the level of intrinsic goods, for this strategy allows him to explore value-pluralism in terms of Aristotelian notion of practical reason so as to make a case for an Enlightenment form of liberalism. To explain, central to his argument for the autonomy-based liberalism is these two assumptions: first, if we are to cope well with the hard choices which are inescapable under pluralism, we need to be *autonomous*; (2) *liberal virtues* are needed to cope well with choices under pluralism if to 'cope well' with such choices means to choose for a good reason.<sup>81</sup> With his objective revealed, Crowder's reason for rejecting Galston's Reformation-style liberalism also comes to light, as found in a footnote: 'an effective right of exit presupposes personal autonomy, because only an

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<sup>78</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.162. My own emphasis.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.165.

autonomous person is in a position to make a decision that is genuinely his or her own about whether to go or stay.’<sup>82</sup> Thus Crowder goes on to argue that rational choice under pluralism, including opting out of one’s own cultural community, requires the exercise of liberal virtues. Note that the language of ‘virtue’ used here is a natural consequence of Crowder’s Aristotelianisation of Berlin’s doctrine. Now that rational choice under pluralism is understood as practical reasoning in concrete situations, choice-making is a process of practical judgement, and a rational one requires a skill which can only be learnt through experience cognate situations. The liberal virtues Crowder has in mind are the following ‘attitudes of mind’: *open-mindedness*, *realism*, *attentiveness*, and *flexibility*.<sup>83</sup> Open-mindedness, as it were, amounts to taking plural values seriously. Yet Crowder links this attitude to the respect for the full range of legitimate goods and good lives. Thus, in practice this virtue promotes the diversity of goods and shows respect for other cultures. What Crowder calls ‘realism’ refers to ‘a feeling for the real costs of moral and political decisions, conditioned in particular by the implications of incommensurability’ – in short, what he understands as Berlin’s ‘sense of reality’. As for attentiveness, it is meant to be the attentive attitude towards the particularities with concrete moral situations. Finally, flexibility is derived from the fact that pluralism implies the absence of monistic moral rules, and it demands the pluralist ‘to be flexible in tailoring their judgement closely to the situation to which they attend.’<sup>84</sup>

According to Crowder, all these four attitudes of mind are ‘characteristically liberal virtues’, and indeed one can agree with him that open-mindedness and a realist attitude have been advocated by Mill and Berlin respectively, and attentiveness as formulated by him may have been ‘represented by the core liberal concern for the fate of individual human beings as captured, for example, by Kant’s doctrine of respect for persons.’<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, it is the fourth virtue, flexibility, that is the cornerstone of Crowder’s autonomy-based Enlightenment-style liberalism. If he is right, ‘[p]luralist

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<sup>82</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.207.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.165-166.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

flexibility overlaps the liberal commitment to personal autonomy,' for '[t]o judge flexibly in the light of value pluralism is to judge for one's own reasons *in a strong sense*, that is, *autonomously*.'<sup>86</sup> His reason is that under pluralism a rational agent must not appeal to any monist rule or procedure or the authority of local tradition for making a choice between incommensurables or solving a moral conflict. Rather, he 'must go behind such perspectives to weigh the values they embody for herself.'<sup>87</sup> At this point, one must acknowledge that Crowder has moved a long way from his earlier abstract, deductive approach to adopt this more concrete and practical approach which is congenial to what Berlin has always advocated for as the proper way – which is 'logically untidy', 'flexible' and *de facto* in nature – to deal with human affairs. It must be noted, however, that this idea of personal autonomy seems to presuppose the possibility of *transcending* all traditions, and probably even the inherent irrationality of tradition, and that makes Crowder's notion of rationality or reasonableness look not much different from the concept of 'rational end' or 'rational purpose' Berlin objects to as incomprehensible in his criticism of Rawls, as discussed in the previous section. In any event, Crowder does make clear how this notion of rationality is possible, and the idea of personal autonomy as an expression of transcendental idea of rationality deviates from Berlin's pluralist line of reasoning anyway. In fact, that marks Crowder's self-conscious point of departure from Berlin. More likely than not, he still remains a monist and at any rate he is now poised to argue for the promotion of autonomy as 'a legitimate goal of public policy.'<sup>88</sup> As acknowledged by himself, his interpretation has transformed Berlin's defence for negative liberty into a liberalism based on a version of *positive liberty*! To paraphrase Sorel's remark in the epigraph of this section, the distance from Berlin's value-pluralist defence for negative liberty to tolerance-based liberalism, and from tolerance-based liberalism to autonomy-based liberalism is smaller than that from the butterfly to the larva, from the larva to the chrysalis, from the chrysalis to the butterfly. Crowder's pluralist liberalism is an

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<sup>86</sup> George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p167.. My own emphasis.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.162.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.168.

innovative theory in its own right but is not be a liberalism that Berlin would defend.

### V.3. Liberalism, Value-Pluralism and the National Question

While Gray and Crowder have fixed their attention on how value-pluralism may bear on the theoretical foundation of liberalism, there is a group of scholars who ‘with a nod of gratitude to Isaiah Berlin’ have tried to make a case for *liberal nationalism*.<sup>89</sup> What these scholars attempt to achieve, according to Joan Cocks, whose book *Passion and Paradox* devotes two chapters to discuss Berlin’s thought on and involvement with the issue of nationalism, is ‘to harmonise what they see as the core truths of liberalism and nationalism: individual equality and autonomy on the one side, cultural particularity and belonging on the other.’<sup>90</sup> Or, as stated in the manifesto of Yael Tamir, who for Cocks is ‘the prominent advocate’ of the case, ‘the liberal tradition, with its respect for personal autonomy, reflection, and choice, and the national tradition, with its emphasis on belonging, loyalty, and solidarity, although generally seen as mutually exclusive, can indeed *accommodate* one another.’<sup>91</sup> This issue deserves our attention for two reasons. Firstly, the fact that Berlin is a liberal thinker who is also well known for his support of Zionism raises the question whether liberalism and nationalism are compatible. How Berlin confronts the ‘national’ question no doubt bears on this issue, as well as the related question – posed by Cocks – whether the attempt to harmonise liberal values with national values runs against the idea of value incommensurability. Secondly, to recall the disagreement between Gray and Crowder over the level of application of value-pluralism – while Gray’s agonistic liberalism is formulated by applying Berlin’s value-pluralism to the level of culture, Crowder’s transformation of Berlin’s liberalism is made possible only

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<sup>89</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.92.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.6. Originally quoted in Cocks’ *Passion and Paradox* with omission.



by his confining the application of value-pluralism to the level of conceptions of the good – Berlin’s defence of nationalism which necessarily includes a vision of man and society at the global level should help settle this issue. Of course, that does not mean that Berlin’s vision at this level would fit together with his liberalism. But, at any rate, a reconstruction of Berlin’s political vision as a whole cannot afford to miss this part of the picture.

What follows in this section thus is a reconstruction of Berlin’s liberal vision of the world by a discussion of the issue of nationalism against the background of what this thesis has established so far. Nevertheless, it is necessary to clear the ground first, and that requires a discussion on the contrasting interpretations of liberal nationalism as a style of political thinking offered by Michael Walzer and Cocks respectively. To be sure, as observed by Raymond Geuss, ‘liberalism is such a practically engaged, historically located phenomenon has three important and interrelated consequences: (a) it has no definition, (b) it tends to rewrite its own past, sometimes anachronistically, (c) it is open to significant modification in the future.’<sup>92</sup> Thus the attempt to make a case for liberal nationalism can in principle be regarded as a continuation of this tradition. That is precisely how Michael Walzer reads Tamir’s *Liberal Nationalism*. On noting that the book was originated as one of the last doctoral thesis (if not the last) written under Berlin’s supervision, Walzer argues that Tamir’s theory should be understood as ‘a modification of nationalism and a complication of liberalism.’

Nationalism is *modified* in two ways: first, its protagonists are required to recognise the collective rights of other nations (to self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy, or whatever); and second, they are required, and this may be harder, to recognise the rights of the members of their own nation as individual men and women (so the nation can’t be conceived as an integral union with a single interest and a single will). Liberalism is *complicated* because it is required to engage with and adjust to an alien particularism, which it can only modify, which it can’t (like any adjective what precedes a noun) wholly transform. Liberal nationalists are attached men and women who respect the attachments of the

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<sup>92</sup> Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.69.

others – without pretending that ‘respect,’ in practice, is going to be easy.<sup>93</sup>

According to Walzer, even if he cannot claim that the doctrine is Berlin’s, it is at least compatible with his refusal to give up personal ‘particular attachments’ or ‘the general good will’ when faced by any case involving group conflicts, including Zionism.<sup>94</sup> And it seems that liberalism and nationalism are bridged by Berlin’s value-pluralism.

By contrast, Cocks understands liberal nationalism as a case of squaring the circle. As noted earlier, she takes the doctrine as a theoretical project to *harmonise* liberalism with nationalism. To explain, according to her, the case for liberalism’s harmony with nationalism is made by appealing to the following three arguments. The first appeals to the fact that ‘liberalism *depends on* the existence of nationalism and national culture’ in a number of ways: *historically*, for instance, ‘nationalism paves the way for liberal democracy by crowning all members of a people with equal dignity and status;’ whereas, *politically*, ‘national identity provides the social cohesion, public commitment, and sense of civic responsibility – the ‘moral resources for modern citizenship’ – that a liberal order requires but cannot supply out of its own stock of individualistic principles.’<sup>95</sup> What is more, national culture serves as the anthropological basis of an individual’s self-identity, as well as the epistemological framework that shapes his worldview and decides what counts as meaningful projects of life or even the alternatives. In short, as Cocks quotes Will Kymlicka, ‘[c]ultural membership is a precondition of autonomous moral choices.’<sup>96</sup> The second argument for liberal nationalism asserts that ‘just as individual human beings deserve recognition of their inherent dignity as free subjects with their own purposes and plans, so do whole peoples deserve recognition as moral equals with equal rights to decide their own fates.’ In other words, liberal nationalists carry the logic of the

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Walzer, ‘Liberalism, Nationalism, Reform’ in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p.173. My own emphasis.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Walzer, ‘Liberalism, Nationalism, Reform’ in *Ibid.*, pp.172-3.

<sup>95</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.92

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

Kantian principle of 'respect for the person' and negative liberty to the level of nation; hence the equal right of persons to self-development has been translated into the equal right of nations to self-determination. This argument, as it were, draws on the analogy between persons and nations, and sees nations as persons writ large. Finally, the third argument asserts that 'liberalism's highest value on individual freedom of choice behooves it to value a plurality of alternatives for the individual to choose among, hence a plurality of styles of life, hence a variety of national cultures instantiating that plurality worldwide.'<sup>97</sup> Apparently, it assumes that by 'its interest in assuring choices for individuals, its own agnosticism with respect to the good, and its support for civic over ethnic sources of political unity,' liberalism can 'safeguard and even nourish cultural variety domestically as well as internationally, with the most liberal societies being those that "encourages cultural pluralism",' which amounts to a faith in its supporters' willingness to act in a liberal way at home and abroad.'<sup>98</sup>

However, if Cocks is right, these three arguments do not coalesce, because while the first argument 'takes the person as the end of national community, the second takes the nation as an end in itself, and the third is parasitical on, without being rooted in, cultural inheritance, national belonging, and a collective notion of the good.'<sup>99</sup> Note that Cocks' intention here is to highlight the contradiction between the liberal nationalists' acknowledgement of the incommensurability of values and their attempt to efforts to *harmonise* them. And her counter-arguments all centre around this theme. Indeed, with regard to the first argument, Cocks replies that it is flawed because (1) it conflates 'culture' with 'national culture', as if values and styles of life are necessarily embedded in cultures at national level but not in local, regional or even global level; (2) it wrongly assumes that 'every national culture is discrete, with its own sealed genealogy, rather than being an interpenetrated part of an interconnected history'; (3) it is not self-evident that national/cultural identity is what gives rise to the individual's choices; (4) it neglects the fact that if cultures can be regarded as a

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<sup>97</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.94.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.94.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

precondition of choice, they are also ‘a precondition of dictation’ that ‘sets its won tight limits on the individual’s imagination’ or even ‘train individuals to submit to authority’.<sup>100</sup> At this point, one may have noticed that Cocks’ first counter-argument as such is directed against the anthropological conception of culture and the idea that culture functions as a precondition of choice for individuals, without addressing the historical and political claims – the two directly related to liberal nationalism. And it makes no distinction between liberalism as an ‘ideology’ of individual liberty, as a ‘political movement’, or even as a ‘social practice’ – as if they are all theoretically exchangeable and lead to the same practical implications. Nor does it appreciate the difference between the *cognitive* implications of culture on individuals’ repertoires for forming and revising his value system and the *political* implications of such cognitive implications. Nevertheless, Cocks’ point is clear: nations or cultures are *collective* in nature and hence conflict the individualism in liberalism which aims at the protection of individuals’ rights and freedom. The most fundamental error of the first argument lies in its neglect of the inevitable conflict between *collectivism* and *individualism*.

With regard to the second argument, Cocks’ diagnosis suggests that it is also flawed for the same reason, although in different ways. As she states, ‘there are the problems with moving seamlessly from valorising choice at the level of the individual person to valorising choice at the level of the nation as a collective “self,” and from valorising a plurality of alternatives for the person to choose among to valorising cultural variety worldwide.’<sup>101</sup> That is to say, this argument is wrong in assuming that the logic of the respect for persons and their choices can be conveniently carried over to the level of national or cultural communities – in other words, the analogy between persons and nations which the validity of this argument depends upon is problematic. For one thing, while liberalism is *individualistic* in nature, given its prioritisation of individual’s (freedom to) choices, nationalism is *collective* in essence. For another, in selecting the members of the nation over all other human beings, nationalism no doubt runs against the *universalistic* commitment of liberalism to humanity as a whole.

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<sup>100</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.95.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

Indeed, argues Cocks, national cultures thrive in the world not because its members are entitled to choose among alternative styles of life but because their members conform to their particular national life-style. And liberal cultures are not different in this regard – paradoxically though, for they also have to wield collective power ‘to cultivate in their members a belief that the good life is the life of private individual freedom in the same breath that they declare that good life to be a matter of individual, not collective, choice.’<sup>102</sup> And they only differ from illiberal cultures in the kind of values they promote. As a matter of fact, despite their shared commitment to diversity, liberalism and nationalism do not share the same concern. Liberalism and nationalism are two doctrines of a very different nature and with conflicting aims. After all, nations are not persons writ large.

On the other hand, this argument for liberal nationalism also fails to recognise that ‘[h]eterogeneity at the global level can coexist with homogeneity at the national level and cultural tyranny at the level of the individual’ – that is to say, as Cocks puts it polemically, ‘national-cultural variety *in fact* almost *inevitably* ensures that the liberal principle of negative freedom will be breached more often than it is met.’<sup>103</sup> It is almost ‘inevitable’ because such practice is a national consequence of the ‘constitutive features of nationalism.’<sup>104</sup> If so, liberal nationalism is a doctrine doomed to practical contradiction. And surely this practical contradiction also undermines the assertion of the third argument for liberal nationalism. For the possible existence of illiberal cultures in a ‘liberal’ world – where all nations are equal internationally but some are more ‘liberal’ domestically than others do – defeats the adjective placed in front of the noun in the doctrine. Of course, as Cocks expects, ‘[l]iberalism might extricate itself from some of the problems that illiberal cultures pose for it, if it were to reinterpret itself as merely the ethos of a particular kind of culture’- that is, one ‘that values individual freedom of choice as the supreme good

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<sup>102</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.95.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., my own emphasis.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

but knows it is no more right and true than other cultures.’<sup>105</sup> That is to say, to save their doctrine from practical contradiction, liberals may acknowledge their own cultural particularity and confine their support for nationalism exclusively to those nations – or national leaders – that share their beliefs in individual freedom and human rights. Of course, this strategy does not remove theoretical incoherence from the doctrine, for liberal values and national values may still come into conflict. But, as it seems, that at least severs the doctrine’s connections from those essentially illiberal cultures. Consequently, the adjective which predicates the phrase ‘liberal nationalism’ can remain as a true description of the noun. However, presses on Cocks, this way of dealing with the issue of coexisting with illiberal cultures can be very costly, for in effect it renders liberalism unable to make moral judgements about the world, let alone ‘to remake the world in its own image of an objective universal ideal’ – which is the liberal’s long-standing political aspiration.<sup>106</sup>

It follows that, if Cocks’ diagnosis is right, liberal nationalism is a doctrine at once theoretically incoherent and practically self-defeating. As a style of political thinking, it harbours a number of internal conflicts between liberalism’s individualistic nature and nationalism’s collective essence which gives rise to the doctrine’s inevitable practical contradiction that can be avoided only if the liberal forsake their aspiration as a universal political ideal – which may also be understood as a dilemma created by the doctrine’s inherent universalism and particularism. And all these conflicts in effect are but variations of incommensurability between the *liberal* values and the *national* values – only at different levels, either theoretically or practically. If Cocks’ refutation is as decisive as she suggests, then, by implication, Berlin as a liberal who supports Jewish nationalism seems unable to escape from the same fate. Or, if Walzer is right in his suggestion that Tamir’s liberal nationalism coheres with Berlin’s vision, then his political thought more likely than not is riddled with similar internal conflicts and contradictions. Indeed, as suggested by Cocks’ observation of ‘the threads of *individualism* and *ethno-nationalism* weaving their way

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.96. My own emphasis.

<sup>106</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.96.

through Berlin's depictions of Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx Chaim Weizmann, and L. B. Namier, Berlin's thinking on the Jewish question must face the same criticisms from Cocks.<sup>107</sup> What is more, as Berlin's support for Zionism is also understood by her as a defence for the value of individual liberty as well as the value of cultural diversity – hence an application of *liberalism* and *pluralism*, her note on Berlin's constant denial of the 'necessary congruence between the two doctrines' at the beginning of her discussion on how Berlin confronts what she calls 'the national question' should be read as an implicit criticism of her subject's methodological inconsistency.<sup>108</sup>

To be sure, Cocks is not unaware of Berlin's distinction between a 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism. This distinction is made with the help of Herder's formulation of nationalism on the grounds of, firstly, the universal human need to be 'at home somewhere, with your own kind,' and secondly, the fact that 'each civilisation has its own, unique, individual spirit ... from which everything flows.'<sup>109</sup> As a dichotomy, its embryonic form in fact can be found in Herder's cultural nationalism, which appeals to the idea of culture to talk about the Jews scattered around the world as a 'people' – hence a nation who share a common *institution* (i.e. religion and language) without a state. Berlin takes up this distinction between race-based nation and culture-based nation, and use this dichotomy to characterise his favoured Zionism as a 'civilised Herderian nationalism' based on the benign human need to belong to a cultural community, while labelling others as *ethno-centric* cases of 'aggressive nationalist self-assertion' driven by the 'psychological wound' inflicted by their more powerful neighbours or colonisers – as in the case of Germany in last century.<sup>110</sup> In a way, as Cocks also seems to understand, this conceptual distinction, on the one hand, enables Berlin to support Zionism as a 'benign' form of cultural nationalism as opposed to the 'aggressive' form of political nationalism and on the other, serves as the theoretical

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<sup>107</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.97.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.100.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., pp.100, 101 and 103.

spectrum – with the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ forms of nationalism sitting at opposing ends – for him to account for how the original idea of individual freedom to choose was eventually perverted into the dangerous idea of the nation’s right to willed collective power as a curious ‘quasi-metaphysical super-personality.’<sup>111</sup> Indeed, Cocks’ criticism of what she takes to be the second argument for liberal nationalism is reminiscent of Berlin’s warning of the danger of analogy in political thinking (see Chapter 4) and of the fact that intellectual tendencies are prone to metamorphosis and contradiction. However, her point is that, even if Berlin’s support for Zionism is meant to be a case for a good and non-aggressive cultural nationalism, it is still a case doomed to fail.

For one thing, as long as it is a variation of liberal nationalism, it must deal with the conflict between the individualistic nature of liberalism and the collective nature of nationalism – which according to Cocks’s diagnosis is a logical problem that ‘will not magically disappear just because liberal nationalists contend that nations *ought* to acknowledge the equal rights of all individuals.’<sup>112</sup> For the necessarily oppositional values of liberalism and nationalism – no matter which form mentioned above it takes – dictates that the doctrine cannot be theoretically coherent, nor can it be realisable in practice. For another, and this is the first direct criticism Cocks mounts against Berlin, the distinction between a non-aggressive and aggressive nationalism is flawed. That is to say, convenient as it is, the dichotomy simply neglects the ‘family resemblances’ between the benign form of cultural nationalism and aggressive ethno-nationalism: the very fact that all nations-states conduct both ‘culture-tests’ and ‘familial descent tests’ to determine the national identity of individuals.<sup>113</sup> In other words, a Herderian nation-state is ‘no less *exclusive* and *exclusionist* than the nation that is racially defined.’ This exclusive nature of nationalism is intrinsically connected with *collective* values (e.g. loyalty to the group) and hence logically runs against the liberal values which are essentially *individualistic*. Therefore, even though Berlin’s

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<sup>111</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.99.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p.96.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.100-101.



sense of reality prevents him from taking the personal analogy of nations to be real, this practical contradiction seems to be a consequence as inevitable as the logical contradiction within the doctrine. For, strictly speaking, it is the concretisation of the logical incompatibility. As a result, Berlin as ‘the original designer of this political style’ not only stumbles at the pitfalls Cocks’ found in the theory of his ‘protégés’, but also perpetrates other mistakes on the way to argue for a liberal case of nationalism. If she is right, Berlin’s support for Zionism not only is a violation of the central message of his own value-pluralism but also is a textbook example of an intellectual tendency prone to ‘ambiguities, contradiction and metamorphoses.’ For his ‘best answers to the national question’ are, suggests Cocks, a ‘darkly dialectical account of the ambiguous constitution and self-corrosive movement of each of those pairs of opposites.’<sup>114</sup>

However, Cocks’ approach to refuting liberal nationalism by way of pointing to the conflict between liberal values and national values may not be as effective as she believes. As a matter of fact, her arguments against the case for liberal nationalism rely heavily on both the practical and theoretical incompatibility between liberalism and nationalism – which has been variously termed as a conflict between individualism and collectivism, universalism and particularism, or even liberalism and pluralism (as in the case of Berlin). And her pre-emptive criticism of liberalism’s strategy to solve the problem can also be regarded as a reiteration of conflicts of this nature, only different in that it takes the form of an acknowledgement one’s own particularities amounting to a retreat from making universal judgements about the world. However, it is dubious whether all forms of particularism and universalism would operate at the same plane of thought and therefore come into conflict with each other. To be sure, just like the way (as noted earlier) she neglects the potentially different implications, theoretical and practical alike, between liberalism as a normative theory and liberalism as a *historical practice*, Cocks employs conceptual dichotomies to make her case without sufficiently attending to their subtle yet very significant differences. Thus, a closer look at the liberal nationalism she presents

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<sup>114</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.101.

reveals that the doctrine does not have to forsake its claim to universalism with regard to the incommensurability of values, the Herderian holistic conception of human values as culturally-embedded, or culture as a cognitive precondition for meaningful choices. Nor does it need to give up the potential political implications of these universalistic claims. In fact, given her understanding of liberalism as a doctrine of ‘agnosticism with regard to the good’ – which must be applicable to all including national leaders who ‘may freely choose courses of action that crush the free choices of some or even most of the nation’s population’ – it is curious Cocks should have taken this line of thought.<sup>115</sup> After all, it is this universal human condition that makes possible of an individual’s *individuality* as well as a culture’s *particularity*.

In principle, liberal thinkers can argue for *individuality* without endorsing *individualism*, and can recognise the collective nature of nations (or the holistic nature of cultures) without subscribing to collectivism. On the other hand, recognising one’s particularities does not amount to retreating from universalism at all levels and in all forms, either prescriptively or descriptively; nor would taking seriously cultural membership necessarily embrace political collectivism. Nor would liberal nationalists necessarily lose their *sense of reality* with regard to the fact that their case is argued by analogy, yet a ‘person writ large’ are not really a person but a nation formed by individuals. Indeed, there is no reason why the liberal will *forget* about the primacy of individual freedom to choose when they draw an analogy between nations and persons to make the case for liberal nationalism – after all, the former is what makes the latter sound convincing in the first place. It follows that liberalism should not easily be equated with universalism and individualism, nor should nationalism be variously treated as just another name for ethno-nationalism, collectivism, cultural pluralism, particularism, or even Berlin’s value-pluralism. That is to say, a decisive refutation of the case for liberal nationalism cannot be formulated by ill-defined terminology such as that used by Cocks. And the validity of how different values or concepts are to be accommodated with each other depends upon how the key terms

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<sup>115</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.95.

are to be defined and to which levels of thinking they are meant apply. In short, there is no *a priori* reason why a world where – to use Tamir’s own words – ‘[l]iberals can acknowledge the importance of belonging, membership, and cultural affiliations, as well as the particular moral commitments that follow from them’, and ‘[n]ationalists can appreciate the value of personal autonomy and individual rights and freedom, and sustain a commitment for social justice both between and within nations’ cannot be envisaged in principle.<sup>116</sup>

If fact, a Berlinian value-pluralist would not attempt to *harmonise* liberal and national values once for all in theory, nor would he consider putting the theory into practice is an easy matter. Indeed, the central message value-pluralism sends out is to the contrary. As argued already in Chapter 4, a value will not be defeated even if it is not chosen to be embodied: that is to say, what makes it imperative for the agent who intends to pursue it will not magically disappear once he chooses to realise the ‘other’ value – that is why a value conflict can lead to a tragic sense for the agent. Values can come into conflict with each other. However, that does not mean that a *compromise* between conflicting values should be ruled out as a principle. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 3, Berlin does not think that a logical solution to the conflict between values such as liberty, the organisation needed for its defence, or a minimum standard of welfare, is possible: for this reason, some ‘logically untidy, flexible, and even ambiguous compromise’ has to be made in the end. Precisely Berlin’s liberal Zionism is a case of this kind. And what such a compromise consists in is not a one-off ‘harmony’ but a never-ending *process* of conflict and *ad hoc* political measures. In other words, solutions of this kind involve temporary expediciencies and hence they are precarious and uneasy. In fact, only a monist would believe a harmony between values are attainable. But that can only be attained by imposing on them a theoretical framework which *defines* their relations. What Cocks has in mind as a coherent theory of liberal nationalism seems to be of this monistic kind, for it must specify all the *logical* relations between values, as well as how they should be embodied in practice, and yet iron out all the possible conflicts. Certainly, that cannot be an intellectual

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<sup>116</sup> Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.6.

offspring of Berlin's value pluralism. Indeed, as also established in the previous two sections, the fact that there is no logical connection – or, to use Cocks's words, 'necessary congruence' – between liberalism and pluralism does not mean that a pluralist case for liberalism in principle is impossible.

In the case of Jewish nationalism, it is clear that Berlin takes the search for 'a sense of belonging to a community' as the cardinal value or *positive goal* that Jews as a scattered nation without a nation-state pursue. To embody this value surely requires a process of state-building which has to fulfil many political and economic conditions whose realisation would inevitably run into conflict with other values – not least the 'sovereign' and 'territorial integrity' of the new state's neighbour states, given that this is a case of compromise at the international level. And, of course, when a state is created, it would, just like any nation-state, have to face a series of value conflicts. For instance, domestically, the need for law and order or loyalty to the state may run against safeguarding individual liberty; whereas, internationally, the idea of universal human rights may come into conflict with the Westphalian notion of national sovereignty. All these value conflicts could give rise to political conflicts that may under some circumstances escalate into a war. However, in Berlin's eyes, the fact that this state-less people's collective pursuit of the values of 'nation', 'cultural membership', and 'a sense of belonging', is a reality we as their fellow human beings must confront, and as long as the embodiment of their values would not give rise to a grave loss (of value) for other people, building a nation for them is an a way out not easy but worth trying. In fact there are two reasons why Berlin's case for a civilised Herderian nationalism may not deteriorate into an oppressive nation-state.

To explain, firstly, if a Zionist is consistent, then he has to abide by and be judged by the same criteria he uses for making his case of nationalism. That is to say, if he argues for the case of nationalism based on the need for belonging to a culture, then, to be consistent, he must accept other party's claim for the same cause. A similar point is argued by Walzer's succinct summary of Tamir's liberal nationalism. His argument goes like this: the fact that all liberal nationalists accept the principle of national self-determination means that they have to accept the same claim made by other nations; in other words, such claims constitute 'the critical moral test' for

them.<sup>117</sup> No doubt this is what the pluralist as a self-critical and consistent thinker with an enlarged mentality would perform. Thus, 'Iraqi nationalists are tested by the Kurds, Algerian nationalists by the Berbers, and Zionists, of course, by the Palestinians.'<sup>118</sup> Of course, what is really being tested in these cases is the *consistency* of the liberal nationalists' reasoning, and we may simply term it as 'a consistency test'. As this is a matter of logic, it is difficult to see how any Zionists can refute it. For as a matter of fact, the kind of particularism – personal attachments or national particularities – the nationalists appeal to does not grant an exemption from logical consistency in thinking. Also, it follows that those whose political behaviour violates this logic would not be counted as liberals anyway; hence, their failure is not the failure of liberalism. In fact, value-pluralism demands that we have to undergo this consistency test. As argued in Chapter 3, Berlin considers that an encounter with a culture different from one's own calls for a reflection upon one's own convictions. That is to say, a Berlinian value-pluralist must be a man of an enlarged mentality who must respect others as his own equals and apply the same standard to criticise his own beliefs consistently.

Secondly, as a matter of fact, Berlin's Zionism is argued in Herderian terms as a case for building up a state for a national group, and for this reason it is different from a case for deliberately promoting collective values within a fully-fledged nation-state. That means the ultimate goal of Zionism is the welfare of each individual of the Jewish people rather than the welfare of the 'Jewish culture (or nation)'. Indeed, nowhere in his writings does Berlin lose this sense of reality in this regard. Rather, the fact that he often returns to his intellectual hero's – that is, Herzen's – declaration that 'men should never be sacrificed in the name of higher abstract ideas' means that he has never been attracted the integralist Zionists' use of the *roots* metaphor to

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<sup>117</sup> Michael Walzer, 'Liberalism, Nationalism, Reform' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p.174.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

characterise their version of nationalism.<sup>119</sup> For him, human beings as a matter of fact are endowed with brains and hearts, but not with roots. In fact, Berlin's Herzenian principle as such marks a crucial difference not only between his Herderian Zionism and the integralist Zionism, but also, paradoxically, Herder's own version of nationalism. Note that Herder is probably best known for his use of the organic metaphor to describe national culture, and he sometimes seems to take the metaphor for real and treat nations as organic wholes of which individuals are merely its parts. Berlin surely understands this when he enters Herder's mind. But his Herzenian realism – that is, the *reality* of human life and the *unreality* of the 'quasi-metaphysical super-personality' called 'nation' – is too strong to adopt Herder's organicism.<sup>120</sup> And that is why Berlin takes up Herder's holistic conception of culture and communitarian conception of men but leaves behind his more mystic baggage. What is more, as immediately suggested by the title of his essay 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism,' Berlin cautions us against the danger of nationalism which tends to transform the Kantian notion of 'man is an end in himself' into the pathological idea of 'nation is an end in itself' justifying aggression and other egotistic behaviours of nation-states.<sup>121</sup> Actually, this warning is noted in Cocks' criticism of Berlin's two concepts of nationalism. However, she only uses it to affirm her own point about the inevitable conflict between individualism and nationalism in practice, and misses Berlin's very point about what makes the idea of nationalism dangerous: the use of *analogy* or *metaphor* in political reasoning.

This is of course a recurrent theme in Berlin's writing. As established in Chapter 2, his Herzenian sense of reality also leads him to oppose the *aestheticisation* of politics. For this reason, the Jewish nationalism Berlin argues for by no means would

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<sup>119</sup> Avishai Margalit, 'The Crooked Timber of Nationalism' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p.155

<sup>120</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism' in *The Sense of Reality* (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp.232-248.

<sup>121</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), pp.238-261. Quoted from Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.98-9.

accord moral precedence to the nation (the whole) over its citizens (the parts). Also, nations not only conduct what Cocks calls ‘culture tests’ and ‘familial descent tests’ but also have to undergo the ‘consistency test’ which would reveal the national leaders true intention behind their nationalism. What is more, as pointed out by Walzer, ‘[t]he fact that large numbers of nationalists are not liberals isn’t counter-evidence’ against the possibility of a coherent account of liberal nationalism,’ for ‘it merely defines the opposition that liberal nationalists encounter and have to deal with.’<sup>122</sup> It follows that, despite their family resemblances, there is indeed a real distinction between a benign and aggressive nationalism. Thus, Berlin’s two concepts of nationalism should not be regarded as a convenient but spurious dichotomy to characterise his favoured Zionism as a civilised Herderian nationalism aiming at meeting the universal human need for a sense of belonging while all other national movements as barbarian enterprises to gratify their imperial greed. Nor should it be seen as spurious analytic framework for Berlin to work out his ‘darkly dialectical account of the ambiguous constitution and self-corrosive movement of each of those pairs of opposites.’

To be fair, Cocks’ phrase ‘darkly dialectical account’ is wrong only when the term ‘dialectical’ is meant in a strictly Hegelian sense, but seems to be right in the general sense of the term. To explain, unlike his intellectual hero, Herzen, Berlin has never been a Hegelian. Therefore, even though Berlin persistently reminds his reader of the power of ideas, sometimes even talking about the life or career of ideas, he does not mean that they are agents independent of human beings. Indeed, just as ‘nations’ or ‘cultures’ are not entities enjoying agency, the ‘movement’ of the abstract ideas can only take place in human mind. And for the same reason, historical events are never *bona fide* ‘incarnations’ of abstract ideas as Hegel seems to suggest in his *Logic*.<sup>123</sup> In fact, Berlin once describes Herzen’s approach to politics as a ‘dialectical compromise’ derived from his earlier Hegelianism. Nevertheless, Berlin as an anti-Hegelian thinker never uses ‘dialectical’ to characterise his own approach. Instead, he often describes his own compromise approach as ‘uneasy’ or ‘logically untidy’. If Cocks by ‘darkly

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Walzer, ‘Liberalism, Nationalism, Reform’ in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla, and Robert B. Silvers (eds.) *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p.174.

<sup>123</sup> G.W.F.Hegel, *Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), esp. Chapter VI.

dialectical account' refers to the uneasy, unstable, and dynamic nature of Berlin's idea of compromise – or *precarious equilibrium*, as sometimes described by Berlin – then she is right.<sup>124</sup> Of course, what is in the name goes beyond just naming. For what 'precarious' implies is a reversion to the style of political reasoning exemplified by the presumptuous political scientists or the ambitious foundationalist theorist whose aim is to ground a grand theory on a single value or a comprehensive ranking of values – which amounts to trying to solve political problems by *thinking* – and *in advance*. A capricious compromise is an *ad hoc* solution to a *de facto* value conflicts. However, what Cocks's 'dialectical account' refers to in effect is Berlin's intellectual tendency which according to her textual analysis is prone to ambiguity, metamorphosis, as well as contradiction. Indeed, for her, not only Berlin's treatment of the national question is a symptom of that tendency, the fact that his political thought harbours a 'minimal moral universalism' is also a vindication of her diagnosis.

As Cocks sees it, Berlin's tendency to contradiction is nowhere greater than in his attitude towards universalism: that is, the existence of 'certain universal values' which serves as 'the common humanity of all mankind' and functions as the basis for promoting 'critical thinking'. In the eyes of Cocks, this universalism runs against Berlin's doctrine of value-pluralism in two fundamental ways. The first is the apparent methodological contradiction between it and the particularism on which value-pluralism is based. And the second, more seriously, is what underneath the apparent contradiction: the fact that what he takes to be 'universal values' – that is, in Berlin's own words, 'the scale of values by which "the majority of mankind, and in particular of western Europeans, in fact live"' – in fact is a case of *ethnocentrism*, or more specifically, Berlin's concealed *Euro-centrism*.<sup>125</sup> For Cocks, this is essentially the mistake of taking the principal – i.e. the 'European' values such as negative liberty

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<sup>124</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.18.

<sup>125</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.107. Berlin's words originally appear in his essay 'European Unity and Its Vicissitudes' in Berlin's *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991).



and equal rights of all individuals – for the universal. More surprisingly, however, if her psychoanalysis of Berlin is true, that is, if his successful assimilation into the English elite circle is a carefully designed endeavour, then Berlin in effect does not differ too much from – as Berlin suggests – Marx’s eschewing his Jewish identity by identifying himself with the working class which in his view was destined to win out in the human history of class conflict: that is to say, Berlin’s identification of himself with the ‘universal’ European Enlightenment liberal values, or more locally the influential post-war Oxford establishment, is the result of his concealed self-denial of his own Jewishness.<sup>126</sup>

To refrain from offering yet another psychoanalytic answer to this sensitive issue, it suffices to say three things here. First of all, to say that Europe is the ‘birthplace’ of the universal values is not necessarily to perpetrate ethnocentrism. For, as it is clear by now, Berlin sees these values as vindicated by human experiences: that is to say, given Berlin’s Herzenian projectivist conception of human value, a value can only come into existence through what John Stuart Mill calls ‘experiments in living’ and hence must have a birthplace or even a birthday. As long as we keep the question ‘How does a value come about?’ from the question ‘Where does a value come from?’, we have no *a priori* reason to believe that Berlin considers the liberal values as what *human* history as a whole has witnessed to be more humane and truer to humanity. After all, Berlin never suggests that the liberal values he believes in are universal and valuable *because* they are European. Secondly, the fact that Berlin does not decide to go ‘back’ to Israel cannot easily be taken to be evidence of Berlin’s insincerity in his support for the Jewish nationalism. As a matter of fact, Berlin is a man of Jewish-Russian-English background. That means he must have experienced more than one culture as valuable and hence has the multi-cultural repertoires for him to make a decision between two conflicting values or, given his Herderian holistic conception of value, cultures. For this reason, one should not assume that Berlin’s sense of belonging to a community should be confined to the Jewish community. Rather, there

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<sup>126</sup> See Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chapter 3, pp.71-91.

is perfect reason for him to stay in England, in particular Oxford. After all, a liberal nationalist is an attached man. Berlin's personal attachment surely is with Oxford, if not All Souls College. Again, there is no *a priori* reason to suggest that a man who argues for the universal human need to belong should not exercise his freedom to choose what he feels is the more 'belonged' community. A value-pluralist must know how difficult such decision can be. From this it also follows that, finally, Berlin's choice not to 'assimilate' into the Jewish community actually demonstrates that a *culture*-based (i.e. not race-based) nationalism does not demand all those who are of the same race must live in a single community. The entry has to be *voluntary*, that is to say. And that might work in favour of Galston's idea of 'exit' as discussed in last section. In the final analysis, Cocks' refutation of Berlin's liberal Zionism is not decisive. And by implication, Gray is right in his insisting that the reach of value-pluralism can run as deep as into the level of culture. To use Berlin's words found in his 'Two Concepts of Nationalism' against which Cocks' criticism is essentially directed:<sup>127</sup>

We can't turn history back. Yet I do not wish to abandon the belief that a world which is a reasonably peaceful coat of many colours, each portion of which develops its own distinct cultural identity and is tolerant of others, is not a Utopian dream.

Berlin's vision of world is certainly of a garden with many flourishing flowers. Each of them has its own colour and distinct feature. But all of them must be liberal of a kind.

To conclude, once again a 'logical' approach to investigate the link between Berlin's value-pluralism and liberalism is uncongenial to his way of reasoning. Rather, a more profitable one is to put ourselves in the vantage-point of a Berlinian value-pluralist and see how others should be treated. That is to say, a Berlinian pluralist is one with an enlarged mentality who must respect others as his equals and think consistently

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<sup>127</sup> Nathan Gardels, 'Two Concepts of Nationalism: an interview with Isaiah Berlin', *New York Review of Books*, 21 November 1991, p.21

when it comes to evaluate a form of life pursued either individually or collectively. This enlarged mentality in effect is the kind of liberalism Berlin has in mind. This may be termed as a *thin* liberalism as opposed to a *thick* liberalism, which specifies a particular political structure. If this analysis of value-pluralism's political implications is correct, then there is no necessarily internal contradiction in this vision of the human world. Nevertheless, a coherent vision is not necessarily a robust argument. The next chapter deals with this issue by exposing some of the major weakness of Berlin's political thought as a whole.

## CHAPTER VI.

### Reconsidering Berlin's Approach to Politics

If the previous chapters are right in reading Berlin in his own terms, then he has two cardinal arguments for his liberal pluralistic political vision: first, the plurality of values as an anthropological truth – hence the falsity of monism as a theory of human value; second, the danger of monism as vindicated by the political terrors occurred in the past century. In effect, there is a common thread in these two arguments: their reliance on the *historical* – or, to use Berlin's own term of art, the *quasi-empirical*. By now it should be clear that his life-long engagement with the history of ideas is not a philosopher's peripheral intellectual activity but rather a distinctive form of argumentation. That is, his sense of history is an integral part of his acute sense of reality, always pervading in all his writings. And his writings are often meant to heighten the reader's *historical consciousness*. What is more, recall that this thesis sets out to study Berlin's political thought as a whole by way of reconstructing his methodology, yet what has emerged from this study is not only a historical methodology – derived from Vico's historicism and Herder's holism, backed up by Herzen's realism – but also a *normative* approach stipulating the way we should encounter others who are far away from us in time or space. This methodology essentially is a secularised Vichian hermeneutical approach applied to the moral and political spheres, and its role in Berlin's system of thought is to function as a practical strategy to transcend cultural differences so as to provide a foundation for making value compromise as well as to arrive at a basis of mutual toleration for conflicting parties. In Berlin's scheme of things, that is to say, the historical landscape of cultural diversity as envisaged by Vico and Herder has transformed into a *vision* of the human world where there exists a plurality of values (whose embodiments may take the form of an individual's experiments in living or ideals, or a group's form of life) and each culture is a unique manifestation of a particular combination of values: the doctrine of value-pluralism. Yet that means that the 'plurality' of human values thus postulated is

grounded on a conception of history which sees past cultures as lost ‘values’ or, more generally, value systems.

This chapter is meant to deal primarily with Berlin’s use of historical approach in his argumentation. By way of discussing his famous essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’ the first section exposes the way history functions in his defence for individual liberty, and the aim of it is to demonstrate that the validity of his case ultimately turns on the doctrine of pluralism as a truer account of the human condition whose validity in turn depends in part on the validity of Berlin’s use of history. The second section of this chapter will then discuss a number of difficulties revealed by such an exposition of the historical in Berlin’s argumentation. They can be broadly classified under two clusters: those theoretical difficulties resulting from the *coherence* of Berlin’s overall political thought and those practical issues which bear greatly on the *feasibility* of the Berlinian liberal approach to tackling value conflicts. It will be argued that the pervasiveness of the historical in Berlin’s political thought means that to agree with him on the truth of the doctrine value-pluralism requires us to adopt his empathetic approach to reading the history of humanity or at least his diagnosis of the twentieth century; yet there is no *a priori* reason to believe that this transcendental strategy would always result in an appreciation of other people’s values systems as morally on a par with one’s own. Given the coherence of his thought, that also means that his political vision in the end lacks an independent argument for real support. And for this reason, his defence of negative liberty against political monism remains a case that still hangs in the balance.

**VI.1 Berlin’s Use of Historical Approach in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’**

The essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ is very rich in content and would inspire those who take the piecemeal approach to Berlin’s writings to construct neat logical propositions out of the text by singling out particular passages. Until now, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, this essay has generally been read as a piece of analytic philosophy dealing with the relative merits of the negative and positive form of liberty as an intrinsic good, and discussions on it has often focused on either the

validity of the conceptual distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty. Yet what the previous chapter has established indicates that this ‘logical’ approach to Berlin’s writings is inimical to his quasi-empirical style of political reasoning which conducts conceptual analysis at the most abstract level of thought yet against the background of concrete historical events. Indeed, Berlin’s style of reasoning means that his writings are often historical and analytical at the same time, and to single out either dimension alone for criticism or reconstruction is bound to downplay the other integral part of his argument which may be of significant relevance. In the case of the essay in question, the situation is further complicated by the fact that, while trying to offer an analysis of the mindsets of his enemies by empathising, Berlin never shies away from making his own partisan value judgements when analysing a wide range of thinkers sometimes add difficulties to appreciating the force of his central message. This section thus aims to recover the hitherto historical elements in Berlin’s famous inaugural lecture, with the view to restoring his defence for negative liberty to its full power.

To begin with, a closer look at the conceptual distinction between negative and positive and liberty is needed. According to Ian Cook, Berlin’s dichotomy as such is an application of the *linguistic* approach in political theory that ‘seek[s] to develop a taxonomy of uses for particular words.’<sup>1</sup> He contrasts this with two other strands of linguistic approach as follows: while the taxonomy strand tries to give a descriptive account of the actual uses of a word, the ‘language-game’ strand takes the discourse of those who study politics to be a particular linguistic network and seeks to clarify the meanings of words so as to facilitate the study of politics; whereas, the ‘therapeutic’ strand assumes the ‘mode of analysis in which alternative uses of particular words are used to reflect upon the problems in the forms of life of the community of users that adopt these alternative uses.’<sup>2</sup> If Cook is right, then ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ does nothing more than merely describe the various uses of the word ‘liberty’ that have occurred in the history of political thought, and Berlin is one of the ‘taxonomists who

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Cook, *Reading Mill: Studies in Political Theory* (London: MacMillan, 1998), p.23.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid..

observe the limits to philosophy that resulted from the linguistic turn by simply attempting to describe word use.’<sup>3</sup> Or, to paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein’s metaphor of language as an ancient city, that means: the idea of liberty is ‘a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods.’<sup>4</sup> Thus, it seems that Berlin can in principle avoid the issue as to why two *different* concepts can be said to be *of* the same idea called ‘liberty’ – that is, if negative liberty and positive liberty are two distinct concepts, why they should both go by the name of liberty? For without the need to ask what is in the name called ‘liberty’, Berlin can simply point to the fact that there have been many different ways of understanding the idea of liberty in the history of human thought, and admit that an idea allows for more than one way of understanding or conceptualising. Whereas, this question is pressing for the monist who believes that there is only one right answer to a question or a single right way to understanding an idea.

To be sure, Cook’s reading of Berlin is aware of the historical dimension in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. However, it neglects the fact that Berlin also takes the discourse of those engaged with political theorising as a ‘language-game’ and seeks to facilitate the study of politics by clarifying the meanings of relevant terms. Indeed, his Vichian empathetic approach and his Herderian holism explicated in Chapter 2 both point to this direction. And one should not forget that the contrast between positive liberty and negative liberty is discussed by Berlin in the context of ‘the open war that is being fought between two *systems of ideas* which return different and conflicting answers to what has long been the central question of politics,’ that is, the question of obedience and coercion: ‘Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else?’ or ‘Why should I not live as I like?’ or ‘By whom, and to what degree, and in the name of what, and for the sake of what should I obey?’<sup>5</sup> That is to say, positive liberty and negative liberty for Berlin are two conflicting conceptions of individual freedom which represent contrasting

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.121. My own emphasis.

visions of how society must be governed. Moreover, Berlin's point that negative liberty is 'a mark of high civilisation both on the part of individuals and communities' means that the system of ideas which incorporates in it the negative form of liberty whose origin lies in 'the desire not to be impinged upon, to be left to oneself' is to be preferred over the political system based on the language of positive liberty which originated from the 'desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the conflict between negative and positive liberty, despite the fact that it appears to be an intra-conceptual value conflict, is actually one between two systems of ideas or two visions of politics. Once again we find Berlin to be a consistent thinker whose holism as found in his historical methodology is also at work in his political reasoning.

What is more, Berlin's essay is not entirely descriptive as Cook suggests. To see this point, we can first consider the following question: given that theories define the idea of liberty differently, how could we possibly talk about the *loss* of freedom cross-theoretically? To put it differently, what 'freedom' in a positive-liberty-based theory refers to is different from that of a negative-liberty-based theory, for it is a *technical* term whose meaning is theory-relative or embedded in a particular discourse. That is how what John Locke envisaged as a 'free' society come to be seen by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as an 'unfree' situation where everyone is in chains.<sup>7</sup> This highlights not only the fact that value-conflict can take place within liberalism, if one is to view it as a distinctive value system. But, more relevantly, it also means that a loss of freedom by a given definition may be a gain in liberty by another. It follows that, unless there can be a theory-neutral, theory-free definition of liberty, we cannot legitimately make cross-theoretical criticisms. Berlin must know this well when he notes that some people in a post-colonial authoritarian state believe that they are enjoying more freedom than under the rule of their benign colonisers, for nationalism is essentially concerned with *who* is the governor of a people. He does not make it explicit that negative liberty for him is a theory-neutral form of freedom whereby political

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.129.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* (London: Penguin, 1969).



freedom must be measured. Yet, more likely than not, that is what he takes negative liberty to be when he argues that it is ‘a more fundamental sense of freedom.’<sup>8</sup> And in any event that is what he will take to measure each society’s overall freedom, or unfreedom.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, although he recognises both positive and negative liberty as valid concepts, the fact that he sides with the negative liberty means that his treatment of the history of the idea of liberty is not just a descriptive enterprise but rather, contrary to Cook’s reading, a therapeutic one in disguise: to rectify the use of political vocabulary, that is, the technical term ‘liberty’ – or at least to raise our awareness of its danger so as to limit its use in political reasoning.

The fact that Berlin’s criticism of positive liberty via entering into its supporter’s mind demonstrates how criticism of another value system is possible should reassure those who worry that his empathetic approach to understanding another culture is an application of the principle of charity that is too wide, as noted in Chapter 2. Also, it must be noted that his point here is not that positive liberty is an internally incoherent concept. Indeed, on Berlin’s projectivist definition, positive liberty is indisputably a bona fide human ‘value’, that is, an end pursued by men for its own sake, and may be ‘historically older’ than the negative concept.<sup>10</sup> Probably, as a value-pluralist Berlin would not believe in a single correct way to conceptualise the idea of liberty anyway, for that amounts to no less than an attempt to establish hegemony over the use of a particular political category – only a monist would do so. Yet, in his judgement, ‘it is this – the “positive” conception of liberty; not freedom from, but freedom to – to lead one prescribed form of life – which the adherents of the “negative” notion represent as being, at times, no better than, a specious disguise for brutal tyranny.’<sup>11</sup> Or, to put it differently, for Berlin, it has been proved that the positive form of liberty is more dangerous than the negative form in the history of collective human experience, not least the twentieth-century history. This quasi-empirical truth is the central message of

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.xxxix.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Kramer has been inspired by Berlin in this regard to construct a rigorous way of measuring overall liberty of a society; see his *The Quality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.131.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

his inaugural lecture and, seen from this point of view, the famous dichotomy under discussion seems to be a necessary conceptual apparatus for highlighting which element of political thought is potentially dangerous. From this it follows that, although Berlin would not reject positive liberty as an inherent flawed conception of liberty but rather as a potentially perilous one which can be employed to justify pernicious political practice such as the terrors witnessed by the century just past.

To be sure, we are now back to the irreducible historical dimension of Berlin's argument against monism mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, as well as the issue concerning whether the monistic style of reasoning would necessarily lead to totalitarian terrors as discussed in Chapter 4. Note that what is really at stake bears on the issue concerning the relative merits of the two conceptions of liberty, and thus should not be confused with his argument for the importance of negative liberty, as discussed in the previous chapter, on the grounds that it serves as the precondition for making choices which are not only inevitable but also expressive of our true humanity. Berlin's reason for preferring the negative liberty to positive liberty is unequivocally a *historical* one. However, it must be pointed now, to say that the positive conception of liberty has led to totalitarianism in history is categorically different from saying that positive liberty will always lead to political terrors of the same kind, for the former is essentially a *retrospective* statement about the past but the latter is a *predicative* one about the future – indeed, as it were, unless a 'law of history' is at work in this regard, Berlin is barred from cautioning us against positive liberty, let alone trying to turn his historical observation into a general truth. For this reason, one may question Berlin by asking whether he secretly harbours a determinist view of history akin to the idea of historical inevitability he overtly condemned.

According to Roger Masters, 'Berlin does not seem to notice that his objection [to the scientific concept of history] takes the form of a general rule or scientific "law" of human affairs.'<sup>12</sup> Masters first encapsulates Berlin's whole argument against the idea of historical inevitability into this: 'no sooner do we acquire adequate insight

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<sup>12</sup> Roger D. Masters, *Beyond Relativism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), p.213.

into the “inexorable” and “inevitable” parts played by all things animate and inanimate in the cosmic process, than we are freed from the sense of personal endeavour; [and for this reason our] sense of guilt and of sin, our pangs of remorse and self-condemnation, are automatically dissolved.’<sup>13</sup> He then goes on to suggest that ‘the empirical evidence of both Calvinist response to the doctrine of predestination and the actual behaviour of Stalinists who believed in the inevitability of dialectical materialism’ – that is to say. the fact that Calvinist’s belief in predestination does not lead to a disbelief in moral responsibility; nor do Stalinists, on embracing the doctrine of the inevitability of historical laws, stop believing that they are acting on their own initiative when carrying out their political actions – contradicts Berlin’s claim that such scientific explanations would rob humans of their belief in ‘freedom’.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, Masters concludes that not only does Berlin misunderstand the effect of believing in historical inevitability, but he also has to rely on a form of historical inevitability to sustain his criticism. If the last point is true, it follows that Berlin is committing, knowingly or unknowingly, a pragmatic contradiction here – if not a methodologically inconsistent thinker who argues against a method by practising it. If Masters’s accusation is valid, that should prompt us to ask whether or not Berlin’s argument against positive liberty or, more generally, monism, also involves a mistake of the same nature.

To proceed, it is necessary to take a closer look at the rationale behind Masters’s argument. What is at issue is whether Berlin is justified in secretly assuming the *symmetry* between the past and the future with regard to the relation between positive liberty and totalitarian terrors. And Masters’s point is that Berlin is wrong in relying on this assumption to mount his argument against determinism because such symmetry has been proved to be non-existent by the experience of Calvinists and Stalinists. Indeed, he attributes to Berlin a belief in the symmetry between explanation and prediction. Note that in historiography, the arguably most notable contemporary restatement of this position is Carl G. Hempel’s ‘covering law’ model of historical

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Roger D. Masters, *Beyond Relativism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

explanation – according to which, explanation in history, like scientific explanation in general, consists in bringing the event to be explained under a general law in the form of a ‘statement that, according to certain general laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned is regularly accompanied by an event of kind *E*:’ that is to say, for any historical explanation to be counted as scientific at all, it has to specify ‘(1) a set of statements asserting the occurrence of certain events *C1*, ... *Cn* at certain times and places, and (2) a set of *universal hypotheses*, such that (a) the statements of both groups are reasonably well confirmed by *empirical evidence*, (b) from the two groups of statements the sentence asserting the occurrence of event *E* can be *logically deduced*’.<sup>15</sup> On this account, therefore, historical explanation should be expressed in a logical model where an event is to be explained by being shown to be logically deducible from a set of initial conditions and the relevant law(s). No doubt, scientific laws are instances of this type of causal laws *par excellence*, and the positivist social scientists undeniably have long aspired to deduce from social phenomena a set of laws comparable to the exactness and certainty of the scientific laws.

At this point, one may be quick to point to the fact that, as argued hitherto by this thesis, this logical approach is inimical to Berlin’s style of reasoning and therefore to attribute this authorial intention to him is just another instance of misreading. Indeed, we can also argue that he never uses the idea of ‘causation’ in his historical writings because the word ‘cause’ is reserved by him solely for characterising the positivist’s methodology and in his eyes is inapplicable to human history in which men as free moral agents are not ‘caused’ but take actions on their own initiative. After all, one may add, his Herzenian historical outlook runs directly against this scientific vision of the human world. However, this way of replying only misses the thrust of Masters’s challenge, for what is really at stake is whether a *definite* case against the scientific vision of the world – be it in the form of positivism or Marxism – can *ever* be made by Berlin’s quasi-empirical approach to human affairs. That is to say, whether Berlin secretly relies on the asymmetry between past and future when cautioning us against

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<sup>15</sup> C. G. Hempel, ‘The Function of General Laws in History’ reprinted in M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre (eds.) *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge M.A.: MIT Press, 1996), p.44. My own emphasis.

the danger of positive liberty and whether his writings are open to the ‘causal law’ reading, which renders his case against positive liberty into a neat logically deducible statement that positive liberty causes political terrors, are two secondary, exegetical issues yet the crux of the matter here is whether Berlin can succeed in closing the case for positive liberty once for all by making a historical case. Whatever the outcome is, moreover, it will bear on whether his case for value-pluralism or against monism can be deemed to be a successful challenge.

The rest of this section argues that, due to his quasi-empirical approach to political reasoning, Berlin is methodologically barred from mounting a case powerful enough to defeat either positive liberty or monism once and for all in *their* own territories. However, in order to do justice to the intricacy of Berlin’s thought, we have to clarify another aspect in the historical dimension of his case against positive liberty. To begin with, recall the point made in Chapter 1 that, as a *contingent fact*, the positive concept of liberty is more likely than the negative concept of liberty to be combined with a holistic notion of the self (or will) into a justification for totalitarian coercion. Here, it must be emphasised that both positive liberty and negative liberty are but two ideas, that is, two elements which can be combined with other ideas into a political theory, and how each of them is fleshed out into a bona fide theory that justifies a particular political programme is a contingent matter subject to the theorist’s intention and other value concerns. Earlier it has been argued that the significance and meaning of a given value word is essentially relative to theory, depending on how it is defined and related to other concepts. To this it must now be added that in order to form a fully-fledged political theory, the technical term ‘liberty’, either in the negative or positive sense, needs an account of human nature or at least a conception of the self. In other words, freedom for the theorist does exist in the process of theory formation and the resultant theory is a contingent historical outcome. Berlin’s writings on the history of ideas in fact account for many of these independent moments during which a benign idea turns into a vicious one. And his view on positive liberty is that, due to its special reliance the idea of self, this idea of liberty as self-mastery is very easily to be combined with a metaphysical, if not metaphorical, concept of collective self into a political theory that can justify coercion such as

Rousseau's favoured form of society where an individual whose life is dominated by his lower self or Private Will may be 'forced to be free' by his higher self, the General Will which always aims at the whole society's common good. Indeed, one of Berlin's central messages sent out by 'Two Concepts of Liberty' is that, as a matter of history, positive liberty 'lent itself more easily to this splitting of personality in two' and created a theoretical space for such manoeuvre.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the distance from positive liberty to a coercive political theory threatening individual liberty is, to use Sorel's metaphor Berlin is fond of evoking, 'smaller than that from the butterfly to the larva.'<sup>17</sup>

With this understanding of what exactly is subject to the force of history under Berlin's vision of the world, we have to modify the simple proposition Masters seems to have in mind as follows: as a matter of history, positive liberty is more easily than negative liberty to be combined with a two-tiered conception of the self and/or, as his criticism of Marxism suggests as discussed in Chapter 4, a linear, progressive concept of history into a theory that justifies political practices which legitimise coercion in the name of liberty. What is more, observes Berlin, only monistic minded thinkers would take up this line of thought because only the positive conception liberty would point to a particular form of life as *the* door to true freedom – whereas negative liberty leaves as many doors open as possible. Thus, on this account, contingency pertains to *ideas* and it is the fact that ideas allow for redefinition and interpretation that makes them a *historical* factor in the sphere of human affairs. As a historian of ideas, Berlin is only too aware of this; or, one may say, it was this understanding of the historicity of ideas that led him to depart from philosopher to become a historian of ideas. For this reason, he begins his essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' with a note on the German poet Heinrich Heine's warning of the fact that 'philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilisation,' and indicates the purpose of the essay by his statement that 'if professors can truly wield this fatal power, may it not be that only other professors, or, at least, other thinkers (and not governments or

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<sup>16</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.134.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.478.

congressional committees), can alone disarm them?’<sup>18</sup> That is to say, Berlin aims to disarm those thinkers who try to incorporate a two-tiered conception of self into the idea of positive liberty so as to form a monistic political theory which prescribes the single way of using of the term ‘liberty’ – as if there is only one correct account of an idea and only one *logical* way to lay out the relations between a set of ideas. His strategy to disarm the dangerous professors, often conceited monists who believe in the infallibility of their solutions, is two-fold: to demonstrate the plurality of an idea’s meaning by conceptual analysis and to pinpoint the historical moments during which ideas change their meaning and significance to flesh out pernicious political theories.

From the last point it follows that ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ is both analytic and historical in nature, and to ignore either dimension of it will result in underestimating the power of his argument. What is more, either dimension of this argument affirms the space for freedom in political thinking and human agency in history. Surely this is consistent with his Herzenian sense of reality and his pluralistic style of thought. And the use of the historical in Berlin’s thought is both more restricted and sophisticated than Masters’s challenge suggests. However, that does not dispose of Masters’s point altogether for no matter how elaborate Berlin’s argument is, the historical dimension of his argument must rely for *conclusiveness* on no less than a historical law about the three main historical factors he has identified in the monistic political ideologies that were responsible for the twentieth-century totalitarian terrors, namely, positive liberty, the linear notion of history, and the two-tiered concept of the self. Indeed, there is no *a priori* reason to assume that all proponents of positive liberty will combine the idea with a two-tiered concept of the self or a progressive notion of history – it is a matter subject to the political theorist’s contingent intentions. And for this reason to say that positive liberty or any of the three aforementioned historical factors will ‘necessarily’ lead to political terrors is to overstate the case – at most we can only argue that it is ‘more likely’ to do so. Given his Herzenian notion of history as a series of accidents, Berlin should never – and as a matter of fact he does not – frame his argument against positive liberty or monism in this ‘historicist’, by his definition of the term, language.

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<sup>18</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.119.

Karl Popper has famously illustrated the problem of empiricism or, more specifically, inductionism, by pointing to the fact that the hypothesis that ‘all ravens are black’ can never be *proved* by no matter how many black ravens we witness, but a discovery of a white will automatically *falsify* it.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, no matter how many historical cases Berlin could find to show that totalitarian regimes were incarnates of the monistic political thinking, his case against monism as a style of political reasoning can never be conclusive – but rather open to falsification. Masters’s case concerning Protestants and Stalinists mentioned earlier is an attempt to falsify Berlin’s argument in this line. And no doubt many more attempts will be made to falsify his case against monism by the same logic. Given the absence of relevant historical laws as he himself claims, that is to say, Berlin’s case against monism will remain a case of probability but never a case with certainty, and the monists will continue to reply by offering new political designs which condemns coercion so as to vindicate their own case – against Berlin’s.

To avoid falling into the backwater of empiricism, this section will conclude by making three points. Firstly, Masters’s challenge against Berlin may be understood as a skirmish in the war between competing views of ordinary language in analytical philosophy, or between the positivist and the hermeneutist.<sup>20</sup> In fact, one may regard it as an updated version of the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* mentioned in our discussion on Berlin’s Vichian historical methodology. As noted already, in following Vico’s humanistic approach to history, Berlin sides with the *anciens* and rejects the idea of applying the scientific methodology to human affairs. Thus, history for him is a *sui generis* intellectual activity whose purpose is to understand the uniqueness in the past events rather than to predict. For this reason, the scientific notion of ‘causation’ is inapplicable to Berlin’s historical writings, because *historical* explanation can only be ‘causal’ for him in the Weberian non-law-like sense, not the Hempelian deductive-nomological sense; nevertheless, Weber’s notion of causation pertains to two ideal-

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London: Hutchinson, 1968).

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed account of this war, see A. C. Danto, ‘The decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History’ in F. Ankersmit and H. Kellner (eds.) *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), pp.70-85.



typicalised *social events* rather than the realm of *ideas* – Berlin’s real concern.<sup>21</sup>

It follows that, secondly, what is really in dispute between Masters and Berlin is a clash between two theoretical paradigms in the social sciences. In effect, Masters’s challenge makes best sense within the positivist paradigm or the scientific vision of the world but not Berlin’s quasi-empirical paradigm. That is to say, only a positivist who sees the world as governed by ‘causal laws’ and aspires to model social science upon the exact natural science would consider an instance involving the asymmetry between explanation and prediction as a refutation of a historian’s advice based on a reading of the past human experience. Whereas, for a Herzenian historian, historical explanation does not have to suggest the symmetry between the past and the future like a scientific law, and whether positive liberty will necessarily lead to a totalitarian theory or regime is a matter of contingency depending on other historical factors – yet the fact that it opens up the conceptual slippery slope to totalitarianism suggests that the *risk* – which denotes possibility rather than absolute certainty – is there. Similarly, the fact that monism is present in all versions of the utopian dream that have turned into totalitarian nightmares is sufficient for any responsible historian to caution us against it. In any event, Berlin is not unaware of the fact that monism as a style of thought is also open to more benign ideologies; for example, nineteenth-century reformist liberalism and the twentieth-century Welfare State – both were in his eyes the intellectual offspring of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Age which he once described as one of the best moments of human history.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, that for Berlin does not gainsay the historical evidence which suggests that human values are plural and at times incommensurable with each other. Hence, to assume the infallibility of their own political solutions is to ignore the truth vindicated by history as a collective form of human experience; to believe in the possibility of reconciling basic human values into a grand theory is to establish hegemony over the use of relevant political vocabulary and will overcome their conceptual conflict by redefining them in a way that distorts their central meaning; to prescribe any form of

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Introduction’ in his *The Age of Enlightenment* (London: Plum, 1993), p.29.

life as the only best one to the exclusion of all other alternatives is to impose one's understanding of the life on others; and thus to congratulate one who is coerced to follow the will of others for having achieved the true freedom is to fly in the face of reality, and those who really believe so in fact have mistaken illusion for reality – at least Berlin's sense of reality.

We are back to the conflict between visions of the reality, which is, as indicated in Chapter 4, what is really at issue in the conflict between monism and Berlin's pluralism. Given the nature of the conflict, that is, between two conflicting paradigms whose difference runs as deep as what counts as the 'reality' and hence the 'truth', it is difficult to see how it can be settled at the conceptual level – in fact, unless there is a common sense of reality to be shared by all, the conflict is bound to continue. What is more, the fact that value conflict exists at the level of intra-conceptual level, such as the conflict between positive liberty and negative liberty, means that monists have the right to exercise their freedom and construct new political theories accordingly. On the one hand, if we really believe in the open-endedness of the future we cannot at this point foreclose the possibility of a history progressing to a great conversion of different culture. Such a final conversion no doubt means a loss of value under Berlin's vision of the world – yet by his projectivist definition of value, he has to accept that if it happens to be what is chosen by mankind as a whole. On the other hand, before we arrive at such a voluntary conversion at the cultural level, the fact that there is a plurality of forms of life pursued by men for their own sake, together with every instance of the monist's failure to impose a single form of life will only corroborate Berlin's pluralism. Or, more paradoxically, the fact that we have difficulties in making a choice between two conflicting paradigms seems to vindicate the truth of pluralism – yet the fact that pluralism argues against a final solution to value conflict means that a conclusive case against monism can not be reached.

In fact, Berlin as a thinker who points out the incommensurability of two values at the systematic level must know well the fact that his case for value-pluralism, or against monism, cannot be won in the territory of monism – and should not have been attempted by engaging with the monists in their favoured logical or rationalistic style of argumentation. Indeed, judged by his criticism of Marxism, Berlin must know very

well the major points of contact between monism and his own pluralism, such as the idea of history, freedom, culture, human agency and the self, the power of ideas and what lies behind the social conflicts between groups. His strategy therefore is to link all these differences to the idea of a vision of the world and its underlying style of reasoning so as to wage a 'systematic' war against the monist. Now, it must be pointed out that: Berlin's subtlest use of the historical in his entire oeuvre is in the formation of the doctrine of value-pluralism as an enlarged mentality. To explain, recall that, as explicated in Chapter 3, the doctrine is meant to provide a historical vantage-point for criticising forms of life or political programmes which are not pluralistic in nature. In other words, it is essentially a *universal historical consciousness* – it is a 'historical consciousness' because our knowledge of the plurality of values is derived from our reading of the history of cultures as the collective manifestations of various human values, and it is 'universal' because, on the one hand, this historical consciousness is valid for mankind as a whole and, on the other, the truth of this doctrine can be recognised by all who make empathetic efforts to understand the history of man. Seen from a different angle, the doctrine of value-pluralism is mainly derived from *his* own empathetic reading of past thinkers and cultures, i.e, his own enlarged mentality, and the reason why he has incessantly advised his readers to put the idea of empathy into practice is that this is the best way to enlarged their minds, to know the truth of value-pluralism. In other words, and here comes the last point of this section, Berlin's best weapon for fighting against monism is the Vichian approach whose application has been extended by him from past thinkers to today's people from 'other' value systems. Thus understood, the empathetic approach is what Berlin can rely on for enlarging his reader's mentality, and the fact that he has spent much of his intellectual life exposing other thinkers' visions is nothing to be surprised at. Using the historical method in this way surely is very subtle. However, as will be argued in the next section, this use of the historical is not free from problems, and some of them may undermine Berlin's whole political project. It is time to take a closer look at the idea of empathy and its implications on Berlin's overall political thought.

## VI.2      **Reconsidering Berlin's Enlarged Mentality**

To be sure, an investigation into the feasibility of the idea of empathy is important for our study of Berlin in two ways: the first concerns, as just explained in the previous paragraph, whether the empathetic approach can be relied on as a means to enlarge one's mentality, i.e. to broaden his horizon of the human possibility, and the second whether the kind of politics Berlin envisages is possible. Of course, these two are not unrelated and the fact that they are related is due to Berlin's applying of this originally 'historical' method to the sphere of politics. To see this point, it is worthwhile taking a look at how the idea of empathy functions in Berlin's overall political thought as this thesis has hitherto established. As noted in Chapter 2, the empathetic approach serves for Berlin as a transcendental strategy to overcome cultural difference so as to arrive at a proper understanding of those who are far away from us both in time and in space. In Chapter 3, this approach is further explained as Berlin's weapon to fight against the problem of relativism, which is understood by him as implying the impossibility of cross-cultural criticism, and thereby distinguish the doctrine of value-pluralism from relativism. Moreover, Chapter 5 has indicated that the first step to reaching a compromise between two conflicting parties would be to secure some mutual understanding; that is to say, the practice of empathy is for Berlin the way to come to a necessary common ground for making compromises. In other words, without empathetic understanding of the people from 'other' cultures or different value systems, no detachment from one's own belief, which is one of the necessary conditions for self-critical reflection, can be achieved. Clearly, all these point to the fact that Berlin is determined to explore the *self-implicating* nature of Vico's historical approach. And the result is that whether an agent can become a Berlinian liberal, i.e. a man of enlarged mentality who only tries to realise the 'relative validity' of his own convictions, all hinges on the feasibility or effectiveness of the historical approach whose application has now been extended to the sphere of politics. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that, although the idea of empathy is meant to be a practical approach rather than a purely theoretical concept, to what extent it is effective has implications not only on the feasibility of Berlin's compromise politics and the

possibility of his reader becoming a value-pluralist – but also on the validity of value-pluralism as a doctrine. This section thus aims to explore the idea of empathy’s implications on the validity of the doctrine and thereby clarify the conditions for becoming a Berlinian liberal – and will have to leave aside the issue whether an agent *would* or *should* become a liberal of this kind, for that is essentially a matter contingent on the agent’s own mind.

To clear the ground for the argument, it may be necessary to begin with John Deigh’s observation concerning what makes psychopaths portrayed in modern literature and contemporary film fascinating figures. As he points out, to describe those psychopaths as ‘moral imbeciles’ does not tell the whole story of them, for as a matter of fact they are fully ‘capable of reasoning, weighing evidence, estimating future consequences, understanding the norms of their society, anticipating the blame and condemnation that result from violation of those norms’ and so on – that is, not very different from a normal moral agent in terms of rationality.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, many of these psychopaths have been characterised as highly intelligent and even socially adept. They from time to time show their concern for the comfort and safety of their victims. And perhaps more alarmingly, they appear to be capable of sympathy and connection with the reality.<sup>24</sup> To illustrate, recall the psychopathic killer portrayed by Sir Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*, the sadist character exhibits not only perfect instrumental rationality but also empathetic understanding of his victim. What this means is that a sadist’s pleasure may be derived from his empathy with the victims. That is to say, empathetic understanding does not necessarily lead an agent to appreciate others as of equal moral worth and treat them as an end in itself rather than as a means to his own pleasure. And from this it follows that the Vichian methodology Berlin favours does not necessarily lead its practitioner, historian of ideas or not, to recognise what he investigates, be it a form of life, or a system of values, as equally valuable as his own – and by implication Berlin’s hope to enlarge his readers’ mentality through reading history of ideas seems to be misplaced.

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<sup>23</sup> John Deigh, ‘Empathy and Universalizability’ in Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (eds.), *Mind and Morals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p.199.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.200.

The crux of the matter is this: when applied to human affairs, the empathetic approach may lead one to acquire an internal understanding of a particular form of life but not recognise the form of life as intrinsically valuable, i.e. as a 'value' in itself. And for this reason the implementation of the Vichian approach does not always contribute to the formation of a mindset characteristic of his liberal attitude towards others. Indeed, as observed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, in order to take a participant's perspective so as to understand the meaning of political writings from an internal point of view or to re-enact the thoughts of the political thinkers under study, we must 'draw on our own culturally and historically situated beliefs and assumptions.'<sup>25</sup> In the end, that is to say, how we regard others at whom our empathetic efforts are directed depends on the convictions we hold, and an act of empathy alone will be insufficient to change a person's outlook. Probably Berlin is not entirely unaware of this difficulty. Or, more likely than not, he sees this difficulty as an opportunity: that is to say, on the one hand, that suggests criticism of another culture is possible and, on the other, insomuch as the doctrine of value-pluralism can *stand alongside* with – not to replace – our own different cultures as an evaluative principle or standard, we can *limit* our effort to realise our own convictions to some extent. Precisely, that is what is meant by his remark that '[t]o realise the relative validity of one's convictions ... and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian' – a man with an enlarged mentality would do. Thus, contrary to Gadamer's claim, what Berlin sees an act of empathy is not only as a chance to broaden one's own horizon on the same plane but to lift his own plane where he originally stands to a higher one where he can see his own value-system's limited validity. Indeed, Berlin would have agreed with the point made by Peter Winch that: 'Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own – not simply to bring the other way within the existing boundaries of our own.'<sup>26</sup> That means, an instance of extending one's existing boundaries is an acquisition of a new *perspective* – whereby

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<sup>25</sup> Hans Herbert Kogler and Karsten R. Stueber, *Empathy and Agency: The problem of Understanding in the Human Sciences* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), p.33.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society' in B. Willson (ed.) *Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp.78-111.

one can reflect upon himself as if he is a third person – derived from an internal understanding of another form of life. This is, as argued in Chapter 3, for Berlin a *possibility* proved by our experience, and his argument for the Vichian approach is grounded on this empirical truth.

Probably, to argue against Berlin’s strong version of empathy by pointing to the fact that psychopaths can empathise for sadist’s purposes is not as effective as it seems. Indeed, one can reply on behalf of Berlin by this: the possibility of performing empathy in the right way alone suggests that we are capable of doing better than a psychopath, and let those who would like to act like a psychopath act as he wills – and that only adds strength to the argument for Berlin’s version of empathy. In any event, all men are capable of acting like a psychopath, but the fact that they do not is of more philosophical importance. In fact, the real difficulty with the Vichian approach lies in its effectiveness rather than its misapplication. To see this point, let us consider the case of psychopath again from a different angle. Given that we are capable of entering the minds of psychopaths, it seems that psychopathic visions must be incorporated into the range of human values, if his Herzenian projectivist conception of value is to be upheld, and what Berlin calls a ‘common humanity’ has to expand as a result – for the only criterion he offers for delineating the boundaries of humanity is *intelligibility*. Or, to put it more mildly, as hinted by Michael Ignatieff in his article ‘Understanding Fascism?’: if by making an empathetic effort we can then understand Fascism, we are bound to widen our original moral boundary and incorporate Fascism into the circle of common humanity; as a result, we may either have to accept moral relativism or worldviews as sinister as that of Fascism or Nazism.<sup>27</sup> Arguably, this uncomfortable theoretical situation is a natural consequence of Berlin’s intention to leave the range of moral possibility as wide as possible so as to allow for new creations – which is consistent with his overall defence of negative liberty and his idea of man as a free and creative being. Yet as a matter of fact that leaves Berlin’s idea of a ‘common moral horizon’ as vague as it can be in terms of the content. Or, as noted by Ignatieff,

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Ignatieff, ‘Understanding Fascism?’ in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Avishai Margalit (eds.), *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), pp.135-145.

‘Berlin wants to maintain both that all human beings know what it is to be human, and that fascists were human only too human’ – but it is not clear how he can.<sup>28</sup> In the end, although Berlin has replaced Mill’s fallibilist foundation of liberal tolerance by value-pluralism as a form of positive knowledge about the human condition, this positive knowledge is too thin to provide a clear moral guidance; in other words, intelligibility is a criterion too weak to exclude a wide range of sinister political visions from the common humanity, and the effectiveness of empathetic approach to understanding can only water down the already vague outline of this common horizon.

If this difficulty, which is mainly due to Berlin’s projectivist conception of value, is not solved, then the difference between value-pluralism and relativism he insists on again and again may eventually remain as a formal one, no better than a declaration. Indeed, given the projectivist conception of value, a value-pluralist must see whatever form of life pursued by men for its own sake as a value, and that means, in any moral dilemma involving two conflicting value-systems he must treat the conflicting two as equal, he should not make any useful advice apart from urging the relevant agents to make a radical choice. Or, judged from what is available in the text, one may try to extricate Berlin from this difficulty by appealing to his moral vocabulary such as ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian’. However, that may not be effective. To explain, as implied by his Herderian holism, the meanings of these terms are defined by reference to his value-pluralism. That is to say, an uncivilised person here merely refers to one who does not recognise the truth of value-pluralism, and for this reason to employ these moral terms in Berlin’s sense requires us to accept the validity of his value-pluralism first. For us to admit the truth of value-pluralism, however, requires that we accept first his projectivist conception of value and his extended Kantian principle, that is, to respect others as our equals and treat their values as equally valid as our own – which amounts to admitting Berlin’s morality. To see this, recall what is indicated by the last paragraph of Chapter 3: the ‘plurality’ of value is *granted* rather than logically deduced through metaphysical argument about the ontology of values. Now, it must be noted that what has led Berlin to grant this ‘plurality’ is his willingness to see all

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.145.



human beings as equal free and creative agents. No doubt, this is an act arising out of moral intent. But, if we ask what exactly Berlin can rely on in justifying this essentially moral principle, then we will find that the answer is, once again, value-pluralism – that is, because there is a plurality of forms of life, no one's chosen form of life is better than other's. In the end, Berlin's empathetic approach and value-pluralism justify each other, and the justification is essentially a moral principle derived from the 'plurality' of values through the internal understanding of the past cultures – nevertheless, such a principle is still too thin to offer concrete moral advice.

Probably Berlin never means value-pluralism to be an ethics. Indeed, he begins his inaugural lecture 'Two Concepts of Liberty' by indicating his belief that politics is an application of morality, and that means behind all political visions can be found at least a moral principle. That may be the reason why all his political thought hinges on the principle of respecting others as equal – and his doctrine of value-pluralism in fact is an application of it and for this reason is a political morality. Of course, a monist can also agree to the Kantian principle, but they would find Berlin's extension of it from a respect for persons to persons' convictions unacceptable, and often would like to examine its validity by way of searching for other independent reasons, and that often leads them to metaphysics; whereas, for Berlin, a consistent thinker must accept that and apply it to the sphere of politics. At any rate, since Berlin rejects metaphysics as irrelevant to our discussion on the issue of value or the sphere of human affairs in general, he must refrain from arguing with the metaphysical-minded monists on their home ground, using their style of argumentation, if he is to remain methodologically consistent. Indeed, Berlin is a consistent thinker. However, his consistency comes not without a price to pay: it verges on *logical circularity*; hence one must either accept Berlin's political thought as a whole or reject it altogether. We have just seen that his doctrine of -pluralism is in fact an application of his Herzenian projectivist conception of value, which in turn is of a piece with his overall quasi-empiricism, Herderian holism, and the Vichian empathetic approach – all of these are united in his sense of reality, i.e. his sense of history as a series of accidents, of man as free and creative moral agents, of the history of cultures as the landscape of values. Indeed, these elements intertwine with each other to form a logically seamless vision of

value-pluralism. Probably that is what a ‘paradigm’ has to be. But, as a result, this leaves everything hinging on his moral principle – which also calls for the liberal attitude Berlin advocates. Moreover, due to his classifying all political reasoning into two types, i.e. monism and pluralism, he leaves no room for a third type and radicalises the difference between them into an either/or situation. Therefore, one must choose one or the other, and by implication, in making a choice of this kind one either chooses illusion or the reality. Yet what counts as illusion or reality is in the eyes of the beholder – albeit that it further depends on where and how he sees with what prior convictions. We are led back to the intellectual deadlock described in the end of last section again – a radical choice between monism and pluralism has to be made.

### VI.3 Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, a comparison between Berlin’s doctrine of value-pluralism and Mill’s idea of ‘higher pleasure’ might be illuminating. Mill’s distinction between lower and higher pleasures is central to his theory qualitative hedonism – advanced with a view to refuting Bentham’s famous disavowal of any qualitative difference between pushpin and poetry.<sup>29</sup> The notion of higher pleasure is often understood together with Mill’s idea of ‘decided preference’ criterion found in *Utilitarianism*, as an empirical test to decide whether a pleasure is a higher one: that is, of two pleasures, *A* and *B*, *A* is a higher pleasure if all or most people have equally experienced and enjoyed both *A* and *B* yet decidedly prefer *A* not for quantitative reason. As understood by John Gray, the ‘decided preference’ criterion functions like the programme of experiments in living in *On Liberty* as an *empirical test*, rather than an *a priori* reasoning, for what we have learnt about the good.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, by applying his empiricism to the sphere of daily life, Mill means to subject our claims

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<sup>29</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapter 2.

<sup>30</sup> John Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence* (London: Routledge, 1983).

about the good to empirical test. And the purpose of it is to attain the higher pleasures. Thus understood, it is of a piece with Mill's doctrine of experiments in living: the knowledge of the higher pleasures functions as the *end* of our pursuit of self-knowledge through conducting experiments in living which is the means to the higher pleasures. It follows that knowledge of the higher pleasures can be attained only through *actual* experience; hence such knowledge is actually the experience of happiness *per se*. For this reason, Mill's experiments in living should be understood as a pursuit of knowledge *qua* experience of happiness – hence the unity of knowledge and experience. Indeed, Mill does not prioritise the cognitive aspect over the experiential, and the whole programme of experiments in living is not meant to be a pursuit of knowledge about the good rather than happiness.

Thus understood, experiments in living are the instrument to higher pleasures, but they can also express autonomy. For Mill, only experiments in living autonomously conducted are valid, i.e. forms of activity and life forced upon from outside, say, by a utility-maximising utilitarian regime is invalid. For the point is that *how* we acquire pleasures is equally important as *what* pleasures we acquire; and only those pleasures acquired through valid experiments in living belong to the higher pleasures. In other words, the idea of the higher pleasures lays down both necessary and sufficient conditions for what can count as a successful experiment in living: the former requires the realisation of autonomy which is *constitutive of* and *instrumental to* the discovery of the higher pleasures – that is, knowledge of the good *qua* actual experience; while the latter requires the actual discovery of the higher pleasures. Also implied by it is the possibility for a valid experiment in living to be unsuccessful. Note that the possibility of failure is significant, for it not only provides a meaning for a successful experiment but also accords a value to an unsuccessful one – to *progress* as a human being on the way to attaining the higher pleasures. Now, one should note that as an empiricist who utterly rejects *a priori* intuitions, Mill must be aware of the *burden of proof*. However, human experiences go against him, for it is unlikely that true happiness can only be found in a life characterised by autonomy. Also susceptible is its implicit claim with regard to the irreversibility of freedom, asserting that anyone who has experienced liberty would never relinquish it – the psychological basis for an

agent to continue his experiments in living. What is more, there is no *a priori* reason to believe in that autonomy as well as its required social and economic conditions are necessary for attaining the higher pleasures. Indeed, it flies in the face of historical facts to deny that great thinkers or artists can emerge out of authoritarian regimes; for instance, the Latin American 'Magic Realist' novelists whose genius may not have been realised without illiberal political conditions. Logically speaking, in the absence of the required empirical evidence Mill merely asserts and reasserts the value of liberty in formulating his defence of liberty. Mill's account of the higher pleasures thus seems to collapse into a *perfectionist* morality grounded on a normative conception of the person – or, a version of *positive liberty*, in Berlin's term.

To return to Berlin, as noted in Chapter 3, our rediscovery of Mill's 'experiment in living' is in part due to Berlin's essay 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,' and it is clear that he accepts this idea. Nevertheless, while Mill sees pleasure as the ultimate end of life and Berlin takes it to be whatever pursued by men for its own sake, they share a broad empirical approach that rejects metaphysics as a guide in this regard. However, they also differ from each other in that while Berlin regards human history as a collective experiment in living, Mill considers such experiments as essentially an individual's business. What is more, there is a contrast between them in their attitude towards the idea of autonomy. On the one hand, instead of seeing 'autonomy' as a criterion for judging whether an experiment in living is valid or not, Berlin merely relies on the formal criterion to evaluate the validity of a particular value pursuit. On the other, while Mill incorporates a normative conception of the self into his defence of liberty and therefore transforms his project into a perfectionist liberalism, Berlin as a historian of ideas, as argued earlier in this chapter, only knows how dangerous that may become, and is determined not to evoke any substantive concept of man. In the end, both of them seem to have committed logical circularity. In the case of Mill, he appeals to a normative conception of the person on which his defence for a form of positive liberty is based, yet these two doctrines in fact refer to each other and no further independent argument is evoked – which makes his idea of experiments in living an insincere proposal. In the case of Berlin, as explained just now, his whole political thought in effect is an *extrapolation* of his Herzenian vision of the reality that

is essentially a moral account of man in disguise, and the fact that he makes no use of external argument for support implies that the vision is either to be rejected outright or to be taken entirely on board. Nevertheless, there is another reading of Mill that can shed light on him as a thinker and encapsulate Berlin's political thought.

According to this reading, Mill's doctrine of higher pleasures can be freed from logical circularity but fails for a different reason.<sup>31</sup> This reading, by taking seriously what is recorded in Mill's autobiography, focuses on the way Mill himself came to attain his higher pleasures and sees the doctrine originating in an *idea* that has been empirically tested by Mill's own experiments in living.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, although it is true that Mill endorses a version of perfectionist notion of human excellence and positive liberty, it is by no means an aprioristic ideal that contradicts his empiricism. In other words, it becomes a positive idea only when Mill has attained what he takes to be the higher pleasures for his own nature, after having also experienced other forms of lives and pleasures as a 'progressive being', and would like to 'point out the way' for other people in his capacity as an experienced judge.<sup>33</sup> Understood in this way, Mill's defence of liberty through the doctrine of experiments in living does not fail because he is muddle-headed or holds ultimately incompatible views. Rather, the failure lies in the very *untransferable* nature of the knowledge derived from a validly conducted experiment in living: that is, Mill's knowledge of the higher pleasures *qua* his own experiments in living cannot automatically be passed on to other persons. That means, in the end it is the untransferability of the knowledge of the higher pleasures *qua* personal experience that turns Mill's hope of a progressive convergence on the higher pleasures into a source of permanent frustration. Yet as a thinker who uses logical arguments as his main weapons to defend his own findings, he does not try to appeal to empathetic approach as a means of transcending individual differences so as to come to realise his own position.

Recall that, apart from the dichotomy of fox and hedgehog, Berlin has also made

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<sup>31</sup> See for detail in Elizabeth S. Anderson, 'Jon Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living' in David Lyons (ed.) *Mill's Utilitarianism* (Boston: Rowan & Littlefield, 1997)

<sup>32</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1989)

<sup>33</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.15&74.

another distinction between two types of thinkers: the ‘argument’ thinker who seek ‘to convince us by rational argument’ and the ‘vision’ thinker who try ‘to expound an all-embracing conception of the world and man’s place and experience within it, [to] seek not so much to convince as to convert, to transform the vision of those whom they seek to address.’<sup>34</sup> If this reading of Mill is right, then he is essentially an ‘argument’ thinker who only knows logical weapons but does not try to transform the vision of those whom he seeks to address. By contrast, that seems to be Berlin’s aim. To refrain from speculating about whether Berlin has by way of rediscovering of Mill’s doctrine of experiment in living noticed the problem of the untransferability of personal knowledge, we at least know that Berlin does believe that the empathetic understanding approach he advises can help individuals transcend cultural difference and overcome the untransferability difficulty. Given his understanding of relativism as a breakdown of mutual communication, it is no surprise that Berlin advocates the Vichian approach, for its chief function is supposed to be able to re-establish cross-cultural understanding. No doubt, Berlin’s conception of objectivity as *intersubjectivity* is also at work in this strategy. Now, to return to the three questions this section sets out to answer. We can conclude that, firstly, empathy is a real possibility for us and the vision compromising politics Berlin envisages for this reason is equally realisable. Secondly, those who would like to act on Berlin’s advice must practise it in exactly the way he prescribes, if the desired mutual understanding is to be achieved. Yet that would require them to take on board Berlin’s Herzenian sense of reality and to respect the other side of people as their own equals. Thirdly, whether one would follow Berlin’s own enlightened journey to become a Berlinian liberal who is not only reflective but also self-critical depends on to what extent he takes Berlin’s empathetic approach as well as other people seriously. Berlin is a liberal of his own kind. He does not intend to construct any grand system, because he tries to realise only the relative validity of his own conviction – the plurality of values. He therefore advocates the self-implicating historical method, hoping that those who practise it will broaden his horizon of human possibility and see his own chosen form

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<sup>34</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p.85.

of life as one among many. Berlin once judged that ‘none [of Mill’s arguments for an open and tolerant society] is conclusive, or such as would convince a determined or unsympathetic opponent.’<sup>35</sup> This remark can also apply to Berlin’s liberal pluralistic political vision. That is to say, if Berlin’s readers are not sympathetic with his style of reasoning and determined not to follow his Vichian approach and reflect on their own convictions in the way Berlin hopes, they would not become Berlinian liberals – which would leave the doctrine of value-pluralism in a position like Mill’s idea of higher pleasure; but would not falsify it.

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<sup>35</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.201.

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