PLURALISM, TOLERATION, AND ETHICAL PROMISCUITY

Philip J. Ivanhoe

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that from an ethical point of view tolerance, which is simply one of a number of possible responses to ethical pluralism, is not an acceptable ideal. It fails to acknowledge and appreciate the good in other forms of life and thereby does not adequately respect the people who live these lives. Toleration limits the range of goods we might appreciate in our own lives and in the lives of those we care most about, and it tends to lead to a number of deformations or personal failures of character. In place of tolerance, we should embrace ethical promiscuity— a view that not only acknowledges ethical pluralism but also offers good reasons to celebrate this state of affairs.

KEY WORDS: *moral relativism*, *pluralism*, *tolerance*, *clash of cultures*, *reasonable pluralism*, *overlapping consensus*, *comparative ethics*

1. Introduction

A number of philosophers have argued for what I will call "the fact of ethical pluralism," which is the view that there are a variety of distinct ethical values in the world that cannot be reduced to one another or derived from any higher common source.[1] While such a definition of pluralism describes an important position regarding ethical values, it does not commit one to any particular view concerning what I will call "the response to or significance of ethical pluralism." People who hold different forms of ethical pluralism, who agree

---

[1] William James, Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, John Rawls, and Charles Taylor are representatives of a much larger group of thinkers who propose and defend some version of this kind of view. For a helpful discussion of different notions of pluralism and the ways in which they can differ from one another and from relativism, see Wong 2006, 94–100. While I agree with much of Wong's analysis in this work and in Wong 1986, I understand his position as primarily a defense of ethical pluralism rather than relativism because the lives or cultures that instantiate different constellations of distinct values for him do not contain values that we and those who live in these different cultures cannot in some way come to see as good. Unlike genuine cases of relativism, for Wong there is a way to deliberate about the merits of conflicting values; he relates all values back to a common, though appropriately accommodating, conception of human nature.

that there are irreducibly different and competing values or systems of value in the world, can, at the same time, hold very different views about whether or not this is a good, bad, or indifferent state of affairs. Many contemporary Western philosophers tend to bemoan or at least show some concern about the variety of values in the world—often described in terms of a "conflict" or "clash" of values or cultures—but there is no clear reason why this is the proper response to the fact of ethical pluralism.[2] If pluralism with regard to ethical values is accepted as a fact, one might well have reasons to bemoan this feature of our world, but one might also have reasons to be indifferent to or perhaps celebrate this state of affairs. By celebrate, I mean, roughly, to see and welcome it as a good thing.

The majority of contemporary Western philosophers who accept the fact of ethical pluralism and take this as a cause for concern tend to argue for tolerance in the face of such differences. Tolerance is here typically understood as the uncritical acceptance of a range of competing and mutually irreconcilable values or forms of life. Something like this response is thought necessary in order to prevent an unjustified war among those who hold and defend competing ethical values.[3] But such a conception of tolerance is not in any way entailed by the fact of ethical pluralism. One could respond to the variety of competing forms of life by arguing that each person should rest content and defend her home tradition, because among the different contenders it is the most familiar and comforting option she has. Alternatively, one might argue that we should let different values and systems of value compete openly with one another, allowing for a kind of natural selection to take its course at the level of values.[4] Without seeking to defend either of these alternatives, the point remains that tolerance, as I have defined it here, is but one possible response to the fact of ethical pluralism, the

[2] David B. Wong is one notable exception to this trend. For an excellent introduction to the "clash of civilizations" point of view, represented most clearly and dramatically by the work of Samuel P. Huntington, see the entry on this topic in *Wikipedia*.

[3] This reflects more the historical circumstances that gave rise to Western notions of tolerance—namely, religious warfare—rather than any deep conceptual fact about pluralism. Under the threat of imminent warfare or physical violence, calls for tolerance make good sense. As a matter of fact, this is when such calls almost always are heard. However, that does not mean that tolerance should be our ultimate goal. By analogy, we think it makes sense to restrain someone who is a threat to himself and others, but that is not what we want for him as an ideal life.

[4] Something like this—a political environment within which such competition can proceed without bias or favoritism—describes one distinctive interpretation of tolerance, shared by such influential thinkers as John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* and William James in works such as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*. Nevertheless, it differs from the sense of tolerance as I am using the term in this essay. For a collection of essays on contemporary notions of tolerance, see Heyd 1996.

one most characteristic and in some ways constitutive of a liberal point of view.

Ethical pluralism and tolerance must be distinguished from ethical or moral relativism. This is the view that (1) ethical claims are true or false only relative to some particular perspective, and (2) no particular perspective is privileged over any other. Gilbert Harman has offered a well-known defense of moral relativism (2000, 3–99). However, as in the case of ethical pluralism, the fact of moral relativism must be distinguished from the response to or significance of this fact. In his work on relativism, Harman shows no interest in whether or not relativism is morally good or bad, right or wrong, and given the nature of his view, such a judgment or attitude would not establish anything of great ethical significance. His primary concern is simply to get us to recognize how things are in regard to moral values and judgments.[5]

In two impressive book-length studies, David B. Wong has argued for the fact of ethical pluralism or what in his early work he calls "relativism" and in his later work "pluralistic relativism."[6] Wong shares Harman's goal of establishing how things are in regard to moral values, but in addition he is interested in defending a particular response to ethical pluralism by showing that a life lived according to a true and complete understanding of relativism or pluralistic relativism is morally better. The reason such a life is morally better is that it enables us to avoid the wrong of inflicting harm upon others by imposing our values on them when we have no adequate warrant to do so. In this respect, Wong's view is something like the view that I will describe and defend in this essay—what I call "ethical promiscuity."[7]

Like pluralistic relativism, advocates of ethical promiscuity insist that it is better to live with a more accurate understanding of ethical value and that we must avoid imposing views upon others when we have no clear warrant to do so. Going beyond these two reasons, however, ethical promiscuity offers additional and substantial arguments for why the life it describes is morally better. These reasons lead

---

[5] Tacitly, both Harman and Wong are committed to the idea that a life lived in light of a more accurate account of how things are in the world is a better life because it exhibits greater intellectual integrity. This belief is shared by the author of this essay.

[6] For a number of reasons, I will focus most of my remarks on Wong's more recent treatment of these issues. Most important among these is that he here supports his view with the kind of naturalistic appeals that I see as the best foundation for ethics. On certain critical points (for example, why his view is morally better than other alternatives), his argument remains quite consistent across his different works. In such cases, my remarks should be taken to apply to both the earlier and later books.

[7] The term "ethical promiscuity" is inspired by John Dupre's notion of "promiscuous realism," used in regard to the philosophy of science (1993). For ethical promiscuity in the writings of the early Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, see Ivanhoe 1996, 196–214.

those who endorse ethical promiscuity to question, and ultimately to reject as inadequate, the popular ideal of tolerance that Wong and others defend as a corollary to their versions of pluralism. Rather than reconciling oneself to irreconcilable differences by adopting a somewhat grim sense of bearing or tolerating opposing points of view, ethical promiscuity argues for a more demanding response, one that celebrates ethical diversity as an important feature of good human lives.

2. Ethical Promiscuity

Ethical promiscuity relies upon two supporting claims. First is the fact of ethical pluralism, understood as the view described above; second is the recognition that no single human life or culture can realize all of the values that are possible for creatures like us.[8] Since, as noted above, a wide range of authors have argued for the fact of ethical pluralism, I will not here rehearse the reasons for accepting this claim other than to note that any naturalistic account of ethics will strongly incline one toward some form of ethical pluralism. On such accounts, "ethical values" refers to a particularly serious and important species of the genus of values in general (Midgley 1981, 103–32). The nature of this species is roughly such that it concerns attitudes, actions, and states of affairs that play a central role in the well-being of human beings. This includes both issues that directly concern their individual welfare as well as those that facilitate and sustain a wide range of interpersonal relationships within families, between individuals, and within or between larger social groups. Given such a conception of the nature of ethical values, it should be clear that a wide and varied collection of goods fall within the ambit of this category. Human lives are complex—individually, interpersonally, and more broadly, socially. Such a view of ethical value points toward the second claim underlying ethical promiscuity: no single human life or social system does, or even can, instantiate all of the values that are possible for creatures like us.

The second supporting claim of ethical promiscuity is an unavoidable feature of human ethical life. It results from the confluence of three related but distinct factors. First, human beings are finite creatures. We can only live one life at a time. Certain values are mutually antagonistic to one another and require a particular form of life; therefore, no single person can hope to experience in any adequate

---

[8] Robert Johnson argues for a similar point concerning our inability to instantiate every virtue in any single human life (2007, 125–46). He further points out the degree to which the cultivation of most virtues depends in complex ways upon the participation of others.

fashion the full range of all human values.[9] Second, access to certain goods is a result of factors such as one's gender, race, tradition, or personal history, which are largely or wholly contingent matters. Chance offers us direct access to only a small sample of the full range of human values. Third, while ultimately based upon core aspects of human nature, to varying degrees human values are products of human ingenuity. Among other things, this means that it is possible to discover or create new human values.

We can explore further some of these claims about the second foundation of ethical promiscuity by analyzing and comparing some examples of good lives. Let us begin by considering two possible lives open to people in modern Western societies. The first is illustrated by someone who finds deep fulfillment in a life dedicated to working in her family business, alongside her mother and father and in the company of her siblings and their children. Part of what is rewarding about such a life is the sense of common purpose and collective effort, which is complemented by the knowledge that her work primarily benefits the people most dear to her in direct and complex ways. She feels a distinctive sense of pride in having this enterprise represent her entire family; the business expresses their shared commitment to hard work, honesty, fairness, and other related values. She finds satisfaction and a more robust sense of self in carrying on this enterprise, in the prospect of doing so once her parents retire and pass on, and in contemplating having her own children, nieces, and nephews work beside her to later carry on the business when her time for retirement and passing on comes around. Being devoted to this business, she

---

[9] Lee H. Yearley has argued for what he calls "spiritual regret," and his view offers a number of important insights that in some respects are similar to and support ethical promiscuity (1994, 1–26). He claims people are aware of and able to appreciate, at least to some degree, the goods internal to religious traditions other than the ones they follow, and this can give rise to a special sense of regret about the inability to enjoy such goods within the ambit of one's chosen life. Yearley argues that spiritual regret is a new virtue, one that human beings are discovering only recently. Spiritual regret differs from ethical promiscuity in seeing *regret* as the primary response to ethical pluralism. One might to some degree regret not being able to live other good lives, but one might also feel *delight* in discovering and learning about other kinds of lives. We do not usually feel regret when reading books about someone else's noble and inspiring life. Another difference concerns the claim that even one who appreciates the good of another form of life would not want it "for myself nor for those about whom I care most" (1994, 13). This seems to indicate a relatively tepid appreciation for the other form of life. Yearley argues that the reason regret is the proper response concerns our sense of integrity, but it is difficult to see why even a strong sense of personal integrity would limit the choices that *other* people make, even those we love. Such an intense and overriding concern with one's own self is the kind of value that one must come to see as a good among goods if one is really to embrace pluralism.

subordinates certain important life decisions to the greater common enterprise, choosing to act out of a commitment to its flourishing even at the expense of other forms of individual advantage. The form of her life and her individual values are distinctive.

Our second case is someone who dedicates his life to military service and finds fulfillment and ultimate meaning as one among a band of brothers. Within the unique camaraderie of fellow soldiers who train, work, fight, kill, bleed, and die with and for one another, he has discovered and come to cherish a form of life that only a few truly understand. It is a highly demanding life in which dedication to mission and the bonds of friendship transcend anything one encounters in the everyday civilian world. This outlook is reflected in the clear line most soldiers draw between themselves and their fellow citizens. It manifests itself in their widespread and pronounced tendency to look down upon the latter as less disciplined, honorable, and brave, generally seeing them as more slovenly, self-indulgent, and naïve than those who have heard and follow the call of duty. Part of the reason those who have served together tend to remain dedicated to their former comrades in arms—regardless of how far apart their lives might later diverge—is that the bonds forged in military service require what in normal life looks like "fanatical" devotion to one another. To those who have served together, this bond is simply a natural and distinctive feature of the life they have chosen to live, one in which risk and sacrifice on behalf of comrades and duty distinguishes them from their civilian counterparts and marks them as forever special and distinct.

Now one might well believe that both of the lives sketched above are fine and perhaps even attractive, and yet the goods within them are in a number of respects distinctive and not mutually accessible. The businesswoman will never know what it is like to close her eyes at night and place her life in the hands of comrades in arms; the soldier will never contemplate building and sustaining a family enterprise in the company of parents, siblings, and children that will continue long after he is gone. Nevertheless, those who have lived one or the other of these lives can, with enough imagination, patience, and understanding, come to see and to some extent appreciate what is valuable within the other—at least to the point where they know that they are looking at another different but worthy human life.[10] This is the kind of mutual

[10] The accessibility of different values or forms of life can vary considerably, and those that are closer to our home sensibilities are easier to appreciate and condone. Some may be so different from our more familiar sensibilities that we find it quite difficult to fully appreciate or embrace them. However, that does not mean that we cannot see them as parts or forms of a good life. Thanks to Ho-mun Chan for raising and exploring this issue with me.

recognition and "appraisal respect" at the heart of ethical promiscuity.[11] Indeed, it does not seem implausible to believe that at least a number of people who work to achieve a sympathetic understanding of other kinds of lives will ultimately come to see their own and the other's lives as in important ways mutually interdependent.[12]

To give another example, consider the role that filial piety plays in the lives of many people in East Asian cultures compared with the role it plays in contemporary American culture (Ivanhoe 2007, 297–312). While contemporary Americans are not wholly bereft of a sense of connection with, obligation toward, and love for their parents, the way that these are conceived and the breadth and depth of such filial feelings are very different from what is the norm throughout East Asian cultures. Some hint of this difference is given by the fact that in most East Asian cultures, the ideal of caring for one's parents in old age is reinforced by a legal obligation to do so, and yet, because of the strength of this shared cultural norm, the legal requirement is almost never brought into play. Filial piety is a widely embraced virtue in East Asian cultures; it is not thought of as arising out of some tacit contract between parents and children, nor is it primarily founded on a sense of strict duty or gratitude for past good treatment. It is rather regarded as the full expression of a natural human inclination to love, care for, and revere one's parents.[13] People who fail to fulfill this virtue fully are regarded as inhumane and those who deeply violate it are widely viewed as cruel, deformed, and—in extreme cases—not fully human. As a result, many people in East Asian societies regard American views about the rights and autonomy of children and their independence from parents as bizarre and off-putting. Many of the related norms and practices of American culture are seen as deeply alien and fundamentally at odds with their own preferred way of life.

In this case we seem to find the "clash of cultures" that is often invoked in discussions about moral relativism and the need for tolerance. Or, alternatively, we interpret this example as offering a case in which at least one of these cultures has failed to see the true features of the moral terrain. People who embrace the latter view can be found on both sides of this debate. However, in opposition to either of these

---

[11] In Stephen Darwall's terms, one must have appraisal respect as well as recognition respect for others (1992, 65–78). Appraisal respect requires that one both understand and truly appreciate some other value: one must *value* it as opposed to simply being able to evaluate it. Of course, this does not entail that one wants what is valued for oneself. We will return to this idea in our discussion of ethical promiscuity below.

[12] Thanks to Eric L. Hutton for pointing out this further possibility.

[13] Religious and other kinds of metaphysical grounds for filial piety are also widely embraced in the Confucian tradition and these remain active reasons for people in contemporary East Asian societies.

possibilities, it seems far more reasonable to see this difference as an example of the irreducible plurality of values. On the one hand, more than a few people from both cultures do in fact see some sense in the alternative way of life. The vast majority of outright dismissals and the harshest criticisms on either side come from people who have no clear sense or experience of the other form of life. Those who understand and have some appreciation for the alternative tend to acknowledge the value of the other, while in many cases still preferring to retain, follow, and defend their home tradition. They see correctly that one cannot live a life that realizes both the distinctive East Asian sense of filial piety and the particular goods associated with modern American independence, autonomy, rights, and choice. Moderately sympathetic people who have lived in both East Asian and American cultures can appreciate the greater order, safety, civility, and shared sense of community and vision in the former while still valuing the greater freedom, individuality, choice, and diversity of the latter. One can genuinely appreciate these sets of goods, recognize the diminished presence of one set in the alternative culture, and yet also realize that it is simply not possible to realize both sets in a single form of life. Here we see another illustration of the phenomenon and general perspective of ethical promiscuity.[14]

These different examples illustrate another important feature of ethical promiscuity. While ethical promiscuity sees great value in the variety of good forms of life—for reasons that will be explained below—it does not entail or advocate jumping around from one form of life to another or simply sampling, buffet-style, from some menu of possible lives.[15] Such possibilities are for the most part more notional than real (Williams 1985, 160–61). Living more than one good life at the same time is a practical impossibility; as the examples above show, one simply cannot simultaneously instantiate a range of important values in a single human life. That said, some people have had the rare opportunity of experiencing the goods internal to more than one form of life. The greater course of a human life can lead one to experience distinctively, even dramatically, different forms of life. Sometimes the

---

[14] I do not here develop a separate example to illustrate the third reason I claim for the second feature of ethical promiscuity (the idea that new values can be created); my discussion of Western conceptions of individualism and autonomy provides a clear example of this phenomenon. Schneewind's seminal study of the development of the Western notion of autonomy offers solid support for this example and general claim (1997). Furthermore, Yearley's claim that "spiritual regret" is an example of a new virtue lends additional support.

[15] Ethical promiscuity is "promiscuous" only in the sense that it sees appreciation of diversity as valuable. It is not promiscuous in the sense of moving easily between different goods.

transition from one period of such a life into the other is uneasy and difficult, as for example, is regularly the case when those who have served in combat return to the civilian world. Sometimes the movement from one form of life to another is so decisive, dramatic and joyful, that people feel inclined to describe it in terms of beginning a "new life" or "being reborn." Those who have overcome serious addictions or have experienced religious conversions offer clear and vivid examples of this type of change. In fact, we have all experienced different forms of life in some sense, including the transition from one to another, as we pass through or reflect back upon the various stages of our own lives.

The fortunate among us can appreciate the carefree nature of youth without indulging in nostalgia. We enjoy seeing our children experience a wide range of goods that we think are real and important, even while, in many cases, no longer wanting such things for ourselves. I was elated when my daughter went to her prom, graduated from college, and entered graduate school, but such experiences are in no way attractive for me. In the same way, one can look back with pride and satisfaction on a period in one's life when one worked in one's family business or served one's country without regretting or yearning for the distinctive goods one enjoyed during those times simply because they are absent from one's present life. The more sensible response to such reflection is the feeling that one has been remarkably lucky, even blessed, to have had these experiences as parts of one's life. In the same way, we can appreciate the lives of many people who live very differently from the way we do if we take the time and make the effort to come to appreciate—as well as simply understand—the lives they lead. This process not only honors them, which is fitting, but it can also improve and benefit us and those around us.

Rather than bemoan or remain indifferent to the diversity of good lives, ethical promiscuity celebrates the fact of ethical pluralism. There are several reasons for such celebration. First, there is the reason that Wong offers in defense of his form of relativism. If one accepts the fact of ethical pluralism, then one has no good reason to condemn those who embrace alternative schemes of value. To do so can harm them in a number of ways. It often leads to direct harm by serving as an excuse to oppress, exploit, or attack those who are seen as radically different; it can also harm more indirectly by denying others the fundamental human good of choosing how to live their lives.

As noted earlier, Wong's view clearly describes a version of ethical pluralism. However, it is much more difficult to see it as an expression of ethical relativism. Unlike the latter type of view, Wong's position accepts that there are an indeterminate number of alternative values and ways of life that really are equally worthy of our appreciation, and

further, that sympathetic and reasonable people who make an effort at understanding and appreciating these other values can see them as arising from the common basic needs, desires, and capacities of human nature. In other words, at least in his latest book, Wong argues that people can both understand and justify a wide range of competing values and forms of life. For this reason, Wong's view fails as a form of relativism. This is not really a loss; his important arguments for avoiding harm to others hold with equal force and lend support to ethical promiscuity. From the perspective of ethical promiscuity, such a commitment to avoiding unnecessary harm to others, which arises from difficult and complex deliberations and results in specific choices and practices, is not just the duty of tolerance, but is additionally a source of satisfaction and delight. Living out of such a commitment expresses a virtue that is a vital and important constituent of a good life.[16]

Ethical promiscuity insists that there are additional reasons to celebrate the diversity and values of good lives. The first of these concerns avoiding a severe deformation of character that prevents one from properly respecting and valuing other good human beings; the second concerns sharing and enjoying a richer and more edifying life. Those who embrace ethical promiscuity avoid a serious ethical deformation by recognizing that the life they lead is not the only good life possible for creatures like us. This will seem like an obvious point to many, but we must not rush to judgment here. This aspect of ethical promiscuity is not something that people who merely tolerate other forms of life manage to achieve. Most advocates of tolerance do not require us to understand, in any substantial way, the views that we are asked to tolerate; rather, we only have to know enough about them to know that they do not violate some minimal level of moral acceptability. None insist that we work to appreciate the mad variety of values in the world and to be open to the quest for new ones. Such a response to the fact of ethical pluralism—a principled openness to the variety of value—leads one to look beyond tolerance in the search for a good human life.

There are several reasons why tolerance is not enough. The first is that it appears to be psychologically unstable and unreliable (Fletcher, 1996).[17] It is odd to think that we can live and work together effectively

---

[16] In some traditions, avoiding harm is a major virtue and a central feature of a good life. For example, consider that the virtue of *ahimsa* defines such an ideal in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions.

[17] As pointed out in note 3, tolerance is not a particularly appealing ideal and so it is difficult to understand it as a standard virtue. It is at best an interim position in times of difficulty. Bernard Williams argues for a similar view, calling tolerance an "interim value" that is at best appropriate for a specific historical context, a point on the way to

with people who lead lives that in one way or another we find reprehensible or disgusting. Some people may be able to bracket their feelings and beliefs, grin and bear it, carrying on as if their compatriots were really acceptable, but most people find it extremely difficult to proceed in this way. If one happens to live in a social class that shields one from regular contact with people who espouse radically different beliefs and practices, tolerance offers a convenient and appealing excuse for not engaging, learning about, and coming to appreciate the nature of these alternative forms of life.[18] But if one has to or chooses to live and work well together with others, one must respect them not only as persons but as people—that is, as fellow members of one's community who are living worthwhile lives. This attitude applies ceteris paribus to the larger communities that link us in various ways to all other human beings.

Even if one could show that such practical concerns about the psychological viability of tolerance as a lived ideal are unwarranted, deeper objections remain that are central features of ethical promiscuity. For if, as ethical pluralism insists, there really are an unspecified number of equally important ethical values to be found in the world, then we have good reasons not only to come to understand this fact but also to appreciate these values. To judge other values and ways of life as good implicitly commits us to this more robust response. Mere tolerance does not insist that we take these further steps; it thereby fails to respect fully the lives that other people live.[19] Moreover,

---

a good society (Williams 1996, 158–72). In a currently unpublished work, "Virtues of Improvement," Brad Wilburn has suggested that tolerance may fare well as a virtue that helps us to be better but that it may not be constitutive of good character (Wilburn 2007). In this sense, tolerance serves as something like a dispositional crutch to get us through difficult times but it does not represent part of an ideal state of character. Wilburn argues that shame can be regarded as such a virtue in Aristotle's philosophy.

    [18] This is one reason why such an ideal is widely embraced among comfortable liberals and many academics in particular. It enables them to feel good about themselves without making much, if any, effort or sacrifice. Consider the flaccid effort that most modern academic philosophers in America, Britain, and Western Europe, who as a group are predominantly and strongly "liberal" and "open-minded," have made to incorporate non-Western philosophy into their curriculum.

    [19] Tolerance expresses recognition respect of a particular conception of what it is to be a person, but it does not express appraisal respect. Erin Cline has suggested that one could make a similar argument about the role that deference to parents plays in the Confucian conception of filial piety. If we simply obey parents, instead of seeking to understand why they encourage us to behave a certain way, we fail to fully respect them or their advice. Wendy Brown makes a similar point about how tolerance can become an excuse for lack of appreciation (Brown 2006). However, I do not share her strongly negative view about tolerance tout court. My view is that tolerance is not the most appealing view for those who embrace ethical pluralism; tolerance is inadequate, but in certain contexts it is the best we can do.

hunkering down behind the ideal of tolerance denies those who settle for this lesser moral standard a range of important goods that they could share with others and enjoy in their own lives. Like a child who refuses to taste an unfamiliar dish, the advocates of tolerance fail to savor all that life has to offer. Coming to understand and appreciate new values and ways to live a good life are fundamental aspects of living well as a human being. This is something that everyone recognizes in regard to children. However, there is no reason why this process of learning and growing should come to an end at the age of consent or at any other arbitrary point in the course of a human life. Ethical promiscuity encourages us to keep our hearts and minds open, to look for and discover new value in human life, and to share these insights with others while incorporating them into our own lives. Such an attitude and effort is needed to show proper respect for our fellow human beings and it is an essential part of the pursuit of a rich and satisfying life for oneself and others, both near and far from one's affection.

3. Ethical Promiscuity and Rawlsian Political Liberalism

One of the most famous expressions of ethical pluralism in contemporary political writings is John Rawls's appeal to "reasonable pluralism" regarding comprehensive views of the good. Rawls argues that people with different comprehensive views about the good will be able to arrive at an "overlapping consensus" concerning social justice, and that those views which find such common cause define the "reasonable pluralism" characteristic of many modern societies (Rawls 1996, 2001). The conception of justice at work in this view, however, is not simply the result of convergence among comprehensive views because, in a well-ordered society, an independently derived and freestanding account of justice as fairness "establishes a shared point of view from which citizen's claims on society can be adjudicated" (Rawls 1996, 35).

The notion of an overlapping consensus conjures up the image of a Venn diagram in which there is a substantial area of intersection (social justice as fairness) and some peripheral areas (other features of one's comprehensive view of the good that fall outside of this shared field of agreement). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the precise proportion of a particular comprehensive view of the good the shared conception of justice represents remains unclear, and, as Rawls notes, will surely vary among different comprehensive views. Notwithstanding their power, the principles of liberal democratic governance are actually quite few in number. However largely they figure in different conceptions of the good life, we still might wonder if they are capable of serving as the center of gravity that holds together various

conflicting conceptions of the good life.[20] Thus, we will here focus on the related notion of reasonable pluralism and its connection to ethical promiscuity.

Any view that is part of reasonable pluralism must offer its adherents a way to endorse the independently derived and freestanding conception of justice Rawls proposed. Such endorsement is something they must reason their own way to rather than something posited as part of a comprehensive moral view; this is what Rawls meant by recognizing in his later work a need "to apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself" (1999, 388). Such endorsement is secured through the exercise of public reason; it need not be, and in almost all cases is not, derived directly, necessarily, or definitively from an individual comprehensive view of the good. As a consequence, even when people reach an overlapping consensus, from within the perspectives of their comprehensive views of the good they will most likely have different and often irreconcilable reasons for endorsing the views they hold in common. For example, you might believe that the maximization of individual liberty consistent with others enjoying such liberties is good in itself and lexically prior to other social goods because such a system allows individual people like you, who adhere to no particular creed and feel fidelity to no tradition or any racial or ethnic group, to form and pursue your own conceptions of the good. I might agree with such a view about liberty but come to this agreement from the comprehensive conception of the good described by traditional Buddhism (Taylor 1999, 124–46). From my perspective, such "liberty" is only an expedient for the only true liberation—the attainment of nirvana. My tradition does not explicitly "take seriously the distinction between persons"; in fact, it denies that persons have any fundamental ontological or moral status.[21] Buddhism allows me to endorse the liberal democratic view of liberty, but my endorsement is not derived directly, necessarily, or definitively from my comprehensive view of the good. This fact makes my allegiance to liberal democracy considerably less strong since my endorsement does not follow in any straightforward way or represent the majority, or even the core, of my comprehensive view of the good. This is where ethical promiscuity can help.

[20] Charles Larmore argues that Rawls should have embraced a more robust conception of public reason as providing a "common point of view" that must be part of all discussions concerning the "principles of political association" (Larmore 2003, 368–93). He notes that the view he defends is sometimes quite difficult to reconcile with Rawls's explicit positions; rather, it provides a related but distinct way to address the problem of common cause and social cohesion.

[21] Rawls directs this criticism against utilitarianism in Rawls 1971, 27. This aspect of traditional utilitarianism is made most explicit and defended in Parfit 1986. Parfit notes the similarities between his views and those of classical Buddhism.

Ethical promiscuity can supplement and strengthen Rawls's account of reasonable pluralism in a number of ways. First, it can give greater content to the idea of what is reasonable about "reasonable pluralism." Working to understand and appreciate one another's reasons allows us to see one another as reasonable in the robust sense of having and deploying reason. Ethical promiscuity can also serve the important practical political end of reinforcing allegiance to our shared social life by making explicit the many different routes reason took to lead different members of society to the cause of liberal democracy. Moreover, ethical promiscuity would raise the level of mutual respect among members of liberal democratic society. A commitment to understanding and appreciating other comprehensive views of the good life reaches out across the differences that separate competing conceptions, helping to bind together people with different points of view. Even those who differ over fundamental issues concerning values and principles will feel a greater sense of mutual solidarity if there is a shared commitment to understand and appreciate as best as possible one another's conception of the good. Ethical promiscuity expresses our desire to live together in light of a frank and honest recognition of our differences. On the one hand, such an attitude goes considerably beyond the willingness to tolerate one's neighbor's alien views. How reasonable or respectful is it to dismiss without understanding, merely tolerating other comprehensive views about what is most good and important in life? On the other hand, ethical promiscuity does not insist upon an overly demanding obligation to accept much less love everything thy neighbor loves.

4. Conclusion

If we embrace "the fact of ethical pluralism," this leaves unresolved the further question concerning "the response to or significance of ethical pluralism." People can agree that there is an irreducible variety of ethical values in the world and that these values—and the lives or cultures that instantiate different constellations of these values—can be equally good and worthy of admiration, while still having very different responses to this state of affairs. One could bemoan or regret that the world is this way; one could celebrate this fact; one could remain largely indifferent. One might wish to dismiss or even hold in contempt alien ways of life, claiming that each should simply rest content in the tradition into which she was born and avoid muddling her life by engaging with or seriously studying alternative values and cultures. Crude appeals to tradition, and even some more sophisticated expressions of such appeals, have invoked versions of this latter response. In varying degrees, the majority of Western philosophers who

accept the fact of ethical pluralism tend to regret or at least worry about this state of affairs and its implications for human conduct. Further, they tend to see tolerance as the proper stance to adopt in the face of ethical diversity.

Relativism denies that one can come to appreciate other ethical values as truly good, and extreme forms of relativism preclude one from engaging or understanding other values in any significant way beyond seeing them as "other" than one's familiar, home tradition.[22] In this case too, it is important to distinguish between claims about the fact of ethical relativism and how one should respond to this purported fact. As noted earlier, one important contemporary philosopher, David Wong, presents a view that he describes as "relativistic pluralism," arguing that those who embrace his version of ethical relativism should be tolerant since they have no good warrant to inflict their own particular ethical views upon many other alternative conceptions of what is valuable. Wong insists that relativistic pluralism offers a morally better life because it represents how things really are and enables one to avoid the moral error of harming others by imposing one's ethical views upon them in the absence of proper justification. I have argued that Wong's view is really a version of ethical pluralism rather than relativism in any robust sense. I have described and argued for an alternative view, which I call "ethical promiscuity."

Ethical promiscuity differs from ethical relativism in holding that there are other values and forms of life that really are equally as good as the values and life that one might happen to lead but that one cannot instantiate in one's own life. It rejects some values and forms of life as repugnant and is just as capable as any other ethical stance of criticizing individual practices within a given form of life.[23] Some values and forms of life are simply inimical to human well-being, as

---

[22] Of course a relativist can allow that someone who takes up an alternative form of life can and will come to understand what is valued within such a life. Successfully doing the former entails doing the latter; religious conversion is a good example of this kind of phenomenon. But relativists cannot adequately account for an almost universal feature of such changes—namely, that the person who takes up a new form of life almost always regards the new way of life as better than the old one, or at least better for himself or herself. A true relativist must dismiss such comparisons as unjustified. All one is entitled to say in such cases is that one has changed one's mind. This, however, fails profoundly to capture an important feature of the point of views of those who make such changes in their lives. The kind of case that I have in mind is being able to understand and appreciate another way of life without forsaking one's own values and form of life. Thanks to Eric L. Hutton for helping me develop these points.

[23] This shows that ethical promiscuity still has standards; promiscuity does not entail being indiscriminate. I take the basic sense of "promiscuity" to be the appreciation and enjoyment of variety, and not the acceptance of every alternative or opportunity.

described earlier.[24] Ethical promiscuity is a specific response to the fact of ethical pluralism. It is distinguished from views such as Wong's, understood here as a form of ethical pluralism, in a number of ways. Among these differences is that ethical promiscuity celebrates ethical diversity for distinctive reasons and rejects tolerance as an inadequate response to ethical diversity.

Wong correctly argues that ethical pluralism shows that it is often wrong to impose one's values upon others; they simply may follow other, equally admirable, values or forms of life. In addition to avoiding the wrong of inflicting unjustified harm upon others, ethical promiscuity sees positive moral value in living according to a particular version of ethical pluralism. A life lived out of a commitment to ethical promiscuity is more than just a duty; it is an achievement, and as such, a source of satisfaction and joy. Coming to understand and appreciate different ethical values and lives helps one to avoid the error of thinking that one's own form of life is the only proper way for human beings to live. Avoiding such a moral deformation is necessary if one is truly to respect other human beings and to lead a fully satisfying life. We must not merely tolerate differences but work to understand and appreciate alternative values. This requires a considerable though not unreasonable amount of effort. One cannot simply note and describe differences; one must work one's way into alternative forms of life through a process of sympathetic understanding. Aside from helping us to avoid thinking we already know all that there is in heaven and earth, such greater understanding and appreciation of other ethical lives offers the opportunity to experience new realms of value; sharing such goods with others and incorporating them into one's own life present additional reasons for adopting ethical promiscuity.[25]

----

[24] How to precisely describe what makes a value or form of life inimical to human well-being is a complex challenge. I will not venture to address it here. However, I would follow a general approach that makes its argument based on a limited yet important set of human needs, desires, and capacities, showing how these can facilitate individual human satisfaction and harmonious social life.

[25] One issue I have not addressed is whether those who embrace the plural values and forms of life that I accept as fact can find ways to live in relative harmony with one another. Should this prove untenable, one might see less reason to celebrate ethical pluralism. Clearly, ethical promiscuity will not guarantee a wholly harmonious and peaceful world. People and cultures can still contend over practical issues such as access to and distribution of resources; this is true even among individuals and groups that share the same values. If acceptable values and forms of life differ radically, this might still lead to a more contentious world than if the realm of value was homogenous or unified. I cannot present a substantial account of this issue here but will offer a few suggestions and remarks. First, if the realm of values is irreducibly plural, and there are good reasons to think that it is, hoping for a more simple moral order is simply nostalgia; we must live in the world we have. If there is a plurality of values, ethical philosophy

We might conclude by saying that the bad news is there is much more to know and appreciate about human life. We must admit that we "adults" are still tyros when it comes to understanding all that human life can be. We might admonish ourselves and insist that we face the facts and "grow up" ethically in this rich, broad, and complex world. But we might also conclude by saying that the good news is there is much more to know and appreciate about human life. From the perspective of ethical promiscuity, human life is rich, broad, open, and complex; it can be good in many ways and holds the potential to be much better for us all.[26]

REFERENCES

Brown, Wendy
    2006   *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Darwall, Stephen
    1992   "Two Kinds of Respect." In *Ethics and Personality*, edited by John Deigh, 65–78. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dupre, John
    1993   *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Fletcher, George
    1996   "The Instability of Tolerance." *See* Heyd, ed. 1996, 158–72.

Harman, Gilbert
    2000   *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heyd, David, ed.
    1996   *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

---

should focus much more on approaches that are closer to mediation and negotiation and considerably less on those that are close to litigation. Second, since the values that ethical promiscuity accepts are grounded in a commonly accessible set of human needs, desires, and capacities, as well as in certain shared, broad social imperatives, this offers a reasonable basis to expect that we can avoid the worst kinds of ideological conflicts. Finally, there is every reason to believe that those who embrace ethical promiscuity and engage in the work of sympathetic understanding of other values and ways of life will develop a greater sense of humility regarding their own ability to settle things definitively in the realm of values. Such an attitude cannot but help to mitigate conflict among people and cultures.

Ivanhoe, Philip J.
  1996   "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?" In *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, edited by Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 196–214. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
  2007   "Filial Piety as a Virtue." In *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, edited by Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, 297–312. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Johnson, Robert
  2007   "Self-Development as an Imperfect Duty." In *Moral Cultivation: Essays on the Development of Character and Virtue*, edited by Brad Wilburn, 125–46. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

Larmore, Charles
  2003   "Public Reason." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 368–93. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.

Midgley, Mary
  1981   *Heart and Mind. The Varieties of Moral Experience*. London: Methuen and Company.

Parfit, Derek
  1986   *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rawls, John
  1971   *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
  1996   *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
  1999   "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 388–414. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
  2001   *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Schneewind, Jerome B.
  1997   *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Charles
  1999   "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights." In *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, edited by J. R. Bauer and D. A. Bell, 124–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilburn, Brad
  2007   "Virtues of Improvement." Paper presented as part of the Dorset Graves Lecture Series, January 16, at Chadron State College.

Williams, Bernard
  1985   *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
  1996   "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?" *See* Heyd, ed. 1996, 18–27.

Wong, David B.
  1986   *Moral Relativity*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

2006   *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yearley, Lee H.
1994   "New Religious Virtues and the Study of Religion." Paper presented at Fifteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion, February 10, at Arizona State University.