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Must Pluralists Be Relativists?

In 1980 Sir Isaiah Berlin published an essay entitled 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought'.[1] In it he wrote that

> pluralism – the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends – is *not* relativism, nor, *a fortiori*, subjectivism, nor the allegedly unbridgeable differences of emotional attitude on which some modern positivists, emotivists, existentialists, nationalists and, indeed, relativistic sociologists and anthropologists found their accounts.[2]

For the fact that

> the values of one culture may be incompatible with those of another, or that they are in conflict within one culture or group or in a single human being at different times – or, for that matter, at one and the same time – does not entail relativism of value, only the notion of a plurality of values not structured hierarchically.[3]

Berlin was responding to a review by his friend Arnaldo Momigliano[4] of his *Vico and Herder*[5] in which that 'distinguished and learned critic has wondered if I fully appreciate the implications of the historical relativism of Vico and Herder which, unacknowledged by them, dominated the historical outlook of these Christian thinkers, and constituted a problem which has persisted to this day'.[6]

Momigliano had observed that the central question of Berlin's book was 'whether the defence and glorification of the peculiarities of each and any civilisation are intrinsically bound up with moral (perhaps even

logical) relativism'. Berlin, Momigliano suggested, 'has to admit defeat: there is no reconciliation in Vico and Herder between cultural pluralism and absolute values' and, given the acceptance of cultural pluralism, 'Berlin leaves us with an open question about the inevitability of moral relativism'. In Momigliano's view, Herder, who was exposed to a variety of cultural experiences unknown to Vico, was, compared to him, 'much more committed to the relativity of values . . . and . . . less prepared to choose between them', 'much more susceptible to poetical emotions and therefore much more subjective', 'drawn to relativism by his virtual abandonment of any separation between sacred and profane history' and 'almost entirely devoid of that interest in the development of private property and other institutions which gave some direction and order to Vico's speculations on history'. But perhaps after all, Momigliano concluded, Vico offers us a 'means of resistance to a relativism which was to a large extent also his own' through his conviction that 'when all has been said about language as the expression of national and tribal peculiarities, it remains true – and Herder recognizes this emphatically – that languages are translatable, that cultures borrow from each other through verbal communications and that ultimately man is capable of universal understanding through language'. Momigliano suggested that exploring this thought was 'the next step after Berlin's essays'.

Berlin responded to this in two ways. First, he sought to draw a sharp distinction between pluralism and relativism. 'Pluralism,' he had written in 'Two Concepts of Liberty' 'with the measure of "negative" liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more human ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of "positive" self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind.'[7] Much of his writing is devoted to advocating it and tracing its expression in past thinkers. But it was, he now insisted, not relativism, nor did it entail it.

Second, he now sought to show that it was an error to describe Vico's and Herder's opposition to the central tenets of the Enlightenment as a form of relativism – an error 'which, I must admit, I have in the past perpetrated myself'. True relativism, he wrote, 'developed from other and later sources: German romantic irrationalism, the metaphysics of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the growth of schools of social anthropology, the doctrines of William Graham Sumner and Edward Westermarck, above all the influence of thinkers who were not necessarily themselves relativists', notably Marx and Freud.[8] The point remained important to him. In his 1988 Agnelli Lecture, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' he stated that

Momigliano had been 'mistaken' in attributing relativism to Vico and Herder,[9] and in a new footnote to the republication of his Herder essay he sought to explain his own description of Herder at several points in that essay as a relativist, which had led to Momigliano's 'misunderstanding of my views'. By 'relativism' he had meant 'not . . . a species of ethical or epistemological subjectivism' but 'what I have elsewhere identified, I hope more perspicuously, as objective pluralism, free from any taint of subjectivism'.[10]

All of which raises two questions. How exactly did Berlin distinguish the pluralism he so persistently advocated from the relativism he so insistently repudiated? And did he consistently defend a plausible case for pluralism untainted by relativism?

In 'Two Concepts' pluralism is said to recognize 'the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another'. In the end

> men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do, because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are, at any rate over large stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human.[11]

In 'Alleged Relativism' he explains that for a pluralist, life affords

> a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective, incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard. There is a finite variety of values and attitudes, some of which one society, some another, have made their own, attitudes and values which members of other societies may admire or condemn (in the light of their own value-systems) but can always, if they are sufficiently imaginative and try hard enough, contrive to understand – that is, see to be intelligible ends of life for human beings situated as these men were.[12]

These conflicting 'objective ends' or 'ultimate values' may be incompatible but

> their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all. This holds, *a fortiori*, of differences between entire cultures. There is a limit beyond which we can no longer understand what a given creature is at; what kinds of rules it follows in its behaviour; what its gestures mean. In such situations, where the possibility of communication breaks down, we speak of derangement, of incomplete humanity.[13]

By 'relativism' Berlin meant 'a doctrine according to which the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood'; indeed 'to speak of truth or falsehood on these assumptions is literally meaningless'.[14] There were at least two types of relativism: that of judgements of fact denying 'the very possibility of objective knowledge of facts'[15] and that of judgements of value, and the latter was at issue here. Relativism, in its modern form,

> tends to spring from the view that men's outlooks are unavoidably determined by forces of which they are often unaware – Schopenhauer's irrational cosmic force; Marx's class-bound morality; Freud's unconscious drives; the social anthropologists' panorama of the irreconcilable variety of customs and beliefs conditioned by circumstances largely uncontrolled by men.[16]

But in all its versions it holds that

> there are no objective values; some versions of it maintain that men's outlooks are so conditioned by natural or cultural factors as to render them incapable of seeing the values of other societies or epochs as no less worthy of pursuit than their own, if not by themselves then by others. The most extreme versions of cultural relativism, which stress the vast differences of cultures, hold that one culture can scarcely begin to understand what other civilisations lived by – can only describe their behaviour but not its purpose or meaning . . . If this were true, . . . the very idea of the history of civilisation becomes an insoluble puzzle.[17]

So pluralism and relativism diverge in at least three ways. First, pluralists see value choices as determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are part of people's being, thought and sense of identity; while relativists tend to see whole outlooks as determined by forces of which people are unaware. Second, pluralists see cultural differences as bridgeable whereas relativists, of the stronger sort, do not. And third, and most importantly for Berlin, pluralists take the values that divide cultures, groups and individuals to be objective, whereas relativists do not.

Is this convincing? Both pluralists and relativists accept that values can be plural, incompatible and even incommensurable; but pluralists assert and relativists deny that they can be 'objective'. What can this mean? Berlin's discussion might suggest several possibilities. One is that the limits to the range of recognizably human values are objectively set: the variety is finite, and the limits are fixed by objective facts of human nature (and

the empirical possibilities of social organization). A second is that the fact of value conflict is objective: those who experience it do so as something constraining and inescapable. This sense of confronting an 'objective' conflict, as when facing a moral dilemma, resists the relativist's attempt to wish it away by proclaiming each of the values in conflict as valid 'in its place' and thus not in conflict. A third is that the values distinctive of cultures or phases of a culture are, as Berlin puts it, 'not mere psychological, but objective facts'.[18] Perhaps this means that they are realized in rule-governed social practices and embodied in cultural objects, and in this sense confront individuals as external and constraining.

These are intriguing and fertile suggestions. But Berlin's argument needs more: namely, a defence of the claim that the values are themselves objective – that they have 'objective correlates' that determine their truth or falsehood and that it makes sense to speak of them in terms of truth and falsehood. But can a pluralist, who holds that values can be plural, conflicting and even incommensurable, take them to be capable of being true or false, in a sense that does not collapse into 'true for us' or 'true for the Trobrianders' (and thus into relativism)? At this crucial point, Berlin leaves us, as Momigliano observed, with an open question.

I suggest that one step forward can be taken by distinguishing between two senses of 'relativism' that are in play in this discussion but not distinguished from each other by either Berlin or Momigliano. The first relates to the issue of mutual intelligibility across cultures. Where do the limits of cross-cultural understanding lie? On this issue a relativist takes a radically sceptical stand. Forms of life (to use Wittgenstein's phrase) set insuperable barriers to such understanding, creating 'unbridgeable differences'. But this kind of relativism, which has tempted many, encounters several insuperable difficulties. One is its self-refuting character (is it only true within 'our' culture?). Another is the reifying conception of 'culture' on which it rests, for cultures, as Momigliano stressed, are all endlessly borrowing from one another. Herder certainly did not adhere to relativism of this kind, as Madame de Staël observed. Momigliano quotes her praise of Herder's translations and her comment in *De l'Allemagne* that the German language was suitable to render the 'naive expressions of the language of each country'. Both Berlin and Momigliano, it is clear, reject such relativism of understanding, though on differing grounds. For Berlin the 'bridgehead' consists in shared, recognizably human 'ends of life'; for Momigliano in Vico's 'universal vocabulary of the mind'. But, rightly, neither supposes that such relativism is identical with or entailed by pluralism.

But what of a second meaning of relativism: the relativism of practical judgement? In this case the relativist's scepticism is directed towards the availability of trans-cultural (or even trans-individual) criteria for deciding evaluative, and in particular ethical, questions. This kind of relativist says (to quote, once again, my late friend, Martin Hollis): 'Liberalism for the liberals; cannibalism for the cannibals.' Does the pluralist have any defences against this kind of relativism? Here it may prove useful to develop a suggestion of Bernard Williams (who distinguishes between 'real' and 'notional' confrontations between (for example) cultures).[19] If a confrontation is real, alternatives are 'real options' which people can be envisaged as facing. If it is 'notional', that is because we are comparing outlooks that are too distant for actual people to experience them both. As Williams writes, the 'life of a Greek Bronze Age chief or a medieval Samurai, and the outlooks that go with these, are not real options for us; there is no way of living them'.[20]

Berlin's pluralism needs protection against the relativism of practical judgment involving real confrontations. A liberal pluralist takes sides on moral and political issues and not just within his 'liberal culture'; and it is illusory to think there is anywhere in our increasingly globalized world that is immune to such real confrontation. Relativism can make sense for the past, especially the remote past, but not for the present and the future. If a 'liberal' is thought of as someone committed to the ideal of pluralism faced with the question of whether to support Amnesty International's activities in, say, Burma, or what to do in face of some impending disaster; and if 'cannibalism' stands for an extinct and exotic way of life, from the study of which much of value can be learned, then the case to be argued had better be: 'Pluralism for the liberals; relativism for the cannibals.'

Notes

1. Isaiah Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought', reprinted in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, London: John Murray, 1990.
2. Ibid., p. 87.
3. Ibid., p. 80.
4. 'On the Pioneer Trail', *New York Review of Books*, 11 November 1976, pp. 35–8.
5. London: Hogarth Press, 1976.
6. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', pp. 76–7.
7. *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 171.

8. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 77.
9. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, London: John Murray, 1990, p. 10. See also p. 77.
10. Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* edited by Henry Hardy with an introduction by Roger Hansheer, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000, p. 390n.
11. Berlin, 'Two Concepts', pp. 171–2.
12. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 79.
13. Ibid., pp. 79–80.
14. Ibid., p. 80.
15. Ibid., p. 74.
16. Ibid., p. 79.
17. Ibid., p. 81.
18. Ibid., p. 80.
19. Bernard Williams, 'The Truth in Relativism', in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
20. Ibid., p. 140. But see the powerful argument against Williams's proposed distinction in Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997, especially chapter 2.

8

An Unfashionable Fox

While working on a book on 'individualism'[1] I recall telling Isaiah Berlin that I had found eleven distinct senses of that protean concept. He outfoxed me, commenting, 'That's rather mean!' In rather the same spirit I want to begin by making the same observation about his famous distinction (drawn from the Greek poet Archilochus) between the hedgehog and the fox. I reject the hedgehog-like view that there is only one distinction here – only one kind of hedgehog and one kind of fox. For among humans there are many kinds of hedgehogs and many kinds of foxes. On some of these Berlin fixed his attention, exposing the moral and political costs of adopting the hedgehogs' limited vision, while exploring the world views of thinkers he recognized as fellow foxes. But there are other kinds of (presently fashionable) foxes he did not recognize as his fellows, with whom he had no elective affinity. I shall conclude by saying something about them and address the question: what kind of a fox was he?

Allow me to offer a preliminary typology of hedgehogs – thinkers who, in Berlin's words, 'relate everything to a single central vision, one system more or less coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance'.[2] I suggest there are at least four varieties, four species of this genus.

First there are what we may call the *positivist* hedgehogs. They believe that 'history could (and should) be made scientific', on the model of natural science (or what natural science is taken to be). Thus Auguste

8. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 77.
9. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, London: John Murray, 1990, p. 10. See also p. 77.
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12. Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism', p. 79.
13. Ibid., pp. 79–80.
14. Ibid., p. 80.
15. Ibid., p. 74.
16. Ibid., p. 79.
17. Ibid., p. 81.
18. Ibid., p. 80.
19. Bernard Williams, 'The Truth in Relativism', in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
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