From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin

Ella Myers

Abstract: The relationship between pluralism and liberalism has been at the center of recent considerations of Isaiah Berlin's thought. In particular, liberal theorists have asked whether the value pluralism Berlin endorses actually undermines his liberalism. A common interpretive approach resolves this problem by presenting Berlin's pluralism as "limited" rather than "radical," and therefore capable of serving as a moral foundation authorizing liberalism. I challenge this re-construction of Berlin's work, arguing that such readings are premised on a conception of judgment Berlin does not share. While many of his readers believe that a judgment on behalf of liberalism requires the identification of a transcontextual ground, Berlin invites us to see human judgment as a meaningful practice that occurs in the absence of absolutes yet does not simply mirror local norms. Berlin's defense of liberalism models this kind of judgment—a judgment that is neither mandated, nor ruled out, by pluralism.

When Leo Strauss took aim at liberalism for what he saw as its untenable abandonment of moral absolutes, he pointed to Isaiah Berlin's famous "Two Concepts of Liberty" essay as emblematic of the problem. The "crisis of liberalism," according to Strauss, is a result of liberalism's claim to have given up the project of grounding itself in absolutes. This position cannot succeed, he argues, because a conclusive case for liberalism would require the identification of some eternally valid principles as its "basis," something liberals decline to provide, citing the nonhierarchical multiplicity and incompatibility of human ends. This attempt to inhabit "an impossible middle ground between relativism and absolutism" is nowhere on clearer display, Strauss declares, than in Berlin's essay.

On Strauss's reading, the text is symptomatic of the crisis in liberalism because Berlin simultaneously defends the plurality of incommensurable values over and against the notion of any moral metastandards, yet he also flirts with absolutism. For example, as part of his account of negative liberty, Berlin insists that "there must be some frontiers which nobody should ever be permitted to cross" and refers to these frontiers as "sacred." The world of plural values seen from a liberal perspective, Strauss ventures, "seems to require some kind of 'absolutism.'"[1] Yet, as Strauss shows, Berlin

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[1] Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. T. L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

also hesitates to supply to liberalism any absolute foundation. Although Berlin wants to claim that the private sphere is sacred, this declaration "has no basis" in the end, since Berlin says the claim might be defended with reference to God, natural law, the demands of utility, or even "my own subjective ends, or the ends of my society or culture." As Strauss quips, "any old basis . . . will do."[2] Indeed, Berlin indicates repeatedly that liberal commitments do not reflect transhistorical truths but are historically specific and contingent beliefs. It is Berlin's oscillation between what Strauss calls relativism and absolutism that makes his essay "a characteristic document of the crisis in liberalism."[3]

The crisis Strauss names, which concerns the feasibility of liberalism absent moral absolutes, continues to dominate liberal political thought in general and scholarship on Berlin in particular. Berlin's interpreters tend to be obsessed with the question of the relationship between value pluralism and liberalism. In particular, many worry that his commitment to value pluralism may actually undermine his other commitment, to liberalism, since the latter, like any political philosophy or system, inevitably privileges certain values above others. What could warrant liberalism's claims to universality or even superiority if value pluralism denies any special status to the constellation of values that liberalism celebrates? Doesn't a defense of liberalism depend upon the existence of some moral absolutes? If liberals wish to embrace the ethical doctrine of value pluralism, must they recognize liberal political orders as simply one possibility among many?[4]

Many of Berlin's readers contend that a universal case for liberalism is nonetheless compatible with pluralism. It is possible to justify the liberal ranking of values generally and across all cases, they claim, but this position requires much more careful elaboration than Berlin provides. This article critically examines liberal universalist approaches to Berlin's thought, the signature of which is an attempt to reformulate value pluralism as "limited" rather than "radical." The significance of this strategy, I argue, is that it posits a reconstructed pluralism that incorporates certain moral absolutes and is meant to serve as the ground sanctioning liberalism. I demonstrate that this interpretive approach is driven not only by the desire to reconcile two competing strains of Berlin's work but also by the broader conviction that an argument on behalf of liberalism requires an absolute foundation in order to be

[2]Ibid. Strauss quotes Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 50.

[3]Strauss, "Relativism," 17.

[4]John Kekes and John Gray, for example, argue that value pluralism undermines liberal universalism, a claim I discuss later in this essay. See John Kekes, "The Incompatibility of Liberalism and Pluralism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (April 1992): 141–51; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1998): 17–36.

justified. This belief, however, is not Berlin's own. In particular, his compelling, though overlooked, account of human judgment challenges the notion that meaningful judgment—including a judgment on behalf of liberalism itself—depends upon the identification of transhistorical absolutes, as these readers suppose. Berlin's work, I suggest, resists the uses to which it is put by those seeking to transform pluralism into a foundation mandating liberalism. Indeed, Berlin's own advocacy of key liberal values such as negative liberty ought to be understood as an expression of his political judgment, neither ruled out, nor mandated by pluralism.

Berlin's Puzzle

Berlin's eclectic body of work evinces a singular preoccupation, by now well known—debunking monism and arguing for the truth of pluralism. By monism Berlin means first and foremost the assumption that all questions are "questions of fact," admitting of one correct answer, including moral and political questions.[5] It is belief in an ultimate ordering of values which would resolve all apparent conflicts that Berlin rails against throughout his work by arguing that "some values may conflict intrinsically." The universe human beings inhabit, Berlin argues, is one in which values can and do clash, giving the lie to the monistic view: "These collisions of values are the essence of what they are and what we are."[6] Value pluralism attempts to describe "the human predicament" in which conflicts between values cannot be resolved through recourse to a moral yardstick that would translate them into more or less of a single good.[7]

Our moral experience, for Berlin, is marked by sacrifice and loss. "We cannot have everything" and whatever we do have may be incomparable to what we forgo, such that we cannot always be assured of having gained more than we have lost. As Berlin explains it, we face situations in which the choice is not one between superior and inferior values.[8] Significantly, Berlin illustrates this claim using the example of freedom, arguing that we should not misconstrue freedom as the highest of all values. If that were so, in cases of conflict between, say, the principle of freedom and the principle

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[5]Isaiah Berlin repeats this formulation often. See "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) and "The Romantic Revolution," in *The Sense of Reality*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), among others.

[6]Berlin,"The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13.

[7]This seems to be what Berlin means by "incommensurability"—that there is no single standard (such as utility) that would allow for a comparative measurement of all values. See Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 102.

[8]Isaiah Berlin, introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, lvi.

of equality, freedom should always win out. Instead, the situation is "more complex and more painful," since freedom may clash with "other, no less ultimate, values."[9] Liberty is "not the only value" and may need to be sacrificed to others. But the sacrifice is real: "We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss."[10]

But what is the connection between Berlin's evocation of a bountiful, varied, and sometimes tragic ethical universe and his liberal political outlook? This question has occupied Berlin's readers in part because he does little to answer it, offering only minimal and inconsistent remarks on the subject.[11] Moreover, his thought as a whole seems to deepen rather than resolve the question. Pluralism is often depicted as thoroughgoing and subversive of any claim to an authoritative ranking of values, but Berlin also seems to grant special weight to negative liberty. I offer a brief sketch of this difficulty before turning to the way it has been treated by some of Berlin's most influential interpreters.

Value pluralism in the context of Berlin's work often describes a condition of profound open-endedness, in which multiple values coexist and sometimes conflict in the absence of any authoritative guide that could instruct us how to live best amidst such plurality. The values that characterize human existence, past and present, may be ultimate, they may be ends in themselves, and nonetheless incompatible and incomparable to one another. Berlin declares:

> I should like to say once again to my critics that the issue is not one between negative freedom as an absolute value and other, inferior values. It is more complex and more painful. One freedom may abort another; one freedom may obstruct or fail to create conditions which make other freedoms, or a larger degree of freedom, or freedom for more persons, possible; positive and negative freedom may collide; the freedom of the individual or the group may not be fully compatible with a full degree of participation in a common life, with its demands for co-operation, solidarity, fraternity. But beyond all these there is an acuter issue: the paramount need to satisfy the claims of other, no less

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[9]Ibid. Moreover, any single value, including liberty, is subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations. See Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in *Concepts and Categories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1950), 149 and Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty*, 125. Subsequent citations for "Two Concepts" refer to this edition.

[10]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13. Berlin credits this lesson to Machiavelli in "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 63.

[11]In "Two Concepts of Liberty," he refers to "pluralism, with the measure of negative freedom that it entails" ("Two Concepts," 171), but in a later interview he states, "Pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts. ... I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected" (Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* [New York: Scribner, 1992], 44).

> ultimate, values: justice, happiness, love, the realization of capacities to create new things and experiences and ideas, the discovery of the truth.[12]

Here Berlin refuses to position negative liberty as a metavalue, whether in relation to alternative conceptions of liberty or to other "ultimate values" such as justice or love. Liberalism's cherished notion of negative liberty is left to vie with other, no less significant values. Here and elsewhere, Berlin's insistence on the multiplicity and even incommensurability of values would seem to rob liberalism of any basis on which to assert its preferred set of values as uniquely authoritative.

Yet at other points in his writing, Berlin seems to treat negative liberty as a universal, perhaps the highest, value, apparently tempering the "radical" pluralism described above. For example, Berlin writes of "the moral validity—irrespective of the laws—of some absolute barriers to the imposition of one man's will on another."[13] This sort of statement suggests that negative liberty is a universal human good that transcends any existing regime. Might it be, then, that negative liberty enjoys a special standing relative to other values? When Berlin remarks, "There are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable," the protection of negative liberty by positive law appears as the reflection of "frontiers" that exist independently of it.[14] Does this mean that negative liberty is an absolute requirement for any regime, and if so, what becomes of the other "no less ultimate values" which may be incompatible with it?

Even when Berlin speaks of certain "frontiers" as "sacred," however, he specifies that "for the great majority of men, at most times, in most places, these frontiers are sacred."[15] This description, surely contestable, is notable for its quasi-empirical character. Berlin does not posit negative liberty as a transhistorical or specially ordained value, but as one that, in practice, has been recognized by many cultures and societies.[16] Additionally, Berlin repeatedly claims that negative liberty is a distinctively modern ideal, "scarcely older than the Renaissance or the Reformation."[17] It may be "only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization."[18] Unlike his critic Strauss, Berlin is genuinely reluctant to posit any value, including negative liberty, as an "eternal principle." He harshly questions the very aspiration: "Principles are not less sacred because their

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[12]Berlin, introduction to *Four Essays*, lvi.

[13]Berlin, "Two Concepts," 166.

[14]Ibid., 165. Berlin also refers in the same essay to the frontiers between the individual and the state as something that "must be drawn," phrasing that emphasizes the creative role of human agents (ibid., 124).

[15]Berlin, introduction to *Four Essays*, lxi.

[16]Ibid., xxxi. Yet Berlin also argues that the "domination of this ideal has been the exception, rather than the rule, even in the recent history of the West" ("Two Concepts," 129).

[17]Berlin, "Two Concepts," 129.

[18]Ibid., 172.

duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past."[19]

Even Berlin's references to negative liberty as an element of human nature are hardly unambiguous. Although Berlin commends a tradition of liberal political thought for recognizing that "we must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to 'degrade or deny our nature,'" that "nature" is revealed to be less of a foundation than a question. Berlin continues:

> What then must the minimum be? That which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature. What is this essence? What are the standards which it entails? This has been, and perhaps always will be, a matter of infinite debate.[20]

Berlin's invocation of human nature does not seem to settle the question of the status of negative liberty, then, but instead draws attention to the disagreement that attends any effort to define a human essence or delineate standards in relation to it. Similarly, while Berlin states that there are "some common values" which are widely shared, he does not delineate them nor does he suggest that such commonality mitigates the fact of plurality.[21] (That is, values that are "common" between people or groups may still conflict and be incommensurable with one another.)

Berlin, then, depicts a varied and conflictual value-pluralist universe that seems to deny liberalism a moral foundation, yet he also comes close to positing negative liberty as a universal, even the highest, good. How are we to understand these contrary lines of thought? One prevalent way of making sense of this puzzle in Berlin's work involves developing what Berlin did not—an argument for the compatibility, even unity, of pluralism and liberalism.[22] As we will see, this conciliatory approach follows a certain form, supplying to liberalism a moral foundation—in the form of reworked pluralism—by which to validate itself.

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[19]Ibid. In an interview, Berlin speaks pointedly of Strauss: "He did try to convert me in many conversations when I was a visitor in Chicago, but he could not get me to believe in eternal, immutable, absolute values, true for all men everywhere at all times, God-given Natural Law and the like" (Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 32).

[20]Berlin, "Two Concepts," 126.

[21]Berlin, introduction to *Four Essays*, xxxi.

[22]Two notable exceptions to these efforts to unite pluralism and liberalism are Ira Katznelson and Michael Walzer, whose interpretations affirm the irresolvable tension between the pluralist and liberal lines in Berlin's thought. See Ira Katznelson, "Isaiah Berlin's Modernity," *Social Research* 66, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 611–30 and Michael Walzer, "Are There Limits to Liberalism?" *The New York Review of Books*, October 19, 1995.

Remaking Value Pluralism

Berlin's thought poses a puzzle, one which his readers are eager to solve. How, they ask, can we best make sense of Berlin's simultaneous advocacy of pluralism—the claim that there are multiple, incompatible "ultimate ends" which cannot be reconciled or rank ordered—and his commitment to liberalism, which necessarily privileges certain values, among them negative liberty, at the expense of others?

Although some of Berlin's readers argue that pluralism and liberalism cannot be reconciled and are in fact incompatible with one another,[23] a more prevalent approach contends that pluralism, properly understood, serves as the very ground of universal liberalism. Prominent liberal interpreters of Berlin, including George Crowder, William Galston, Amy Gutmann, and Jonathan Riley argue that pluralism and liberalism are not merely compatible with one another, but that liberalism actually follows from pluralism, properly understood. Thinkers who argue that pluralism legitimates liberalism acknowledge that Berlin's work must be reconstructed if this relationship is to be recognized. That is, his own writings do not present or explain such a relationship. Yet, they argue, there is a version of pluralism implicit in his work which, if developed, reveals itself to be the basis of liberalism. The signature of these readings is a modified pluralism which is understood as "limited," "constrained," "restricted," "informed," or "qualified," rather than "radical."[24] The point of this move is that it incorporates key

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[23]See, for example, Morton Frisch, "A Critical Appraisal of Isaiah Berlin's Philosophy of Pluralism," *Review of Politics* 60, no. 3 (1998): 421–33; Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*; Kekes, "Incompatibility"; Matthew Moore, "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 244–56; Robert Talisse, "Can Value Pluralists Be Comprehensive Liberals?" *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2004): 127–39. Gray, Kekes, and Talisse do not rule out a meaningful defense of liberalism altogether. Though they claim that pluralism denies the possibility of liberal universalism, Gray and Kekes allow for more local, context-specific justifications for a liberal ranking of values while Talisse suggests that Rawlsian liberalism is better suited to pluralist conditions than comprehensive liberalism. Frisch and Moore go further, explicitly casting pluralism *as* relativism, and charging that there is simply no way to rank values at all if the pluralist thesis is accepted. According to Frisch, there is only "arbitrary preference" (427).

[24]I include in this grouping George Crowder, William Galston, Amy Gutmann, Steven Lukes, Jonathan Riley, and Daniel Weinstock. See George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002); William Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 769–78 and *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Amy Gutmann, "Liberty and Pluralism in Pursuit of the Non-Ideal," *Social Research* 66, no. 4 (1999): 1039–62; Steven Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin," *Social Research* 61, no. 3 (1994): 687–717; Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," *American Political Science Review*

liberal commitments *into* pluralism, and thereby allows pluralism to serve as a foundation that justifies liberalism, rather than as a potential challenge to its supremacy.[25]

I provide several examples of this approach here. The claim is not that these authors forward identical treatments of Berlinian pluralism and liberalism, but that their interpretations, despite their differences, bring a similar foundationalist perspective to bear on Berlin's work. First, they posit a structural relationship between pluralism and liberalism, according to which pluralism, a true description of human experience, serves as the basis that warrants liberalism. Second, this depiction of the pluralism/liberalism dynamic reflects the shared conviction that a defense of liberalism *requires* recourse to an absolute foundation in order to be valid. In what follows I draw out these elements in the work of some of Berlin's most influential readers, before arguing that Berlin's thinking resists this interpretive approach.

Crowder declares that value pluralism is the very "ground" of liberalism, yet he is critical of Berlin for failing to effectively demonstrate this connection. He thinks that Berlin's most explicit attempt to "argue from value pluralism to liberalism" fails, but that it is nonetheless possible to get "from" value pluralism "to" liberalism while remaining faithful to Berlin's general perspective.[26] More specifically, Crowder claims that there are "conceptual

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95, no. 2 (2001): 283–95 and "Defending Cultural Pluralism: Within Liberal Limits," *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 68–96; Daniel Weinstock, "The Graying of Berlin," *Critical Review* 11, no. 4 (1997): 481–501.

[25]Distinguishing between "existential" and "moderate" pluralism, Peter Lassman argues that recent political thought "has moved uneasily between the kind of existentialist view put forward by Weber and the attempt to contain it" (Peter Lassman, "Political Theory in an Age of Disenchantment: The Problem of Value Pluralism: Weber, Berlin, Rawls," *Max Weber Studies* 4, no. 2 [2004]: 271). The interpretations of Berlin that I focus on are devoted to the task of "containing" pluralism. As Lassman points out, "most contemporary political thinkers, and especially those generally thought of as being in the Liberal camp, have spent much of their energy in trying to argue for some grounding for general principles as a counterweight to the demands of pluralism" (ibid., 256). Glen Newey speculates that "liberals could, of course, narrow 'pluralism' to refer only to values, or associated conceptions of the political, which they endorse" (Glen Newey, "Value Pluralism in Contemporary Liberalism," *Dialogue* 37, no. 3 [1998]: 516). I contend that this sort of narrowing is a widespread interpretive strategy in the secondary literature on Berlin.

[26]Crowder explains that Berlin sometimes suggests that the "necessity of choice" warrants privileging the "freedom to choose" and thereby liberalism itself. Even if "pluralism shows us that we *need* to choose among conflicting values, how does it follow that we must *value* the act of choosing?" (Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 81–82).

elements of pluralism itself" which, if clarified, carry "normative implications" that generate "liberal conclusions."[27]

Crowder offers three separate accounts of how value pluralism, properly conceived, can lead to liberalism, but one example will suffice to illustrate his interpretive approach, which has considerable similarities with other efforts to show that pluralism authorizes liberalism. Crowder argues that "the value of diversity" connects pluralism to liberalism. The pluralist conception of multiple, incommensurable goods, which Berlin develops, "implies" a commitment to promoting as many goods as possible and this is best achieved under liberalism. Thus, getting "from" pluralism "to" liberalism involves two "moves": "from value pluralism to the promotion of diversity and second from diversity to liberalism."[28] Matthew Moore has argued persuasively that this maneuver is flawed insofar as it rests on a duty of moral diversity—the pursuit of *more* genuine moral values rather than fewer—which is not intrinsic to, or even supported by, the pluralist thesis. The "more is better" principle that Crowder advances ultimately functions as a metavalue, the existence of which pluralism denies.[29] For the purposes of the present discussion, I want to focus less on the contradiction Moore identifies and instead highlight the *structure* of Crowder's argument and the central assumption on which it rests. First, Crowder's strategy is to attempt to demonstrate that pluralism *already contains* certain normative principles that lead in a liberal direction. Second, this effort is driven by the conviction that liberalism must be justified by an absolute that precedes it.

William Galston, with whom Crowder has long debated rival forms of liberalism, also rejects the view that pluralism and liberalism are simply at odds with one another. Unlike Crowder, however, Galston acknowledges that pluralism, in and of itself, cannot lead to liberal conclusions. An "additional premise" is required, and Galston proposes "expressive liberty" to fill that position. In other words, Galston suggests that although there is no direct line to be drawn from pluralism to liberalism, if the pluralist "premise" is coupled with the premise of expressive liberty, then liberalism follows. Galston claims that expressive liberty is not a "particular value" but a "structural fact about human agency."[30] "Expressive liberty," however, is defined in terms very similar to the Berlinian value of negative liberty:[31] "the absence of constraints, imposed by some individuals on others, that make it impossible (or significantly more difficult) for the affected individuals to live their lives in ways that express their deepest beliefs about what gives meaning or value to

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[27]Ibid., 12–13.

[28]Ibid., 135–36.

[29]Moore, "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism," esp. 250–51.

[30]William Galston, "Liberal Pluralism: A Reply to Talisse," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, no. 2 (2004): 145.

[31]Galston *does* regard Berlin's negative liberty as a specific value (*Liberal Pluralism*, 50–51).

life."[32] If, on Galston's view, Berlin "refuses to radicalize value pluralism so as to put negative liberty on all fours with other human goods," Galston surely does something similar when he posits pluralism and expressive liberty as two coequal premises.[33] That is, Galston's "expressive liberty" serves to "de-radicalize" pluralism. Even without issuing a verdict on whether "expressive liberty" is actually a nonvalue, as Galston wants it to be, its function seems clear—to add to pluralism a normative directive that can generate liberal conclusions.[34]

Galston's technique for deriving liberalism from pluralism is not identical to Crowder's. Galston is explicit that he is "adding" something—expressive liberty—to pluralism, whereas Crowder claims to be identifying what is already "implicit" in pluralism in order to make the connection to liberalism. Yet both authors modify Berlin's pluralism so as to include (or to be coequal with) normative aims—the maximization of diversity and the protection of expressive liberty, respectively—that are figured as *prior to* liberalism. Although Crowder and Galston also defend quite different forms of liberalism as the outcome of revised pluralism, both theories are driven by the underlying conviction that liberalism requires an absolute basis by which to validate itself. And pluralism, modified appropriately, is thought to perform this role.

Amy Gutmann tackles the question of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism by arguing that Berlin's work advances a specific "kind" of value pluralism that, "unlike many others," is "at least minimally liberal."[35] Although Gutmann acknowledges that Berlin does not formulate his own position this way, she contends that he "adds or incorporates substantive moral judgments into pluralism."[36] "Pluralism per se," or "pluralism by definition," does not involve any metastandards, Gutmann states, but "Berlin's

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[32]Ibid., 28. Galston's argument on behalf of expressive liberty is intended to protect individuals and groups who "live in ways that others would regard as unfree" (ibid., 29). The "rights of exit," however, must be available to ensure that individuals are not coerced to remain in associations that are hierarchical and directive if they do not wish to (ibid., 122).

[33]Ibid., 51.

[34]At times Galston formulates the point more modestly, in negative terms, by claiming that value pluralism "rules out" certain things, namely, "policies whose justification includes the assertion that there is a unique rational ordering of value" (*Liberal Pluralism*, 58). If Galston means by this that the pluralist doctrine denies the truth of monism, this is surely correct. But it would be a mistake to imagine that value pluralism automatically "rules out" any particular law or practice, as though by philosophical fiat. The *political* task of arguing and organizing against policies thought to rely wrongly on monistic reasoning persists. While the doctrine of value pluralism may be a *tool* in this argument and struggle, it is not a substitute for it.

[35]Gutmann, "Liberty and Pluralism," 1042.

[36]Ibid., 1047.

understanding of pluralism, at its best, is morally informed and constrained"
by the values of individual liberty and the avoidance of human suffering.[37]
The modified pluralism that Gutmann develops out of her reading of Berlin
therefore includes a "moral minimum" requiring the protection of individual
liberty and the avoidance of cruelty. The significance of this development is
clear. Gutmann defends a version of "constrained" pluralism which, if
accepted, seems to lead to liberal outcomes. Indeed, once liberal values are
built into pluralism, as they are by Gutmann, it is but a short step to
liberalism.

Riley's treatment of Berlin also centers on developing a version of pluralism
that is "limited" rather than "radical."[38] Focusing on "cultural pluralism"
(with "culture" defined as a "system of values"), he seeks to show that
rather than being "committed to pluralism as such," Berlin's work contains
a defense of cultural pluralism "within at least minimal liberal limits."
According to Riley, Berlin identifies a "common moral horizon" which
includes "values which are at least minimally liberal insofar as they prescribe
the protection of some set of basic human rights."[39] Importantly, this horizon
can serve as a line of demarcation, on Riley's account, such that cultures which
"fall below a common moral horizon" are to be "vetoed."[40] (I return to the
topic of the Berlinian "horizon" in the next section.) Incorporating normative
directives, which Riley argues are dictated by the "common moral horizon,"
into pluralism means that pluralism not only does not contradict liberalism
but serves as its very basis. Again, the movement is somewhat circular:
Berlin's value pluralism, modified so as to include certain liberal absolutes,
leads to liberalism.

All of these authors, then, aim to improve upon Berlin's work by better
articulating what he did not: a special relationship between pluralism and lib-
eralism in which the former grounds the latter. More specifically, they argue
that pluralism *already contains* normative directives (or in Galston's case, that
pluralism is tempered by its coequality with the "premise" of expressive
liberty) and consequently, pluralism is not only compatible with, but actually
authorizes, liberalism. This response to Berlin's work, though driven by the
desire to "solve" an apparent puzzle therein, is also animated more generally
by the belief that liberalism stands in need of a fixed and universal basis if it is
to be justified.

Pluralism is an especially appealing candidate to fill this foundational role,
because pluralism, as presented by Berlin, is a *true description of the moral uni-
verse.* It is not merely the observation of existing disagreement over values,

[37]Ibid., 1049. Gutmann includes the latter on the basis of Berlin's statement in
"The Pursuit of the Ideal" that "the first public obligation is to avoid extremes of
suffering" (17).
[38]Riley, "Defending Cultural Pluralism," 69, 71.
[39]Ibid., 78.
[40]Ibid., 83.

but an account of the deep structure of our existence.[41] Pluralism has a special status. It names a condition of human experience, held to be true, regardless of our understanding of it. (Some of us remain monists, after all.) So when the thinkers cited above present modified versions of pluralism, which incorporate certain normative (liberal) absolutes, they are positing a *truth* about the moral universe. And this truth is what authorizes the judgment on behalf of liberalism.

These efforts to adapt pluralism are governed by the relativism paradigm. "Relativism paradigm" here refers to a framework for thinking about the practice of human judgment. (Thus, to claim that a particular theory evinces this paradigm is not the same as saying that it is itself relativistic.) More specifically, the relativism paradigm portrays valid judgment as the product of fixed, absolute, *transcontextual* criteria.[42] If such criteria cannot be found, then judgment is the product of differing parochial standards at best and mere subjective preference at worst.[43] The options are stark: *either* judgment is authorized by standards which are constant and universal *or* our judgments are only reflections of local norms (perhaps so "local" as to be individualistic), which vary greatly and do not necessarily carry any force beyond a particular context.

This model of judgment underlies the approach to Berlin's work considered here. The attempt to show that liberalism follows from pluralism expresses the belief that a judgment in favor of, and a defense of, liberalism depend on the existence of universal, transcontextual standards. This effort, common to the four perspectives discussed above, is meant to counter the claim that support for liberalism or for key liberal values can be justified only in relation to the conventions of a particular society. John Kekes and John Gray have made arguments in this vein. Both contend that because pluralism denies the existence of any "overriding values," it is incompatible with universal liberalism. Any case for liberalism can only be local in character; a liberal ranking of values takes place within a particular context and with recourse to a specific tradition.[44] Gray explains that resolutions between pluralism's competing and irreconcilable values will be "internal to particular ways of life" and will conform to liberal principles only if that way of life is

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[41]As Galston puts it: "Value pluralism is presented as an account of the actual structure of the normative universe. It advances a truth claim about that structure" ("Value Pluralism," 770).

[42]John Gunnell, "Relativism: The Return of the Repressed," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993): 563. Gunnell argues that the issue of relativism which pervades political theory is a gripping matter only from within the confines of a "traditional epistemological search for transcontextual certainty" (ibid., 567).

[43]According to Frisch, for example, because Berlin denies that there is an "overriding principle" that ought to determine judgment universally, individual "arbitrary" or "mere" preference is the only alternative (Frisch, "A Critical Appraisal," 424, 427).

[44]John Kekes, *The Case for Conservatism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 63.

itself liberal.[45] In other words, for both Kekes and Gray, the case for liberalism is possible—and will have resonance—only when and where the relevant cultural context is liberal. Not surprisingly, this argument is unacceptable to the thinkers considered above. Crowder contends that this view means the defense of liberalism is nothing more than "preaching to the converted."[46] For this reason, Crowder and other liberal universalist readers of Berlin seek a justification for liberalism that goes "beyond context."[47] And as we have seen, pluralism itself is presented as a transcontextual ground.

Despite the claims of these authors that the foundationalist rendering of the pluralism-liberalism relationship is supported by Berlin's work, I want to suggest that his thinking in fact poses a challenge to it. This challenge consists first in Berlin's treatment of pluralism as a description of our moral universe rather than a prescription for a particular ranking of values or form of life. Second, and even more importantly, Berlin's work contains an account of judgment that contests the assumptions driving these foundationalist arguments. Although Berlin's pluralism is more "radical" than many readers want to admit, this is not cause for alarm in Berlin's eyes, precisely because he understands the practice of judgment in terms that defy the relativism paradigm. I argue in the next section that Berlin rightfully understands judgment—including judgment in favor of liberalism itself—as a practice that occurs in the absence of transcontextual absolutes yet is also more than the simple reiteration of local norms.

Radical Pluralism and Berlinian Judgment

Berlin's pluralism is "radical," in the sense that it describes a feature of the human condition—multiple, genuine ends, which are not fully compatible or rank orderable, and are even incommensurable with one another—without adjudicating between those values or endorsing any particular form of life.[48] When Berlin speaks of pluralism he does so in an existential

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[45]Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company," 34.

[46]Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 112. Crowder suggests that the particularist case might be improved by adopting a more capacious sense of "context," in recognition of the fact that people can and do pursue notions of the good that diverge from and even conflict with local traditions. Yet he also insists that liberals should try to go "beyond context" altogether in their justification for liberalism (ibid., 113, 108).

[47]Ibid., 108.

[48]It can be difficult to tell exactly what "radical" signifies for Berlin's readers who attempt to counter such a possibility with a more limited or qualified pluralism, but it seems to designate a version of pluralism that is, in Crowder's words, "indeterminate" in the sense that "no particular value (or set of values) has any 'morally privileged status'" (*Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 80). The authors focused on here are concerned to repudiate that version of pluralism in favor of one that does accord special standing to liberal values.

sense; he uses the term to describe a timeless truth about human experience (though recognition of this condition, Berlin says, may be more recent). The plurality of values, definitive of our life on earth, is reflected in the tremendous variety of laws, customs, and entire civilizations that have existed in the past, exist today, and presumably will exist in the future. In other words, value pluralism is itself indeterminate; it does not prescribe or proscribe any particular form of existence. It tells us only that we can expect "different nations, different roots, different laws, different peoples, different communities, different ideals."[49] More pointedly, value pluralism is open ended such that liberal arrangements are only one among many possibilities. Berlin regularly cites nonliberal societies when elaborating upon the meaning of value pluralism; the presence of diverse and incompatible ways of life across time and space is for him supporting evidence for pluralism as a true description of our condition.[50]

Pluralism's openness, however, does not rule out a defense of liberalism; such a defense is neither prohibited by, nor follows necessarily from, pluralism. Instead, the support Berlin shows for liberalism generally and for specific liberal values such as negative liberty expresses a political *judgment*, one which conforms to the conception of judgment articulated throughout his work. According to this view, judgment is exercised without recourse to universal, absolute standards, yet it is also not merely the echo of narrowly local conventions.

Berlin's insightful and pragmatic conception of judgment challenges the terms of the relativism paradigm. Many of Berlin's readers, as we saw, take a strongly philosophical and specifically epistemological approach to the question of liberalism's justification, seeking an absolute from which liberalism can be derived and its validity established. They worry that the only alternative to such justification is the admission that liberalism can be defended only among liberals, that is, only "within" specific traditions and cultures and not across them. I suggest that Berlin, unlike his readers, is not exercised by the problem of relativism precisely because he believes it to be a "pseudo problem" that rests on an inaccurate understanding of what we do when we judge.[51]

Although Berlin does not provide a well-developed theory of judgment, his work consistently presents judgment as a situated human practice that is neither absolutist nor parochial in character. In this section, I first clarify this general model of judgment, before suggesting that the case for liberalism

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[49]Isaiah Berlin, "Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," in *Crooked Timber*, 33.

[50]Berlin describes "the human condition" as one in which choice is unavoidable because "ends collide" and "we cannot have everything" (introduction to *Four Essays*, li).

[51]Gunnell, "Relativism," 563. Gunnell argues that political theorists ought to refuse relativism as a "pseudo-problem that is sustained by the aspirations of rationalism and foundationalism."

and its core values ought to be regarded as expressions of just this sort of judgment.

Berlin writes:

> Or, if we do condemn societies or individuals, do so only after taking into account the social and material conditions, the aspirations, codes of value, degree of progress and reaction, measured in terms of their own situation and outlook; and judge them, when we do (and why in the world should we not?), as we judge anyone or anything else: in terms partly of what we like, approve, believe in, and think right ourselves, partly of the views of the societies and individuals in question, and of what we think about such views, and of how far we, being what we are, think it natural or desirable to have a wide variety of views. . . . We judge as we judge, we take the risks which this entails.[52]

This statement highlights Berlin's nonabsolutist and practice-centered approach to the question of judgment. When we render judgments, according to Berlin, we do not identify and apply standards that are independent of our forms of life. Instead, we are engaged in a situated activity in which we draw on "our" preferences, beliefs, and commitments—which may themselves conflict—in order to make assessments that are informed, but never simply determined, by those resources. (Our best and most considered judgments also stretch beyond our own culturally specific norms to imagine the meaning of various practices and beliefs for people different from ourselves, as I discuss below.)[53] Berlin's pragmatic account of the judgment-making *we already engage in* stresses that we are capable of making meaningful assessments even in the absence of universal, transcontextual criteria: "It is plain that there can exist no 'super-standard' for the comparison of entire scales of value, which itself derives from no specific set of beliefs, no one specific culture."[54] Yet for Berlin the absence of a "super-standard" does not strip us of our capacity to judge.

In a short essay coauthored with Bernard Williams, for example, Berlin argues that although the pluralist perspective they endorse denies the

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[52]Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 102–3.

[53]Berlin describes a process by which we "make out the best, most plausible cases for persons and ages remote or unsympathetic to us or for some reason inaccessible to us; we do our utmost to extend the frontiers of knowledge and imagination" ("Historical Inevitability," 103).

[54]Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 86. Berlin also argues that in cases of conflicts among ultimate ends that require the sacrifice of one end to another, "there is no rule according to which this can be done—one must just decide" ("Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes," *Salmagundi* 120 [1998]: 108). When asked "How do you decide what the bases for human rights are?" Berlin replies simply, "How do you decide anything?" (ibid., 111). In these places and elsewhere Berlin declines to provide the sorts of determinate rules his readers assume to be indispensable for judgment.

existence of any "determinate and general procedure for solving conflicts," this does not disable the faculty of judgment. More pointedly, Berlin and Williams defend situated, nonabsolutist judgment as meaningful, and question why one should accept the fallacious notion that "a judgment to the effect that in a particular context a certain consideration is more important or significant than another is specially non-rational or subjective or a matter of taste." They ask, "Why should we believe this?"[55]

Berlin's portrait of judgment is at odds with the foundationalist model Gutmann endorses. Gutmann argues for "morally discriminate pluralism" because she claims that "pluralism by definition" is a threat to judgment itself: "Without a moral minimum, value pluralism would lead to such absurdity as considering Serbia and Sweden as incommensurably decent societies." According to Gutmann, value pluralism "per se" leaves us incapable of making ethico-political distinctions; we can only affirm whatever exists. If we wish to make critical judgments, we must identify an absolute, a priori—albeit "minimal"—morality that transcends all contexts and provides desperately needed standards for our judgments.[56]

Berlin gives us reason to doubt that the crisis Gutmann invokes is genuine. Why, he pushes us to ask, should we assume that absolutes or "eternal, immutable" standards are required in order for judgment to get underway?[57] Rather than accept Gutmann's claim that value pluralism condemns us to a posture of indifference, Berlin believes that we can and do make assessments, give reasons for our views, and attempt to convince others of them, all without applying fixed, transcontextual standards. We draw on norms and ideals, vocabularies and rules of thumb that are immanent to our ways of life, rather than prior to or above them.

Berlin's repeated references to what we do "in practice" brings the question of judgment back down to earth, where distinctions and evaluations are regularly made and regarded as meaningful (even if we do not agree with them), despite the fact that they cannot be shown to be the product of a universal moral ground.[58] Berlin writes that if we "consider the normal thoughts of ordinary men" on the subject we will see that they do things such as

[55]Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply," *Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (1994): 306–9.

[56]Gutmann presents the "moral minimum" as a "standard" for judgment but seems to regard the minimum itself as a product of human judgment. Gutmann, "Liberty and Pluralism," esp. 1058.

[57]Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 32.

[58]For this practice-centered view, see especially Berlin, "Historical Inevitability." In response to worries over mere subjectivism, for example, Berlin counters, "Where to draw the line—where to exclude judgments as being too subjective ... —that is a question for ordinary judgment, that is to say for what passes as such in our society, in our own time and place, among the people to whom we are addressing ourselves" (ibid., 95).

"assess the value of Cromwell's statesmanship … describe Pasteur as a benefactor of mankind or condemn Hitler's actions" without supposing themselves to be "saying something particularly hazardous or questionable."[59] According to Berlin, we routinely make judgments that are not the results of universal criteria that exist beyond any particular cultural formation, yet are not therefore irrelevant or unreliable.

If Berlin's writings challenge the absolutist models of judgment advocated by some readers, he also does not endorse the view that is presented as the only possible alternative within the relativism paradigm: a "particularist," or "traditionalist," conception.[60] According to that perspective, exemplified by Gray and Kekes, because value pluralism does not provide or permit transcontextual criteria that sanction liberalism (or any other political system) universally, any defense of liberal designs will take place "internally," in accordance with the already-established norms, beliefs, and customs of a specific (liberal) culture.[61] A case for liberal rankings of values must be local in character, particular rather than universal. For the liberals I discussed in the previous section, this view is unsettling because it suggests that a judgment in favor of liberalism may not carry any critical purchase beyond its origins.

Although Berlin does not believe we can go entirely "beyond context" when we make judgments, he also does not suppose that our judgments are provincial in the way that is assumed by both the proponents and the critics of particularism. This is because Berlin does not adhere to the portrait of culture that informs that view, in two important ways. First, the characterization of judgment and reason-giving as "local" often assumes a strangely narrow and monistic culture, rather determining in its effects. Here, "tradition" provides settled and agreed-upon standards that generate judgments which, in turn, will resonate within that particular community.[62] Yet as Berlin

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[59]Ibid., 87–88.

[60]"Particularist" is Crowder's term for views such as Gray's and Kekes's; "traditionalist" is Kekes's description of his own position. See Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, esp. chap. 5; Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company"; Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*.

[61]This view is similar to Richard Rorty's controversial endorsement of "ethnocentric" liberalism, according to which liberals accept that justificatory procedures are "local and culture-bound" (Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 208).

[62]Gray and Kekes both nod to internal complexity, yet ultimately rely on monistic portraits of culture when they describe how conflicts among values will be negotiated. According to Kekes, within a particular tradition, there is "only one true answer to the question of which of two conflicting values in its domain is more important in a particular situation" (*A Case for Conservatism*, 63). Although Kekes briefly acknowledges that "in any society, there are a plurality of traditions," he continuously invokes "tradition" as that which settles value conflict, without explaining why or how a *single* tradition, among many possible traditions, will be regarded as authoritative or explaining why we should believe that such a tradition is itself free from value conflict

insists, pluralism goes all the way down. Every society is constituted by diverse individuals, groups, subcultures, and traditions, which honor competing and sometimes incommensurable values. Thus, there are always multiple and conflicting sources for judgment making; there is no single, self-evident "culture" to defer to. For better or worse, no society, liberal or illiberal, is the unified and coherent entity it is imagined to be when particularism is juxtaposed with universalism.[63] (Recent struggles in Iran, for example, remind us of this fact.) Recourse to "context," if "context" is treated as a tidy, self-identical whole, betrays the pluralist insight at the heart of Berlin's thinking.

The second way Berlin challenges the particularist approach is perhaps even more important. Our forms of life, according to Berlin, are neither internally consistent nor closed systems, discrete and cordoned off from one another. While the particularist view tends to treat cultures as tightly bounded units, each equipped with its own private set of resources, Berlin sees cultures as more porous and open to one another than this view suggests. Values circulate not only within ways of life but also between them, providing points of connection even across difference. Berlin's insight in this regard is even more relevant in the globalized present, where increasing cross-cultural exchange and influence undermine the picture of cultures as closed rooms.

The human horizon is an image Berlin invokes to express the idea that ways of life are not "windowless boxes" to which we are confined.[64] Cultures, by virtue of being situated within the human horizon, are never entirely unto themselves.

> I am not blind to what the Greeks valued—their values may not be mine, but I can grasp what it would be like to live by their light, I can admire and respect them, and even imagine myself as pursuing them, although I do not—and do not wish to, and perhaps could not if I wished. Forms of

and therefore capable of generating "objective" rankings of values. Similarly, Gray notes that communities are not "seamless" but he treats "ways of life" as coherent enough to ensure "local settlements" which definitively resolve value conflict (Gray, "Pluralism and Toleration in Contemporary Political Philosophy" and "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company").

[63]This point is frequently made by Third World feminists, who challenge the tendency among Western feminists to depict non-Western cultures in unitary, single-dimensional ways, namely, as uniformly oppressive toward women. Uma Narayan, for example, has criticized that mode of representation as well as the depiction of feminism in non-Western contexts as simply a form of "Westernization." Narayan argues that both views "fail to perceive how capacious and suffused with contestation cultural contexts are." This perspective does not "acknowledge that Third-World feminist critiques are often just one prevailing form of *intra-cultural* criticism of social institutions" (Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 9).

[64]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.

life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon.[65]

The horizon expresses Berlin's belief that ways of life, though distinctive and diverse, are not closed off or opaque to one another. We can comprehend modes of existence unlike our own, even across great distances of time and space. Writing of the plurality of values, Berlin states:

> 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. And the difference this makes is that if a man pursues one of these values, I, who do not, am able to understand why he pursues it or what it would be like, in his circumstances, for me to be induced to pursue it. Hence the possibility of human understanding.[66]

The specification that human values are finite—which is notably not accompanied by any effort to list or count the values within the horizon—is critical because it implies that differences concerning the kinds of lives we pursue are not absolute barriers to understanding. Berlin's vision of the horizon challenges the notion of radical cultural difference that informs the particularist view and supports its model of separatist, local reason-giving. Rather than imagining cultures as insular and wholly foreign to one another, Berlin believes that the horizon, coupled with our capacity for sympathetic insight, facilitates understanding across difference.[67] Crucially, as we will see in a moment, such cross-cultural understanding is not a substitute for critical judgment, but rather its precondition.

If human cultures are not "impenetrable bubbles," this means that when we make judgments, whether in regard to an element of "our" way of life or that of another, we are not simply hostage to local conventions.[68] Though we cannot leave behind the traditions and norms of our time and place (which are themselves pluralistic) in favor of an Archimedean standpoint, we are also not limited to "homemade dogma."[69] Our position within the human horizon allows us access to an expansive perspective that reaches beyond what is close and familiar. This enables (without

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Isaiah Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," in *The First and the Last* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1999), 50–51.

[67]Drawing heavily on Vico's and Herder's work, Berlin argues that "members of one culture, can by the force of imaginative insight, understand (what Vico called *entrare*) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space" ("Pursuit of the Ideal," 10).

[68]Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth Century European Thought," in *Crooked Timber*, 85.

[69]Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 102.

guaranteeing) reflections and determinations that are nonparochial. Similarly, because cultures are not locked cells, we can expect that judgments—our own and others'—will resonate beyond their point of origin. That diverse ways of life coexist within the human horizon means for Berlin that when we make judgments, we are not restricted to what is "local," either in terms of the criteria we draw upon or in terms of those with whom we wish to communicate.

Importantly, the human horizon reflects Berlin's simultaneous refusal of *both* absolutism and particularism. His understanding of the horizon defies the absolutist uses to which Riley puts it, at the same time that it disrupts parochial conceptions of insular and tightly bounded cultures. I will show that this is so, as the final part of my sketch of Berlinian judgment, before turning to the question of how this conception of judgment might help us understand the relationship between pluralism and liberalism differently.

When Riley makes his argument for "limited" pluralism, he invokes a "common moral horizon," which he argues produces a division between a "top" set of cultures, which are "vastly superior" to a second, bottom, set. [70] (Unsurprisingly, the top set consists of "minimally liberal" orders.) This dividing line, which Riley claims to derive from Berlin's notion of the horizon, is presented as an indispensable tool for assessing varying cultures and, more pointedly, justifying the superiority of liberal cultural formations.[71] In other words, Riley, like Gutmann, seems to believe that a judgment advocating liberalism is dependent on a preexisting absolute and he enlists the

[70]Despite the centrality of "liberal values" to Riley's limited pluralism, he is somewhat vague when it comes to specifying what these are or how exactly they would authorize a "two-tier" ranking of cultures. Riley notes that Berlin does not specify a set of rights that could be used to sort cultures into Riley's categories of "barbaric" and "minimally liberal," but suggests that "perhaps not a lot should be made of this." Riley then identifies a set of rights (subsistence, not being attacked by others, freedom from arbitrary arrest and enslavement, freedom to emigrate, some degree of freedom of thought and expression) that he says "are not contingent on their recognition by the laws or customs of a given society" ("Defending Cultural Pluralism," 89).

[71]Riley emphasizes Berlin's "near-universalism" in support of his position. There are certainly elements of this in Berlin's thinking, as discussed in the first section above. At times he suggests that there are "common values" shared by all human beings and, similarly, that there may be "goods" in the interest of all people (Berlin, introduction to *Four Essays*, xxxi; Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations*, 39). (When speaking of goods that are "in the interest of all human beings," it is not clear whether Berlin is claiming that they in fact exist or noting that a belief along these lines is the basis for human rights claims.) We also saw, however, that he is reluctant to specify them and that he historicizes such declarations, noting that there are goods, such as negative liberty, that have been widely recognized in the modern West. For a brief but useful consideration of the question of universal values in Berlin's thought, see George Crowder and Henry Hardy, "Berlin's Universal Values—Core or Horizon?" in *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

"horizon" itself to perform this role, separating acceptable from unacceptable (or more precisely: liberal from illiberal) forms of life.

Yet when Berlin speaks of a horizon, it is most often in reference to a *human* horizon, and "human" is not simply synonymous with "moral."[72] Rather than supporting any definitive set of values as absolute, the Berlinian horizon *designates a field of judgment*. In other words, the horizon does not act as a fixed boundary dividing the moral from the immoral. While Riley points to a "common moral horizon" (not Berlin's term) and depicts it as a line demarcating what is "decent" from what is not,[73] the horizon Berlin depicts cannot fill this function, including as it does a vast range of practices and beliefs, not all of which we would wish to commend. That the human as Berlin conceives of it cannot easily serve as a shortcut to moral absolutism is most evident in the following passage:

> If I pursue one set of values I may detest another, and may think it damaging to the only form of life that I am able to live or tolerate, for myself or others, in which case I may attack it, I may even—in extreme cases—have to go to war against it. *But I still recognize it as a human pursuit.* I find Nazi values detestable, but I can understand how, given enough misinformation, enough false belief about reality, one could come to believe they are the only salvation. ... I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining men, believe this and commit the most unspeakable crimes.[74]

Here Berlin seems to include even Nazi "values" within the human horizon, claiming that Nazis were still "men" and that it is possible to "see" how men could be led to behave so gruesomely, even as he also declares them "detestable." Berlin's reason for wanting to include even the Nazis and their "values" within the human horizon, I suggest, stems from the belief that our critical assessment of any behavior or belief is predicated upon recognition of it as

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[72]This challenges Daniel Weinstock's claim that Berlin endorses a definition of "the human" which involves substantive moral content and can therefore determine pluralism's "limits" (Weinstock, "The Graying of Berlin"). In my view, "the human" for Berlin is a much more capacious and less determinate category than Weinstock allows.

[73]William Galston also argues that Berlin's moral universe is "divided by a horizontal line—universality below the line, pluralism above." Galston is more circumspect about this division than is Riley, noting that "the real argument concerns the location of the line" (Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 [2009]: 97). However, Galston, like Riley, fails to acknowledge that Berlin's notion of the human horizon, which he draws upon, appears to include values and practices that we would want to judge as immoral. But see Jason Ferrell, "Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice," *Contemporary Political Theory* 8, no. 3 (2009): 300, who argues that Berlin's human horizon is not constituted by liberal values alone, as some readers suggest.

[74]Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 53. My italics.

"human" in some sense. The horizon is best understood as separating that which we can perceive and recognize as human beliefs and activities (even if informed by "widespread illusion" or "false education")—which are therefore available for our understanding and judgment—and what is literally nonsensical or incomprehensible to us. The horizon demarcates what is intelligible from what is not, rather than dividing the moral from the immoral.[75]

Indeed, critical judgment is exercised *within* the human horizon. Berlin stresses the importance of imaginative sympathy in regard to ways of life different from our own, yet he does not suppose such hard-earned understanding to be a replacement for, or an abdication of, judgment. Rather, Berlin tends to present such understanding as a *prerequisite* for judgment; some imaginative sympathy is required if we wish to judge at all.[76] We are free to "reject" a particular custom, policy, or belief, but only if we have struggled to apprehend it as a *human* practice. The human horizon, then, does not cleanly mark off what is moral from what is not, as Riley suggests that it does. Instead, the horizon refers to the immanent and pluralistic field of human experience, within which we attempt to understand and judge in the absence of moral certitudes.

In sum, Berlin's model of judgment defies the relativism paradigm. He challenges the supposition that judgment requires grounding in an absolute to be valid, and he throws into question the strategy of his readers who advocate a reworked pluralism that is meant to serve as such a ground. Yet he also rejects what the relativism framework presents as the only alternative to such absolutism: the recourse to strictly "internal" and local standards. In ordinary practice, Berlin insists, we make judgments that defy this schema.[77]

[75]For example, Berlin remarks that if he encounters people who worship trees "not because they are symbols of fertility or because they are divine . . . or because this grove is sacred to Athena—but only because they are made of wood; and if when I ask them why they worship wood they say 'Because it is wood' and give no other answer; then I do not know what they mean. If they are human, they are not beings with whom I can communicate. . . . They are not human for me" ("The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11–12).

[76]Berlin approvingly attributes to Vico the view that "to understand is not to accept" (*Crooked Timber*, 86).

[77]At times Berlin's universalist readers seem attuned to judgment of this sort, as when Crowder describes an Aristotelian "context-centred practice of practical reason" that can resolve value conflicts without recourse to an "absolute formula" and when Galston argues that significant deliberation and reason-giving are possible in the absence of algorithmic procedures. ("Philosophic assumptions about how the practice of judgment must work" conceal this possibility, however.) (George Crowder, "Berlin, Value Pluralism, and the Common Good: A Reply to Brian Trainor," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34, no. 8 (2008): 932; Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, 35.) Yet both treat judgment on behalf of liberalism as altogether different. Practical judgment comes into play only in specific instances of conflict "within" an already-established "political framework" (Crowder, *Value Pluralism and Liberalism*, 187). Liberalism—the "framework" itself—is thought to require, and to enjoy, a

But where does this leave the case for liberalism or for key liberal values? How, committed liberals might wonder, can a liberal good such as gender equality be defended within this framework? According to Berlin's model of practical judgment just outlined, how do we *justify* the judgments we make, particularly if we hope to reach the "unconverted"?

Justification, like judgment itself, is pragmatic in character. We defend our judgments in accordance with existing practices of argumentation and reason-giving, for "what passes as such" among those whom we address (which will vary depending on circumstances). We make the best cases we can, providing evidence and making appeals that we believe will resonate with others. At some point, however, reasons run out,[78] and there is no first principle that can absolutely validate our claims.

But this does not resign us to "preaching to the converted," pointless talking among ourselves. Because no culture is a monolith, even "illiberal" contexts will contain multiple and competing values as well as traditions, some of which can serve as resources for those seeking to make liberal arguments.[79] Moreover, communication is possible between, and not only within, cultures. We can, with effort, at least partly comprehend the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of members of cultures other than our own, and can craft arguments that we believe will have purchase for those whom we seek to persuade.

If one wishes to defend the principle of gender equality, for example, there is no formula according to which this is to be done. There is not a transhistorical, transcontextual absolute that will somehow settle the matter once and for all, if only we point it out.[80] The task is to make appeals that can reach

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different kind of justification. As I have been suggesting, however, Berlin's thought does not support this moral foundationalist portrait. Even liberalism—though it may often act for us as an unquestioned "framework"—is not authorized by transcontextual absolutes, but by practices of human judgment and commitment.

[78]Berlin famously concludes "Two Concepts of Liberty" by quoting Joseph Schumpeter: "To realise the relative validity of one's convictions ... and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian" ("Two Concepts," 172).

[79]This also means that it is a mistake to treat liberal societies as uniform, as simply "converted." As Berlin repeatedly reminds us, there are real conflicts *among* the values that liberalism holds dear, which means that the difficulties of judgment and justification are never missing for members of a liberal polity. Moreover, every liberal culture contains illiberal elements, giving the lie to the view of a single, unified cultural context that determines judgments or renders the activities of argumentation and justification unnecessary.

[80]Among the interpretations focused on here, there is a common assumption that the identification of certain absolutes as intrinsic to value pluralism will solve the problem of liberalism's justification. There is an unspoken but prevalent and unfounded belief that if value pluralism can be shown to involve "limits" or a "moral minimum," then the problem of reason-giving and persuasion disappears.

those whom we aim to persuade. A liberal who seeks to make a case for
gender equality might proceed by invoking a general principle of human
equality (recognized even among some nonliberal societies) and attempting
to forge a connection to gender.[81] Or one might point to the material suffer-
ing experienced by women living under regimes of marked gender inequal-
ity. One could compare regimes with and without such equality, arguing
that anyone who has experienced the former would choose it over
the latter.[82]

If the liberal's objective is to extend and deepen gender equality, then the
best case will involve imaginative sympathy and the crafting of arguments
that can potentially reach the unpersuaded, whether near or far.
Cross-culturally, liberals seeking to promote the good of gender equality
will be most convincing if they strive to understand the specific (and mul-
tiple) traditions at work in a particular setting and ally themselves with
gender equality advocates who draw on those traditions. For example, lib-
erals might productively align themselves with women's rights activists
and scholars in Islamic countries who articulate a vision of gender equality

[81]The 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, which held that all men and women are
created equal, is an example of this sort of effort. The judgment presented in that docu-
ment is neither the consequence of discovering and applying an absolute standard nor
is it simply a case of narrowly local and insular reason-giving. It conforms to neither of
the options presented by the relativism paradigm. As Linda Zerilli has argued, the
claim that men and women are equal *does not follow from* the concept of political equal-
ity, which was defined in the United States strictly in relation to white, propertied
males: "The Declaration of Sentiments did not simply apply this concept [of political
equality] like a rule to a new particular (women)" (Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss
of Freedom* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 162). Linking the principle of
equality to gender relations was a creative act, designed to persuade. The Declaration's
expression of judgment also cannot be understood as "preaching to the converted,"
since it countered the views of the Founding Fathers as well as those of most
nineteenth-century Americans. For an interpretation of the Declaration as a model
of reflective judgment, see Zerilli, *Feminism*, chap. 4.

[82]This mode of justification resembles Rorty's pragmatist version, according to
which Western liberal pragmatists' "justification of toleration, free inquiry, and the
quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison
between societies which exemplify these habits and those which do not, leading up
to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter"
(Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 29). I believe this statement is generally con-
sistent with Berlin's, but Rorty relies on a conception of "community"—the milieu
in which dialogue and reason-giving occur—as either "ours" or "theirs." He rep-
resents communities as internally consistent (more monistic than pluralistic) and
closed off from other forms of life, understandings that Berlin explicitly challenges.
Rorty's portrait of judgment and persuasion largely conforms to the localist model
of justification which the relativism paradigm juxtaposes to universalism. As I have
been arguing, Berlin displaces this binary.

compatible with Sharia law.[83] This pragmatic approach recognizes that the case for gender equality will not be a universally binding philosophical proof, yet this does not mean, on the contrary, that liberals committed to this principle are confined to an echo chamber, issuing needless justifications to those with whom they already agree. Berlin suggests, rightfully, that judgment, reason-giving and persuasion occur between these false alternatives.

Conclusion: Pluralism and Liberalism, Openness and Closure

Unlike his readers, Berlin is not particularly vexed by the apparent gap between pluralism and liberalism, precisely because he does not believe that the case for liberalism requires the identification of prior absolutes. If "relativism is not the only alternative to universalism," this is because we can and do make distinctions, present arguments, and appeal to others on grounds that are neither transcontextual nor strictly provincial.[84]

Liberal universalist interpretations of Berlin, however, highlight instances of "near-universalism" in his work in order to advance a version of pluralism that is "limited" by particular normative aims and therefore capable of serving as a foundation for liberalism. The reading of Berlin offered here invites us to see those apparently absolutist moments in Berlin's work differently—as instances of political judgment. In other words, when Berlin argues for the importance of negative liberty or suggests that the minimization of human suffering ought to be a central concern in public life, he is not contending that such goods are somehow features of pluralism itself. Rather, he is making a *judgment* concerning the significance of these goods and attempting

[83] Amira Mashhour, for example, argues that the "deterioration of women's rights in many countries has nothing to do with their Islamic nature but rather with their patriarchal nature" and that "common ground can be found between Islamic law and gender equality" (Mashhour, "Islamic Law and Gender Equality—Could There Be a Common Ground?" *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 2 [2005]: 563). Her analysis demonstrates that Sharia is not static but evolving, with various interpretations not only between countries but within the same country, in different contexts and eras. Although mainstream interpretations tend to be conservative, feminist *Ijtihad* exist and should be developed further in order to pursue greater gender equality in Islamic countries. Mashour cites Tunisia's laws banning polygamy and granting women equal rights to divorce as men as examples of the way in which gender equality can be sought and justified in "congruence with Sharia." See also Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Reproductive Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1995): 366–81, which argues that there are "commonalities" between Western notions of reproductive rights and principles that define gender rights in Islam, which can serve as the basis for international and cross-cultural feminist projects.

[84] Berlin, "Alleged Relativism," 85.

to *persuade others* (namely his readers) of their value: he is taking a stand, which is neither necessitated nor ruled out by pluralism.[85]

Pluralism names a condition of human existence—the abundance of genuine and often conflictual ends which cannot be neatly combined or definitely ranked—but it leaves to human beings the task of navigating such a moral universe. We are left to our imperfect processes of judgment, in which we draw on a repertoire of available concepts and ideals, immanent to forms of life—yet not locked within them—and without access to a "superstandard." Furthermore, we are left to the political work of convincing others and finding ways to act on behalf of the norms, practices, and laws we think right. Berlin's work models for his audience this kind of judgment and reason-giving.[86]

Value pluralism, as a description of our ethical universe, neither mandates nor guarantees anything. Its openness—and the apparent anxiety it generates—is countered by the interpretations considered in this essay, which aim to remake Berlinian pluralism into a substantive morality that validates universal liberalism. Certainly pluralism in its radical form is unsettling, suggesting as it does that our political arrangements lack grounding in any extrapolitical source. Similarly, understanding Berlin's defenses of particular values not as moral absolutes restricting pluralism from the start but as examples of political judgment and persuasion may seem to demote their standing. Yet accepting the full indeterminacy of pluralism can also serve to affirm human freedom and responsibility. As Alex Zakaras argues concerning Berlin, "Once we know that there are multiple conflicting and incommensurable values, once we know that reason is powerless to order them, we are freed to live by our own lights."[87] The open-ended quality of the value pluralist universe should not be cause for regret—neither for Berlin nor for us—lest we also wish to lament our freedom.

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[85]Berlin declares, "Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails [an] absolute stand" ("Two Concepts," 165). Importantly, what is "absolute" here is not a Straussian "eternal principle" to be discovered but rather a *stand that is taken.*

[86]Jason Ferrell ("Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism") argues that although Berlin's liberalism cannot be "derived from" his pluralism, Berlin nonetheless offers an "insightful defense of liberalism," which proceeds by linking pluralism and liberalism together via other concepts. Most notably, Ferrell believes Berlin theorizes philosophy as the "bridge" between pluralism and liberalism: the condition of pluralism underlies the critical, question-asking activity of philosophy, and such philosophy flourishes under liberalism. Ferrell's contention that Berlin presents a "plausible case" for liberalism despite the fact that he does not claim for it "*a priori* universality or eternal validity" overlaps with my own.

[87]Alex Zakaras, "Isaiah Berlin's Cosmopolitan Ethics," *Political Theory* 32, no. 4 (2004): 510.

Finally, in place of dominant readings that attempt to "solve" the apparent conflict between Berlin's pluralism and his liberalism, we might accept and affirm the gap between them as the very structure of free political life. If the project of liberal-democratic politics is characterized, as Alan Keenan has effectively argued, by both "openness" and "closure," then perhaps Berlin's movement between pluralism, on the one hand, and apparent liberal absolutes, on the other, is not so much a contradiction to be overcome as a representation of a tension that frames liberal-democratic existence.[88] Berlin's value pluralism, in its radical form, corresponds to what Claude Lefort refers to as the "dissolution of the markers of certainty."[89] But as Keenan shows, liberal-democratic politics can never be wholly "open," because it inevitably involves specific practices, procedures, and institutions—degrees or kinds of "closure"—that prevent any polity from being fully inclusive or fully open to question.[90] When Berlin argues on behalf of a liberal ranking of values, he is expressing a political judgment, or performing an act of closure, which counters the fundamental openness signified by pluralism.

[88] Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question: Democratic Openness in a Time of Political Closure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[89] Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory,* trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 19.

[90] Keenan argues that democratic politics is "animated" by the ideal of openness. Such openness is "twofold," involving both the openness of inclusion and the openness to question. But, as Keenan writes, "it turns out that the people cannot be fully open, either in the sense of fully inclusive and general, or in the sense of fully open to question." Collective life requires "*particular* foundations, traditions, and institutional forms that cannot be fully general or open to question" (*Democracy in Question*, 10–11).