

VALUE PLURALISM AND LIBERALISM: A CONFLICTUAL OR A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEM?

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ABSTRACT

One of the most fascinating debates in the field of political theory has been the one about the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism. Based on their different conceptions and definitions, various theorists have often theorized a tension in the relationship between pluralism and liberalism. On the one hand, *liberal authors* who believe in the universality of liberal values that have to do with the safeguard of freedom (conceived at least to some extent as “*negative freedom*”), in the expressions and the free choices that individuals within a society or group can make, tolerance, in their individuality, in the equality of opportunities for everyone, etc., and on the other hand, *the pluralists*, who emphasize that different values, beliefs and human goods (the diversity) in society are essentially incompatible with one another, and as such, also incommensurable. Against the positions of some various authors who theorize an inherent conflict between these two ideas, in this paper, we argue that in practice, but also theoretically justified, there is a connection and a mutual support relationship existing between pluralism and liberalism. Therefore, the main principles that pluralism protects, such as pluralism of value, incommensurability between multiple conceptions of the goods, etc., can find themselves best in the context of a liberal society.

Keywords: *value pluralism, liberalism, incomparability, incommensurability, negative freedom, group autonomy.*

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One of the most discussed and fascinating issues in political theory has been the debate on value pluralism and its potential relationship or coexistence with liberalism. These two concepts constitute two separate central theoretical categories or schools of thought in the political theory field if we to keep in mind also the evolution of debate within each of them, their acceptance or rejection in the political reality of various societies, or the various definitions given to pluralism and liberalism by different scholars. Although since from the beginning, many of the pluralism principles or its core assumptions such as: value pluralism, the (objective) reality of diversity and its value, their origin from the belonging group, etc., are widely accepted mainly in liberal democratic societies, various authors (such as, Kekes 1992; John Gray 1996; George Crowder 1994, 2002) theorize the existence of a conflict or incompatibility in the relation between the idea of pluralism and liberalism. The idea of a relational (supportive) connection between pluralism and liberalism has been questioned by theorists arguing that there is no theoretical link between both, and that in fact, that pluralism presents also obstacles for liberalism (Montminy, 2001). In contrast with these authors' critiques, and by focusing mainly on arguments presented by Isaiah Berlin's standpoint, on this paper I argue that there is, theoretically and practically, a supportive connection between the ideas of pluralism and that of a liberal society.

Isaiah Berlin's Stand in Defense of Value Pluralism

Isaiah Berlin is one of the most influential contributors to liberal theory throughout the 20th century and, at the same time, one of the most prominent defenders of the idea of pluralism. Perhaps his most remarkable originality and noteworthy contribution in

this direction lie in the defense he makes to freedom conceived as "negative liberty" as the only context to recognize and apply plural human values. Montminy wrote:

The originality of Berlin lies in his belief that incompatible and incommensurable ways of life conflict with one another, and that we, human beings, free and self-creating agents through choice-making, are better off living in societies where negative liberty is protected by liberal institutions because this is what best fits our age and our human nature (Montminy, 2001: 1).

According to Bernard William,

Isaiah Berlin has always insisted that there is a plurality of values which can conflict with one another, and which are not reducible to one another; consequently, that we cannot conceive of a situation in which it was true both that all value-conflict had been eliminated, and that there had been no loss of value on the way (1981: 71).

Isaiah Berlin has given in this direction one of the most significant contributions in political theory in defense of the plurality of values. Isaiah Berlin, in his writings, saw the diversity of values, beliefs, and goals [which are often in contrast with each other] as an objective reality of the human condition, which he theoretically justified by defending himself from the criticism of moral relativism. Berlin himself writes (1969: 131):

Pluralism, with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures... It is truer, because it does, at least, recognise the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.

The components of value pluralism and incommensurability were central to Isaiah Berlin's stand in defense the pluralism and, ultimately, in relation to its link/coexistence with liberalism (or a liberal society). To Isaiah Berlin, value pluralism and various beliefs exist naturally in people, and they conflict with each other inherently and cannot be reduced to each other. He considers this a conceptual truth, and when he states that among the several components which pluralism contains, the most fundamental is to argue that values are plural which means that they are not forms of nor are they derived from a single source (cit., Lassman, 1999: 4). And, based on this idea that there is no single source or origin where values stem from, we argue here the justification of the existence and objectivity of such values and the diversity of various beliefs, goods adopted by everyone as ultimate purposes of their lives. "[S]ince some values may conflict intrinsically, the very notion that a pattern must in principle be discoverable in which they are all rendered harmonious is founded on a false a priori view of what the world is like" (Berlin 1969).

Regarding this point, Isaiah Berlin defends his pluralistic point of view against criticisms that essentially reduce his arguments to moral relativism or cultural relativism, and which intrinsically oppose the idea of a supportive connection between pluralism and liberal society. For example, John Gray's cultural relativism have led him toward a rejection of idea of liberalism, and especially the claims made by some liberal theorists that their values command universal authority (cit., Gray 1996). John Kekes is on the other hand drawn towards conservative conclusions by his restrictive view of incommensurability, which ends up in an all-out skepticism towards recent liberal theory and eventually in an embracement of traditionalism (cit., Thorsen, 2004: 18). In defense against

these criticisms, Berlin denies that his positions in defense of the pluralism of values can be confused or simply reduced to relativism. In this his last account of pluralism he sums up his views:

I am not a relativist; I do not say 'I like coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favour of kindness and you prefer concentration camps' – each of us with his own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated. This I believe to be false. But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ. There is not an infinity of them: the number of human values, of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite – let us say 74, or perhaps 122, or 26, but finite, whatever it may be (cit., Thorsen, 2004: 18).

In this regard, Isaiah Berlin, in his defense of the existence of the plurality of values, beliefs, and ultimate ends that different individuals have and that he conceives as an objective (and desirable) reality of mankind, also sees the strength of pluralism as it creates the framework for their coexistence, the tolerance of diversity, as well as excludes the possibility of creating a degree of hierarchy between competing values. This idea is clearly indicated in the definition that Isaiah Berlin gives to pluralism in his book "*The Crooked Timber of Humanity*", as "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other" (1990: 11).

Related to this stance defended by pluralist authors, are two very important concepts: the *incommensurability* and *incomparability* of the values. Given that to Isaiah Berlin' pluralism is first of all and essentially a theory of incommensurability of different rival values, we should explain

shortly here these very crucial terms for the pluralists. *Incommensurability* is taken to mean that there is no single scale of units of value in terms of which different values or, perhaps, more accurately, different bearers of value could be measured. The term is often used to mean *incomparability* - the idea, simply, that things, in this case values, cannot be compared (Lassman, 1999: 4-5). In Berlin's view of pluralism, he sees incommensurability as also implying incomparability. These two terms are important on the analysis of pluralism, because they also suggest that: first, no given list of goods or values can exist a priori and itemized hierarchically, and based on which one could commensurate, evaluate or show the validity of each one of them; on the other hand, given that perceptions of good and ultimate life purposes by people are different, they could be also incompatible, and as such incomparable, and should be freely followed by their "believers".

The Supportive Connection between Value Pluralism and Liberalism

In this section, we put now forth the arguments relating the ways in which pluralism and the principles it contains, are connected with liberalism. To the defenders of the idea that there is a rational link between them, "at the heart of the argument that liberalism and pluralism are compatible is the claim that value pluralism - multiple and incommensurable conceptions of the good - is the starting point of liberalism" (Schlosberg, 2006: 153). It is known that for liberalism, despite various interpretations that might lead to different directions, its central principle/value it is

freedom [conceived at least to some extent as "*negative freedom*"): freedom to act, to choose, to pursue ultimate life goals without interferences from externally "constraints" etc. This is exactly the point where value pluralism, with the emphasis it places on the multiplicity of values, beliefs and ultimate ends that different individuals might have, is given its specific importance in the contexts of a liberal society, because it implies that individuals must be free to recognize and pursue all true and genuine values they believe in. Thus, we see that there is a compatibility between the idea of value pluralism and the idea of individual freedom (conceived here as negative freedom¹). As William Galston (2002: 119) notes:

For liberal pluralists or pluralist liberals, liberal principles serve the empirical reality of value pluralism. Ideally, a liberal pluralist society "will organize itself around the principle of maximum feasible accommodation of diverse legitimate ways of life.

That is, if it would tolerate such very different lifestyles and if it would guarantee their maximal potential adaption within the context of a given society.

With regards to this, it is worth mentioning another important liberalism value, *the autonomy*, which also finds support in the context of a pluralist society. Autonomy can be understood as having a small space within which the individual or groups are free to develop their beliefs, purposes, and act in the best way they deem possible, without being forced by external factors or influences. The idea that the liberal value of autonomy fits and finds itself rationally within a pluralist society is put

¹ Berlin defines the negative freedom as *freedom from*, which implies the absence of externally imposed constraints, i.e., by the state or by a group of people. Thus, it is implied that the existence of a freedom space within which every individuals acts in, without being hampered by anyone externally. In general, it is agreed that the human being is as free as long as no one else interferes with his activity. See more in Isaiah Berlin (1969), "*Four Essays on Liberty*". Oxford, Oxford University Press.

forth by different pluralist authors. Joseph Raz points out that “autonomy presupposes a variety of conflicting considerations”. Thus, the liberal value of autonomy, then, can only be realized in a pluralistic society, and so valuing autonomy leads to the endorsement of moral pluralism. “The liberal value of autonomy, then, can only be realized in a pluralistic society, and so valuing autonomy leads to the endorsement of moral pluralism (cit., Schlosberg, 2006: 153). On the other hand, William Galston also advances this argument regarding the liberal value of autonomy which is endorsed by pluralist theories. Moral pluralism, he argues, “supports the importance of expressive liberty in a way monist theories do not” (Galston, 2002: 37–8). Thus, for these mentioned authors, to value or to embrace the principle of personal autonomy and/or of the group [as liberals do] naturally results also in the embracement, or at least in the acceptance of, the different perception of views compared to others’ different ways of action, purposes, etc. And such a thing again is best suited in the context of a liberal pluralist society.

Another argument given to demonstrate the supportive connection between pluralism and liberalism is linked to the importance that they both give to the choices made by individuals. As it was highlighted above, there is a natural conflict between various values, beliefs, purposes and lifestyles existing in a giving society and on the basis of every single individual can make [is presupposed] to make free choices according to the liberal authors. And it is exactly the making of such choices which define the way we are and what we do, that are best made in the context of a pluralist society. This is what Isaiah Berlin had in mind when he stresses: “choice-making as the embodiment of human self-creation. We make ourselves what we are... through our choices”. Pluralism is the best context for this choice-making because it recognizes

both incommensurability and rivalry across values (Berlin, 1969: 171). This because, in this rivalry or conflict between various values, pluralism sticks to the idea that there could exist no accurate and single choice which served to all values and interests of people at the same time, so they should be left to choose or pursue those values they believe are best for them freely. In this vein, Berlin (1969: 172) continues:

It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization.

Yet another argument in favor of the existence of the mutual support relationship between pluralism and liberalism, is the one concerning the group (or the groups) in which individuals belong to, and the recognition of differences between these groups. While it is accepted that the pluralists authors are more generally focused on the group, they recognize the importance it has in the shaping of identity and behavior of individuals which compose such group. Pluralist theories evaluates and legitimates the diversity of values, beliefs, purposes different lifestyles which characterize different groups. The criticism which is addressed to liberalism on this argument, and on the bases of which many authors (see for example Gray 1996) claim its disruption or incompatibility with pluralism, is related to the individualist nature of liberalism, the absence of social in liberal principles, or the lack of a middle ground between individuals and the state, “which is in essence a lack of recognition of the difference and autonomy of group life” (cit., Schlosberg, 2006: 155).

However, such assumptions are seemingly not accepted by liberal pluralist authors, who claim that liberalism does not serve only to the individuals or to the individualism in society, but it generally

serves to the groups too. William Galston, a multiculturalist pluralist, in this regard has stressed: “liberalism requires a robust though rebuttable presumption in favor of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit, within a broad range of legitimate variation, in accordance with their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value. I call this presumption the principle of *expressive liberty*. This principle implies a corresponding presumption (also rebuttable) against external interference with individual and group endeavors (2002: 3). For Berlin, this freedom and recognition for self-definition in a plural society is not solely for individuals, but for groups as well. (cit., in Scholsberg, 2006: 154). Thus, a defense of liberalism claiming that it also serves the various groups that compose society, as well as their self-determination based on what they sense as giving value and meaning to their lives, without having here the implications of interventions that may come from outside (the group), and above all recognizing the principle of diversity and multiplicity of different values, beliefs and goals in society, which essentially constitutes the essence of pluralism.

Conclusions

This paper aims to justify, both in practice and theoretically, the existence of a supportive connection link between pluralism and liberalism. Although the idea of a supporting link between pluralism and liberalism has generated a series of criticisms from various authors who oppose this kind

of relationship, in this paper, it was argued that the main principles that pluralism defends, which are: value pluralism, the incommensurability and incomparability between different values and the many conceptions of goods - find compliance and fits best in the context of a liberal society. It is precisely from this context of freedom that is defended by liberalism, where pluralism also takes on its specific significance since it presupposes that individuals should be free to recognize and follow all the genuine values in which they believe. As Peter Lassman has observed, “it is difficult to see how anyone would accept pluralism if they were not already receptive to liberal ideas” (1999: 19). Likewise, other relational (mutual) links between liberalism and pluralism, principles that they jointly support and that find themselves best implemented on the ground in the context of a liberal pluralistic society, are also: the appreciation of personal autonomy for individuals, but also for the groups; the importance that both liberalism and pluralism give to making free choices by individuals; as well as recognizing the importance of group freedom, recognizing differences and diversity between groups, and self-determination based on what they believe it gives value and meaning to their lives. Although pluralism and liberalism are different concepts and theoretical traditions that do not necessarily entail or overlap each other through the main principles that each of them emphasizes, there is a mutual support connection between them, which can be concretized also in coexistence in the conditions of a society.

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