

Isaiah Berlin and William James: Tragedy, Tragicomedy, Comedy

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Introduction

Given the influential way in which he imported the classic metaphysical theme of “the One and the Many” into moral and political philosophy, Isaiah Berlin has been recognized as the father of contemporary “value pluralism.” But Berlin is not without his precursors – most famously, Max Weber, with his 1919 lecture “Politics as a Vocation.”¹ William James has also been counted among them. As Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy write in their encyclopedia entry on Berlin, for example: “Ethical pluralism first emerged under that name . . . in America, inspired by William James’s pluralistic view of the universe.”² And indeed, for some time now, many have identified James as a pluralist – not least James himself.³

But in some respects, his position is much more ambiguous than Berlin’s. For example, a close look at the title of his *A Pluralistic Universe* should prepare us for the fact that, while the book rejects various monisms (in particular, those from Socrates through to absolute idealism), it also makes clearly non-pluralistic claims such as that “we still have a coherent world . . . Our ‘multiverse’ still makes a ‘universe’.”⁴ Indeed, while I wouldn’t go as far as Robert B. Talisse for whom James is “anti-pluralist,”⁵ I will argue that James is both pluralist *and* monist. In fact, it is my contention that neither James nor Berlin is a pluralist *tout court*.

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¹ In *The Vocation Lectures*, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004).

² Cherniss and Hardy, “Isaiah Berlin,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), § 4.2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/berlin/>.

³ See, for example, James, “Preface” to *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956 [1904]), p. ix; Jean Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England and America*, trans. Fred Rothwell (London: Open Court, 1925), bk. 3; Richard A.S. Hall, “The Polytheism of William James,” *The Pluralist* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 18–32; and Russell B. Goodman, “William James’s Pluralisms,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2, no. 260 (2012): 155–76.

⁴ James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977 [1909]), p. 146.

⁵ Talisse, *Pluralism and Liberal Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 42; see also pp. 43–59.

One reason is that, as we shall see, neither asserts the fragmentation of all. Fragmentation, I propose, is the hallmark of pluralism. This stands in contrast to the cohesion – or oneness – that is the hallmark of monism. So they should be distinguished from the numerical conception of both, according to which pluralism is a synonym for multiplicity and monism for singularity. Because as I shall employ the terms here, it’s possible for a monist to embrace multiplicity – that is, as long as it is unified.

Consider the Christian doctrine of the Trinity when compared to Jewish or Muslim theologies. Augustine is certainly within his rights to argue that to claim that God consists of three distinct persons in no way undermines His unity, since they *are* one (*The Trinity* IV § 29–30, V § 12). But notice that Augustine does so by appealing to mereology, the metaphysics of parts and wholes:

[T]he effect of oneness is the fittingness and harmony by which those things that are composite are insofar as they are. For simple things are by themselves because they are one. But those things that are not simple imitate oneness by the harmony of their parts, and they are to the extent that they attain it.⁶

The problem here is that, while a simple thing is certainly one numerically, there’s no reason to assume that it is unified, fully cohesive. Because what if there are gaps in it, say because it is broken? Surely this is a possibility, whether or not it has parts.⁷

This question should be kept in mind by all those for whom Kant makes room for (what I would call) pluralism when he asserts that “[t]he opposite of egoism can only be *pluralism*, that is, the way of thinking in which one is not concerned with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world.”⁸ Evidently, by “mere citizen,” Kant means to refer to someone who is aware of being one of many rather than one alone. But in deriving

⁶ Augustine, *The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life* II, 6, 8, in *The Manichean Debate*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Roland J. Teske in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/19 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), p. 72.

⁷ See my “[Gaps: When Not Even Nothing Is There](#),” *Comparative Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (Jan. 2021): 31–55.

⁸ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1798]), 7:130; see also *Lectures on Metaphysics*, eds. and trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28:206, 28:657.

this from a mereological claim about the world's complexity – that is, from its consisting of numerous parts – his point is limited to quantity. This is only to be expected, since Kant is another monist, at least in his practical philosophy. Regardless, pluralism as I conceive of it goes further: it asserts not only multiple over singular but also the fragmentation of the whole.

This makes it incompatible with the final example of monist multiplicity that I want to offer here, which comes from something that Martin Buber has said about myth. “Pure myth,” he states, “knows multiplicity” and yet “there is no division of essential being.”⁹

Conceiving of pluralism and monism in this way helps us to recognize that while Berlin certainly is a pluralist when it comes to moral and political philosophy, and so with respect to what we might call “the practical” dimension of reality, James, both in his ethics as well as outside it, combines pluralism with monism, making his approach that of a paradoxical “pluramonism” (for lack of a better term).¹⁰ As such, he can be seen as striving to embrace that form of creativity and openness to otherness that paradox sometimes provides. Paradox plays little if any role in Berlin's thought, however, and the same may be said of many whose thinking he influenced, not least Bernard Williams. To be sure, this has not prevented them from being open and creative in their own ways; still, these are best identified as pluralist rather than pluramonist.

I will lend further support to this contrast by showing how Berlin and James' approaches can each be associated with different narrative genres: tragedy in Berlin's case, and tragicomedy in James'. More space shall be dedicated to Berlin in order to demonstrate how his approach – and by implication James' – contrasts with those of monists. Monists can be associated with a certain kind of comedy, as one might expect, but also with tragedy – albeit with limited and sometimes even strictly ersatz forms of it, as I shall argue. This is because monisms tend to be aligned with cosmologies that, whether religious or secular, are best seen as providential, and it goes without saying that the idea of providence is not particularly hospitable to tragedy. Indeed, there's a sense in which the two are defined in opposition to each other.

⁹ Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (1955), trans. Maurice Friedman (London: Routledge, 2002, 2nd ed.), xiii.

¹⁰ This is typical of difference philosophy, of which the poststructuralism that emerged in France during the 1960s can be considered another version. See my “Loving Wisdom,” in *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009). Among the major pragmatists, however, I wouldn't consider Charles Sanders Peirce a philosopher of difference, in contrast to John Dewey. See, for example, Dewey's “The Development of American Pragmatism (1925),” in *The Essential Dewey, vol. 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

There are at least two alternatives to monism, pluralism, and pluramonomism. One is nihilism, about which I shall say next to nothing (thereby illustrating the approach). The other, which I favour, will be briefly canvassed in the conclusion. As we'll see, it is best understood as treading a path *in between* monism and pluralism.

Berlin's Pluralism: Tragedy, Not Comedy

Berlin, I contend, is only a partial pluralist because he considers nature, or "the natural" dimension of reality, as unified. Though he never says so explicitly, I think this is one reason why he thinks it so important to distinguish between the human and natural sciences.¹¹ He would thus almost certainly agree with Williams that it makes sense for natural scientists to strive for a unified "absolute conception" of nature. Though not when it comes to the practical world.

Of course, Descartes is among those who would disagree, which is why when Roland Hall describes his ontology as a "partial monism," given his conception of matter but not mind as a unitary substance, it's evident that Hall is using the term "monism" in strictly the numerical sense. Descartes' belief that all matter and mind can be joined into one, thanks to God, means that, in the sense in which I am using the term, his monism is anything but partial.¹²

Philosophy is another field as regards which Berlin and Williams can be characterized as monists. The proposition that the practical world contains a multiplicity of often irreconcilable values is, whether true or false, certainly coherent, and indeed both Berlin and Williams have written about it as well as numerous other subjects with remarkable lucidity. Some of their writings also contain criticisms of other thinkers who are charged with being contradictory. So it is wrong

¹¹ See, for example, Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History (1960)," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.); and "The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities (1974)," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.).

¹² See Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 248; Hall, "Monism and Pluralism," in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 363; and Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644), part I, art. 60, in *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 135. That Williams agrees with Berlin about the divorce between the human and natural sciences can be derived from the former's "Consistency and Realism," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), where he contrasts conflicts of obligations with conflicts of belief; and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 111–12, 138–40.

to suggest, as a few have done, that there's something paradoxical about Berlin's affirmation of value pluralism as a single, master idea.¹³

When it comes to practical reality, then, as distinct from philosophizing about that reality, Berlin is indeed a pluralist. Plato's Socrates once went so far as to claim that "justice, and prudence, and piety, and all these qualities, taken together, constitute some one single thing, virtue"; otherwise put, they are all "names for the same one thing."¹⁴ Berlin, by contrast, offers us a Butler-inspired epigram: "Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience."¹⁵ By this, he means to assert not only the discreteness of values' core meanings, but also that they can be so radically different from each other, so "incommensurable," that we cannot overcome their conflicts by appealing to some unified moral or political theory for guidance. Values, in other words, are often separate in a radical sense, separate and so plural.

Whence Berlin's great emphasis on tragedy. For the most part, this is tragedy as Hegel conceives of it, since it arises not from the commission of an intellectual error, as in Aristotle, but because of ethical dilemmas, the guilt-inducing struggle of good against good.¹⁶ So where Aristotle emphasizes how tragedy arouses pity and fear because, being drama rather than historical narrative, it relates an unmerited suffering that audience members imagine could happen to them,¹⁷ Hegel is less interested in the effect of reception than in the core structure of tragic narrative, which he identifies with the conflict of goods. What frightens us about tragedy, he believes, is the power of the goods that the conflict threatens to violate: "What a man has really to fear is not an external power and oppression by it, but the might of the ethical order which is one determinant of his own free reason and is at the same time that eternal and inviolable something which he summons up

¹³ See, for example, Chandran Kukathas, "What's the Big Idea?" *Reason*, November 1996.

¹⁴ *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett and Hayden Pelliccia, in *Selected Dialogues of Plato: The Benjamin Jowett Translation* (New York: Random House, 2000), 329C–D.

¹⁵ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 172.

¹⁶ For Aristotle's discussion of intellectual error (*hamartia*) driving tragedy, see *Poetics* 1453a8–9, 14–16.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, chs. 13–14.

against himself if once he turns against it.”¹⁸ Berlin would agree: when values clash, he states, we are “doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.”¹⁹

Berlin nevertheless diverges from Hegel in two respects. To begin with, even though *Hamlet* was Hegel’s preferred tragedy, a line from *Agamemnon* probably best captures his overall take on the genre: “We must suffer, suffer into truth.”²⁰ To Hegel, contending with tragedy can – indeed should – amount to more than just damage control. Through the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of conflicts, he believes that we can transcend them progressively. There’s little room for such progress in Berlin’s world, however.

Second, there is a sense in which Hegel thinks that the loss expressed through suffering in tragedies is ultimately not genuine. This is also why he considers comedy superior to tragedy since, unlike the emotions evoked by the latter, comedy encourages a dismissive “it is as nothing” attitude toward loss.²¹ Moreover, to Hegel, *everything* is open to being taken comically:

¹⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 1198.

¹⁹ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.), p. 14. Other works that emphasize the connection between value pluralism and tragedy include Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” in *Problems of the Self*; Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 2nd ed.), ch. 6; George W. Harris, *Reason’s Grief: An Essay on Tragedy and Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Lauren J. Apfel, *The Advent of Pluralism: Diversity and Conflict in the Age of Sophocles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chs. 1, 6–9; Jeff Spinner-Halev, *Enduring Injustice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. pp. 7, 17, 55, 122; and Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. ch. 1.

²⁰ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1966), p. 109. Paul Ricœur would object that this reflects Aeschylus’ impure conception of tragedy: *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 228–29. And evidently, unlike Kant, Hegel does not limit drama, nor any of the other arts, to the aesthetic dimension – as if they were a matter of beauty, say, but not of truth. It is because Hegel assumes that nothing is independent of Spirit that “the only important thing for a work of art is to present what corresponds with reason and spiritual truth” (*Aesthetics*, p. 1197). The structure of clashing goods he sees in tragedy, for instance, can be grasped by a “speculative” form of reason that he considers capable of reaching beyond the aesthetic to achieve an “absolute” idealism, one that unifies all dimensions of reality. See Martin Thibodeau, *Hegel and Greek Tragedy*, trans. Hans-Jakob Wilhelm (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 8–9, 18, 144–45, 178–79.

²¹ On the superiority of comedy, see p. 1205 of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, where he says that, compared to tragedy, comedy asserts “in a still higher degree the free right of the subjective personality and its self-assured dominion.” On the “it is as nothing” attitude, see William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult, and Comedy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), chs. 5–6; and Stephen C. Law, “Hegel and the Spirit of Comedy: *Der Geist der stets verneint*,” in William Maker, ed., *Hegel and Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 116–17.

What this self-consciousness beholds is that whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it – in its thinking, its existence, and its action – and is at its mercy. It is the return of everything universal into the certainty of itself which, in consequence, is this complete loss of fear and of essential being on the part of all that is alien. This self-certainty is a state of spiritual well-being and repose therein, such as is not to be found anywhere outside of this Comedy.²²

Hegel, then, would essentially have us “laugh it off,” since his monism implies that, from the “higher” perspective of Spirit, any loss is ultimately subjective. Indeed, the subjectivities that drive the conflict are cancelled out, in contrast to Spirit’s dialectical development, which is real because objective.²³ So while Hegel can still be interpreted as seeing tragic loss in terms of practical meaning, it remains relatively “flat” in that the “nothing” of “it is as nothing” appears to be identical to that of “there is nothing there.” Otherwise put: it is the nothing, not of nihilism, but of insignificance, of what does not stand out from what followers of Heidegger and Wittgenstein have identified as the prereflective background that makes all practical meaning possible.²⁴ Any loss is thus compatible with Hegel’s world-redeeming theodicy, which means it can be seen as equivalent to the conception of pain rejected by Emmanuel Levinas: “This is pain henceforth meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality glimpsed by faith or belief in progress. Beliefs presupposed by theodicy!”²⁵

Hegel’s approach to loss is far from new. He himself associates it with “the smiling blessedness of the Olympian gods,” long linked to watching comedy. As Julian Gough has put it:

²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 452–53.

²³ On the “higher” perspective, see Hegel, *Aesthetics*, pp. 1207–208, 1221. As Desmond puts it on p. 335 of his book, it is through affirming the “self-certainty of consciousness at one with itself” that “all otherness is viewed as finally a subordinate moment in the self-mediation of consciousness certain of itself.”

²⁴ See, for example, Charles Taylor, “Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Taylor, “Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger,” in Charles Guignon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 2nd ed.); and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁵ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: On-Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 96.

Two and a half thousand years ago, at the time of Aristophanes, the Greeks believed that comedy was superior to tragedy: tragedy was the merely human view of life (we sicken, we die). But comedy was the gods' view, from on high: our endless and repetitive cycle of suffering, our horror of it, our inability to escape it. The big, drunk, flawed, horny Greek gods watched us for entertainment, like a dirty, funny, violent, repetitive cartoon. And the best of the old Greek comedy tried to give us that relaxed, amused perspective on our flawed selves. We became as gods, laughing at our own follies.²⁶

Hegel similarly calls on us to see our losses as mere spectacle. That's why he would have us surrender ourselves as victims to "the *cunning* of reason," and it's why he can suggest that every one of us is no more than "a *moment* of the whole."²⁷ To protest would, supposedly, be to take ourselves too seriously – to perpetrate a form of moralism.

Yet all this assumes an aestheticized conception of conflict as unfolding within the unified totality of Spirit. No matter how violent the antagonism, Spirit provides a guarantee, at least in principle, of dialectical synthesis, of mediation. And because "opposition is the possibility of reunification," it seems that even such an absolute horror as the Holocaust may be sublimated and so redeemed. For "the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind."²⁸ The guarantee, moreover, allows Hegel to say that "it is to this absolute freedom of spirit which is utterly consoled in advance in every human undertaking, to this world of private serenity, that Aristophanes conducts us."²⁹

²⁶ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1222; Gough, "[Divine Comedy](#)," *Prospect Magazine*, 26 May 2007.

²⁷ That Hegel's preferred comedian is Aristophanes is made clear on pp. 1220–21 of his *Aesthetics*; as well as in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1: *Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1892]), pp. 426–30. "Cunning of reason" is from Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.166 (p. 663), and *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, vol. 1: *Manuscripts of the Introduction and The Lectures of 1822–3*, eds. and trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165–66 (p. 96 n. 44); and "a moment of the whole" is from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 669.

²⁸ Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 232; and Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 669. For an illustration of the aesthetic appeal of leaving no scars behind, see this video: "[Amazing Extreme Precision CNC Made Metal Block You Never Seen By Jingdiao](#)," *Machine Miracle* YouTube channel, 25 November 2019.

²⁹ *Aesthetics*, p. 1221. The very same guarantee of healing is behind the famous *Doppelsatz* from the preface to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge

Berlin would not agree.³⁰ More than that, he can be said to move away from Hegel in the opposite direction from Nietzsche – who, in his own way, also fails to give genuine tragedy its due. Hegel ultimately denies suffering, and so would suppress it; Nietzsche, even less realistically, calls on the capable few to celebrate the life that includes it, to embrace what he goes so far as to call tragedy’s “joy.”³¹ It was Nietzsche’s acute sense of compassion which led him to conclude that affirming life – given all the suffering – requires overcoming the self-hatred that inevitably comes from asserting, yet failing to live up to, moral standards. We cannot do this by adopting the theorist’s delusion that it’s possible to escape to some stable, painless place, however. So Nietzsche chooses instead to *welcome* the world’s senseless horrors, to endorse them aesthetically, for their own sake.³² And as Walter Benjamin implies, Nietzsche’s early, aestheticized conception of tragedy is based on a monist (because Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian) metaphysics: Nietzsche, Benjamin writes, admires the ability of “the truly aesthetic listener to bring to mind the tragic artist,” the one who lets us sense “the highest artistic primal joy, in the bosom of the primordially One.”³³

Berlin is far too sober a thinker to entertain any such flight to “the aesthetic” dimension of reality. While there are times when terrible losses must be accepted, he knows that, given what they are, they can never be embraced. At most, they can be “covered-over,” and even then not

University Press, 1991), p. 20: “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.” According to it, only that which actualizes or properly expresses a thing’s essence is real and, because this cannot involve loss, progress is inevitable. For as Hegel once put it to Heinrich Heine: “all that is rational must Be.” Quoted in *Heinrich Heine’s Memoirs: From His Works, Letters, and Conversations*, vol. 1, ed. Gustav Karpeles, trans. Gilbert Cannan (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), p. 115.

³⁰ See Berlin, “Hegel,” in *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, 2nd ed.).

³¹ Nietzsche, “What I Owe to the Ancients,” in *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, § 5, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³² See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and on embracing, “for their own sake,” those aspects of existence previously denied, see *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, ed. R. Kevin Hill, trans. Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), § 1041; as well as *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josephine Nauckoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), § 276; “Why I Am So Clever,” § 10, in *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*; and the epilogue to *Nietzsche contra Wagner: From the Files of a Psychologist*, the latter two in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*.

³³ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998, new ed.), p. 102.

always. “One can’t use a grin like a bandaid / or antidote for reality, / at least not all the time,” writes Al Purdy.³⁴ It is one thing to recognize there are good things that are not all good and bad things that can bring certain advantages (even Nietzsche doesn’t embrace tragedy solely for its own sake, since he also believes that it can ennoble great souls and its threat can help combat boredom). It is quite another thing to assume that, no matter the deprivation, every tragedy can be made subject to a theodicy.³⁵ This is why, as many have noted, Nietzsche’s most celebrated aphorism, “*From life’s school of war. – What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger,*” is plainly false. Perhaps none other than Norm Macdonald puts it best: “That which does not kill you makes you weaker, and will probably kill you the next time it shows up.”³⁶ Nietzsche, then, is guilty of what we might call “tragic thinking,” since he has adopted an utterly unrealistic conception of tragedy as something other than intolerable.

The irony here is that he shares much of this lack of realism with his philosophical arch-enemy. Plato once actually complained that tragedians lie when they fail to portray those brought to suffering by the gods as thereby benefiting from it.³⁷ But while Plato draws on Parmenides, to whom Shelley’s “The One remains, the many change and pass” certainly applies, Nietzsche is like Hegel in turning instead to Heraclitus, as we see from their endorsement of both becoming over being and the unity of opposites.³⁸

³⁴ “Over the Hills in the Rain, My Dear,” in *Al Purdy: Selected Poems 1962–1996*, eds. Purdy and Sam Solecki (Madira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1996), p. 75.

³⁵ On Nietzsche’s theodicy, see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 212–23; and Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 11.

³⁶ Nietzsche, “Arrows and Epigrams,” in *Twilight of the Idols*, § 8 (see also “Why I Am So Wise,” § 2, in *Ecce Homo*); and Macdonald, *Hitler’s Dog, Gossip & Trickery* (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2017), at 32:40.

³⁷ See his *Cratylus* 408C; and *Republic* 380B.

³⁸ “Adonais,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), line 460. For the relevant writings by Heraclitus, see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 2nd ed.), ch. 6, nos. 199–209. Plato can be interpreted as rejecting them given a conception of the Forms that combines Pythagorean ideas (e.g. *ibid.*, ch. 7, nos. 252–53) with Eleatic ones (e.g. Plato’s *Parmenides*). By contrast, Hegel declares that “there is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my Logic” in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 279; and Nietzsche tells us that “I generally feel warmer and in better spirits in [Heraclitus’] company than anywhere else” in his “*Birth of Tragedy*,” § 3 in *Ecce Homo*. In fact, Nietzsche himself makes clear that he gets his tragic thinking directly from Heraclitus: “Do guilt, injustice, contradiction and suffering exist in this world? They do, proclaims Heraclitus, but only for the limited human mind which sees things apart but not connected, not for the con-tuitive god. For him all contradictions run into harmony . . . In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence.” Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago:

So while both thinkers may be considered (Heraclitean) monists, neither can be said to uphold the “Platonic ideal” that, Berlin has asserted, “has been at the centre of ethical thought from the Greeks to the Christian visionaries of the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to progressive thought in the last century; and indeed, is believed by many to this day.”³⁹ The ideal asserts three things:

in the first place that, as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place, that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the third place, that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another – that we know *a priori*.⁴⁰

Note that, by implying the possibility of ongoing inquiry, these commitments include a sort of open incompleteness – and so more questions remaining to be asked, or truths to be discovered. Even so, I think Hegel and Nietzsche would have a problem with them all. To the Heraclitean, genuine questions cannot have single answers, since the questions themselves cannot be singular: each must differ at least slightly in meaning, since each questioner will be differently situated in the “river” of becoming. For the very same reason, there cannot be only one dependable path towards the discovery of the answers. And while those answers must indeed be compatible, they may still in some sense oppose one another, since that’s what it means to uphold the unity of opposites.

These differences should alert us to the possibility that other, more Platonist monists may uphold alternative conceptions of tragedy. We can begin with Plato himself, about whom there’s reason to question how much he, as distinct from his followers, embraces the second of Berlin’s

Henry Regnery, 1962), § 7.

³⁹ Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” p. 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 5–6; see also “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, pp. 25–27; “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” p. 102; and “A Message to the Twenty-First Century,” an appendix to *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, eds. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015).

three criteria. After all, doesn't his Socrates occasionally refer to the limitations of dialectic, that merely "second best" method of discovering truth employed by souls imprisoned in bodies, who have no choice but to rely upon human language?⁴¹

On one reading, first offered by Aristotle, this reveals a Plato who assumes a sharp ontological division between the Forms themselves and those material/subaltern entities that partake in them, albeit in deficient ways.⁴² The implication is that there's a fundamental distinction to be made between Plato's idealism and his naturalism. They may still fit together (he must surely hope), but they are essentially different. So we might expect this Plato to be doubtful about the possibility of actualizing the ideal of justice portrayed in Socrates' "city in speech."⁴³

On another reading, however, any talk of deficiency should be limited to flaws inherent in our thinking about, or perception of, the world. In which case, they are restricted to the second of Berlin's three criteria. In the cave allegory, for example, the shadows on the wall are merely apparent, but the cave itself, not to mention the things represented by the statues casting the shadows, *do* lay claim to reality – at least to the degree that they accurately reflect the Forms.⁴⁴ And those Forms are ordered by Reason according to the Form of the Good, the ultimate principle of unity.⁴⁵ Plato can thus describe creation as follows: "It was harmonized by proportion, and therefore has the spirit of friendship, and having been reconciled to itself, it was indissoluble by the hand of any other than the framer."⁴⁶ In such a world, perfect justice should be, at least in principle, a possibility, which is why Socrates declares, apparently without irony, "it's not impossible that it come to pass nor are we speaking of impossibilities. That it's hard, we too

⁴¹ See *Phaedo* 61D, 65B–67E, 82D–E, 99C, 107B; and *Timaeus* 29C–D.

⁴² See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1086b3–5; and *Phaedo* 74A–76A for Plato on material entities' deficiencies. Hans-Georg Gadamer goes so far as to imply that Aristotle deliberately misinterprets Plato on this point: see his *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, ed. and trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 133–34 n. 6, 144–45.

⁴³ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: HarperCollins, 1991, 2nd ed.), 368E–369B.

⁴⁴ See *Republic* 515C.

⁴⁵ See *Republic* 530A and *Laws* 967B. On the Form of the Good, see *Phaedo* 99C; *Republic* 508D–E, 509B, 511B; and *Philebus* 15A.

⁴⁶ *Timaeus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato: Volume III*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Sphere Books, 1970), 32C; at 33A, Plato also goes further and describes the world as "perfect." But if it is, then why would there be illusions in it? Hence Władysław Tatarkiewicz's remark that "this conception of the world as perfect may be regarded as an inconsistency on Plato's part." Tatarkiewicz, "Ontological and Theological Perfection," trans. Christopher Kasparek, *Dialectics and Humanism* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 187–92, p. 187.

agree.”⁴⁷ That said, this Plato ought to have room for the idea that, at least on occasion, real tragedy will be inescapable – though not, again, because of the world, so much as because of our failure to grasp it properly.⁴⁸

I consider the latter of these readings to be the more accurate, though there’s evidently something to be said for both.⁴⁹ Indeed, conflicting echoes of the two are present within monistic thinking since Plato, in domains from aesthetics to the natural world and politics. One of the more notable examples can be found in Renaissance English literature, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, when Prospero informs us that (mimetic) art is both absolute illusion (“the baseless fabric of this vision”) and absolute power (“graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let ’em forth / By my so potent art”).⁵⁰ Most thinkers have tended to go “all in” with one reading or the other, however.

On one side, we get visions of an illusory, oppressive sensible world like that of the Gnostics. They interpreted the “dyad” of the Middle Platonist Numenius of Apamea in a way that led them to blame the world on a demiurge, the inferior principle that created and structured it. Something of this attitude was later taken up (minus the theology, and with the world’s oppressiveness transposed into indifference) by twentieth century existentialism.⁵¹ On the other side, we get the far more popular idea that the mundane is both real and a major part of a thoroughly simpatico cosmos. The dominant version of this monism comes not from Plato, however, but from Aristotle, for whom “the rule of the many is not good, one ruler let there be.”⁵²

⁴⁷ *Republic*, 499D. And a great deal of luck is required, since it is necessary that “some divine chance coincidentally comes to pass.” *Ibid.*, 592A.

⁴⁸ See my “[Dirty Hands: The One and the Many](#),” *The Monist* 101, no. 2 (Apr. 2018): 150–169, pp. 157–58.

⁴⁹ For a succinct account of Plato’s ambivalences, see Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 155–58.

⁵⁰ *The Tempest*, IV.i.141, V.i.49–51; and see Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 116. The connection to Plato is made in Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 215 n. 48.

⁵¹ Regarding the parallels between Gnostics and existentialists, see Hans Jonas, “Epilogue: Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism,” in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, 2nd ed.)

⁵² *Metaphysics* 1076a4, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001). (Aristotle is referencing Homer’s *Iliad* II.204.) And here is Williams on Aristotle’s monist cosmology: “The idea that there was a harmonious fit between social roles, the structure of the human mind, and nature was by no means a belief that all Greeks held, and in its most complete and comforting form it was almost an Aristotelian specialty, one that was to prove immeasurably influential.” *Shame and Necessity*, p. 126.

Politically, this allowed Aristotle to award men an active role as citizens of a unified polis. In so doing, moreover, room was made for inflecting an added pathos in those cases of tragedy that are to be blamed on the failures of people to grasp the world properly. But when the polis gave way in late antiquity first to the kingdom and then to the empire, man became a passive citizen of the cosmos. This idea was already implicit in the Stoic conception of the *logos*, but it was also occasionally made explicit, as when Marcus Aurelius declared that “if [the gods] have not made decisions concerning me alone but have done so concerning the Whole, then I am obliged to welcome and be content with all that happens to me according to this sequence of natural events.”⁵³

Later permutations of this providential monist cosmology alternated between awarding people active, passive, or ambiguous roles to play. Boethius, for example, for whom “[t]he world in constant change / Maintains a harmony / . . . O happy race of men / If Love who rules the sky / Could rule your hearts as well!” seems best read as ambiguous about man’s role. Averroës clearly supports an active role for us, however, as does Spinoza (for both “truth does not oppose truth”); Leibniz (“Do your duty and be content with that which shall come of it, not only because you cannot resist divine providence, or the nature of things [which may suffice for tranquillity, but not for contentment], but also because you have to do with a good master”); and Condorcet (“Nature has linked together in an unbreakable chain truth, happiness and virtue”). Such ideas, however, certainly contrast with the passive strain expressed in Pope’s declaration that “whatever is, is right.”⁵⁴

⁵³ *The Essential Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Jacob Needleman and John P. Piazza (New York: Penguin, 2008), 6.44. This echoes Posidonius (c. 135BCE – c. 51BCE) who, while mortally ill, exclaimed “It’s no good, pain! Grievous you may be, but I shall never confess that you are an evil.” *Posidonius: III. The Translation of the Fragments*, trans. I.G. Kidd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), T38 (p. 41).

⁵⁴ For the shift from our playing active to passive roles as parts of the whole, first as polis and then as cosmos, see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 245–50. As for the other references: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V.E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1969 [c. 524]), bk. II, § 8, which, incidentally, is echoed in *The De Monarchia of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Aurelia Henry (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904 [1551]), ch. 9: “Men, as the Sons of Heaven, Should Follow in the Footprints of Heaven”; Averroës, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom in Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, ed. and trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UH: Brigham Young University Press, 2001 [c. 1180]), p. 9; Spinoza, “Thoughts on Metaphysics,” in *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. F.A. Hayes (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 144; Leibniz, “Preface,” to *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985), p. 55; Condorcet, *The Sketch* (1795), trans. June Barraclough, in *Political Writings*, eds. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 140; and Pope, *An Essay on Man*, l.294 (though this is qualified at IV.113–16). The claim that Condorcet is a consistent monist has been questioned by Lukes and Urbinati in their “Editors’ Introduction,” to Condorcet, *Political Writings*, pp. xxiv–xxvi, following Emma Rothschild’s *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), ch. 7. But they all seem to me

This tension between more politically passive and active monisms continued to Berlin's day. He would have us reject them all, however, and turn instead to those such as Helena from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for whom there are times "When truth kills truth, O devilish-holy fray!" (III.ii.129). This is why Berlin is so interested in those thinkers who have opposed the mainstream, monist tradition, however irrationally. They are the ones who "uncover the cracks, the flaws, the places between the ribs where the dagger can successfully be inserted."⁵⁵ He therefore never fails to remind us that, when values do conflict, often the best we can do is to balance them against each other, to compromise in hope of reaching an accommodation. So real loss, and so real tragedy, is sometimes unavoidable. But this is not due to some failure on our part, whether because our thinking or perception is essentially flawed, or because we are active or passive or some mixture of the two; rather, it's because of the nature of our values. They are why we need to reject monism, whether Heraclitean, as with Hegel and Nietzsche, or Parmenidean, as with Plato, Aristotle, and the many who came after them.

James' Pluramonism: Tragicomedy

James would agree – and not. We should be able to see why by invoking some of the distinctions traced above between Berlin's thought and the various monisms, as they will help us explore the nuances of James' often-misunderstood position. For even though he and others frequently identify his approach as pluralist, still others have seen fit to describe his ontology, at least, as a "concatenated unity." The reason, I believe, is that both the many and the one have a fundamental place in his thought. This is why he says that "the universe belongs to a plurality of semi-independent forces, each one of which may help or hinder, and be helped or hindered by, the operations of the rest." It's also why "the great point is to notice that the oneness and the manyness [of the world] are absolutely co-ordinate here. Neither is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other." Finally, regarding religion, it's telling that James expresses sympathy for both polytheism and a monistic mysticism.⁵⁶

to show only that Condorcet has room for "disagreement," not genuine (i.e. potentially irreconcilable) "conflict."

⁵⁵ Berlin, letter to Norman Brown (6 May 1991), in *Affirming*, p. 415.

⁵⁶ "Concatenated unity" is from John A. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 58, 108. The James quotations are from "The Dilemma of Determinism (1884)," in *The Will to Believe*, p. 175; and *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1907]), p. 68. On religion, see James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin, 1982 [1902]);

So when it comes to the practical, we should see similarities – but also differences – with Berlin’s value pluralism. These are particularly evident as regards moral and political dilemmas, along with their possible solutions. One might think of Berlin’s perspective on the conflict of values this way: unlike Lego pieces, all of which can be fitted together, values can stand so far apart that, when they do come into contact, it takes the form of a “clash” or “collision” – an adversarial, inherently zero-sum struggle that may be attenuated, perhaps, but never truly reconciled. Indeed, to attempt the reconciliation of such values would be like trying to fit a Lego piece together with, say, a quark. It just can’t be done.

For James’ view, consider his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life (1891).”⁵⁷ It certainly appears to endorse pluralism when it rejects any attempt to weave moral relations “into the unity of a stable system” (p. 185), or when it affirms “a mass of [ideals] about which no general consensus obtains” (p. 198). It is because “the various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals” that “no single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale” (p. 201). To James, this is why “every end of desire that presents itself appears exclusive of some other end of desire” (p. 202), and so why we should accept a “tragically practical” (p. 202) world, one in which, all too often, “some part of [an] ideal must be butchered” (p. 203).

Near the beginning of the essay, however, we are also told that moral philosophers must aim for an account of moral relations that gathers them “into the unity of a stable system, and make[s] of the world what one may call a genuine *universe* from the ethical point of view” (p. 185). James then proposes that we recognize the single “*most* universal principle, that the essence of good is simply to *satisfy demand*” (p. 201); more specifically, “to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*” (p. 205).⁵⁸

and Hall, “The Polytheism of William James.” Note, as well, the title of what Megan Rust Mustain has called “James’ metaphysical unwritten magnum opus”: *The Many and the One*, in *Manuscript Essays and Notes: The Works of William James*, vol. 18, eds. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Mustain, *Overcoming Cynicism: William James and the Metaphysics of Engagement* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 88 n. 13. So when James dismisses “pluralist monism” on p. 14 of *Pragmatism*, I interpret him as referring not to what I call pluramonism, but to a mereological position that would combine, not pluralism and monism, but atomism and holism.

⁵⁷ In *The Will to Believe*. Except where indicated, the quotations in this and the subsequent two paragraphs are all from this essay.

⁵⁸ As Sidney Hook puts this idea, which he considers the central aim of all pragmatist practical thought, it consists of finding “some encompassing value on the basis of some shared interest.” Hook, “Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 33 (1959–60): 5–26, p. 23.

Is this meant to be a unifying principle? Yes, but not in the way that utilitarianism, for instance, negates plurality by reducing all values to that of utility; rather, James' principle remains an overarching one, a canopy of sorts that covers-over the plurality without (consistently) negating it. And because it also unifies, it makes a kind of progress possible, since it provides a "perfectly definite path" (p. 204) – one that, if taken, will ensure "the course of history is nothing but the story of men's struggles from generation to generation, to find the more and more inclusive order" (p. 205). For "though some one's ideals are unquestionably the worse off for each improvement, yet a vastly greater total number of them find shelter in our civilized society than in the older savage ways" (p. 205). The best action, then, will consistently be the one that "makes for the *best whole*," that awards the highest rank to those values which "*prevail at the least cost*" (p. 205).

So James affirms unity both alongside and exclusive of plurality, as well as combined with it, making for more plurality while simultaneously forming a whole that is inclusive of all of its elements. This is dizzying, to be sure, but for James it merely reflects the "victory and defeat" (p. 205) that necessarily attends all successful philosophy. Because in addition to the achievement of philosophy's "more inclusive side," there's also the undeniable fact that "even in the hour of triumph it will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party's interest lay" (p. 205). That this is not unadulterated pluralism should be obvious, since pluralists, as we've seen with Berlin, offer us no more than a multiplicity of incompatible goods, whereas James thinks we can be true to all of them, together, by respecting "one unconditional commandment," by striving to "bring about the very largest total universe of good which thou canst see" (p. 209).

All of this explains why, alongside tragedy, James also gives an important place to comedy. It has been said that "a deep sadness lay behind James's playfulness. His humour . . . came, if not from, then with his reasoned view that 'better' is not fated but possible."⁵⁹ Not that humour should be equated with comedy, which is best seen as a narrative form rather than something arising from a particular kind of conflict.⁶⁰ That said, humour is, of course, present within comedy (though not always, since some comedies obviously fail to be funny). And as Ramón del Castillo points out in a paper that presents humour as an abridged expression of the sympathetic (as distinct from cynical) temper that James vindicated in philosophy, comic selves are the counterpart to those of

⁵⁹ Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 276.

⁶⁰ See my "On the Minimal Global Ethic," in *Patriotic Elaborations*, pp. 151–62.

tragedians. For their humour engages with, but also deflates, the tragic situation.⁶¹ And James, I've been claiming, does both this and its opposite.

This is why, while he seems to me correct to have written of “my pluralism,”⁶² I believe this pluralism sits alongside, and in paradoxical tension with, a monism. Berlin, by contrast, is once again best understood as a thoroughgoing pluralist, at least as regards the practical. True, there was a time when he may have believed that multiple values could cohere and so be unified enough that it was possible to derive a liberalism directly from them. But he later clearly came to agree with those, such as Leo Strauss, for whom such a move is untenable. Hence this declaration of his: “Pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts. There are liberal theories which are not pluralistic. I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected.”⁶³

Ultimately, then, Berlin's loyalty is strictly to the tragic. And that is why, though he certainly shared with his intellectual hero Alexander Herzen an “unquenchable delight in the variety of life and the comedy of the human character” in his personal life, there was no place for comedy in

⁶¹ See James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 16; and del Castillo, “The Comic Mind of William James,” *William James Studies* 8, (2012): 65–116, esp. p. 83.

⁶² James, letter to Minot Judson Savage (4 January 1910), in *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 12: April 1908–August 1910*, eds. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 407.

⁶³ As Strauss wrote of this issue: “we are here concerned with a theoretical problem, and in this respect we are forced to say that Berlin contradicts himself.” Strauss, “Relativism (1961),” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 16. Berlin's declaration is from Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Peter Halban, 1991), p. 44; see also Berlin and Bernard Williams, “Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply,” *Political Studies* 62, no. 2 (June 1994): 306–309, pp. 308–309; as well as my “Isaiah Berlin,” in Hugh LaFollette, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015); and, for a more general treatment of the question, my “Political Philosophies and Political Ideologies,” in *Patriotic Elaborations*.

Berlin's writings on morality or politics.⁶⁴ Evidently, he would never have concurred with James' vision of life as "all this mortal tragi-comedy."⁶⁵

Conclusion: Comedy First

I disagree with both pluralists such as Berlin and pluramomists such as James. Because I refuse to accept that a genuine conflict between values is necessarily one that can be, at best, accommodated. I do not, however, think we should be adopting one of the monist alternatives – be it Plato's, which as we've seen would ultimately make the very idea of such conflicts more or less illusory; or Hegel's, which would do the same regarding the loss attending a given conflict's sublation; or Nietzsche's, which calls on us to feel joy about the loss. Because what if the values can be transformed? Despite their devotion to Heraclitus, neither Hegel nor Nietzsche seem to me to go as far as they should in embracing the possibilities of Heraclitean flux. To conceive of values as parts of a practical whole is to make way for the possibility that they can be transformed such that their conflicts are not merely accommodated, but truly reconciled through integration. Then, instead of "victory and defeat," room could be made for an outcome that is truly "win-win" for all concerned. In this way, we could mend the world.

Such an approach lends itself to a *serious* lightheartedness, one that can be associated with a different type of comedy than the Aristophanic kind that Hegel favoured. I'm thinking of the New Comedy that was inaugurated by Menander. As Northrop Frye shows, the earlier Old Comedy's distinguishing feature is "the contest or *agon*" that its characters embody, with "absurdity" more often as not the victor.⁶⁶ The humour of Old Comedy thus remains directly based

⁶⁴ Berlin's description of Herzen is from "Herzen and His Memoirs," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 519. For an exquisite example of Berlin's own wit, consider this excerpt from his 9 August 1955 letter to T.S. Eliot: "I feel quite sure that, for all your disclaimers, your erudition, as well as your wisdom, are far profounder than mine will ever be. Not that it would take much to be that; but it is all I can offer, sincerely, in return, and I do offer it to you in all humility and admiration." *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, eds. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009), p. 493. As for Berlin's philosophical neglect of comedy, Cynthia Willet remarks that "[w]hile philosophers may view tragedy as a reliable source of wisdom, they have been more likely to neglect comedy altogether. The classic defense of liberalism, Isaiah Berlin's post-World War II essay, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', exemplifies this typical prejudice. Berlin draws upon a broad range of human experience to clarify the meaning of freedom. And while tragedy features a prominent role in the discussion, no mention at all is made of the comic." Willet, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 117–18.

⁶⁵ James, Letter to John C. Gray (23 November 1899), in *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 9: July 1899–1901*, eds. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁶⁶ Frye, "Romance as Masque," in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana

on conflict (and of the sort that, I presume, once led Hannah Arendt to observe that “the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny”⁶⁷). New Comedy, by contrast, aims to go *through and beyond* the conflict, given its far more ambitious goal of genuine reconciliation. It’s for this reason that its stories typically feature alienated lovers who succeed in moving towards union. Frye again:

New Comedy reaches its *telos* in the final scene, which is superficially marriage, and, more profoundly, a rebirth. A new society is created on the stage in the last movements of a typical New Comedy, and is often expanded by a recognition scene and a restoring of a birthright. The recognition is connected with the secret of somebody’s birth in the common device of the foundling plot. Simpler and equally popular is the comedy in which a hero, after many setbacks, succeeds in doing something that wins him the heroine and a new sense of identity.⁶⁸

The humour here is, again, still initially generated by conflict. But the lightheartedness comes not from adopting the god’s-eye perspective that allows one to be “raised altogether above his own inner contradiction,”⁶⁹ so much as from successfully going through the conflict and its contradictions – from treating its outcome seriously rather than as nothing. This is why Menander’s characters so often participate in successful conversations: “I’m totally convinced by you” and “You see I’ve been convinced,” says one. “You have convinced me by your words,” says another.⁷⁰

However, such conversations are only possible, when they are possible, if they’re concerned with things that are related to each other in a certain way. The whole of which they are parts must be neither a one, nor a many, nor both, nor neither; rather, it must be something in between. Because, ultimately, the conversation is about nothing other than the meaning of this whole.

University Press, 1976), pp. 150–51; see also Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 46, where he associates Old Comedy with play.

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1964, rev. ed.), p. 48.

⁶⁸ Frye, “Romance as Masque,” p. 148.

⁶⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1200.

⁷⁰ Menander, *The Bad-Tempered Man*, in *The Plays and Fragments*, trans. Maurice Balme (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 35–36.

(Indeed, given that ideas are part of the world, even conversations leading to better understandings of nature can be said to contribute to its mending.⁷¹)

None of this is to deny that there are times when tragedy is inescapable – when, as has been said, even “[h]e that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (Eccles. 1:18). But a tragic bias is still wrong, since it will cause us to miss real opportunities for progress. It’s not only the threats of tragedy that should make us serious. The prospects of comedy should do so as well.

⁷¹ For more on this approach to ethics, both personal and political, see my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics: Putting Practice First* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).