

# Value Pluralism Does Not Support Liberalism: A Comment on William A. Galston's *What Value Pluralism Means for Legal-Constitutional Orders*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| I.   | INTRODUCTION .....                                | 925 |
| II.  | FROM VALUE PLURALISM TO LIBERALISM?.....          | 926 |
| III. | NO RATIONAL BASIS FOR RESTRICTIVE POLICIES? ..... | 930 |
| IV.  | EXPRESSIVE LIBERTY AND VALUE PLURALISM.....       | 933 |
| V.   | EXPRESSIVE LIBERTY VERSUS LIBERALISM.....         | 936 |
| VI.  | INCOMMENSURABILITY .....                          | 939 |

## I. INTRODUCTION

Following hints in the writings of Isaiah Berlin, some political theorists hold that the thesis of value pluralism is true and that this truth provides support for political liberalism of a sort that prescribes wide guarantees of individual liberty.<sup>1</sup> There are many different goods, and they are incommensurable. Hence, people should be left free to live their own lives as they choose so long as they do not harm others in certain ways. In a free society, there is a strong presumption in favor of letting individuals act as they choose without interference by others.

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1. ISAIAH BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY* 118 (1969).

William A. Galston has developed this argument with exemplary clarity.<sup>2</sup> He is wrong. The idea that value incommensurability is a reason for toleration of diverse ways of life and protection of the individual's freedom to choose among diverse ways of life is a mistake.

In his paper for this issue, *What Value Pluralism Means for Legal-Constitutional Orders*, Galston undertakes to resolve a further problem, namely, whether the presumption in favor of individual liberty that value pluralism establishes can be kept within bounds. In his words, "Within the pluralist framework, how is the basis for a viable political community to be secured?"<sup>3</sup> On one construal of these words, Galston is seeking the solution to a nonproblem. Value pluralism does not establish any normative presumption in favor of liberty, so the worry "does this presumption hold without limit," or "are there good reasons that constrain it at some point," is otiose. On another construal, Galston is addressing a different question: if most of the members of society came to believe that given value pluralism, they ought to be left free to live according to their own conception of values, then would a "decently ordered public life" be impossible to sustain?<sup>4</sup> On the second construal, the issue being posed is a genuine empirical question, which philosophical arguments cannot answer.

## II. FROM VALUE PLURALISM TO LIBERALISM?

Here is a statement of the argument from value pluralism to liberalism:

[T]here are multiple goods that differ qualitatively from one another and which cannot be rank-ordered. If this is the case, there is no single way of life, based on a singular ordering of values, that is the highest and best for all individuals. This has important implications for politics. While states may legitimately act to prevent the great evils of human existence, they may not seek to force their citizens into one-size-fits-all patterns of desirable human lives. Any public policy that relies on, promotes, or commands a single conception of human good or excellence as equally valid for all individuals is on its face illegitimate.<sup>5</sup>

Let us call the political order that massively restricts individual liberty in violation of the political ideal of liberalism the "Stalinist alternative." The term is deliberately pejorative. The question is, does value pluralism

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2. WILLIAM A. GALSTON, *LIBERAL PLURALISM: THE IMPLICATIONS OF VALUE PLURALISM FOR POLITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE* (2002).

3. William A. Galston, *What Value Pluralism Means for Legal-Constitutional Orders*, 46 SAN DIEGO L. REV. 803, 806 (2009).

4. *Id.*

5. William A. Galston, *The Idea of Political Pluralism*, in *MORAL UNIVERSALISM AND PLURALISM* 95, 96 (Henry S. Richardson & Melissa S. Williams eds., 2009).

rule out Stalinism? Does value pluralism provide any reason at all, place even a small weight on the scales, in favor of liberalism?

We should straightaway acknowledge that value pluralism and value incommensurability rule out one possible type of argument for Stalinism. No massive program of state coercion to organize society to maximize the achievement of any single good or combination of goods can be justified by appeal to the premise that goods can be rank ordered and that the good—or combination of goods—we are promoting ranks highest. But this acknowledgement concedes nothing to those who see value pluralism as supporting the entrenchment of liberalism. The situation is symmetrical. If value pluralism and incommensurability take away this premise that might be deployed in an argument to reject liberalism, then they equally take away this premise from the arsenal of their opponents. If goods cannot be rank ordered, then any claim that asserts or presupposes that goods can be rank ordered is false and cannot be deployed successfully in an argument to support liberalism.

Maybe value-pluralism-and-incommensurability is an arrow that only fits the bows of Stalinists, and is only useful to them, so removing this arrow from the stock of arms available to both enemies and advocates of liberalism hurts the enemies and helps the advocates. In this way asymmetry is restored. However, it is just not true that no plausible arguments for liberalism depend on the claims that goods can be rank ordered and that there is a conception of human good or excellence equally valid for all individuals. We need not search the libraries for such arguments; they are ready at hand. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill argues from perfectionistic utilitarianism to a strong principle entrenching individual liberty.<sup>6</sup> Mill famously urges that human nature is various, so there are different types of people. It may even be that the innate personality and trait potential of each person are unique, so there are as many different types of persons as there are individual persons. What mode of life would be suitable for a person, would give her a good prospect of attaining a good life, depends on the type of person she is. Moreover, an individual's own type is not transparent—not to other people, and not even to the person herself. Hence each person in order

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6. JOHN STUART MILL, *ON LIBERTY* (David Bromwich & George Kateb eds., Yale Univ. Press 2003) (1859) [hereinafter MILL, *ON LIBERTY*]. For Mill's perfectionistic version of utilitarianism, see especially his discussion of higher and lower pleasures in JOHN STUART MILL, *UTILITARIANISM* 6–25 (George Sher ed., Hackett Publ'g Co. 1979) (1861).

to have a satisfactory prospect of achieving a good life must engage in wide experiments in living in a society in which others are doing the same and we can all learn from one another's experiments what kinds of plans of life are sensible in present social circumstances.

From one's own experiments in living and from observation of the experiments of others, one comes to acquire knowledge of the sort of person one is and the sort of plan of life that would be good to lead. A good plan balances efforts at go-getting, changing one's circumstances to make them more favorable, and efforts at self-culture, changing oneself so one is better able to adapt successfully to whichever circumstances one encounters. Choosing and executing a plan of life in the light of knowledge of oneself and the world gained from experiments in living and improving one's traits as appropriate according to the plan are what Mill calls developing one's individuality.<sup>7</sup> Being the creatures we are, and inhabiting the environment we do, developing individuality is necessary for having a reasonable prospect of a good life.<sup>8</sup>

General knowledge of the human good, of what counts as genuine perfectionist accomplishment that is associated with higher rather than lower pleasures, is necessary for carrying out self-development as Mill envisages it. When I am trying to discover what mode of life suits me, I am not merely looking for what feels good, but for a match between what I am capable of doing and capable of persevering at trying to do and what would make my life more rather than less worthwhile if I succeeded in doing it. Would I be better off being a respectable skilled carpenter or a barely competent slothful professor? Undertaking a risky marriage or adhering to a somewhat isolated spinsterhood? And so on. Of course, we do not actually make these life choices motivated by ideal desires to achieve the highest goods for self and others, but in the society of free experimentation, driven by our actual motives, warts and all, we end up over the long haul with greater aggregate "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."<sup>9</sup> That is Mill's conjecture anyway.

Mill sometimes appears oddly euphoric when writing about how great life will be under the regime of utilitarian liberalism,<sup>10</sup> but his argument does not need that optimism in order to succeed. Suppose less optimistically that the lives most of us reach under the rule of Millian liberty would be gray mediocrity or worse. All Mill needs to demonstrate to defend his version of liberalism is the proposition that however bad the aggregate

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7. MILL, ON LIBERTY, *supra* note 6, at 121–38.

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 81.

10. *See, e.g., id.* at 127–29.

perfectionist human good score would be in societies regulated by his proposed liberal principles, the outcomes under more restrictive sets of rules would be even worse.

Critics of Mill's arguments for liberty have doubted his success in showing that adherence to strict no paternalism according to his liberty principle is the best strategy for maximizing perfectionist good.<sup>11</sup> His arguments regarding individuality and liberty plausibly show that wide individual freedom is needed for people to have a good chance of developing individuality, which they need to have a good prospect of a good life. But wide individual liberty is compatible with some judicious paternalism. The ideal regime of liberty might include enormous free scope for experiments in living although this regime remains lightly hemmed in by paternalistic laws. For example, the ideal regime might require seatbelts in cars and protective headgear for motorcyclists, prohibit the sale and use of some hard drugs used for recreational purposes, and impose food and drug regulation and medical licensing requirements. That is as may be. However, even if Mill's arguments fail to generate knockdown arguments for his extreme absolutist liberty principle, they still support an enormously strong presumption for individual liberty and against arbitrary restriction.

After this detour, we return to Isaiah Berlin and William Galston and those who claim to discern some arguments supporting liberalism in the thesis of value-pluralism-and-incommensurability. Galston has correctly observed that if the thesis were correct, then one cannot appeal to value-monism-and-commensurability to support illiberal politics that deny people negative liberty.<sup>12</sup> My response is that if the thesis were correct, then one cannot appeal to value-monism-and-commensurability to support liberal politics that guarantee wide scope for negative liberty. So the thesis is evenhanded in its impact and does not tilt in favor of liberalism.<sup>13</sup> Against the suggestion that maybe there are no powerful arguments for liberalism that appeal to value-monism-and-commensurability, so the loss of such arguments is no setback for the liberal cause, I pointed out historical evidence to the contrary. Arguably the most

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11. See Gerald Dworkin, *Paternalism*, 56 *MONIST* 64 (1972).

12. See Galston, *supra* note 3, at 804–05.

13. On the question, “does value pluralism provide reasons that on the whole support liberalism in politics?,” my answer is in broad agreement with that offered in JOHN GRAY, *ISAIAH BERLIN* 141–68 (1996).

powerful arguments for liberalism we have are those of Mill, who makes just such an appeal in developing his arguments.<sup>14</sup>

### III. NO RATIONAL BASIS FOR RESTRICTIVE POLICIES?

Another possible way in which Isaiah Berlin's claims about value pluralism and incommensurability might lend argumentative support to liberalism broadly construed is as follows. Perhaps there is only one possible argument or set of arguments for Stalinism that has any color of plausibility, and this cluster of arguments is defeated if appeals to claims about human good inconsistent with value pluralism and incommensurability are disallowed. In contrast, maybe good arguments for liberalism remain standing even if the appeals to monism and commensurability are disallowed. In that case, it would advance the liberal cause if one could find good reasons to affirm pluralism and incommensurability. Success in that venture would cut off the one possible strategy for defending illiberal politics and leave the field open for some viable arguments for liberal politics.

The line of thought sketched above fits Galston's thinking. He writes:

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."<sup>15</sup>

This argument is too swift. If there are plural values and no ranking of them can be defended, then one cannot claim that in organizing society to maximize the single value *X*, one is maximizing what is best. But equally no one can *object* to making *X* the politically privileged value on the ground that better outcomes would be obtained if we let a thousand flowers bloom, so values *A* through *W* would be achieved, the great flourishing of these many values being more than adequate compensation for the loss in achievement of *X* that would accompany

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14. Mill's arguments appeal to utilitarianism, the view that one morally ought always to do whatever would most advance the aggregate sum of well-being in the long run. This appeal strikes some as highly controversial and very likely illiberal at root. On this topic, one might see Mill's arguments as having force to the degree that there is a significant beneficence component in morality—the implications of which Mill charts—even if the beneficence principle is accompanied by familiar deontological constraints. The more weight the beneficence component of morality has by comparison with the rest, the more decisive Mill's arguments for liberty, to the degree that they succeed in their own terms.

15. GALSTON, *supra* note 2, at 57–58 (footnote omitted) (quoting STEVEN LUKES, *MORAL CONFLICT AND POLITICS* 20 (1991)).

the liberalization of society. Nor can anyone defend a policy of refraining from giving pride of place to some single value or set of values in the political arrangements of society by appeal to the loss of value that would ensue if we did entrench some value or values as privileged. Incommensurability entails that we lack a scale on which such measurements could be made. In other words, from the assumption of incommensurability one gets incommensurability, and thus no basis for choice one way or another—not even the slightest hint of a tilt toward liberalism and wide guarantees of negative liberty.

Galston, Berlin, Lukes, and company are evidently assuming that the default position is liberalism. No argument is needed to support the default. If no good argument is put forth for moving away from the default, then there we should remain. But this argument only succeeds if there is some prior argument that puts Berlinesque liberalism in the default position. I do not see such an argument offered in the writings of these authors, nor any sense that such an argument is needed.

The missing argument cannot consist merely in noting that negative liberty is a value, a human good. Let us grant that premise. So if we establish a Stalinist regime, we end up with less of this negative liberty value than we would have if we established a nice liberal regime. But so what? So long as there is some other value—however trivial you or I might think it to be—that the Stalinist society achieves to a greater degree than would be achieved under liberal auspices, then in the framework of value pluralism and incommensurability, nothing can be said that favors establishing liberalism rather than Stalinism. Suppose there are plural values *A* through *X* and no rank ordering of the values, no commensurability. In that case, one could maintain that one social policy or constitution of society is preferred to another on the basis of the degree to which the policy or constitution promotes the plural value if, and only if, a dominance relation holds: the one society achieves more of at least one value and just as much of each of the others as the alternate society. So if Stalinism would gain less of values *A* through *W* than liberalism and more of just one value, say colorful military parade beauty, then Stalinism, by the Isaiah Berlin measure of value, is neither better nor worse in achievement of human good than liberalism or any other undominated possible alternative form of society.

There is yet another reason to reject the inference from value pluralism and incommensurability to any sort of presumption in favor of liberalism. Value pluralism as espoused by Berlin and Galston is

supposed to be consistent with knowledge that there are bads, evils that impede any form of human flourishing, and that restriction of liberty as necessary to reduce the great evils to acceptable levels is morally acceptable and probably morally mandatory. Incommensurability of human good is supposed to be compatible with commensurability of human bad. But within the framework set by these claims about value and disvalue, there is room for what one might call a Brechtian strategy of argument in favor of extensive state restriction of individual liberty beyond what liberalism as standardly conceived countenances.<sup>16</sup> The idea is that human nature is prone to selfishness, aggression, and greed, and needs to be tightly reined in by social controls if humans are to have reasonable prospects of living decent lives. The Stalinist might argue for tight restriction of market economy relations on this ground.

The Stalinist might also argue against wide toleration of diverse ways of life and division of society into a plethora of associations and subcommunities organized around diverse comprehensive conceptions of the good life. According to the Brechtian vision, the bonds of community necessary for decent social life are fragile.<sup>17</sup> To preserve these bonds, keeping predation and aggression within check, it may well be necessary to foster a single sense of community organized around some single conception or set of similar conceptions of human good. State power is then deployed for some ways of life and against others, against the guarantees of negative liberty that liberalism cherishes, not on the ground that some ways of life and conceptions of the good are objectively superior to others but rather on the ground that the attempt to encourage people to fan out and embrace ways of life that achieve many different goods is inimical to the achievement of any. To keep the great evils in check, negative liberty to pursue one's own good in one's own way needs to be curtailed. The claim then is not that some single way of life is intrinsically better than others but that sustaining a single way of life oriented around some small subset of the universe of human goods is instrumentally valuable for preventing an explosion of the bads.

The Brechtian Stalinist I am imagining argues against wide individual freedom not on the ground that individuals left free will head off in various directions away from the One True Good, but rather on the ground that individuals left free will head off in different directions in a

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16. See BERTOLT BRECHT, *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE* (Eric Bentley trans., 1999) [hereinafter BRECHT, *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*]; see also BERTOLT BRECHT, *The Measures Taken*, in *THE JEWISH WIFE AND OTHER SHORT PLAYS* 75 (Eric Bentley trans., 1965).

17. This theme emerges in the setup of the story of the judge Azdak within *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. See BRECHT, *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*, *supra* note 16, at 63–85.

way that erodes elementary social solidarity and generates social conflict that causes Many Objective Bads. Liberal toleration leads to the lessening of some people's willingness to cooperate in the ways needed to sustain minimally decent social relations. A variant of this argument claims that given wide individual freedom, too many people will aim at bads that have the tempting appearance of goods, so heavy restriction of liberty is needed not to achieve utopia, but to block the emergence of dystopia.

These arguments rehearse familiar conservative critiques of liberalism, which I myself do not find especially compelling. However, I want to note that certain familiar liberal strategies for responding to these arguments are unavailable to the Berlin-Galston value pluralist. The familiar strategies concede that sometimes people may exercise negative liberty by developing communities and associations and enterprises oriented around sharply conflicting values and setting people at odds. However, these costs are tolerable in light of the great goods that liberal freedoms promote. This strategy of argument presupposes some commensurability across goods and bads, and any such commensurability is unobtainable within the value pluralist framework of assumptions. The value pluralist liberal must argue against the conservative and the Stalinist with one hand tied behind her back, and it is far from clear that she can win the argument with these ground rules in place.

I should acknowledge straightaway that the position for which I am contending cannot be conclusively established by argument. At least, I can provide no knockdown argument. The value pluralists say that the thesis of value pluralism and incommensurability supports liberalism. I demur. They suggest arguments. I try to poke holes in those arguments. However, I have no general proof to the conclusion that no argument supporting liberalism contains value pluralism and incommensurability as an essential premise. The most I can do is throw cold water on arguments currently on offer and record my skeptical doubts that further arguments are forthcoming that will succeed where these fail.

#### IV. EXPRESSIVE LIBERTY AND VALUE PLURALISM

My critical enterprise may seem misguided and churlish. Galston does not claim that value pluralism alone supports liberalism. Value pluralism is alleged to be one of three pillars of support—one leg in a three-legged stool. Another pillar is a presumption in favor of according people the liberty to live “as they see fit, within a broad range of

legitimate variation, in accordance with their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value.”<sup>18</sup> Galston calls this “expressive liberty.”<sup>19</sup> The third is political pluralism, the idea that there are legitimate sources of authority other than the state.

I readily grant, from the premise that there is a presumption in favor of letting people live according to their convictions plus the premise of value pluralism, that you can validly derive the conclusion that there is a presumption in favor of letting people live according to their convictions. Value pluralism is not a premise that by itself destroys or erodes a given claim to liberty. What I do not so far see is how value pluralism enhances or strengthens any claim of liberalism you may be inclined to assert on independent grounds.

Galston’s line of thought is that if we start from a presumption in favor of letting people live as they choose, and add the idea that there are many values that cannot be ranked against each other, then there is wide scope for liberty—the presumption applies to a wider sphere.<sup>20</sup> However, the point I have made already still applies. The thesis of value pluralism denies to the advocate of negative liberty the claim that over the long run individuals are more likely to achieve the good rightly and monistically conceived if accorded wide individual liberty. This is the Millian claim already discussed. So value pluralism, so far as the defense of liberty is concerned, looks to me to be a wash—it takes away one argument and gives another. If we hand ourselves a presumption in favor of expressive liberty and add the Millian monistic defense of liberty, the presumption is strengthened. If we hand ourselves the same presumption and add value pluralism, the presumption perhaps gets a boost, but I do not see that it gets more of a boost than under Millian monism. Value pluralism, so far as I can see, yields no net gain in terms of arguments supporting leaving people free to live as they choose—so long as they do not harm others in certain ways that violate their rights, this is common ground between Galston and Mill.

The boost to the presumption for liberty that value pluralism provides strikes me as decidedly limited—perhaps more limited than the counterpart boost available to the believer in monism and commensurability. Left free, people might pursue what is bad, as determined from the standpoint of the plural incommensurable goods that the value pluralist affirms. Value pluralism as such does not provide any boost to the presumption for liberty in this case—if anything, the opposite. The Millian liberal position provides grounds to disfavor coercive

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18. GALSTON, *supra* note 2, at 3.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 29–30.

paternalism in such a case. The individual will learn from his mistakes, perhaps, and be toughened by struggling with them, and at any rate others will learn from the negative results of people's experiments in living. The value pluralist needs analogues of such arguments to strengthen her presumption for liberty—mere assertion of value pluralism and incommensurability does not work here. Also, even if an individual is pursuing a conception of good that is among those the value pluralist affirms, she might be pursuing it ineptly and social interference might nudge her toward paths more likely to be fruitful from the standpoint of achieving the values she seeks. There is a lot of normative space in which the affirmation of the presumption for liberty, along with value pluralism, might be coupled with, and outweighed by, doubts about the ability of most people in a wide array of circumstances to organize their lives effectively to achieve their values as they conceive them.

We should also note that the presumption in favor of expressive liberty might take a form such that assumptions about the nature of value are simply irrelevant to the strength and reach of the presumption. One might hold as a matter of individual right that people should be left free to live as they choose so long as they do not harm nonconsenting others. They do not lose this moral right just because they abuse it or use it ineptly. The moral right to liberty is taken as rock bottom, not a provisional or rebuttable claim that needs further support. The right to liberty in other words might be asserted on deontic grounds not value-theoretic grounds. I mention this just to indicate that it is unclear to me exactly what moral principles the value pluralist means to affirm in conjunction with value pluralism and expressive liberty, or how assumptions about value—the good—are supposed to interact with assumptions about what is morally right in value pluralist liberal doctrine. Notice also that the Stalinist might argue for strong restrictions of individual liberty, for example in the economic sphere, without making any appeals to conceptions of value, pluralist, monist, or otherwise. The Stalinist might instead appeal to doctrines of moral right that are taken to be freestanding and independent of one's commitments on the nature of the good. For example, the Stalinist may endorse the prohibition of "capitalist acts between consenting adults"<sup>21</sup> on the ground that such acts are inherently immoral.

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21. ROBERT NOZICK, *ANARCHY, STATE, AND UTOPIA* 163 (1974).

## V. EXPRESSIVE LIBERTY VERSUS LIBERALISM

The presumption for expressive liberty that Galston takes as his starting point is a presumption for liberty to follow one's convictions even if one would abandon those convictions if one were to engage in free critical reflection and scrutiny of them. Nor does Galston's liberalism find extra value in people's living successfully according to autonomously chosen values as opposed to nonautonomously chosen values. Individual autonomy figures as simply one among the many plural values and has no special status among them. Some might value autonomous choice; some loyal obedience to tradition or innocent embrace of the ways we do things around here. The state ought to promote wide toleration of ways of life and refrain from seeking to undermine those who fail to cultivate autonomy. Regarding autonomy, the state should be neutral. His stance against the idea that the liberal state should promote the value of autonomy is a signature feature of Galston's doctrine of liberal pluralism.<sup>22</sup>

This derogation of autonomy merits rejection. A society that fully achieves the Galston ideal of expressive liberty could be one in which people, living freely according to their convictions, are mired in superstition, prejudice, confusion, and inconsistency.<sup>23</sup>

If Galston's downgrading of autonomy is a problematic feature of his account, I do not believe this problem can be traced back to his value pluralism. An advocate of value pluralism and incommensurability could, with perfect consistency, embrace autonomy and hold that a just state should promote autonomy in citizens. Let us grant that there are plural values and no rank ordering of them is possible. In the next breath, we can affirm that it is intrinsically as well as instrumentally desirable that each individual should live according to convictions about the right and the good that have survived her own critical scrutiny and that she is disposed to reexamine and rethink when doing so is "appropriate."<sup>24</sup>

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22. GALSTON, *supra* note 2, at 20–24.

23. It might seem that I am being unfair to Galston. Superstition, prejudice, confusion, and inconsistency are uncontroversial bads, so if cultivation of autonomy impedes them, cannot Galston endorse state policy that favors autonomy? Reply: He could, and I say, he should, but he does not. This is my critique. But my point here hardly deserves to be called a "critique," as I note toward the end of this section. I am raising an issue, the adequate resolution of which would involve a long and difficult argument, which this comment does not pretend to launch.

24. The scare quotes around "appropriate" signal a difficult topic that needs to be treated with care. The autonomous person is not obsessively and endlessly rethinking her commitments rather than acting to achieve them, but she is disposed to respond to warning signs that her commitments might be misguided and that reconsidering them here and now might be productive. The right setting of these dispositions involves balancing many desiderata.

There are plural values, any one or combination of which might form the focal point of a worthwhile life, but the good life consists of autonomous embrace of values and successful pursuit of them, and the just state fosters autonomy as part of its project of helping citizens live worthwhile lives.

Is this proposed synthesis of value pluralism and state commitment to autonomy plausible? Galston can correctly point out that people can succeed in living what are surely lives of genuine value without scoring high on autonomy. A member of a hunter-gatherer culture might simply follow the way of life of her tribe, but if she is lucky, the way of life might be a genuinely good one. Moreover, it could be the case that achieving some valuable ways of life is incompatible with being autonomous. What then?

One might suppose that incommensurability removes the point of autonomy, which is to guide the individual toward better values—but *better* presupposes a commensurability that is not available. This supposition is false. First, given incommensurability, one still may well be in need of critical scrutiny of candidate values to avoid the bad—the weeds among the flowers—and find some incommensurable good. For all I know, the traditions in which I have been raised, the conventions I have been trained to find natural and wholesome, might contain goods and bads intertwined rather than simple goods, or even some dominant bad masquerading as good. To investigate this possibility, I need to think things through, and so I need the critical skills and habits of mind, and intellectual and moral virtues that enable me to do this and incline me to do so. Second, nothing in the hypothesis that there are plural incommensurable values rules out the possibility that there are further definitely lesser values along with the select incommensurables. Critical scrutiny and sifting and sorting of values may be necessary in order to find a conception of good and a way of life that is above the threshold of higher value at which incommensurability commences. Third, to plan a life, I need to find values that mesh with my circumstances and my particular traits in such a way that pursuit of those values enables me to lead a life as good as any I might choose. Fitting my traits and circumstances to values taken for granted may not yield the globally best plan for me, and a wider scrutiny that looks at various values I might orient my life around is needed. In this way, discovery of values and choice of a life plan are part of one connected inquiry, successfully engaging in which is being autonomous.

Here one must be careful not to make a fetish of autonomy, which to my mind is more a tool than a goal.<sup>25</sup> Galston has a point. Good values are ones that would withstand ideal critical scrutiny, but one can, and people do, follow good values without actually engaging in any critical scrutiny. Moreover, critical scrutiny can lead one astray. Even if good values are the ones that one would affirm at the end of ideally extended inquiry, that ideal is in actual life unattainable, and nothing guarantees that the baby steps I take toward it will not lead me to discard perfectly good traditions and conventions in order to follow some cockamamie fad. The less native capacity for rational inquiry I have, the smaller the chances that cultivating these capacities and exercising them will be more likely to steer me toward the good and the right than would the alternative strategy of uncritical conformity to the advice of a trusted authority: a village elder, a parish priest, a wise guru, or something comparable.

Liberal doctrine exhorts people to become autonomous and asserts that the just liberal state promotes the development of autonomy in all minimally competent members. The exhorting and asserting are done on the basis of a broad empirical conjecture—or leap of faith if you will.<sup>26</sup> The liberal faith is that on the whole and on the average—encouraging the individual to become autonomous is the best available strategy for bringing it about that people embrace sensible conceptions of the right and the good and follow sensible plans of life that maximize their chances of leading choiceworthy lives.

To the extent that autonomy, cultivating and exercising one's deliberative faculties in order to form one's beliefs about the right and the good, is regarded as intrinsically valuable, a value pluralist like Galston is right to say this is one value among several. It should be respected but not revered as a supervalue in a way that assumes a value commensurability that value pluralism denies. However, in the liberal tradition, autonomy is also instrumentally valued, and nothing in the thesis of value pluralism and incommensurability has any tendency to make one skeptical about its instrumental value. I am not at all skeptical about the instrumental value of autonomy and autonomy promotion. Galston is skeptical. From a nonskeptical standpoint, expressive liberty as Galston conceives it is too thin a value to capture the core liberal

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25. See the elucidation and assessment of the norm of autonomy in Richard J. Arneson, *Autonomy and Preference Formation*, in *IN HARM'S WAY* 42 (Jules L. Coleman & Allen Buchanan eds., 1994).

26. For related discussion as to how progressive political beliefs may rely on broad, vague empirical conjectures that might involve faith as much as reason, see Robert Merrihew Adams, *Moral Faith*, 92 *J. PHIL.* 75 (1995); see also Richard J. Arneson, *Marxism and Secular Faith*, 79 *AM. POL. SCI. REV.* 627 (1985).

commitment to human freedom. Nothing I have said in this essay provides any significant evidence that should change Galston's mind or anybody else's on this issue. I simply want to make the point that being for value pluralism gives you absolutely no reason in itself to take Galston's side in this dispute.

In previous parts of this essay, I have urged that value pluralism does not give you any reason to be a liberal. Value pluralism neither establishes nor supports a presumption in favor of individual liberty. In this part, I have urged that value pluralism does not provide reasons that favor being one type of liberal rather than another—a Galston liberal rather than an autonomy favoring liberal. This dispute turns on other considerations. In this as in the other controversies, value pluralism is a bystander, not the supportive comrade Galston takes it to be.

## VI. INCOMMENSURABILITY

These comments have challenged an inference supportive of some version of liberalism that some have thought could be drawn from value pluralism. I have not ventured any criticism of the claim of value-pluralism-and-incommensurability itself. In particular, I do not intend to insinuate that if this claim has unpalatable implications, we should reject it. Value pluralism and incommensurability are theses of moral metaphysics. Whether they are true or false depends on how the moral metaphysical arguments go; we simply have to live with the results, be they palatable or unpalatable.

“Value incommensurability” has been pretty much a placeholder in this discussion. I simply take over the idea from Berlin and Galston and have not sought to clarify it. Clarification is needed, however, before one could begin to assess the claim. I cannot do that here. Here is a simple way to think about the idea: suppose there are plural values, for example, friendship, pleasure, and intellectual achievement. One might doubt that for any single value, one can specify what counts as an increment of it, such that one could cook up a scale and, in principle, measure the degree to which, over the course of her life, the individual achieves the value. Suppose to the contrary that one can do that. Given arbitrary scales for each of the values under review, one might well wonder whether there is an objective answer to the question, would there be more value, a greater contribution to a person's overall well-being, if that person gains a specified quantity of friendship according to the friendship scale or instead a specified quantity of pleasure according to

the pleasure scale.<sup>27</sup> Given the various combinations of the various values the person could achieve by alternate choices of how to live over the course of her life, is it in principle determinate, whether a given combination is better, equally as good as, or worse than another?

With “yes” answers to these questions, one could write an equation that tells us, for any combination of goods one might get in one’s life, how much well-being one would then attain. With “no” answers, there might still be zones of commensurability. Even if there is some range within which adding to one’s store of friendship is neither better than, worse than, nor equally as good as getting a specified quantity of intellectual achievement, there might still be many comparisons beyond this metaphysically fuzzy range, where commensurability does hold. The extremes of full commensurability and no commensurability strike me as too extreme; I suspect the truth is some form of partial commensurability, some intermediate position. Galston allows that particular assessments might be correct but denies that any correct general assessments can be formulated; I count this as an extreme denial of commensurability.<sup>28</sup> The extreme position might be true, who knows? It is worth pondering its implications. Galston deserves much credit for pressing us to confront the issue. I disagree with his claims about what implications we can draw, but I applaud the pressure his writings apply.

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27. This way of putting the question may assume that the values do not interact when combinations of them appear in someone’s life. Interaction might occur. For example, pleasure taken in friendship might enhance the value of a given quantity of friendship, and pleasure taken in friendship might yield more valuable pleasure than pleasure taken in some other things. If so, we need to identify more complex goods, to get a list of goods such that we can just add up the amounts of each good in a person’s life and sum the total to get the total well-being score.

28. See Galston, *supra* note 3, at 805–06.