

The Path Between Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Order: Questioning the Connection

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I. INTRODUCTION

If value pluralism is true, does it provide support for liberalism? Isaiah Berlin famously thought that this question should be answered affirmatively. Berlin's protean idea has spawned an interesting discussion in contemporary political theory, as a number of thinkers have engaged with one or another aspect of the value pluralism-liberalism connection. John Gray and John Kekes have, in quite different ways, affirmed the idea of value pluralism while denying any strong link between it and liberal political morality.¹ On the other hand, William Galston and George Crowder have provided comprehensive and powerful expositions of liberalism claiming a supportive relationship with value pluralism.² This essay criticizes the view that value pluralism provides philosophical support for liberalism. I have no objection to register here against the terms of liberal political morality, or to the general idea of identifying paths of philosophical support for it.³ However, I want to raise a number of questions about value pluralism in its relation to liberalism, and about specific lines of argument advanced by Crowder and Galston in support of their positive view of the connection. These questions are critical in impact—at least if correct—but do not proceed from a position advocating an alternative to the basic terms of liberal political morality. My more modest aim is one of provoking elaboration and clarification of certain key aspects of the value pluralism-liberalism relation by means of questioning it.

After a few terminological preliminaries in Part II, I turn to two primary tasks. First, in Part III, I raise questions that seem to me to confront the basic logic of the connection between value pluralism and liberalism. Second, in Part IV, I discuss at length the “argument from diversity” articulated by George Crowder in support of the view that value pluralism supports liberalism.⁴ This line of argument is only one of a number that Crowder advances in support of that view, and so doubts about its success do not necessarily implicate the other lines of argument he pursues. However, the argument from diversity is a

1. See JOHN GRAY, ISAIAH BERLIN 61–62 (1996); JOHN KEKES, THE MORALITY OF PLURALISM 199–203 (1993).

2. GEORGE CROWDER, ISAIAH BERLIN: LIBERTY AND PLURALISM 148–70 (2004); GEORGE CROWDER, LIBERALISM AND VALUE PLURALISM 135–57 (2002) [hereinafter CROWDER, LIBERALISM]; WILLIAM A. GALSTON, THE PRACTICE OF LIBERAL PLURALISM 154, 187 (2005) [hereinafter GALSTON, PRACTICE OF LIBERAL PLURALISM]; WILLIAM A. GALSTON, LIBERAL PLURALISM: THE IMPLICATIONS OF VALUE PLURALISM FOR POLITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE 4 (2002) [hereinafter GALSTON, LIBERAL PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS].

3. The argument here is thus not part of a more general antifoundationalism in political theory.

4. CROWDER, LIBERALISM, *supra* note 2, at 135–59.

particularly interesting and prevalent form of argument in defense of liberalism—in the form of the “spatial” argument referred to later—and hence, I trust, worth the extensive and exclusive attention given it here.

II. PRELIMINARIES

I want to start with a few definitions and analytical distinctions that will prove helpful as a means of shorthand in the ensuing discussion. First, as per my title, I want to think about the path *between* value pluralism and liberalism, as opposed to thinking in terms of the path *from* value pluralism to liberalism. The traffic of ideas runs both ways, though it is common to think of the philosophy—value pluralism—as foundational to, or “underneath,” liberalism. I do not view traffic from liberalism to value pluralism as in need of regulation or restriction, though I do affirm the traditional idea that the truth or falsity of a philosophical thesis cannot be established by examining the political implications of that thesis. But, like most of the political theorists who think and write about the value pluralism-liberalism connection—including Isaiah Berlin—I am not fundamentally interested in conducting inquiry into the pure philosophical question of value pluralism. Content, then, to proceed with thinking from the base of “if value pluralism is correct, what follows for politics,” I am curious as well about the traffic of ideas in the other direction. I will not pursue that curiosity in this essay, but note here that value pluralism seems like a philosophy of value especially well-suited to liberal political arrangements, perhaps even to the point of sparking some suspicion that it might, at the end of the day, appear to be essentially liberal political arrangements dressed in the garb of value theory at the level of philosophy. It might, that is, simply be liberalism redescribed, rather than being a theory independent of liberalism that might support it. I am curious about that possibility, though also disturbed at the possibility of its truth. Still, I can recognize that thinkers like John Dewey and Richard Rorty, certainly to be counted as friends if not champions of liberalism, would not be at all disturbed by it, and would likely recommend that we own up to it without apology, the sooner the better.⁵

5. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Democracy*, 21 U. CAL. CHRON. 39 (1919), reprinted in JOHN DEWEY, *THE POLITICAL WRITINGS* 38 (Debra Morris & Ian Shapiro eds., 1993); RICHARD RORTY, *CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY* 44 (1989).

Second, I want to make use of a simple but important shorthand distinguishing two senses of the term *value*. One sense, the “D”-sense, is purely *descriptive*. The D-values of a person—or more generally, agent, including groups, societies, epochs, civilizations—refer to the ends actually pursued in life by such agents. Values genuinely worthy of being pursued, that is, genuine goods, have *normative* value, hence, “N”-value. Whether descriptive values are morally worthy or good—normative—values is an open question. Hence, D-values and N-values are not necessarily the same.

The same difference can be applied to senses of the term *pluralism*. D-pluralism is the sense of the word *pluralism* most often encountered in writing about contemporary politics and culture. It refers to the increasing social and cultural diversity, of many different types, that has come to characterize modern societies in an increasingly globalized world. D-pluralism is empirical, a fact about the way we live together now. D-pluralism is celebrated by some, bemoaned by others, but experienced by all. The idea of value pluralism is not about D-pluralism. Value pluralism tells us that value, objective value, is not monistic but plural. It thus tells us something about (a) the *form* of morality, and also something about (b) its *rational character*, namely that it is not relativistic but is rather a type of objective moral realism. It does not tell us anything about the actual N-values in the world, except that they exist, that there is a plurality of them, and that there is not an infinite amount of them. I assume that all value pluralists would accept the difference between D-value and N-value, and the difference between the ideas of D-pluralism and N-pluralism.

III. QUESTIONING THE BASIC CONNECTION

A. *The Formality of N-Value in Value Pluralism*

Value pluralists posit the existence of a plurality of N-values, but ordinarily do not attempt to specify either (a) the number of N-values, or (b) the substance of these N-values, however many there are. This is not objectionable in and of itself. The formality of the idea does not prevent us from using it to reflect systematically on important metalevel questions regarding the nature of N-value, especially the question of whether N-value is fundamentally monistic or plural. Indeed, the formality of the idea positively contributes to the careful consideration of such questions because it helps us not to lose sight of the metaquestions should they become entangled with the substantive ethical question of which substantive D-values are truly N-values. There will, of course, be deep disagreement about that question, and not only

disagreement about the question of whether N-value itself is monistic or plural. Formality helps us to keep our disagreements straight.

But how far can we go with the purely formal ideal of N-value, especially if we want to examine the relationship between the theory of value and politics? A number of my queries in the next section are derivative of that fundamental concern, and express in different ways a doubt that value pluralism as such can deliver much support for liberal political principles. Consider a particular problem that arises for the value pluralist in this respect. The fact that there is a plurality of D-values in a society—say, seven—does not necessarily give us reason to affirm a set of familiar liberties designed to facilitate choice amongst these alternatives. If we treat all of these D-values as N-values, then it seems true that the state would lack any obvious justification for limiting the liberty of citizens to choose amongst them.⁶ But we cannot cross that argumentative threshold without moving from the level of formality to that of substantive judgment. This is a problem *within* the value pluralist framework—and not merely the point that whether value pluralism or an alternative like monism is the right philosophical view of value is a question that cannot be definitively answered for now. That much is obvious, although one could think that mere phenomenological reflection upon human experience is enough to establish the truth of value pluralism. I do not think it is. Value pluralism is an interpretation of that experience, but so is monism, and indeed so is relativism. All cannot be right, but experience itself is not enough to determine the matter for us.

To return to the primary point: even from within the value pluralist framework, we do not know how many D-values are N-values without substantive argument about what is genuinely good and valuable. Without that information, we have no way to know *how genuinely valuable it is to allow people to have the liberty* to choose amongst a set of D-values. If only one of the set of seven D-values is, in fact, an N-value, then the liberty to choose among the whole range of seven is seen in a quite different light than would be the case if it were true that all seven of the D-values were N-values. Bracketing for the moment the issue of whether there is value in choice itself, separate from the issue of

6. “Any obvious” as used here is a hedge to take account of the fact that a set of particular contextual factors, including extreme pressures on the survival of the polity, might provide such a justification.

whether the choices involve genuinely valuable goods, it certainly would seem that there is a significant difference in the two cases. Limiting the liberty of choice in the case of one N-value and six D-values that lack genuine value would seem to be less objectionable—perhaps far less—than limiting the liberty of choice amongst a plurality of genuinely good choices. So how can we know how to value the liberty of choice—or at least value it overall—if we do not know whether we are dealing with D-values or N-values?

B. The Slippage Between D-Pluralism and N-Pluralism

One key reason it appears that value pluralism and liberalism are mutually supportive is that it seems like value pluralism is naturally capacious when it comes to respecting the legitimacy of different conceptions of the good and ways of life. It is easy to imagine that if we affirm the idea of value pluralism, then we are affirming the legitimacy of difference on a “broad” or “wide” scale. Consider this passage from Galston—where the term *moral pluralism* is standing in for *value pluralism*:

I need not dwell on the relationship between expressive liberty and moral pluralism. Suffice it to say that if moral pluralism is the most nearly adequate depiction of the moral universe we inhabit, then the range of choiceworthy human lives is very wide. While some ways of life can be ruled out as violating minimum standards of humanity, most cannot. If so, then the zone of human agency protected by the norm of expressive liberty is capacious indeed.⁷

I agree with the judgments stated by Galston in this passage—there are a great many choiceworthy ways to lead a good human life—but when I try to reflect on why I believe this and how I might try to defend the view to someone skeptical about it, I gradually lose confidence that the idea of value pluralism itself would be of much help. The key reason is simple: the form of the idea of value pluralism is not robust enough, not pregnant enough in meaning, if you will, to yield these conclusions. “Value pluralism” tells us about plurality and incommensurability, but it does not tell us about how much plurality and about how deep and confusing and befuddling it might be. Without that kind of supplement, I cannot see that the thesis of value pluralism itself can do much work for us. Is the idea of value pluralism adequate in the real world of diverse ways of living valuable human lives, what we might call N-lives? How could we even begin to answer until we have on hand some notion of what the contours of N-lives are? And how could the idea of value pluralism itself give us *that*? I cannot see that from the mere

7. GALSTON, LIBERAL PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS, *supra* note 2, at 37.

stipulation that value pluralism is the correct account of value, we can conclude that the “range of choiceworthy human lives is very wide.” I do not have an alternative to offer in defense of Galston’s proposition with which I acknowledge agreeing; but I do not think the idea of value pluralism can be the kind of justification we need.

The range of D-values and conceptions of the good in contemporary societies that respect expressive liberty is, I grant, wide. But, value pluralism is not about D-value, and nothing in the idea of value pluralism itself necessitates that the range of N-value that is the heart of value pluralism be wide, or indeed similar, to the range of D-value.

Crowder is very clear about this distinction. He explicitly distinguishes “plurality of belief” from value pluralism:

[V]alue pluralism is not mere “plurality of belief,” the idea that different people or groups of people believe different things. This latter is the usual sense attached to the word “pluralism” in contemporary political theory. But value pluralism in the sense that concerns me is not an empirical claim about the nature of current belief. Rather, it is a claim about the true nature of morality independently of what some people may happen to believe. . . . Consequently my argument that value pluralism grounds a case for liberalism should not be confused with the familiar claim that liberalism is justifiable as the most sensible response to modern divergence of belief about the good life.⁸

That marks clearly the difference between D-value and N-value. Yet Crowder also sometimes talks about N-value and the idea of value pluralism as if it were safe to assume that the range of allowable values and conceptions of the good encompassed by it were expansive. For example, in defining the idea of plurality in value pluralism, he says that “the things that are valuable for human beings—including both universal and local values—are plural, or several. Many different goods are required for human flourishing, not just one or a few”⁹ I agree with these judgments, but cannot see that the idea of value pluralism actually does much to support them. Even if we accept that as a matter of definition, value pluralism means there are *many* goods required for human flourishing, and not just *one or a few*, it would seem that the important substantive question is what these goods are. Now a supporter of value pluralism might say, “Well, of course such substantive knowledge—or our best estimate of it—is essential to political theorizing here, but we never said that such a supplement was not

8. CROWDER, LIBERALISM, *supra* note 2, at 3.

9. *Id.* at 2 (emphasis omitted).

necessary. Your criticism is unfair if you take us to be claiming that the formal idea of value pluralism itself could do *that* much work. Of course it could not, but we never claimed it could.” I take the force of this reply, but my worry is that the formal idea of value pluralism is not doing *any* real work at all. I think it often seems to only because we slip into supposing that there is a fairly robust correspondence between the range of politically significant D-values in the empirical polity under consideration and the range of N-values encompassed by the right account of value pluralism, whatever it is. But there is no reason to suppose that.

C. Galston’s Value Pluralism Argument Against Single-Solution Illiberalism

Consider the argument that value pluralism supports liberalism in the following way. Galston writes:

Value pluralism suggests that there is a range of indeterminacy within which various choices are rationally defensible, at least in the sense that they all fall above the Hampshire-Hart line of minimum decency. Because there is no single uniquely rational ordering or combination of such values, no one can provide a generally valid reason, binding on all individuals, for a particular ranking or combination. There is, therefore, no rational basis for restrictive policies whose justification includes the assertion that there is a unique rational ordering of value. If value pluralism is correct, then as Steven Lukes puts it, “For the state to impose any single solution on some of its citizens is thus (not only from their standpoint) unreasonable.”¹⁰

Consider two points. First, the argument seems sound, but I do not see that it has much real significance in establishing the connection between value pluralism and liberalism. We are assuming here that liberalism is constituted by the state refusing to impose on its citizens any single solution regarding value *because it would be unreasonable to do so* given the truth of value pluralism. However, this argument would not reach states that imposed a single solution on grounds other than that solution being uniquely rational. Many such grounds seem available; for example, the claim that the solution is in accord with the deepest and most important traditions of the community, or that it is a good way of maintaining social solidarity and therefore security. It may even be, supposing the single solution is being sustained rather than invented, that the solution is an instantiation of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Moreover, suppose that the single solution being imposed is an N-value. It is true that value pluralism tells us that at least one other N-value must

10. GALSTON, LIBERAL PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS, *supra* note 2, at 57–58 (footnote omitted).

be being ignored, or repressed, in such a case, but the state would have some fairly powerful things to say in its own defense. After all, it *can* give a reason for its imposition of the single value, and a pretty impressive reason—the value it is imposing is good, genuinely good, an N-value.

Can we legitimately complain about value pluralism that it dangerously licenses this sort of reply by the single solution state insofar as it affirms the objective idea of the rational good, though insisting that this good is in fact a plurality of goods? I do not think we can. From the fact that someone subscribes to the view that values are objective and plural, I do not believe we can conclude anything about that person's political principles or actions. The same applies to state activity, it seems to me. Because value is objective, it does not follow that we have to think it is a good idea to allow the state to act on the basis of appeal to that objective knowledge. There is a long list of familiar reasons to which liberals and others have long appealed in this respect. First and foremost would be the doubt that the state has any particular expertise in knowing these objective truths, coupled with the thought that it or its agents have powerful—and hence dangerous to citizens—incentives to feign knowledge of such truths when they actually fail to possess it. Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* constitutes a canonical expression of this argument.¹¹ Note, however, that every argument used to defend value pluralism against such a charge can also be used to defend value monism. There is no difference between them in terms of appealing to a notion of the objective rational good. If that is a politically dangerous idea, then value pluralists are hardly any less threatening, simply as value pluralists, than monists are. And if it is not a politically threatening idea, then value pluralists are off the hook, but so are monists.

Still, even if it is correct to think that Galston's argument above is limited in its reach and significance, it may be responded that his argument *does* engage and defeat one line of defense of nonliberalism, and a not insignificant one at that. It seems to me plausible to interpret communist tyrannies as forms of polity that, at least sometimes, purported to justify themselves with the claim that their impositions, on what Galston terms the “expressive liberty” of citizens, represented the

11. JOHN LOCKE, A LETTER CONCERNING TOLERATION (1689), *reprinted in* 35 GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD 1, 17 (Robert Maynard Hutchins ed., 1952).

rational truth about human value.¹² Such a claim cannot be rendered consistent with value pluralism. On the other hand, value pluralism does not do much by way of insuring nontyranny either, unless we are presupposing that the range of objective values encompassed by the true account of value pluralism is an extensive one. If there are many N-values, then a state imposing the single solution must be ignoring many of them, and presumably preventing people from living in accordance with them. But, whether there are many or few N-values, not to mention what they actually are, is not something we can learn from value pluralism as such.

D. Value Pluralism Between Monism and Relativism

Value pluralism is commonly portrayed as a view that is an alternative to both monism and relativism. Yet it is, when one thinks about it, a somewhat odd contrast. The key difference between value pluralism and monism is over the issue of whether the good is best understood as unitary or plural, but the key difference between value pluralism and relativism is over the issue of whether the good—whether plural or unitary—is objectively real or a matter of subjective taste or preference. There are two separate questions at issue here, not one question with three possible answers.

We might describe the rhetorical stage upon which value pluralism makes its appearance this way. Traditionally, there are two fundamentally opposed positions in metaethics. One, moral realism, maintains that the nature of the good is properly understood as an objective matter. Inquiry into the question of the good for human beings is rational inquiry into the nature of reality, an attempt to discern what is truly and genuinely good for human beings as such. This goodness is understood to be something different than a simple description of what people believe, feel, perceive, or otherwise subjectively announce to be good; it is what *really* is good, whatever people may believe or prefer. It is, in that sense, objective. Opposed to this view about morality is the relativist view. On this view, there is no such objectively real truth about moral matters to be discerned. Beliefs about the good, moral beliefs generally, are properly understood as relative to some feature of the believer: his or her environment, social position, cultural identity, and so on. Such beliefs do not admit of rational demonstration as something objectively true.

Now in the history of Western philosophy, each position, rhetorically speaking, has a particular vulnerability. The relativist position has been

12. GALSTON, PRACTICE OF LIBERAL PLURALISM, *supra* note 2, at 45.

attacked since Plato for failing to take morality seriously—at best—and contributing to the development of bad moral character and the consequent corruption of society—anything goes—at worst.¹³ Rhetorical attacks on the poor character of contemporary postmodernists are the current version of this age-old discourse. On the other hand, the moral realists are vulnerable to the charge of intellectual narrow-mindedness—at best—or the practical, political analogue of this—tyranny—at worst. They can be portrayed as narrow and pretentious in claiming to know what is good for human beings and practically dangerous insofar as they are moved to want to impose this alleged truth on recalcitrant human beings for their own good. Now it is always possible to bite the bullet as an exponent of one of these positions, and to embrace the negative description of your enemy as your own. Consider, for example, Richard Rorty’s artful rhetorical performances in the service of relativism¹⁴ or, on the other hand, the rhetorical stance of those fundamentalists, religious or secular, who are intent upon making all of us an offer we cannot refuse. But for the most part, the dominant rhetorical response to the tension between the two positions is to affirm one while in one way or another denying that it actually is as vulnerable as it might appear to the bad consequences alleged to be endemic to it by adherents of the other positions. So most relativists decline the “Rorty option” and instead prefer to go about demonstrating that they are not really the bad people the objectivists say they are, while most objectivists decline the fundamentalist option and insist instead that your freedom is safe with them, indeed perhaps only with them as opposed to those untrustworthy relativists. Rhetorically, the weakness of each of these dominant responses is that they implicitly concede the case of their opponent. The “responsible” relativist thereby acknowledges that there may well be something wrong with irresponsibility, and the nontyrannical objectivist has conceded that tyranny is something to be avoided. So, there is plenty of fuel left to ignite the traditional forms of the rhetorical attack of each position upon the other. Every relativist who demonstrates his own responsibility ensures that two of his cousins will be tarred and feathered as irresponsible, and every objectivist who demonstrates his open-mindedness and tolerance condemns his kin to the age-old charges.

13. See generally PLATO, *GORGIAS* (Donald J. Zeyl trans., Hackett Publ’g Co. 1987).

14. RORTY, *supra* note 5.

Value pluralists occupy what appears to be a happy medium here. They take morality seriously, while at the same time recognizing that plurality is real and not merely apparent. They are serious like the objectivists, but not vulnerable to the charge of tyranny; after all, they recognize that the good is not monistic, but diverse. And, unlike the relativist, they cannot be charged with irresponsibility. They, after all, take morality to be every bit as objective as the objectivist does. Still, there are questions that linger.

First, how different are value pluralists from monists? The big difference between value pluralists and relativists is that value pluralists affirm the objectivity of the plural account of the good they endorse. So do monists. Traditionally, one of the most effective lines of argument advanced by relativists against monists is what might be labeled the “epistemological challenge.” Like the man from Missouri, the relativists challenge the monists to “show me.” Monists are asked not simply to express their endorsement of the position that the good is a matter of objective knowledge, but to demonstrate it. This is notoriously difficult to do. Reasonable people disagree not only about whether it can be done, but whether it has been done. I have nothing to say directly to this issue. Rather, I want to point out something that I think is important, though easily overlooked, in discussions of value pluralism. The epistemological challenge facing the value pluralist is every bit as great as that facing the monist, however great one may assess that challenge to be. The difficulty of demonstrating the objective goodness of some plural number of ways of life or values is no less difficult than that of demonstrating the objective goodness of what some monists claim is the single best way of life. It is not true that the challenge is greater for the monist than it is for the value pluralist.

Value pluralists commonly invoke illustrative examples of arguably good lives in the course of explaining their ideas. So, for example, it might be said that the life of the (a) Christian saint and that of the (b) Homeric warrior are two objectively valuable modes of life, and that the pluralist has the advantage over the monist insofar as he can recognize this. A monist would have to defend the view that (a) is good and (b) is not, or that (b) is good and (a) is not, or that neither (a) nor (b) is good, though some (c) is. What about the value pluralist? True, he does not have to deny the goodness of either (a) or (b), but he does have to defend the view that both (a) and (b) are objectively good and not bad. This seems to me no less difficult, epistemologically, than the challenge facing the monist.

A second, and related, issue is that the notion of a plurality of objectively good lives would, ultimately, have to be specified and defended in a way that again seems every bit as demanding as the

philosophical task confronting the monist. The plurality of good lives entertained by the pluralist is finite. Not all ways of life/values are good, and ultimately the pluralist owes an account of how to demarcate the line between the two and how to know which particular lives/values fall on either side of the line. Another way to put it is this: there is a great *plurality of possible value pluralisms*, depending on the number and the substance of the true values posited. From the point of view of a concern with principles of right political order, almost everything hinges on these features of the particular brand of value pluralism under consideration. Very little if anything actually hinges on the general nature of value pluralism itself.

IV. CROWDER'S DIVERSITY ARGUMENT FROM VALUE PLURALISM TO LIBERALISM

Along with Galston, George Crowder has made the most sustained particular efforts at defending the connection between value pluralism and liberalism. In this section, I consider one key line of argument that Crowder develops in his attempt to establish the connection. This is the "diversity argument," and Crowder divides it into two steps, each of which I will now consider. The first draws an "ethic of diversity" from the core idea of value pluralism. The second then moves from that ethic to a set of liberal political principles.

A. From Value Pluralism to Diversity

Crowder reasons that "[t]o accept value pluralism is to accept that there are universal goods and that these are many and incommensurable."¹⁵ Further, he argues that to "accept" the existence of these goods is not merely to "allow" them, but also to "endorse" them.¹⁶ This makes sense because while we might, pragmatically, have to allow a range of D-goods as a practical necessity, we would not think that constituted a reason to endorse or support them. The fact that they were N-goods, however, would be such a reason. As Crowder puts it, "from the pluralist point of view, the universal goods are not merely values that, a matter of fact, some people happen to hold. Rather, the pluralist sees

15. CROWDER, LIBERALISM, *supra* note 2, at 137.

16. *Id.*

them as goods that contribute to human flourishing objectively.”¹⁷ He then argues that because value pluralists are committed to human flourishing, they must be committed to “promoting the various goods that contribute to that flourishing.”¹⁸ This, too, seems a legitimate move, though a potential problem begins to emerge here. Given the plural nature of the good, we know that the value pluralist will have more than one way in which he can “promote” flourishing. Moreover, we know that he will not be able to directly compare and “weigh” these various possibilities because of the reality of incommensurability. There is no metric by which competing packages of objective goods, all of which can be said to contribute to human flourishing, can be comparatively weighed. So someone committed to flourishing will know that he should promote objective goods and not bads, but he will not know which goods, or package of goods, to promote, at least in any abstract and generally applicable way.

B. The Equal Value Postulate

The next step in the argument invites more questions. Crowder argues that “[f]urthermore, the pluralist must endorse all such goods equally, in the sense that they have an equal claim on us until we are presented with a particular context in which we must choose among them.”¹⁹ In effect, the point is that incommensurability prevents us from having a rational basis for choice amongst goods, or from knowing which goods are most conducive to human flourishing. Only knowledge of the context, historical and social, within which the choice is being made would give us some potential guidance about how to proceed. It seems to me that the proper way to describe the state of affairs here is to say that we have no reason to attach any comparative value to any of the objective goods, not to say that we have reason to value them equally. In effect, we have no reason to value them equally or unequally. The point may seem merely semantic, but I think it is more significant than that.

Crowder is certainly aware of the potential difficulty here. He writes: “The plural goods are incommensurable, and so cannot be said to be equal according to any measure, but they are, as Berlin puts it, ‘equally ultimate.’”²⁰ No explanation is given of this idea of Berlin’s that the goods are “equally ultimate.” I was puzzled by this apparently nonmetrical notion of equal valuation of each good that is based on their

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

status as “ultimate.” Checking the context of Berlin’s passage—which comes from the famous *Two Concepts of Liberty* essay—to which Crowder refers here does not help much. Berlin is there emphasizing the “necessity and agony” of choice amongst “equally ultimate” values, arguing that this explains why “men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose.”²¹ Knowing—insofar as they are value pluralists—that the values cannot be reconciled and mutually realized in a possible utopian situation, men, as Berlin portrays them here, insist upon the value of being able to choose for themselves which set of irreconcilable values they will pursue. But as I read him, the point is about the “ultimacy” of these allegedly “equally ultimate” values, and the agony of the tragic choices that follow, rather than about their “equality” in a sense that would stand as an argument for the position Crowder is defending. It is of course possible that I have missed a relevant sense of *equal* that is actually there in either Crowder’s or Berlin’s formulation. Still, the incommensurability postulate of value pluralism would seem to undercut a general attribution of equality to a range of values.

The significance of the equal value postulate in terms of Crowder’s overall argument can be seen in the next step of his argument. He says that from their status of being valued equally, “[i]t follows that the pluralist outlook commits us to valuing the full range of human goods.”²² This is a crucial step. The argument is going to require us to endorse a larger rather than a smaller range of objective goods—N-goods. But it is not clear why this should be so. We are interested in the way in which these goods contribute to human flourishing, and we have no way to know that “more is better” when it comes to N-goods. Incommensurability prevents that. It might be that endorsing a package of N-goods (*X*) that is “larger” than another package (*Y*) would contribute to human flourishing to a greater degree. However, only if we knew that the values were metrically equal would it become plausible to entertain the idea that more is better. Without the equal value postulate, we would not have a case for endorsing a “larger” package of values over a “smaller” one, and without that endorsement, a crucial link in the chain of argument is endangered. Crowder will argue that liberalism does a better job than alternative political views of

21. ISAIAH BERLIN, *TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY* (1958), reprinted in *LIBERTY* 166, 213–14 (Henry Hardy ed., 2002).

22. CROWDER, *LIBERALISM*, *supra* note 2, at 137.

fulfilling the aim of “valuing the full range of human goods.”²³ I will argue later that there are problems with this spatial way of conceiving liberalism. But even if it were to prove sound, we would not have a reason for thinking that the best political system is one that protects the “widest” or “largest” set of human values, unless we also had reason to accept the equal value postulate. The best political system will presumably be one that promotes human flourishing to a degree greater than the alternatives at hand. But, we will not be able to know what flourishing is and how well it is promoted by looking at the range or number of values that a given polity endorses or secures. We are stuck with the difficulty of looking at the substance of what is promoted and foregone.

Crowder does provide another reason, separate from the equal value postulate, in support of his view that value pluralism leads to valuing diversity. He writes:

To acknowledge the truth of value pluralism is to acknowledge a multiplicity of genuine goods, of diverse natures, not merely ethical mistakes with which it is nevertheless best not to interfere. It is to acknowledge a duty to promote those goods so far as possible: a duty to promote diversity.²⁴

This makes it seem as if the critic were denying the value-pluralism-to-diversity link because the critic denied the objective goodness—the N-goodness—of the various goods at hand. But the criticism I am raising does not deny this. Rather, the point is that we have no reason to believe that flourishing is better supported by the endorsement of a wider rather than a less wide range of N-goods in a particular society. The issue of the goods themselves being objective and not mere ethical mistakes is beside the point.

C. Maximization and Coherence

In denying the equal value postulate, I am questioning whether one can generate a value pluralist defense of diversity that is, as it were, quantitative and nonsubstantive. Because we cannot know that more is better in terms of promoting human flourishing, we cannot build a defense of liberal political principles on the idea that liberalism is superior to alternative political theories because it is “wider,” “more spacious,” “more open,” or “less restrictive.” I will label this idea the “spatial” conception of liberalism. One attraction of the spatial idea is that it seems to provide a means of defending liberalism without invoking substantive claims about the good. I do not think the spatial

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

idea of liberalism is an illuminating one, and I do not think that defenses of liberalism that appeal to it are attractive ones.

Crowder is aware of this problem and does present an interesting argument to counter it. I am skeptical that the argument succeeds. Crowder acknowledges that “[a]n ethic that consisted merely in maximizing the number of values to be pursued would be hard to distinguish from other maximization ethics. . . . Such an ethic would be in conflict with the fundamental pluralist injunction to attend to the distinctiveness of values.”²⁵ He continues:

This would be a serious problem if the ethic of diversity I am proposing amounted merely to an injunction to promote “more rather than fewer” values or “as many as possible.” But this kind of quantitative consideration—how many values?—is only one aspect of what I have in mind. The maximizing dimension of the ethic of diversity must be supplemented by a second kind of consideration, that of balance or coherence among the values to be promoted. Sheer multiplication of different goods must be tempered by attention to the content of those goods and to the relations among them, since some may impede others. The diversity implied by pluralism is therefore best understood as involving both a quantitative and a qualitative element, both a requirement of a generous range of values and a requirement that the values within that range should be tolerably coherent with one another. The ethic of diversity embraces both “multiplicity” and “coherence.”²⁶

From this it might seem that Crowder has abandoned the spatial defense of liberalism and acknowledged the unavoidable substantive nature of the question of the good. However, “coherence” turns out itself to be, on Crowder’s rendering, a kind of supplement to the maximizing idea rather than an actual departure from it. Let me explain by advancing two doubts about the argument above.

First, note that the maximizing aspect of the diversity argument is not abandoned, but is instead reaffirmed in this passage. It is not maximizing that is identified as the problem, but maximizing unsupplemented by considerations of coherence. But the burden of the previous section was to argue that no coherent account of what it could mean to *maximize* incommensurable values can be given here, once we reject the equal value postulate. In this passage, Crowder introduces the notion of value pluralism “involving” a requirement of a “generous range of values,” but “generous” is here functioning as another spatial term that is

25. *Id.* at 139.

26. *Id.*

unfounded.²⁷ Whether a “generous” range of values is more conducive to human flourishing than an “ungenerous” range is an unanswerable question. It depends on the substance of the values in question and upon the nature of the relations between them. Crowder does, it is true, recognize that last point insofar as he introduces the necessity of attending to “coherence” among values when evaluating alternatives, but the point I wish to emphasize here is that the fact that coherence should be taken into account does not give us a reason for taking multiplicity into account. In other words, if, as I hold, the maximizing idea of multiplicity is groundless from a pluralist point of view, it does not become any more grounded or persuasive because it is supplemented by another criterion—coherence. However strong the case for coherence may be, and I agree that it is a strong one, it does not strengthen the case for multiplicity. In my view, the alleged pluralist case for multiplicity remains ungrounded.

Second, there is a peculiarity about the idea that the criterion of coherence *adds* a qualitative element to the otherwise quantitative nature of the multiplicity criterion. The core idea behind the coherence criterion is the recognition that “the content of the values pursued must fit together within a horizon of real possibility for the individual or society concerned, given the person’s or the society’s experience and identity.”²⁸ Moreover, “in addition to being realistic prospects, the values in question should not be so widely scattered or fragmented that their pursuit can only be half-hearted or self-defeating. The goods should therefore cohere sufficiently that all may be taken seriously.”²⁹ Let us call these the “practicality” and “nonfragmentary” conditions of the criterion of coherence. Now both conditions make good sense. However, the problem is that they are so reasonable that they undermine any appeal that the maximizing criterion of multiplicity has. In other words, the conditions of coherence introduced by Crowder may serve to *undermine* the quantitative criterion, not serve as a *supplement* to it. This is because the conditions of coherence are sensible just because they show us that it is not the range—in terms of quantitative space—of values that matters, but rather the degree to which a given range—whatever its absolute spatial extent—has enough practicality and unity to lead to human flourishing to a greater degree than some alternative range.

Now that last statement sounds as if it invokes a quantitative concept—“greater or lesser flourishing”—but I am not sure that it does.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 142–43.

29. *Id.* at 143.

Flourishing is the conceptual term Crowder has chosen to designate the end-state that we are pursuing in terms of deciding which values to support as social evaluators, and the crucial point about it is precisely that it is nonquantitative, while nevertheless being objective. We cannot figure out how to “maximize” flourishing; in a way, the use of *flourishing* is itself testimony to this fact. We could imagine maximizing “utility” or some other *commensurating concept*, but as value pluralists, we have to eschew the use of such concepts. *Flourishing* is the peculiar concept with which we are left. It is a concept trying to perform two functions at once. It commensurates at a very high level of abstraction lower level concepts that are supposed to be incommensurable—so it both “commensurates” and “fails to commensurate” at once. Speaking of *flourishing* commensurates insofar as it implies that different packages of values can be comparatively assessed in terms of the twin criteria of multiplicity and coherence to determine which package better supports the end-state of flourishing. But it fails to commensurate insofar as we realize that we cannot carry these comparative evaluations out in any kind of quantifiable or quantifying way. Value pluralism is consistent with the idea that we can distinguish the good from the bad, but it does not seem to me consistent with the idea that we can distinguish the greater from the lesser amount of good.

Crowder comes close to acknowledging the way in which coherence undermines rather than supplements multiplicity when he describes what remains of the criterion of multiplicity once we grant that considerations of coherence must be taken into account. He writes:

[T]he ideal of diversity implied by the pluralist outlook cannot be captured solely by the idea of maximizing a range of values. Once again there is a need for choices to be made, choices that require guidance of a qualitative nature. That is not to say that considerations of quantity are irrelevant to pluralist diversity, since the narrowing of available values to a *very small range* is clearly at variance with the pluralist outlook. Pluralist diversity implies support for *at least some generous range* of goods as available goals for individuals and societies.³⁰

For all intents and purposes, this final formulation leaves the criterion of multiplicity empty. Even granting Crowder’s qualifying point that “[w]hat exactly that range should be is, of course, not something that can be expressed in a precise formula applicable to all cases,”³¹ it is hard to

30. *Id.* at 142 (emphasis added).

31. *Id.*

see what evaluative work the criteria could actually do. The “very small range” of values that would definitively violate the criteria is, in effect, the range of one, that is, monism. For we cannot know that a range of even only two values would be inferior in terms of promoting human flourishing to some alternative set of more than two; the quantitative comparison will simply not tell us what we need to know. Crowder is right in my view to introduce the qualitative criterion of coherence into the discussion, but wrong in holding that the quantitative criterion of multiplicity can be sustained once this introduction is made. Value pluralism, it seems to me, teaches us that the question of the good is qualitative “all the way down.”³²

My conclusion is that the connection between value pluralism and diversity maintained by Crowder does not hold up. The equal value postulate cannot be used to sustain the view that more is better when it comes to the relation between quantity of values and human flourishing. The coherence criteria, I have argued, serves to undermine rather than supplement or support the view that the width of the range of values endorsed in a society is an indicator of the degree to which that society enables human flourishing.

D. From Diversity to Liberalism

Suppose that I am wrong and Crowder is right about the relationship between value pluralism and diversity. Let us examine the second step in his argument from diversity in support of the view that value pluralism generates a case for liberalism. This is the claim that the principle of diversity generates a case for liberalism. I want to consider this argument in detail because I believe it constitutes an example of the spatial form of argument that I fear does not serve liberalism well. The essence of it is to try to defend liberalism not by means of affirming substantively the type of human life or lives to which it predominantly gives rise—as superior to some alternative set yielded by an alternative form of political order—but rather by claiming that liberalism is in some spatial sense—“wider,” “broader,” “more capacious,” “less restraining,” “open,” et cetera—more appropriately accommodating of diversity than its rivals, however defined. In short, it is a form of argument that appeals to quantity as a substitute for qualitative judgment about the good when comparatively evaluating political orders. I am skeptical that any such argument can ultimately be sustained.

Crowder’s form of the spatial argument is a thoughtful one. He frames the defense of the liberal political order as a respecter of diversity

32. *See id.* at 5.

in terms of its “‘approximate[.]’ neutral[ity].”³³ Approximate neutrality is a more modest version of *whole* neutrality. Crowder criticizes the doctrine of whole neutrality. Whether whole neutrality is conceived as neutrality of *impact* of policy upon different ways of life or as neutrality of *reasons* justifying political policy, it is a highly unlikely possibility in Crowder’s view: “[I]t is doubtful whether any form of liberalism can be wholly neutral, either in impact or reasons.”³⁴ Note, though, that Crowder does not conceive neutrality as an impossibility, but rather as a highly unlikely but nevertheless coherent empirical possibility. Whole neutrality in his view is possible but highly unlikely; hence, it makes sense to imagine it as a desired endpoint that one could approach to a greater or lesser degree. His defense of liberalism is in terms of such an approach. He claims that liberalism, while certainly not wholly neutral, is nevertheless “‘approximately’ neutral, that is, more neutral or accommodating than the alternative political forms.”³⁵ Liberalism, he claims, “provides the best political framework because it leaves more space for the flourishing of multiple and diverse goods than any known or realistically imagined alternative.”³⁶ In a similar formulation, he says that:

The pluralist ethic of diversity can realistically require no more than that the political ranking endorsed by a given society be as accommodating to diversity as possible in the circumstances and more accommodating than the alternatives. Liberals should concede that liberalism is not unlimited in its capacity to accommodate diversity, but they can plausibly argue that the diversity ethic is more fully satisfied by liberal principles and institutions than by any other.³⁷

Does liberalism provide more “space” in the requisite sense than any “known or realistically imagined alternative”? Crowder’s answer is yes, but I am skeptical, not so much because I think the answer is no as because I am not sure it is the right question.

The space we are metaphorically speaking of here is space for the plural good, that is to say, space for N-goods. We are imagining not the space available for alternative values and modes of life generally, that is, D-goods, but rather the space available for that subset of this general set that we know to be objectively good. Now there is, I think, a certain

33. *Id.* at 138.

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

level of plausibility to the “liberalism provides more space” idea when we are talking about the general category of D-values without regard to their objective goodness or badness. I grant the general idea that liberal political orders are, *relatively speaking*, morally permissive, and the public/private split—in whatever particular historical configuration it takes and however fragmented it may be—characteristic of such orders can be understood as generating space available for individuals to pursue different D-conceptions of a valuable life. But this is space for the morally bad as well as for the morally good; let us say, for “B”-conceptions of the good—morally bad conceptions of the good—as well as for N-conceptions. The fact, if it is one, that liberalism provides “more space” in this sense does not give us reason to conclude that the good of human flourishing is served by liberalism and the space it provides relative to an alternative. To know that, we would need to have substantive knowledge of the nature of the good—plural and objective—and we would need to see how well liberalism did relative to alternatives in terms of nurturing it. The point is that knowing that liberalism provides more space for value choice of D-goods than an alternative does not help us to know whether liberalism is more supportive of human flourishing, that is, N-goods, than that alternative. After all, that liberal space might enable more flowers to bloom, but it might also enable more weeds to grow, some of which might prevent flowers from growing. So in this case, the spatial idea of liberalism is—or so I have suggested—conceptually plausible, but unhelpful in terms of providing a reason in support of liberalism.

On the other hand, consider the spatial idea in the context of thinking about the subset of N-values only, not the general set of all D-values. Here, the spatial idea is conceptually implausible. How could we know that liberalism provides more space for the N-good than that provided by some alternative political order? Nothing about the spatial attributes of liberalism—or its alternatives—could help us to know this. The thing that would help us to make an evaluation such as this would be substantive knowledge of the good—knowledge about which values and ways of life purported to be good by various individuals and groups actually were objectively good. The spatial idea of liberalism would add nothing to this. Here again, we have no reason to think that more is necessarily better. Only if we believed that allowing quantitatively more D-value choices tended to yield more good choices of N-value overall would we have reason to affirm the spatial defense of liberalism from a value pluralist point of view. But I do not see how we could know that, especially if we had reason to think that the bad need not simply *peacefully coexist* alongside the good, but might also *thwart and inhibit* the development of the good. In short, and to repair to the gardening

metaphor one last time, if we desire a flourishing garden, we will have to do something other than look for the largest plot of land and grant permission for a hundred flowers to bloom. Defending liberalism in terms of its “approximate neutrality” while criticizing the idea of “whole neutrality” is like saying that even if the best garden is not infinitely large, the larger garden is the better garden. But size and quantity are not the appropriate tools of evaluation here.

Moreover, spatial concepts are no more effective as criticisms of alternatives to liberalism than they are as pillars of support for it. Crowder defends liberalism indirectly by arguing that it responds to the truth of pluralist diversity in a balanced way that makes it superior to the extremes of too little concern for diversity—this is said to be the vice of a number of political views, including Marxism, anarchism, socialism, communitarianism, and conservatism—or a wanton overconcern for diversity—said to be the vice of postmodernism. Liberalism, on the other hand, is said to have “a strong claim to be seen as striking the required balance between multiplicity and coherence, and therefore to satisfying the requirements of pluralist diversity.”³⁸ There is much to be said, and much of great interest that has been said, both for and against these various political views; in a sense, the consideration of them, in all of their substantive detail, is a considerable part of the traditional enterprise of political theory. I cannot see that assessing them in the spatial terms employed here is of much help in coming to a sustained judgment about them—or about liberalism, for that matter. Thus, for example, postmodernists are charged with “ethical incoherence” for promiscuously “promoting multiple values without regard to what these values are and how they relate to one another. . . . The fostering of otherness or difference cannot by itself be an adequate criterion for public policy.”³⁹ On the other hand, conservatism is treated as guilty of the opposite spatial vice, that of being overly narrow and insufficiently broad in terms of its response to the truth of value pluralism. Crowder portrays conservatives as confronting the dilemma of choice in the face of value pluralism by repairing to an insistence “on an adherence to local tradition which is excessively narrow.”⁴⁰ Conservatives, like liberals and unlike postmodernists, appreciate the need for coherence to temper

38. *Id.* at 145.

39. *Id.* at 144–45.

40. *Id.* at 149.

multiplicity when it comes to the question of responding to value pluralism. Unlike liberals, however, conservatives, in appealing to local tradition as the source of guidance in value choice, are said to “rest[] on an unnecessarily narrow interpretation of the context required for pluralist choice, and [are] neglectful of universal norms.”⁴¹ Conservatives are thus mistaken insofar as they practice a “rigid insistence on local tradition”—is it the rigidity that is the problem?—and fail to realize that “[p]luralist diversity requires that limits be placed on multiplicity, but existing traditions are not coextensive with those limits.”⁴² So: conservatives are too narrow, and postmodernists are too wide. Liberals are just right, spatially measured.

V. CONCLUSION

I have presented a number of arguments here that call into question the strength of the linkage between value pluralism and liberal political morality. I have focused attention on the idea of value pluralism, saying little about the details of the idea of liberal political morality. Ultimately, our overall view of the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism would need to take full account of the plurality of liberalisms. Galston’s “reformation” liberalism, for example, is quite different from the enlightenment version of liberalism that privileges a robust conception of individual autonomy.⁴³ Crowder’s brand of liberalism partakes of both strains and is interesting in its attempt to synthesize them. Although I believe that Galston’s idea of a reformation liberalism stressing tolerance over autonomy is the preferable model of political liberalism, I have tried to explain here why I have doubt that the idea of value pluralism is helpful in the articulation of liberalism of whichever type.

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.*

43. GALSTON, LIBERAL PLURALISM: IMPLICATIONS, *supra* note 2, at 15–27.