

## Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism

JONATHAN RILEY *Tulane University*

**I** argue that Isaiah Berlin's pluralistic liberalism is best interpreted as a sophisticated form of liberal rationalism, as Berlin himself suggests. His value pluralism, even if it is viewed (as his critics typically view it, with considerable justification) as claiming that any choice between conflicting incommensurable values cannot be a rational choice, does not subvert his liberalism. Rather, this agonistic pluralism emanates from his liberal rationalism, which pictures reason as too weak to resolve conflicts of incommensurables. Yet, reason remains strong enough to discover that certain basic liberal values, including those associated with some minimum core of equal rights, are far more important than any competing values created by mankind. Berlin apparently sees his pluralistic liberal rationalism as a genuine rationalism that, in stark contrast to mainstream utopian rationalisms which wildly exaggerate the power of reason, makes suitable room for the valid insights provided by the romantics.

**S**ir Isaiah Berlin's (1969, 1991, 1999) work has recently been interpreted as a muddled and half-hearted version of liberalism (e.g., Crowder 1994; Gray 1995, 1998; Ignatieff 1999; Kateb 1999). The main problem, according to the critics, is his "agonistic" brand of value pluralism, which holds that plural basic values (and constellations of values, or cultures) are not only incompatible but also incommensurable in the sense that they cannot be rationally compared or ranked in cases of conflict. Such pluralism undermines the possibility of liberal rationalism, given that liberal and nonliberal values are incommensurable in the sense described. As Gray puts it, "Berlin's agonistic liberalism—his liberalism of conflict among inherently rivalrous goods—grounds itself on the radical choices we must make among incommensurables, *not upon rational choice*" (1995, 8, emphasis added). "Radical choice" is "ungoverned by reason," "without criteria, grounds, or principles," and is at "the heart of Berlin's liberalism" (pp. 23, 61). Morgenbesser and Lieberman (1991, 3–7) confirm that Berlin gives many examples of this "radical kind of choice" arising "as part of the normal human situation." As they also point out, he credits Machiavelli for implicitly suggesting that "'ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision *without possibility of rational arbitration*'" (p. 6, emphasis added; quoting Berlin 1981, 74).

If the critics are right, Berlin's commitment to liberalism must ultimately be lacking in rational conviction. Perhaps Berlin admires liberal and nonliberal cultures alike as if they were artworks, for example, objects whose peculiar beauties not only cannot be compared but also cannot be reduced to, or judged in

terms of, common standards of truth and morality. Kateb suggests that Berlin is in the grip of such an aestheticism, so much so that he typically ignores or rationalizes the potentially grave moral costs (such as violations of fundamental rights) that flow from his aesthetic outlook: "Berlin appears to me to be, despite his liberalism, unaware that human dignity involves . . . the status of each individual person, a status that only the recognition of individual rights can fully protect" (Kateb 1999, 1037). By implication, Berlin fails to recognize that his aestheticism (if that is what it is) countenances the destruction of his liberalism. He might point to the admiration he feels for liberal social institutions and practices to explain why he picks them when nonliberal cultures are available. But no appeal to practical reason can justify his aesthetic choice: Nonliberal cultures cannot rationally be ranked as inferior to liberal ones within the aesthetic realm. There is nothing in reason to prevent the aesthetic pick of a nonliberal culture.

I shall argue against the critics that Berlin's work is best interpreted as an unusual but coherent version of liberal rationalism. In making the argument, I shall assume that the critics are correct to attribute to him the doctrine of agonistic or tragic pluralism, with its idea of incommensurability as incomparability. This is not to deny that a more benign brand of pluralism might be attributed to him. Unlike agonistic pluralism, benign pluralism views incommensurability as allowing rational comparisons of conflicting values (see, e.g., Barry 1990, 3–8; Chang 1998; Crowder 1998a, 1998b; Galston 1999, 771; Hurka 1996; Larmore 1996, 157; Stocker 1990; Williams 1979). Berlin does appear to waiver between agonistic and benign pluralisms. At times he suggests that incommensurable values can be rationally compared, with the caveat that such comparisons do not involve either reduction of the values to a common denominator, such as welfare, or the mechanical application of a single scheme of lexical priorities valid for all times and places (Berlin 1983; Berlin and Williams 1994, 307; Jahanbegloo 1992, 142–3). Nevertheless, he often endorses agonistic pluralism as well, as the critics claim.<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Riley is Professor in the Department of Philosophy and the Murphy Institute of Political Economy, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118 (jonriley@tulane.edu). During the academic year 2000–01, he is Visiting Rockefeller Fellow, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544–1006 (jriley@princeton.edu).

This research was supported in part by grants from the Murphy Institute. For criticism and encouragement, I am grateful in particular to the late Isaiah Berlin, as well as to Geoff Brennan, Jerry Gaus, John Gray, George Kateb, Julian Lamont, Stephen Macedo, Philip Pettit, Molly Rothenberg, the *APSR* editor, and five anonymous referees. Responsibility for the views expressed is mine alone.

<sup>1</sup> Lukes (1994, 706) distinguishes between incommensurability and

Moreover, it is agonistic pluralism, not benign, that captures the antirationalism Berlin associates with the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. As depicted by him, the most ardent romantics insist that individuals and nations create their own ideals in an endless process that transcends rational assessment. The creative will, or spirit, or imagination, or passion is not something that can be caged or ordered by reason. Ultimately a mystery, it is the stuff of religion and myth (Berlin 1999, 99–109, 121–2). Thus, since rational standards are lacking, the ideals created by one individual or nation cannot be judged to be more or less reasonable than those chosen by another. Rather, men ought to defend their ideals at all costs, as authentic manifestations of their peculiar creative drives. True, when different ideals clash as they inevitably will, the human consequences may be tragic since the conflict cannot be rationally resolved. But the pure romantic accepts this and assigns “the highest importance” to “integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one’s life to some inner light, . . . fighting for your beliefs to the last breath . . . , martyrdom as such, . . . [and] dedication to [your] ideal . . . no matter what it was” (pp. 8–14, 139–41). Berlin makes clear that he regards the romantic tide of antirationalism as a valid corrective to mainstream Enlightenment rationalism, which he repeatedly attacks as incoherent and (despite appearances to the contrary) dangerous to liberty. The romantic movement “attacked and gravely damaged . . . the old proposition that virtue is knowledge,” he states, and thereby dispelled the mainstream illusion that the art of life is “a jigsaw puzzle” to be fit together by reason (pp. 118–9).

I shall read Berlin as an agonistic pluralist not only because such a reading engages his critics on their own terms and better reflects the antirationalistic spirit of the romantics but also because it makes more difficult my project of reconstructing his thought as a version of liberal rationalism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it may seem inconceivable that he can be interpreted as any kind of rationalist, given his strictures against mainstream rationalism and his support for romanticism. Nevertheless, he explicitly encourages such an interpretation: “Fundamentally, I am a liberal rationalist. If you believe in liberal principles and rational analysis, as I do, then you must take account of what the objections are, and where the cracks in your structures are, where your side went wrong” (Jahanbegloo 1992, 70–1). Taking Berlin at his word, I shall argue that his work is best seen as a liberal

rationalism with “cracks” or imperfections built into the power of practical reason to resolve ethical and political conflicts (including conflicts of equal rights).

Berlin’s agonistic liberalism has foundations in rational choice. Such a liberalism involves subsets of possible outcomes about which it is rational to believe that reason is powerless to determine our ethical and political choices. Within these subsets or zones of rational indeterminacy, agents are morally free to choose as they wish because conflicts of incommensurable values cannot be rationally resolved: There is no rational justification for choosing any one option over the others, all things considered. But the boundaries of the zones are defined such that the freedom to choose does not extend to illiberal choices. A minimum core of human rights must not be violated, even though other liberal rights (distinct from the core rights) may conflict with one another in ways that implicate plural and incomparable values.

It deserves emphasis that when Berlin refers to himself as “a liberal rationalist,” and when I attribute to him a species of rationalistic liberalism, no endorsement is implied of the Western rationalistic tradition. In his view, mainstream rationalism, exemplified by Socrates as represented in Plato’s dialogues; by enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, Helvetius, and Condorcet; by (to a large extent) Kant, Schiller, and Goethe; by utilitarians such as Bentham, James Mill, and J. S. Mill; by Marx and Marxists; and by Hegel and his Anglo-American followers, including Green, Bosanquet, and perhaps even Dewey, is committed to fake social utopias of various descriptions, the pursuit of which inevitably leads to state oppression (e.g., Berlin 1969, xxxvii–lxiii, 167–72; 1991, 1–48; 1999, 21–34). The fundamental mainstream error, he thinks, is the proposition that “virtue is knowledge,” more specifically, that an all-powerful Reason can discover how to resolve any and all ethical and political conflicts, whether by maximizing some single ultimate value, such as happiness, or by adjusting plural ultimate values into an ideal pattern of perfect harmony. This is the great error exposed by the romantics.

But Berlin’s clear rejection of mainstream rationalism as a false and dangerous ideology does not imply that he is hostile to all conceivable forms of rationalism, including those which combine their commitment to rational choice with a belief that reason is incapable in principle of resolving all ethical and political conflicts. Rather, his point seems to be that mainstream rationalism, by exaggerating the power of reason to classify and arrange the moral universe, distorts and obscures a genuine rationalism, which recognizes the true limits of reason and makes room for agonizing moral choices that lack rational justification. Indeed, I suggest that Berlin’s depiction of himself as a liberal rationalist is far from careless, and it may be intended to encourage us to investigate more closely the distance between aggressive mainstream rationalism (which he sees as false and illiberal) and a more humble and imperfect rationalism (which he sees as genuine and liberal).

Admittedly, Berlin could not consistently call himself

incomparability but argues that both ideas are among the different components of Berlin’s pluralism. He may be right that Berlin’s pluralism is an unsystematic collection of ideas that “seem to be separable and not to entail each other” (p. 708).

<sup>2</sup> For similar reasons, I shall not read Berlin as endorsing what may be termed partial commensurability, that is, the view that competing values can invariably be reduced to a common scale but only imperfectly so. A unit of justice might correspond to some range of welfare units, for example, whereas a unit of mercy corresponds to a different but overlapping range of welfare units. Some comparisons of justice and mercy in cases of conflict might then be rationally determinate in terms of welfare. Whatever its attractions, partial commensurability represents a concession to monism in which Berlin shows little if any interest.

a liberal rationalist if he fully endorsed romanticism. Unrestrained antirationalism implies that nothing is worth salvaging from mainstream rationalism. Virtue is not knowledge but creative self-expression and a willingness to die for one's ideals no matter how foolish they appear. The good life is not a jigsaw puzzle that can eventually be grasped and understood by rational people. It is an endless striving to express one's own true and perfect nature, endless because that creative nature is literally inexpressible and beyond the power of reason to articulate. As such, the good life cannot ever be pinned down by rational methods. Rather, human life is necessarily tragic, replete with romantic "nostalgia" if not "paranoia" (Berlin 1999, 104–9).

But Berlin makes clear that he does not endorse "unbridled" romanticism. He points out that some common values must exist for people to understand and communicate with one another at all. "To the extent to which there are common values, it is impossible to say that everything must be created by me; that if I find something given, I must smash it; that if I find something structured, I must destroy it in order to give free play to my unbridled imagination. To this extent romanticism, if it is driven to its logical conclusion, does end in some kind of lunacy" (p. 145). In short, romanticism and its focus on creative self-expression must be restrained by some common ethical and political norms that are accepted as given. A common moral horizon properly limits the range of plural and incommensurable ideals that may be chosen spontaneously by individuals or groups. Berlin thinks this common horizon is something that can be discovered by rational methods. Its unusual structure is the focus of a genuine liberal rationalism.

For Berlin, then, the "cracks" in mainstream rationalism on which romanticism throws light are fatal to the mainstream image but not fatal to rationalism altogether: "This great structure was not overthrown, but it was cracked, as it were, by the romantics" (Jahanbegloo 1992, 159). Mainstream rationalism must be given up in favor of a more complex liberal rationalism that makes room to a limited extent for a tragic pluralist conception of moral life. All hope of a rational social utopia must be abandoned since conflicts of values cannot always (or perhaps even often) be rationally resolved. At the same time, however, the more complex doctrine must include liberal limits on the pluralist conception that are rationally justified. In other words, the scope of pluralism must be limited by a common moral horizon such that the elements of the horizon are reasonably held to take precedence when they conflict with any other ideals and values created by men. Thus, a belief in reason—rational choice as opposed to radical choice in Gray's sense—is at the foundation of Berlin's liberalism.

## RECONSTRUCTING BERLIN'S DOCTRINE

### Making Room for Romanticism

Berlin (1999, 146) argues that the romantics left a lasting legacy: "The notion that there are many values,

and that they are incompatible; the whole notion of plurality, of inexhaustibility, of the imperfection of all human answers and arrangements; the notion that no single answer which claims to be perfect and true, whether in art or in life, can in principle be perfect and true—all this we owe to the romantics." The romantics, it seems, made explicit what had only been implicit in Machiavelli's writings (Jahanbegloo 1992, 44–5, 53–61). An agonistic value pluralism, which holds that the plural ideals created by men can conflict in ways that cannot be rationally resolved, is true to our moral situation, Berlin insists. Thus, any idea of a rational social utopia, in which conflicting values have been reasonably adjusted or balanced to produce complete ethical and political harmony, must be dismissed as false.

These romantic insights into pluralism and the imperfection of reason are apparently confirmed by genuinely rational methods of ethical and political inquiry. Berlin (in Jahanbegloo 1992, 39) certainly does not deny that such rational methods exist: "Rational methods, roads to the truth, . . . are, as Socrates taught, of cardinal importance to the fate of individuals and societies: about that the central traditions of Western philosophy are right." But he argues that the genuine methods are not those employed by mainstream rationalistic ideologues themselves, who have an unwarranted *a priori* intuition that omnipotent Reason can settle any and all conflicts of values. "I never said that I didn't believe in 'reason.' But I simply don't understand what some philosophers mean by reason, which is for them a kind of magical eye, which sees non-empirical universal truths" (p. 113). In his view, mainstream rationalism is truly a species of irrationalism "enunciated by over-rational and over-scientific analysts" (Berlin 1999, 146).

Berlin emphasizes that mainstream rationalism involves a false *a priori* intuition that a rational social utopia is possible. "Since 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, li). Even great liberal philosophers have been under this mainstream hyperrationalistic illusion, he alleges, including Mill (p. li) and Kant (Jahanbegloo 1992, 109). Against the mainstream, Berlin argues that genuine rational methods tied to empirical observation confirm the validity of tragic pluralism and thus the impossibility of finding a best option in which all truly valuable things find their rational place:

If we are not armed with an *a priori* guarantee of the proposition that a total harmony of true values is somewhere to be found—perhaps in some ideal realm the characteristics of which we can, in our finite state, not so much as conceive—we must fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge. And these certainly give us no warrant for supposing (or even understanding what would be meant by saying) that all good things, or all bad things for that matter, are reconcilable with each other. The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are

faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others (Berlin 1969, p. 168).

Such a pluralism must be distinguished from relativism and subjectivism about values (Galston 1999, 770, 773–4; Gray 1995, 46–7; Newey 1998, 494). It claims that certain propositions are true about the nature of moral value. According to one proposition, some limited field of plural and incommensurable values is part of a common moral horizon that can be identified and understood by any reasonable human being, whatever his social context. Indeed, it is because these different values and ways of life all belong to the common horizon that “we can communicate with people whose forms of life may be different from ours—living in different conditions at different times” (Jahanbegloo 1992, 108). A second proposition holds that these incomparable values and forms of life cannot be rationally harmonized to form a best option when they come into conflict.

Like the romantics, Berlin seems convinced that some values naturally belong with others in that they are observed to evolve together in particular clusters or cultures, from which they cannot be extracted without loss of vitality (Gray 1995, 43–75, 129–31). As spontaneous creations of particular groups, cultures are living webs of interconnected values. The elements of one web cannot be artificially mixed with those of others to form some artificial utopia. Virtues peculiar to the pagan culture of Periclean Athens cannot be ripped from it and rationally combined with virtues peculiar to Christian culture, for example, as Mill ([1859] 1977, 266) mistakenly supposed. Rather, as Machiavelli suggested, the values of pagan self-assertion and Christian self-denial are incompatible and cannot be rationally harmonized within the same culture.<sup>3</sup>

To make room for romanticism, then, Berlin seems to be saying that a genuine rationalism must recognize, first, that there are plural irreducible values and, second, that there is no perfect moral or cultural arrangement in which all conflicts of values are rationally resolved. By implication, a genuine rationalism must reject both value monism (i.e., descriptive homogeneity of the feasible options of value as, for instance, just so many different quantities of welfare) and—something quite different—the possibility of a best or utopian outcome that beats or at least ties every other feasible option in an all-things-considered ethical ranking of the given options. In short, a genuine rationalism must recognize the validity of agonistic pluralism, which does reject both monism and perfectionism. Rejection of monism does not preclude the possibility of a complete and transitive all-things-considered ordering. As Sen (1987, 63, n. 6) warns, “the issue of ethical ordering must not be confused with that of descriptive homogeneity . . . an ordering does not re-

quire descriptive homogeneity.” But rejection of any possibility of a best outcome does entail rejecting any chance of a complete and consistent ordering.

### Agonistic Pluralism and Rational Indeterminacy

Agonistic pluralism affirms that conflicts among incommensurable values cannot be rationally terminated. The conflicting values, being equally ultimate and giving rise to equally absolute directives, cannot be reasonably compared and balanced to yield a best outcome that beats or at least ties every other possible outcome in the domain implicating those values. Rather, any ethical ranking that gives due consideration to the respective directives of the equally ultimate values must exhibit rational indeterminacy, such that no option can be rationally chosen as best from the given set of feasible options.<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate how tragic pluralism gives rise to rational indeterminacy, consider the suggestion by Berlin (which he traces to Machiavelli) that Christian and pagan cultures are distinct and irreducible forms of life between which at least some conflicts cannot be rationally resolved. Suppose that Christian virtues conflict with pagan values in the context of a domain of three possible outcomes  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $w$ . Let  $x$  be a wholly pagan Florence in which political leaders and citizens are expected to use ruthless cunning to promote the wealth and glory of the republic,  $y$  be a purely Christian Florence in which the church organizes all social practices to promote the glory of God, and  $w$  be a partly pagan and partly Christian Florence in which an attempt is made to mix ruthless cunning in public life with devotion to family and God in private life. Since the conflicting Christian and pagan values are by assumption rationally incomparable, there is no feasible option  $z$  at which pagan and Christian elements are rationally harmonized to produce a Florentine utopia. Any feasible mixture such as that at  $w$  saps the vitality of the ingredients and cannot be viewed as a best outcome. At the same time, since the conflicting values are by assumption equally ultimate, neither  $x$  nor  $y$  is a best option. Because there is no best option, there can be no complete and transitive ethical ranking that rationally integrates the directives of the competing values with respect to  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $w$ .

To clarify the latter point, let us first restrict attention to the pagan form of life. Clearly, it directs us to rank  $x$  ahead of  $w$ , and  $w$  ahead of  $y$ , to yield a complete and transitive “pagan ranking”:  $x > w > y$ .<sup>5</sup> Given that

<sup>4</sup> It is not that equally ultimate values are equally valuable, in which case we could compare their conflicting rankings of options to determine a best option in terms of value overall. Rather, the values are equally basic, having no common source, and their directives cannot be reasonably compared at all when conflicts arise. Even Gray at times seems not to appreciate that indeterminacy must arise in an overall ranking of any two options if the directives of rationally incomparable values come into conflict with respect to that pair (e.g., Gray 1998, 27).

<sup>5</sup> The symbol  $>$  denotes “better than.” Strictly speaking, the symbol should be suitably indexed to make clear that the ranking is a pagan directive, e.g.,  $>_p$  denotes “better than in terms of pagan values.”

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of Mill's vision of an ideal utilitarian liberal culture, in which pagan spontaneity in self-regarding conduct is integrated with Christian obedience to general rules of other-regarding conduct, see Riley 1998, n.d.

it is reasonable for anyone who imagines herself in the position of a pagan to hold this ranking, it may be accepted by pluralists as a reasonable pagan directive for this domain. (It is possible to introduce rational indeterminacy at this point by assuming that paganism issues an incomplete directive or that rationally incomparable pagan values issue conflicting directives. But I shall ignore these complexities for ease of exposition.) Next, let us turn to the Christian form of life and restrict attention to it. Clearly, it directs us to form a complete and transitive “Christian ranking”:  $y > w > x$ .

Now we have two conflicting fully determinate rankings, one rooted in paganism, the other in Christianity. Under tragic pluralism, the conflict cannot be rationally resolved. This failure of reason can be expressed as rational indeterminacy in an all-things-considered ethical ranking that takes account of pagan and Christian values. Such a ranking may be interpreted as the product of a process of rational judgment (or rule of rational choice) that aggregates or deliberates over the pagan and Christian rankings after correctly identifying them. For convenience, suppose that the process is internal to the individual. Its domain is profiles of value rankings of the options, one ranking for each value or form of life (paganism, Christianity) under consideration.

Following Sen (1987, 65–8), rational indeterminacy in the all-things-considered ranking of options may be interpreted in either of two ways, namely, incompleteness and overcompleteness. According to the incompleteness interpretation, no all-things-considered ranking of  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $w$  exists at all in this instance. Agreement among the directives of any rationally incomparable values is deemed necessary to determine an all-things-considered ranking of any pair of options implicating those values. But there is no agreement between any of the pairwise directives of the pagan and Christian values. If we consider  $x$  and  $y$ , for example, paganism directs  $x > y$ , whereas Christianity directs  $y > x$ . Because the directives conflict and there is no rational basis for settling the conflict, we must refuse to assert that either ranking is reasonable, all things considered. We must refuse to assert even that  $x$  is as good as  $y$ , all things considered. There is thus no all-things-considered ranking of  $x$  and  $y$ . Of course, we can arbitrarily pick  $x$  when  $y$  is available, thereby revealing a preference for paganism over Christianity with respect to the ethical choice between  $x$  and  $y$ , but we have no reasonable basis for doing so. Similarly, we can arbitrarily “reveal” a complete and transitive ranking of the three options, but we have no rational argument for doing so.

According to the overcompleteness interpretation, the all-things-considered ethical ranking is  $x > w > y >$

---

Indexing would remove the possibility of confusing the pagan value ranking with distinct types of rankings of the same possible outcomes, e.g., a Christian value ranking  $>_c$ , an all things (values) considered ranking  $>_s$ , a rational person i's ranking  $>_i$ , or a majoritarian social ranking  $>_m$ . Nevertheless, I shall not bother with indexing when discussing these and other types of rankings later in the text. The relevant type(s) of ranking will always be obvious from the context.

$w > x$ . Inconsistency appears in the ranking because conflict between the directives of any rationally incomparable pair of values is deemed sufficient for both directives to appear simultaneously in the all-things-considered ranking of any pair of options implicating those values. If we consider  $x$  and  $y$ , for example, both the pagan  $x > y$  and the Christian  $y > x$  are included in the all-things-considered ranking. Because the directives conflict and there is no rational basis for settling the conflict, we must assert that the inclusion of both is reasonable, all things considered. Although this might seem bizarre, Sen (1987, 66) insists that pluralists can reasonably accept “the compelling nature of two [or more] potentially conflicting principles of overall judgment with an overlapping domain.” Indeed, overcompleteness is merely another way of interpreting the fact that there is no reasonable basis for settling the conflict between pagan and Christian values with respect to this pair of options. Again, arbitrary or “radical” choices may reveal a preference for one option (and value) over the other, but such revealed preferences are not reasonable judgments about the relative importance of the conflicting values involved.

Incompleteness and overcompleteness in the all-things-considered moral ranking of any pair of options  $x$  and  $y$  are distinct descriptions of the same phenomenon, to wit, an inability to choose rationally between  $x$  and  $y$  or to judge which is best. Whether described as incompleteness or overcompleteness, such rational indeterminacy means that it is not the case that  $y$  is better than  $x$ , or that  $x$  is better than  $y$ , or even that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally good, all things considered. True, we may have to pick  $x$  or  $y$ , but we have no reasonable basis for choosing. When we consider the pair, both  $x$  and  $y$  are what Sen (1997, 763) calls a “maximal” option, that is, one that is unbeaten by any other options, although it does not necessarily beat or even tie them because it may not be ranked against them.<sup>6</sup>

Thus far I have emphasized that rational indeterminacy can arise because of a conflict of rationally incomparable values. But it also may arise in situations in which there is no conflict of values, as illustrated by the story of Buridan's ass, which starved to death because it could not rationally determine which of two identical stacks of hay would be best to eat. Even if we cannot reasonably say that one stack is better than, worse than, or as good as the other, a rational beast would surely make a radical pick of one stack to eat, rather than starve. As Sen (1997, 765) puts it, “only an ass will wait” for a best option when no possibility exists of finding one.

Worthy of emphasis is that rational indeterminacy is irremediable when it arises because incompatible values are asserted to be incomparable. The indeterminacy is not contingent on lack of information or faulty deliberation. It reflects the supposedly genuine structure of moral value. The most penetrating examination based on perfect information cannot tell us how to weigh these values rationally to remove the conflict.

---

<sup>6</sup> A best option is by definition also a maximal option, but a maximal option may not be a best option.

The intractability of the indeterminacy is important. Even monists have no trouble admitting indeterminacy that is contingent on mistakes in judgment or lack of information about the quantities of value (such as welfare) involved in some options, as is arguably the case in the story of Buridan's ass.<sup>7</sup> But monists and benign pluralists insist that any indeterminacy arising from these familiar sources is remediable. The possibility of complete and transitive all-things-considered orderings is left open because any competing values are always rationally comparable in principle.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, agonistic pluralism holds that incommensurable values are not only plural and irreducible but also rationally incomparable. Given that conflicting forms of good cannot be rationally harmonized if they are rationally incomparable, there is no possibility of a best outcome in which all conflicts of values have been rationally resolved. Rather, there must be rational indeterminacy in any all-things-considered ranking that reflects the pluralist nature of value. Because agonistic pluralism claims that there is no best option and that radical choices must be made between maximal options that embody incomparable forms of good, it implies that all-things-considered deliberation genuinely cannot avoid irreparable losses of distinctive values. Some values lost with rejected maximal options cannot be replaced or compensated because the values associated with chosen maximal options are not comparable with the lost values.

### Rational Liberal Limits on Agonistic Pluralism

As Sen (1987, 67) argues, the presence to some extent of incompleteness or overcompleteness (permanent or otherwise) in an all-things-considered ranking entails "no departure from rational choice." There is nothing incoherent about a rationalism that accepts limited zones of indeterminacy as reasonable in its all-things-considered judgments. It is rational to make a radical pick of any maximal option when restricted to the given subset of options comprising any particular zone. At the same time, rationalism cannot permit these zones to extend over the whole set of feasible outcomes without destroying itself. Such an extension would be forced on us if we were to accept an unlimited agonistic pluralism. But this would amount to "a kind of lunacy," as Berlin (1999, 145) states in his critical assessment of unbridled romanticism. In other words, only a lunatic can assert that all values (and cultures) are incomparable. A rational human can only accept agonistic pluralism within reasonable limits. The next step is to clarify how it is restrained in a theory such as

Berlin's, which brings us to the "liberal rationalist" part of agonistic liberal rationalism.

Berlin insists that there is a common moral horizon that establishes a lower bound on what can count as moral thinking and behavior among human beings. He rejects Nazi culture as immoral, for example, as falling below the common moral threshold. But his critics seem puzzled by this aspect of his thought, and they claim that the common horizon neither limits the field of agonistic pluralism nor provides any support for liberal rationalism (e.g., Gray 1995, 157–8; Kateb 1999, 1028). In contrast, I shall argue that the common horizon does both.

Earlier I called attention to Berlin's claim that the pluralist nature of value is a warranted inference from the everyday experience of human beings. This knowledge is part of the common moral horizon as Berlin envisions it, which anyone capable of rational thought may be expected to apprehend. A genuine rationalism thereby affirms the truth of agonistic pluralism, at least with respect to some limited field of ethical and political choices. But there is more to the common horizon than pluralism. As I discuss later, he suggests that another warranted inference from everyday experience is that liberal values are far superior to illiberal ones. In Berlin's view, reasonable people widely agree that basic human rights (or at least some minimum set of them) must be duly protected by any decent society (even if the language of rights is not always employed to affirm this). For him, it seems, a genuine rationalism affirms the moral priority of (minimal) liberalism in this sense. It follows that agonistic pluralism does not extend to conflicts between liberal and illiberal values. These two kinds of values (and cultures) are rationally comparable, one to another, and conflicts between them can be rationally terminated in favor of liberalism.

To escape Berlin's charge of "lunacy," in other words, an agonistic liberal rationalist maintains that fundamental liberal values are reasonably viewed as more important than any other ideals created by men. Of course, various ways of justifying the relatively immense importance of liberal norms are open to the rationalist. Berlin even hints at the possibility of a restricted utilitarian justification, according to which the superiority can be inferred by comparing liberal and illiberal values in terms of common welfare. "Utilitarian solutions are sometimes wrong, but, I suspect, more often beneficent. The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices—that is the first requirement for a decent society" (Berlin 1991, 17–8).

The structure of the common moral horizon can perhaps be clarified by considering what sort of reasoning process is implied by it for making all-things-considered ethical and political choices. Given that the force of agonistic pluralism is limited by the relative superiority of liberal values over illiberal ones, as Berlin suggests, any reasoning process that genuinely reflects the nature of value must, first, give suitable priority to liberal values when conflicts arise with

<sup>7</sup> Not everyone accepts that the donkey's dilemma is properly interpreted as a case of indeterminacy. There are no conflicts of plural and incomparable values. Thus, it can be argued that indifference between two equally valuable haystacks leads to the beast's demise. Moreover, given that eating either haystack is more valuable than starving to death, the beast is clearly irrational on either interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> A similar distinction between "tentative" and "assertive" indeterminacy is drawn by Sen (1997, 763–4).

illiberal values; second, recognize that conflicts of incomparable values cannot be rationally resolved; and, third, permit radical choices when confined to the maximal options within any zone of rational indeterminacy associated with conflicts of incomparable values. In short, a (minimally) liberal rational choice process must be employed to generate all-things-considered rankings, which will typically exhibit some indeterminacy, from any set of particular value rankings (one ranking for each value) over a given domain of options. The relevant liberal procedure can be viewed as an ethical process of personal judgment if the plural values being considered are assumed to be located within one reasoning person. It can also be viewed as a political process of social choice if the different values are assumed to be located within different persons. In either case, certain liberal values, including basic human rights and correlative duties, must be seen as generally more weighty than competing values, perhaps even infinitely so.

It may be useful to say a bit more about a genuinely rational liberal political process in this context. To be at least minimally liberal, the political system must duly secure at least some minimum set of human rights (left unspecified for the moment). Perhaps this security can be provided without political democracy, even if equal citizenship provides the best security. A constitutional monarchy may be sufficient, despite the unequal privileges accorded to its subjects. For the sake of illustration, however, consider a more advanced liberal process: majority rule confined by suitable checks and balances within the limits of a highly developed system of equal rights and liberties. Unlike a mainstream rationalist, Berlin cannot say that this political process enables citizens to resolve all their value conflicts. Like the romantics, he is committed to the truth that conflicts of incommensurable ideals are forever beyond rational resolution. He must therefore reject any epistemic view of the political process as a method for generating a complete and transitive all-things-considered social ranking that is most likely to represent the true unobservable ranking of the options.

Young (1988, 1995) adopts an epistemic perspective, for example, when arguing on the basis of Condorcet's work that simple majoritarian procedures can be extended to generate a complete and transitive ranking that is a maximum likelihood estimate of the true ranking. But Berlin, despite his declared sympathy for Condorcet's rationalistic aspirations (Jahanbegloo 1992, 75–6), insists that objective rankings are indeterminate with respect to some subsets of options because rationally incomparable values come into conflict over those subsets. In his view, rather than try to make a best guess at how to remove this indeterminacy, rational people must recognize that it is genuinely irremediable and make radical choices that lack rational justification.

To illustrate, suppose, as a first approximation, that rationally incomparable pagan and Christian values coincide with, respectively, two separate individuals, Arnie and Jack. Arnie is entirely pagan, and Jack is purely Christian. With the same options described in

the earlier example, Arnie has the ranking  $x > w > y$ , and Jack has the ranking  $y > w > x$ . These two people have conflicting rationally incomparable complete and transitive rankings of the options. Any all-things-considered ranking is now a social ranking produced by a political process that considers the individual rankings of the options. Rational indeterminacy arises in the social ranking because the conflicts between pagan and Christian directives cannot be reasonably settled. The liberal political process cannot rationally resolve the issue of whether Arnie's ranking (reflecting pagan values) is more important than Jack's ranking (reflecting Christian values). But it can reasonably be used to make radical choices between different maximal options within the boundaries set by fundamental liberal norms. Since  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $w$  are all maximal options in the example under consideration, any one of them can be picked over the others by the liberal process. It is reasonable for the process to reveal any social ranking of these options in order to fill in this zone of rational indeterminacy without genuinely removing it.

Of course, it makes little sense to match separate values to separate persons on a one-to-one basis. In general, we must assume instead that each rational person will form an all-things-considered ranking that in her judgment reasonably takes account of the directives of the plural values that figure into her choices over options. (These values may be said to comprise the culture—or at least the relevant portion of it—that shapes her ethical and political choices). Given Berlin's claim that rationally incomparable values are known to conflict in the context of some zone of options, however, any all-things-considered personal ranking must exhibit rational indeterminacy—incompleteness or overcompleteness—over that domain. Still, agents may be forced by circumstances to choose between options within the zones of rational indeterminacy.

With this in mind, even if we assume that everyone has perfect information and makes no errors in judgment, different persons must be expected to reveal different complete and transitive rankings of the options. Rational agents who recognize the genuine nature of moral value will make the same comparisons of any rationally comparable values and to that extent form the same all-things-considered ranking over options involving those values. But when competing values are rationally incomparable, different persons may reasonably make different radical picks between options implicating those values: There are no criteria of rationality to determine anyone's choices. In other words, different rational persons will typically reveal competing all-things-considered rankings to the extent that they make competing radical choices to fill in the zones of rational indeterminacy inherent in the nature of value.

We can then speak of a liberal political process that generates social rankings of options from profiles of complete and transitive all-things-considered personal rankings of the same options (one ranking revealed by each person), with the important caveat that disagreement among personal rankings will typically be observed even if everyone is assumed to be fully rational

and moral. This political process cannot genuinely resolve conflicts of rationally incomparable values. Any social ranking produced by it will exhibit genuine rational indeterminacy, even if that indeterminacy is hidden in a complete and transitive "revealed" ordering generated from the set of complete and transitive personal orderings.

Agonistic liberal rationalists view the liberal political process as a reasonable device for making radical picks among maximal options, where any pick is compatible with liberal values (as reflected in the liberal procedure) but does not imply that underlying conflicts of rationally incomparable values have been rationally terminated. The point is that a political decision may be needed for reasonable public purposes now, at a given time and place, even though a best option cannot be rationally determined. But liberal rationalists of Berlin's ilk do not hope to find best options, let alone complete and transitive social rankings. Rather, they insist that many distinct options can be maximal for liberal purposes because conflicts of irreducible values cannot be rationally resolved. It is reasonable to confine the liberal political process to these maximal options, but no rational justification is available for picking one maximal option rather than another. Thus, the liberal democratic process itself can also be viewed in romantic terms as an inexhaustible creative process within liberal limits, a continuing public decision procedure in which citizens may freely participate in an indefinite series of maximal picks over time without ever being constrained to provide a fully determinate all-things-considered social ordering of the feasible options.

Against this dynamic romantic view, it may appear that any liberal democratic procedure must by definition rationally compare what are supposed to be the incomparable values held by different individuals. This is not so. In the case of majority rule constrained by a liberal system of basic rights, for example, majority rule is properly defined without making reference to equal weighting of different persons' rankings of options. Given that those rankings are rationally incomparable to the extent that they involve different radical picks within the zones of rational indeterminacy associated with conflicts of incomparable values, majority rule generates a social ranking from incomparable personal rankings. Indeed, given that each person's ranking can be represented by a purely ordinalist utility function because the ranking is complete and transitive, majority rule works with a set of incomparable personal utility functions. Because the personal rankings (whether represented by utility functions or not) are not comparable, it is meaningless to speak of equal weighting (or any other weighting) of them. Majority rule makes no rational comparison of the different personal rankings or of the rationally incomparable values reflected in them.

This is not to say that liberal democratic procedures will generally yield fully determinate social rankings if competing personal rankings are incomparable. Given three or more options, Arrow's (1963) impossibility theorem and related results show that every decision

rule (including majority rule) that satisfies some seemingly mild conditions of liberal democracy will generally fail to generate a complete and transitive social ranking of the options. To cite a familiar example, suppose that persons  $i$ ,  $j$ , and  $k$  reveal the following rankings: for  $i$ ,  $x > y > w$ ; for  $j$ ,  $y > w > x$ ; and for  $k$ ,  $w > x > y$ . Because majority rule aggregates over each personal ranking without assigning any relative weights (including equal weights) to them, it yields a cyclical social ranking:  $x > y > w > x$ . But the lack of a complete and transitive majority ranking is hardly unreasonable from Berlin's perspective; after all, the pluralistic nature of value precludes any genuine rational ordering of this utopian sort. To that extent, the romantic spectacle of majority preference cycles is quite compatible with Berlinian liberal rationalism. The fact that a majority's radical picks may alternate repeatedly among some given subset of maximal options more or less by accident is neither here nor there.

At the same time, there is a need for liberal institutional devices (including basic rights) to keep majority rule within liberal limits. These devices serve to veto illiberal options even if majority cycles over the maximal liberal options remain. Such devices can also be used, however, to fill in zones of rational indeterminacy in the social ranking. For example, each person may be given the right to cast one equally weighted vote for his first-place choice (ignoring the remainder of his ranking). Then  $x$  gets one vote,  $y$  gets one vote, and so does  $w$  in the above example. Majority voting restricted in this way yields a three-way tie among  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $w$ , that is, complete social indifference. In effect, the equal franchise artificially converts each of the maximal options into best options. The social ranking becomes fully determinate, and we can simply draw straws to pick one of these best options. Any standing tie-breaking rule is acceptable in this situation.

By employing majority rule constrained by such liberal devices, agonistic liberal rationalists can artificially remove indeterminacy in all-things-considered social rankings without pretending to make rational comparisons of genuinely incomparable values. In effect, weighty liberal values are extended, such that it comes to seem "reasonable" that the political process artificially converts one of many distinct maximal options into a "best" option, which must be accepted by the members of society (under threat of social coercion) despite underlying conflicts of rationally incomparable values. But "political reasonableness" so understood is not concerned with discovering a genuine resolution of the relevant conflicts of values. Rather, it is concerned with making decisions that serve liberal purposes for the moment without terminating rational debate about what is best, all things considered.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Rawls's (1993) "political liberalism" also relies on a distinction between criteria of truth and standards of public reasonableness. I do not mean to suggest that Rawls's distinction plays out in the same way as the distinction I have attributed to Berlin.



## Plural Liberty

Despite the liberal limits on its scope, agonistic pluralism extends even within liberalism's citadel: "It goes all the way down, right down into principles of justice and rights" (Gray 1995, 60). Given that liberal principles themselves cannot be insulated from pluralism, different basic rights may implicate rationally incomparable values that clash irreconcilably when the rights conflict with one another.

Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty is too well known to require much discussion. I shall emphasize merely that, for Berlin, liberty itself is plural. Its different aspects may be associated with conflicts of rationally incomparable values:

If the claims of two (or more than two) types of liberty prove incompatible in a particular case, and if this is an instance of the clash of values at once absolute and incommensurable, it is better to face this intellectually uncomfortable fact than to ignore it, or automatically attribute it to some deficiency on our part which could be eliminated by an increase in skill or knowledge; or, what is worse still, suppress one of the competing values altogether by pretending that it is identical with its rival—and so end by distorting both (Berlin 1969, 1).

Berlin (1969) admits that positive liberty may be "at no great logical distance" (p. xliii) from negative liberty, and the two aspects of freedom "cannot be kept wholly distinct" (p. 131). But they are not the same thing. Democratic self-government, for example, is "logically uncommitted" to negative liberty (p. 165). Moreover, rights to participate in self-government may clash with property rights or rights to privacy, and the values attached to the respective rights may be incomparable.

Berlin (1969, xvii) does not doubt that positive liberty is "a valid universal goal" and "something valuable in itself." Contrary to Taylor (1979), he seems to think that both positive and negative liberty can be rooted in a fundamental "opportunity concept" of freedom that comprehends the need for an agent to have internal opportunities (i.e., certain minimum rational capacities to make choices) as well as external ones (i.e., an absence of certain external obstacles to potential choices). Yet, he emphasizes that positive liberty (unlike negative liberty) was twisted historically into false ideals of rational self-perfection, the alleged desirability of which was used to justify forms of authoritarianism. Berlin (1969) is careful to point out that a similar history of perversion "could equally have been the fate of the doctrine of negative liberty" (p. xlvii), but that did not happen. "Hence, the greater need, it seems to me, to expose the aberrations of positive liberty than those of its negative brother" (p. xlvii). In his opinion, negative liberty does not possess the confusing historical connotations associated with positive liberty, and it is thus less likely to obscure the basic idea of freedom as opportunity (pp. lxi–lxii; see also Jahanbegloo 1992, 40–2). As a result, he tends to identify the basic idea with its negative aspect. But that should not blind us to the value of positive liberty, or to the possibility of irreconcilable clashes between it and the value of negative liberty.

Given that the idea of liberty itself is not immune from the force of agonistic pluralism, it follows that plural and rationally incomparable liberal cultures may come into conflict. Each liberal culture may be built on a distinctive conception of freedom or set of rights and liberties. More generally, each culture may be associated with a distinctive liberal political procedure. If conflicts arise between the directives of these liberal cultures with respect to some overlapping domain of possible outcomes, then rational indeterminacy can arise in any all-things-considered universal liberal ranking of the options. There is no best liberalism that could remove this indeterminacy.

## The Priority of Basic Human Rights

Even though Berlin says that liberty is plural, he emphasizes that it is of immense importance relative to competing values. He argues that a capacity to recognize this is inseparable from "what we mean by being a normal human being."

There must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should be permitted to cross. Different names or natures may be given to the rules that determine these frontiers: they may be called natural rights, or the word of God, or Natural Law, or the demands of utility or of the "permanent interests of men" . . . . What these rules or commandments will have in common is that they are accepted so widely, and are grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being. Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some such absolute stand (Berlin 1969, 164–5).

In other words, our understanding of what it means to be a reasonable and decent person entails acceptance of moral rules that distribute equal rights for all. Certain equal rights must be recognized by any "normal human being" even if, as a result of prejudice or ignorance in particular social contexts, these equal claims do not receive equal protection under prevailing laws and customs. Also, the system of equal rights must be viewed as being of paramount or near-paramount moral value. The values attached to basic rights must generally override other values in cases of conflict, so that a minimum extent of individual liberty may remain inviolable.

The foregoing quotation is not an isolated statement by Berlin. In his view, it is a "general truth" that human rights are essential to any "decent, even tolerable way human beings can live with each other" (Jahanbegloo 1992, 114). He insists that every decent or civilized way of life suitably privileges human rights.

The idea of human rights rests on the true belief that there are certain goods—freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love—that are in the interest of all human beings, as such, not as members of this or that nationality, religion, profession, character; and that it is right to meet these claims and to protect people against those who ignore or deny them. I think that every [normal or decent] culture which has ever existed assumed that there exist such rights—or at least a minimum of them (Jahanbegloo 1992, p. 39).

By implication, any acceptable culture is at least minimally liberal in the sense that it suitably privileges at least some minimum core of equal rights for all. A form of life that does not do this is barbaric, unacceptable (if not "unintelligible") to "normal" human beings.<sup>10</sup>

When discussing this requirement of any decent society, Berlin typically uses the language of negative liberty to avoid the confusions surrounding the idea of positive liberty due to its historical perversions. But he does not deny that a reasonable conception of positive liberty also enters into the minimum core of basic rights. The great value of freedom extends to "both the positive demand to have a voice in the laws and practices of the society in which one lives, and to be accorded an area, artificially carved out, if need be, in which one is one's own master, a 'negative' area in which a man is not obliged to account for his activities to any man so far as this is compatible with the existence of organized society" (Berlin 1969, lx, emphasis added). Thus, the minimum core comprehends both negative and positive liberty: freedom from coercive interference by others and a minimum degree of control over one's life, including a (not necessarily equal) voice in the laws and practices of society.<sup>11</sup>

If the minimum core of equal rights comprehends both positive and negative liberty, however, then conflicts of liberal rights within the core can apparently implicate these irreducible aspects of plural liberty. It might be claimed that the liberal values attaching to conflicting rights can always be rationally compared, in which case these particular conflicts can always be rationally resolved to bring about an ideal system of harmonious rights. But this is contrary to the agonistic spirit of Berlin's approach. It is more consonant with his view to assume that the conflicting liberal values may at times be rationally incomparable, such that there is no possibility of an optimal system of rights and liberties. Thus, when liberal rights clash, we may be forced to make radical picks between them.

At the same time, we must be able to identify illiberal claims, so that they cannot masquerade as liberal rights and defeat the possibility of a decent society. Unless there is a reasonable way to distinguish

between liberal and illiberal claims, agonistic pluralism becomes unbridled again; for example, the right not to be enslaved and the claim to own another person as property can both be associated with liberty (as they were in the United States prior to the Civil War), with clashes between them seen as implicating rationally incomparable values. If the values attaching to these two conflicting claims are incomparable, however, then agonistic liberalism comes apart, because it must permit radical choices for proslavery options when anti-slavery options are available. That is, slavery is not vetoed as barbaric.

To keep tragic pluralism within liberal limits, it must be possible to distinguish liberal claims and values from their illiberal counterparts. Conflicts between liberal rights can implicate rationally incomparable values, as can conflicts between illiberal claims. But conflicts between a liberal right and an illiberal claim cannot implicate incomparable values. Rather, liberal rights (and, more generally, liberal political procedures) must be far more valuable than illiberal alternatives.

Admittedly, Berlin does not say much about how liberal claims can be reasonably distinguished from illiberal ones. As a result, it may seem difficult to draw a clear line between liberal culture and illiberal alternatives. Despite his reticence on this point, however, something can be learned from his insistence that every liberal culture must privilege at least some minimum of rights due equally to all humans. To escape from barbarism, he says, society cannot deny equal liberty altogether. But this means that some putative rights are not eligible to be liberal rights. A right to enslave others is not eligible, for example, nor is a right to sell oneself into slavery: These claims are incompatible with the preservation of any extent of equal liberty for all.<sup>12</sup> It makes no sense to say that liberal culture can involve equal rights to enslave one another. There is no equal liberty in a slave society. Rather, an equal right not to be enslaved is essential to minimal liberalism. Again, a putative right to kill innocent members of particular ethnic or racial groups is an illiberal claim. It denies that a minimum core of equal rights attaches permanently to each person by virtue of his humanity. An equal right to be free of such ethnic and racial violence must be an element of any liberal minimum.

It emerges that an agonistic liberal rationalist must assume the possibility of a minimum core of equal rights that do not conflict with one another. Any claims that annihilate a person's core right not to be enslaved, for example, are illiberal claims. Liberal claims cannot violate any of the basic rights included in the liberal minimum. I have called attention to a couple of equal rights that seem to be elements of a liberal minimum, and no doubt there are others. Even with just the two mentioned, however, the requirement of suitable priority for a minimum core of equal liberty has remarkably powerful implications for liberal culture. For example, given that an equal right not to be killed arbitrarily by others is essential, any minimally liberal culture may entail an equal right to be free of starva-

<sup>10</sup> Berlin at times suggests that barbaric forms of life that sink below the common moral horizon are simply "unintelligible" to normal humans. Civilized people must be able to understand barbarism to some extent, however, in order to identify it, veto it as indecent, and communicate its indecency to one another.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin is not as clear as he might be about the priority of plural freedom in his doctrine. For discussion of some of the ambiguities, see Gray 1995, 5–37, and Morgenbesser and Lieberman 1991, 22–5. I believe he is saying that liberty (with its plural aspects) generally takes priority over other values in cases of conflict, except in extraordinary situations, when suppression of freedom may be justified to prevent imminent social catastrophe (Berlin 1969, lx–lxi). Although the minimum core of basic rights is not inviolable strictly speaking, "we recognize that under normal conditions, for the great majority of men, at most times, in most places, these frontiers are sacred, that is to say, that to overstep them leads to inhumanity" (p. lxi). Moreover, even in normal conditions, neither negative nor positive liberty has absolute priority. Given that these irreducible aspects of liberty can come into conflict, it may be reasonable to privilege negative liberty in some situations and positive liberty (including democratic extensions) in others. This is true whether we adopt benign pluralism or agonistic pluralism.

<sup>12</sup> For a similar statement, see Mill [1859] 1977, 299–300.

tion caused (however indirectly) by social and economic institutions. In that case, liberal property rights would have to be tailored accordingly to permit redistribution of wealth when required to prevent starvation. The idea that private owners have an absolute right to retain their surplus wealth when others are starving would become an illiberal perversion of the idea of negative liberty. Myriad examples of this sort are conceivable. Thus, the requirement of at least a minimum extent of equal liberty may place many constraints on what claims can count as liberal rights in any given social context.

I shall not attempt to delineate with any precision the contours of a liberal minimum core of equal rights.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of what marks the boundary between minimally liberal culture and barbarism, claims that conflict with rights in the minimum core must be illiberal claims. Adding illiberal claims to the liberal minimum does not expand the extent of equal liberty but instead compromises the minimum. In contrast, many liberal rights can be added to those in the minimum core, recognizing that liberal rights outside the minimum are by definition equal rights that do not conflict with the minimum rights. Liberal property rights or political rights can be added, for example, without violating the basic right not to be enslaved or the right not to be starved arbitrarily. Adding liberal rights to the liberal minimum expands the extent of equal liberty, even though clashes of liberal rights outside the minimum may implicate rationally incomparable values.

### AGONISTIC LIBERAL RATIONALISM

I shall now draw together the threads of my reconstruction of Berlin's agonistic liberal rationalism. Berlin certainly rejects the possibility of a rational liberal utopia, an implication of his tragic brand of pluralism. Thus, he warns against the vain pursuit of any ideal culture. Like Buridan's ass, liberals may lose everything if they persist in searching for the nonexistent ideal. Consistent with his warning, however, Berlin can also claim that a common moral horizon confines reason-

able humans to more or less imperfect liberal cultures, which assign "immense value" to at least some minimum core of equal rights, including rights not to be murdered, enslaved, and the like.

Even if all ideas of progress are rejected so that one liberal culture cannot be said to be any more advanced than another, each and every liberal culture can still be rationally justified as a maximal option that beats every nonliberal alternative (since all nonliberal options are nonmaximal) yet does not beat or tie any of the other maximal options. Any liberal culture is reasonably ranked above any nonliberal one because the latter fails to meet the common moral standards—it does not protect even a minimum core of equal rights. Yet, no liberal culture can be reasonably ranked above another, given that rationally incomparable values attach to the different rights in their distinctive systems of equal liberty when conflicts arise between the systems (keeping in mind that conflicts between them cannot arise with respect to the common minimum core of equal rights). It is not that any two liberal cultures are equally good. Rather, any two maximal options are rationally incomparable. Complete indeterminacy exists in the ranking of distinct liberal cultures.

Although agonistic pluralism reaches into liberal values themselves, agonistic liberal rationalism posits an all-things-considered partial ranking of feasible cultures. That ranking is completely indeterminate over a top set of at least minimally liberal cultures, but it does reasonably veto every illiberal option from the top set. Moreover, people immersed in the customary rules of a particular liberal society are free to affirm them radically, even though there is no rational justification for picking those particular customs instead of competing liberal options. In contrast, under an unbridled romantic approach, in which agonistic pluralism is unrestrained, every culture (liberal and illiberal alike) must be seen as a maximal option. No all-things-considered ranking of different cultures is possible. Highly illiberal options (including slave systems and Nazi ones) cannot be ruled out as inferior to liberal options, because liberal values are not rationally comparable to illiberal ones.

Despite Berlin's rejection of teleology, it may also be reasonable for an agonistic liberal rationalist to defend an idea of progress in the sense of movement toward a more extensive system of equal rights and liberties (although not necessarily a greater level of general happiness or justice). Berlin states: "I believe in working for a minimally decent society. If we can go beyond this to a wider life, so much the better" (Jahanbegloo 1992, 47). A particular liberal culture advances by recognizing and enforcing a greater number of equal rights, taking for granted that freedom to choose has immense importance in comparison to competing values. There is simply a greater expanse of equal freedom in the more advanced culture. Such progress requires an increasing number of radical political choices to be made, and made repeatedly. This occurs because as more and more liberal rights outside the minimum core are recognized, there are more and more conflicts of liberal rights that may implicate

<sup>13</sup> Rawls (1999, 544–55) discusses a minimum set of human rights which he considers essential to any decent society, but his view of liberal culture is quite restrictive because he ties it to equal citizenship and state neutrality. Taylor (1994) suggests that liberalism can be committed to the survival and flourishing of particular group forms of life within a larger community, if adequate safeguards are provided for basic rights of persons outside the privileged groups. Habermas (1994) objects persuasively that group rights to cultural reproduction cannot be guaranteed by democratic liberalism. Even so, it may be a mistake to insist that liberalism is inseparable from democracy, as if no basic individual rights are recognized by non-democratic societies. What Rawls calls decent nonliberal societies may better be viewed as at least minimally liberal, to emphasize continuities between advanced democratic Western societies and nondemocratic societies (including pre-democratic versions of Western societies themselves) that honor some minimum of human rights. Surely any society that honors all of the human rights that Rawls considers essential to human decency is aptly described as being at least minimally liberal. Even if we accept Rawls's view to the contrary, however, Berlin's rationalism still endorses advanced democratic liberalism, given the idea of progress discussed later in the text.

rationally incomparable liberal values. In deciding which of the conflicting rights and values to enforce, each particular society is free to advance along its own peculiar path. There is no single rational path of progress toward a greater extent of equal liberty. Rather, different liberal cultures advance along incompatible and incomparable paths by picking different liberal rights and values when clashes occur outside the minimum core. Any pick is permissible because the conflicting values attached to the different rights are incomparable, and none of the added rights violates the liberal minimum.

This idea of progress is relative to each particular liberal society. Each pursues its own distinctive path of development toward a greater equal freedom. In effect, each exhibits its own more or less advanced cultural stages as it moves along a trajectory from a minimally liberal phase toward a maximal one. Any two cultures are on the same path if and only if, when the set of rights recognized by the less advanced of the two is considered, they give the same priority to the same rights when conflicts arise (whether or not the conflicts implicate rationally incomparable values). The more advanced culture recognizes all the equal rights recognized by the less advanced one and then some.

Given such a notion of progress, the top set of maximal options is narrowed to include only the more advanced liberal cultures. But myriad advanced liberal cultures can be maximal options, which cannot be reasonably compared or ranked vis-à-vis one another. Any maximal liberalism must give suitable priority to an extensive system of equal rights for all, far beyond the minimum core. But different maximal liberalisms will give priority to different equal rights beyond the minimum. Different cultures may reasonably make different radical picks among conflicting rights that implicate rationally incomparable liberal values, provided the minimum core is not compromised. Also, any maximal liberalism must generally refuse to recognize as legitimate any special privileges or immunities that conflict with its extensive system of equal liberty for all. This requirement makes maximal liberalism far more demanding than minimal liberalism, which merely protects the minimum core of equal rights by refusing to recognize the legitimacy of any claim to annihilate it through slavery, arbitrary killing, and so on.

In addition to being ranked above illiberal alternatives, any particular maximal liberal culture is ranked above less advanced liberal cultures along the same path of development (less advanced versions of itself, so to speak). A maximal liberal culture protects a greater extent of equal liberty, and a smaller (perhaps zero) extent of unequal privileges and immunities, as compared to a less advanced liberal culture that is moving along the same path. Any agent has a greater number of equal opportunities to make her own choices in the more advanced culture, which recognizes all the same rights as the less advanced society and then some. True, maximal options are path-dependent: A liberal culture that is maximal with respect to one path is not maximal with respect to other paths. Indeed, it cannot generally even be rationally compared to dis-

tinct liberal cultures that have made their own peculiar picks in cases of conflict between liberal rights that implicate incomparable liberal values. But this does not alter the fact that every less advanced liberal culture is vetoed from the top set because it is reasonably ranked as inferior to some more advanced culture on its same path.

The upshot is that rationalist agonistic liberalism posits an all-things-considered partial ranking of feasible cultures. Although still rationally indeterminate over a top set of more advanced liberal cultures, that ranking vetoes every other culture—less advanced liberal ones and illiberal ones alike—from the top set. Moreover, the partial ranking is indeterminate over much more than the top set. In particular, there will generally not be a determinate ranking of any pair of liberal cultures following different paths of development. If different rights are picked when conflicts arise that implicate incomparable values, then the two cultures are incomparable. Rational agents are free to affirm radically either one over the other. At the same time, a more advanced culture is reasonably ranked as superior to a less advanced culture traveling the same path.

It should be stressed that a maximal liberal culture is unlikely to stir much excitement in a mainstream utopian rationalist. The various equal rights that can be included in its extensive system of rights are not mutually harmonious, and their clashes may implicate incomparable values. Because one right rather than another must be picked in these clashes, tragic sacrifices of liberal values cannot be avoided. Within the same culture, one right may be chosen over another in some situations, whereas the reverse choice is made in other situations. Different cultures can make different picks in like situations and still remain maximal. Moreover, unless equal liberty is given something like lexical priority over all competing values, a maximal liberal culture may occasionally recognize unequal privileges and immunities as more important than equal rights, with the caveat that such unequal claims cannot go to the length of authorizing their holders to annihilate the basic human rights of others. In short, the liberal cultures justified as maximal in terms of our common moral horizon may be a far cry from rational liberal utopias. At the same time, they are surely distinguishable from, say, a feudal culture, whether the latter is viewed as a less advanced variant of liberalism or as an illiberal option.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I argue that Berlin's liberalism is grounded in rational choice as opposed to "radical" choice unguided by reason. His agonistic pluralism does not subvert his liberalism. Rather, his pluralism emanates from his

<sup>14</sup> A feudal order can be included among nonmaximal liberal cultures if it recognizes the immense value of at least some minimal core of equal rights. It is not necessary that lords and peasants enjoy equal liberty in all respects. But a feudal order in which some are in effect enslaved is an illiberal option, unacceptable in terms of the common moral horizon (or "natural law") of civilized human beings. For related discussion, see Galipeau 1994, 117–9.

liberal rationalism, which insists on reason's inability to resolve certain conflicts of values. As Lukes (1994, 714) emphasizes, "it is a pluralism intended to be compatible with the absolute, overriding, and universal value of liberty, the existence of a common human nature, rational criticism, and the tractability of many but not all value conflicts in public and private life." Berlin's doctrine is best seen as a rationalistic liberalism that affirms pluralism within rational limits rather than as an unbridled romantic liberalism that lacks any rational basis for barring the door against illiberal intruders.

If my reading is correct, Berlin does not favor toleration of illiberal groups that deny basic human rights to their members (including the right to exit from the group). Rather, he thinks it is reasonable to extend at least some minimum of basic rights to everyone across different cultures. Indeed, if (negative and positive) freedom is held to be of such immense importance that a greater extent of equal rights is more valuable than a lesser extent, *ceteris paribus*, then his liberal rationalism affirms the superiority of any advanced liberal democratic culture over nonliberal or minimally liberal versions of itself. Once an advanced system of liberal rights (some of which may clash irreconcilably) has been established, it is perfectly reasonable for society to employ due coercion to secure that system of rights.

I also suggest that a main concern of Berlin is to unveil what he considers a genuine rationalism in stark contrast to mainstream utopian rationalism, which he repeatedly attacks as false and dangerous to liberty. He emphasizes that reason is too weak ever to resolve certain conflicts of values. A genuine rationalism must make room to a limited extent for a tragic pluralist moral outlook of the sort implicit in romanticism. Such a rationalism is necessarily antiutopian: It must recognize that conflicts of rationally incomparable values will inevitably frustrate any rational vision of ethical and political perfection. Yet, although reason is weaker than its mainstream promoters would have us believe, it remains for Berlin the ultimate guide in ethical and political life. It apparently justifies a common moral horizon that is minimally liberal in content. In particular, liberal political procedures, including at least some minimum core of equal rights, should be given suitable priority over illiberal values. The radical freedom to create and pick among plural and incomparable ideals, so prized by the romantics, is thus kept within reasonable liberal limits.

## REFERENCES

- Arrow, Kenneth J. 1963. *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2d ed. New York: Wiley.
- Barry, Brian. 1990. *Political Argument: A Reissue with a New Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1981. "The Originality of Machiavelli." In *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 25–79.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1983. "Reply to Robert Kocis." *Political Studies* 31 (3): 388–93.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1991. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy. New York: Knopf.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 1999. *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berlin, Isaiah, and Bernard O. Williams. 1994. "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply." *Political Studies* 42 (2): 306–9.
- Chang, Ruth, ed. 1998. *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crowder, George. 1994. "Pluralism and Liberalism." *Political Studies* 42 (2): 293–305.
- Crowder, George. 1998a. "From Value Pluralism to Liberalism." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 1 (3): 2–17.
- Crowder, George. 1998b. "John Gray's Pluralist Critique of Liberalism." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15 (3): 287–98.
- Galipeau, Claude. 1994. *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Galston, William A. 1999. "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory." *American Political Science Review* 93 (December): 769–78.
- Gray, John N. 1995. *Berlin*. London: Fontana.
- Gray, John N. 1998. "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6 (1): 17–36.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1994. "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State," trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Pp. 107–48.
- Hart, Herbert L. A. 1961. *The Concept of Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hurka, Thomas. 1996. "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret." *Ethics* 106 (April): 555–75.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 1999. *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 1992. *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. London: Peter Halban.
- Kateb, George. 1999. "Can Cultures Be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work." *Social Research* 66 (4): 1009–38.
- Larmore, Charles. 1996. *The Morals of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukes, Steven. 1994. "The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin." *Social Research* 61 (3): 687–717.
- Mill, John Stuart. [1859] 1977. "On Liberty." In *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, ed. John M. Robson. London and Toronto: Routledge and University of Toronto Press. Pp. 213–310.
- Morgenbesser, Sidney, and Jonathon Lieberson. 1991. "Isaiah Berlin." In *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*, ed. Edna Margalit and Avishai Margalit. London: Hogarth. Pp. 1–30.
- Newey, Glen. 1998. "Value Pluralism in Contemporary Liberalism." *Dialogue* 37 (3): 493–522.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1999. "The Law of Peoples." In *John Rawls, Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. 529–64.
- Riley, Jonathan. 1998. *J. S. Mill: On Liberty*. London: Routledge.
- Riley, Jonathan. N.d. *Mill's Radical Liberalism*. London: Routledge. Forthcoming.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1987. *On Ethics and Economics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1997. "Maximization and the Act of Choice." *Econometrica* 65 (July): 745–79.
- Stocker, Michael. 1990. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Taylor, Charles. 1979. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" In *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. Alan Ryan. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 175–93.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Pp. 25–73.
- Williams, Bernard O. 1979. "Conflicts of Values." In *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. Alan Ryan. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 221–32.
- Young, H. Peyton. 1988. "Condorcet's Theory of Voting." *American Political Science Review* 82 (December): 1231–44.
- Young, H. Peyton. 1995. "Optimal Voting Rules." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (Winter): 51–64.