

Pluralism and Liberalism

Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams

'Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply' (to George Crowder, 'Pluralism and Liberalism', *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 293–305), *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 306–9

'Pluralism', Crowder writes, 'presupposes the possibility of a stronger form of conflict among values than mere incompatibility'. The 'stronger' form of conflict to which he refers applies to situations in which it is not only true that one cannot advance or honour one value without losing something in terms of the other, but, in addition to this, there is no 'common measure or ranking'. This means, for one thing, that there is no common currency of comparison, such as that promised by Utilitarianism. It also means something wider (though Crowder himself does not explicitly distinguish the two points), that there is no other determinate and general procedure for solving conflicts, such as a lexical priority rule. It is in this wider sense that values may be said to be 'incommensurable'. The claim that there are such conflicts (equivalently, that there are incommensurable values) is made by pluralism, in the sense in which Crowder ascribes this position to us and in particular to Berlin. We do not want to disown the pluralist position, so described, but we reject what Crowder infers from it.

Crowder claims that according to pluralism choices among incommensurable values 'are "undetermined by reason" or contain an element of rational "indeterminacy"'. It is crucially unclear what Crowder means by these phrases (which are quoted from other writers, not from either of us). He admits that people can choose in situations of conflict, and that 'no doubt they can offer reasons for their choice'. So far, this sounds quite encouraging. However, Crowder supposes that there is a serious limitation on what the

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pluralist can admit beyond this. The problem is that he does not make clear what he takes this limitation to be.

Sometimes – as when he asks rhetorically whether ‘justice is more important than loyalty’ – his point seems to be merely that given two values that are capable of conflicting, the pluralist will deny that one of them in every conflict trumps the other. This simply repeats the claim that there is no priority rule. Moreover, for many kinds of conflict, it is what a reasonable person would expect. What justice favours should in a wide variety of cases be pursued at the expense of loyalty, but it is not always so; in other circumstances it may be reasonable to see loyalty as more important than the considerations of justice that come into the matter. Of course, some people will insist that none of this can arise, and that true justice can never demand a cost in terms of true loyalty, and conversely; but they are people for whom there are no real conflicts between these values, and they will not have started on the pluralist path at all. Those who have started on that path will accept that a value which has more weight in one set of circumstances may have less in another.

It is consistent with this, moreover, that the answer in any particular case could be the subject of discussion and potential agreement by reasonable people. The other, and quite different, limitation to reason that Crowder may have in mind involves the idea that under pluralism this cannot be so. ‘The reasons I can offer are exhausted short of determining the choice of one end rather than the other’; the reasons cannot ‘mandate that choice’. In saying this, Crowder seems to mean that if in a particular situation I think that (say) loyalty is more important than justice, there is no room for anyone rationally to agree or disagree with me. Indeed, at one point Crowder says, rather wildly, ‘I must simply rely on my own preferences and desires to settle the issue.’ His idea seems to be that a judgement to the effect that in a particular context a certain consideration is more important or significant than another is specially non-rational or subjective or a matter of taste.

Why should we believe this? In particular, why should we believe that such judgements are intrinsically less rational or reasonable than a claim to the effect that some simple priority rule should be accepted (e.g. that justice always trumps loyalty)? Of course, if we all agree on a certain priority rule, then (trivially) we agree about the cases that we agree to fall under it. But, equally, if

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we agree in our judgements of importance, we agree about the cases; and if we disagree in our judgements of importance, we are at least as likely to disagree about the merits of a given priority rule. It is true that there are some conflicts, particularly involving issues of public policy, that are better decided by simple and publishable rules than by individuals' judgements of importance. Equally, there are other matters that are better left to judgements of importance. Moreover, there is, inescapably, no mechanical procedure for deciding which are which. None of this in itself sheds much light on the powers and limits of reason, except to remind us that practical decision could not in principle be made completely algorithmic, and that a conception of practical reason which aims at an algorithmic ideal must be mistaken.

In his talk of 'underdetermination by reason', Crowder seems unsure which of two quite different views about potentially conflicting values he is ascribing to the pluralist: that it is not a requirement of reason that there should be one value which in all cases prevails over the other; or that in each particular case, reason has nothing to say (i.e. there is nothing reasonable to be said) about which should prevail over the other. Pluralists – we pluralists, at any rate – see the first of these views as obviously true, and the second as obviously false. Some of the time Crowder himself seems to agree with us. Yet a confusion between some such views seems to be implicit in his discussion of reason. It also seems to play an important part in the methods he now employs to pursue his main aim of contesting various connections that have been alleged between pluralism and liberalism.

In pursuing this aim, Crowder's strategy is to reduce all the various arguments to the same form, consisting in each case of two parts: (i) pluralism supports, promotes, favours etc. some value X ; (ii) X is central to, supports, or at least is favoured by, liberalism. (We shall call this the '(i)–(ii) structure'.) Six candidates for the value X are considered. In the case of five – tolerance, freedom of choice, humanity, diversity, and personal autonomy – Crowder criticizes (i); with the values of truth and truthfulness, it is (ii) that is claimed to fail. We shall not have anything to say about the argument, ascribed to Lukes, in which the value X is taken to be tolerance. There are no doubt connections between pluralism and tolerance, but they are by no means simple, and we agree with Crowder in rejecting the argument which he considers.

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In the case of the other values that he discusses, there are three basic forms of criticism that Crowder deploys, and we do not find any of them persuasive.

(a) *X is not uniquely related to pluralism or, again, to liberalism.* This is plainly irrelevant. It may well be that views other than pluralism support or favour e.g. freedom of choice, but the discussion concerns the (i)–(ii) structure – that is to say, the support that pluralism can give to liberalism via the value in question. This is unaffected by there being other supports for that value. Equally, it is irrelevant, in the case of the link (ii), that liberal institutions may be understood as the correct expression of outlooks other than pluralism. No doubt they can be and have been, but this only shows that a good cause can have more than one friend.

(b) *The value X is on pluralism's own account only one value among others.* It is not clear to us why Crowder takes this point, which he often repeats, to be an objection. All that is strictly necessary for the (i)–(ii) structure to produce an effective argument is that *X* should be appropriately related to liberalism, and that pluralism can urge the claims of *X* more effectively than the enemies of liberalism can urge the claims of some value *Y* which supports their rejection of liberalism. Nothing that Crowder says shows that this is inconsistent with pluralism's recognizing that *X* is one value among others (and, perhaps, that *Y* is another).

Why should Crowder think that pluralism faces a problem here? It may be because of the unclarity we have already mentioned in the idea of 'reason's underdetermining' the choice of values. If you think that under pluralism each person must opt at a general level for a certain value to the exclusion of others, it will of course be quite mysterious why the liberal's friend, *X*, should be preferred to the anti-liberal's friend, *Y*. But, as we have already rather laboriously explained, this is not the kind of choice that pluralism requires or even permits.

It is true, as Crowder points out, that pluralists sometimes urge the particular importance, on their views, of some value such as variety or autonomy, which on other views may be less important, or perhaps not a value at all. Once again, there is no inconsistency between their doing this, and their accepting that this is one value among others. If they move to asserting the overriding importance of this value, as some liberals do, then they may begin to be in trouble with pluralism. But then pluralists will not be that kind of

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liberal, and indeed the liberal who sometimes comes closest to that outlook, Mill, is mentioned by Crowder himself (though for different reasons) as one who is not in the present sense a pluralist.

(c) *So far from supporting it, pluralism 'positively undermines' the liberal case.* 'It is' as Crowder puts it, 'always open to the pluralist to ask, why not the illiberal option?' But it is open to anybody, including any liberal, to ask that question. What matters is whether pluralism must find the question peculiarly difficult to answer. There is nothing in Crowder's argument to show that it must, except once more the idea that pluralism is anti-rational and in effect sceptical, an idea perhaps based on the confusion we have already discussed.

At the immensely abstract level of argument that Crowder has chosen, we cannot find anything behind his claims except some such confusion. In fact, neither of the present writers believes that this formal style is the most illuminating way in which to discuss these matters. There are indeed well-known and very important issues about the social and political stability of liberalism and of the outlooks historically associated with it. It is from concrete discussion of those issues, rather than from debate about logical possibilities, that the weaknesses of liberalism, and the problems of a self-conscious pluralism, are likely to emerge. Equally, it is from social and historical reality that we are likely to be instructed in liberalism's strengths, and to be reminded of the brutal and fraudulent simplifications which, as a matter of fact, are the usual offerings of its actual enemies.

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Crowder responded in *Political Studies* 44 No 4 (1996), 649–50, which records an incipient shift in his view of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism. This view evolved further in 'From Value Pluralism to Liberalism', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 1 No 3 (1998) (*Pluralism and Liberal Neutrality*) [= Richard Bellamy and Martin Hollis (eds), *Pluralism and Liberal Neutrality* (London, 1999)], 2–18, and then in his books *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London and New York, 2002) and *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2004).

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