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Isaiah Berlin's *value pluralism*. Refining theory to improve democratic practice

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ABSTRACT: Isaiah Berlin's humanistic liberalism is still an influential theory and an implacable antidote against extremism and fanaticism in all their guises. The author of this article notes that one of the main contributions of this theoretician born 100 years ago consists in gaining awareness that there is a multiplicity of values in plural societies which cannot be reduced to a single principle, or a universal permanent combination of values applicable to all individuals and all practical cases. However, Berlin's defence of value pluralism is in no way a gratuitous concession to relativism or scepticism. Without a doubt, there is a role reserved for reason in moral conflicts. However, "reasonable" discrimination between values is much more context-dependent, even on an individual scale, than what moral, political or religious "rationalist" conceptions assume.

Keywords: Isaiah Berlin, value pluralism, relativism, democracy, federalism

Intellectual biographies usually include a series of readings and discussions which awaken readers from their "dogmatic slumber", as happened to Kant with David Hume's thinking. Something similar happened to Isaiah Berlin through the works of Herder and Vico (despite the fact that he later criticised them on some points). In my case, Berlin's liberalism was – just as Montaigne and Wittgenstein were in another sense – one of those theoretical lightning bolts that captivated my mind and helped me to think better; in a way that was simultaneously more realistic, more complete and more nuanced. And especially with Berlin, this characteristic has been reinforced over time.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Berlin's theoretical style is his use of anti-enlightened romantic thinking to refine the values of the Enlightenment itself. His forthright criticism of the theoretical and moral prejudices of Western philosophy can be summarised by his well-known statement that from classical Greece and Christianity until the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its derivatives, this tradition has

acritically accepted three considerations: 1) that all questions have a rational answer, 2) that this answer is unique and knowable, and 3) that all the answers to the different questions that are considered true or correct are compatible with each other. Berlin showed how each of these three considerations is highly questionable. Instead, he tells us, ideologies and utopias based on a single theoretical perspective are not only impossible in practice but are also incoherent in theoretical terms.

Here we shall focus on what I believe is the centre of gravity of this new intellectual “music”: value pluralism. The most important point of Berlin’s pluralism is the “rational” conviction that there cannot be a single correct, unitary vision of good or morality. His criticism of “monist” theoretical conceptions, that is, those that maintain that there is only one ultimate value, or a single combination of moral values that represents the “most human”, “most moral” or “most rational” way of living life, is now classic. There are no “equivalent” ways of living human life for the moral, religious or political monism currently in vogue apart from what they propose. However, “monism”, Berlin tells us, “is the root of all extremism”. This is the case, for example, of Platonic philosophy or the common interpretation of the monotheistic religions by their respective orthodoxies and churches. Given this position (and others like cultural pluralism, which defends a complete link of morality in each of the “cultures” in which it develops), Berlin defends *value pluralism*: the existence of a multiplicity of heterogeneous values that cannot be reduced to a single principle or a universal, a permanent combination of values applicable to all individuals and practical cases. In contrast to the assumptions of many political or religious ideologies, moral heterogeneity cannot be reduced to any harmonious combination of values.

In fact, regardless of the moral and political conceptions deemed to be most appropriate in a given context, in the early 21st century “value pluralism” appears as a highly influential philosophy of morality. Thus, this form of pluralism basically asserts three things:

a) The *irreducibility* of goods and values. The goods and values of human life are radically diverse. It is impossible to reduce some values to others or to derive some values from others, or to combine them all into a single higher value or a permanent combination of values.

b) *Agonism*. Goods and values are often mutually incompatible. It is impossible to harmonise them into a coherent whole. The moral struggle does not occur between good and evil but between good and good.

c) The *incommensurability* of goods and values. Conflicts between different goods and values cannot be decided in terms of interpersonal reasonability. There is no set of principles shared by all humans that is capable of resolving this kind of conflict. There is no universal hierarchy of values.

The most radical feature of value pluralism is the third one: incommensurability. This feature is formulated in relation to values between cultures as well as within cultures themselves. However, this does not entail adopting a sceptical or relativistic position in the moral sphere. Berlin maintains that values are objective and that reason plays a role in moral conflicts. However, “reasonable” discrimination between values is much more context-dependent, even on an individual scale, than what moral, political or religious “rationalist” conceptions assume. Faced with a specific situation of conflicting values, there is no single “truth”, nor is there one “correct” moral position. Reason plays a role when prioritising and interpreting values in a given situation, but this will often become an unavoidably controversial issue given the three aforementioned characteristics of morality, especially the incommensurability of goods and values.

The fundamental basis of incommensurability is in how individuals deal with practical contexts. Despite genetic and cultural differences, human nature is partly shared by all individuals. Yet these individuals differ with regard to how they deal with shared needs, and not all needs are shared. There are a number of “universal evils” (slavery, torture, genocide, etc.) which foster a certain “universalism” regarding what should be avoided, but no moral conception can claim to defend true “human good”. Thus, moral *pluralism* replaces moral *monism*. As we know, this is accepted by some theoreticians of democracy and justice, such as John Rawls. However, in Berlin’s pluralism, values cannot be placed in a universal hierarchy regardless of the context (in contrast to, for example, the two Rawlsian principles of socioeconomic justice, which stipulate the permanent priority of freedom over equality). Berlin’s perspective rejects the claim of the majority of traditional moral schools, and some modern ones, that any well-

constructed moral theory must be capable of establishing a permanent hierarchy of its values or principles in order to “rationally” resolve practical conflicts.

The perspective of value pluralism brings us closer than other moral theories to the cases of *rational “undecidability”* which are common in empirical political spheres. For example, it brings us closer to the practical dilemmas and rivalries that are so appealingly shown by the tragedies in literature, both classical Greek and Shakespearean.

Value pluralism and classical tragedy

Despite being a literary genre, in tragedies the action often takes place beyond the limits that human languages can express. In them, we often fail to understand all the motives that spur the characters to take actions that are not totally decidable in rational terms. However, these characters must not only decide in theory, they must also act in practice. These characters have their doubts and their questions with multiple answers, and their criticisable actions force the audience’s most insecure side to mentally participate in the action of the play. The characters (and we with them) often face an agonistic plurality of values, a plurality that becomes “tragic” not only because any practical decision leads to some kind of loss, but also because it is impossible to avoid the fact that this decision will trigger negative consequences, regardless of what it is.

The classical tragedies still fascinate us today. Tragedy and democracy emerged together as the novel products of the *city* in classical Greece. Tragedies evoke the contingent, complex world of human actions. “There is no tragedy without action”, said Aristotle. It is the representation of a chessboard where our political and moral decisions play out. And that which is human is also contradictory, Berlin repeats, because the values with which we try to morally order the world are often irreconcilable. Considered in isolation, love, justice, freedom, knowledge, duty or friendship lead to dogmatism in the theoretical sphere and are ephemeral in the practical sphere. They are suitable values, but they cannot be combined in a harmonious way. The moral conflict, as we said above, is between good and good.

We are also what we do. And human actions never form a single image but the multiple reflections of a moral “*cracked mirror*”. We will not behave more fairly by trying to mask the contradictory plurality in which we must act; nor will we be happier. Tragedies show what moral and political theories tend to silence: our instrumental reason is strong, but our morality is fragile. Practical actions are never decidable in a wholly rational fashion. However, Creon, Antigone, Orestes, Brutus, Henry IV and Lear must act, despite the fact that their questions have several possible rational and moral answers.

So tragedies reinforce individuals’ moral perspective and the awareness of the limitations of their theoretical reference systems. They also give us the chance to become better political and moral thinkers when we perceive the difficulty of finding clear and “rational” answers to the *actions* that are occurring on stage. Tragedies constantly highlight our role as historical beings and transform us through the decisions we take. These decisions are often based on emotions and reasons that are always partial, and in conflict with their own internal nature. In the practical sphere, the sphere of action, Plato and Kant are wrong. In other words, the interpretation and hierarchy of values is always debatable; democracy refers to an inevitably “tragic” pluralism.

From an epistemological standpoint, despite the “objectivity” of the conception of Berlin’s values, value pluralism refers back to the *modern* attitude of the 16th century humanists (Montaigne). This attitude claims that universal perspectives of morality inevitably generate conflicts which cannot be fully resolved. This attitude is more sceptical, more tolerant and more concerned with the practical aspects of human existence than the more “systematic” theoretical attitude of the Cartesian and Hobbesian philosophies of the following century, which has so strongly influenced contemporary moral and political thinking.

Thus, Berlin’s value pluralism is a theoretical perspective that:

- 1) Warns us of the *plural* and *agonistic* nature of morality and politics (something that the majority of monist theories in general [Kantian, utilitarian, etc.] usually try to avoid, fairly futilely, I think);

2) Stresses that legitimising criteria in politics are not always related to a universal, context-free *moral* perspective but instead to specific and contextual *ethical* perspectives, and to *pragmatic*, rational perspectives; and

3) Illustrates that these legitimising criteria are based not only on *values*, even when functional (not moral) values are included such as efficiency or stability, but also on specific collective *interests* and particular *identities* (which are sometimes also presented under the guise of values).

Perhaps to some people, value pluralism is not a conception of morality “to keep” in normative terms, but I think that it is at the very least a conception “to consider” in order to refine the theories proposed and to avoid their epistemological excesses and simplifications.

Value pluralism and plurinational federalism

Berlin’s writings do not address the issue of federalism, even though they do discuss nationalism, which he saw as a reaction to previous collective grievances. Unlike other concurrent phenomena or movements associated with cultural pluralism (immigration, religious groups, indigenous peoples, etc.), in some democracies it is possible to witness harmony or basic similarity between the “lifestyles” of the members of different national collectives who live together (plurinational democracies like Canada, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain, etc.). However, inevitably, and also unlike other cultural pluralism movements, both majority and minority national collectives are partly the product of nation-building processes which, in the case of plurinational democracies, are to some extent in competition with each other.

In these contexts, I believe that the adoption of value pluralism as a theoretical perspective of plurinational federations has at least two advantages over other theoretical perspectives:

1) First, with regard to political liberalism, value pluralism allows individual and collective rights and freedoms to be constitutionally investigated and established more openly. Moreover, it allows for mutual recognition between the different national collectives or *demos* within a democracy. As a result, fewer issues are excluded a priori from the political agenda, and the dialogue between the different parties is no longer based on monist theories – be they more “liberal” or more “republican” (both of which display conceptual and institutional biases when applied to plurinational realities). In this way, for example, the constitutional regulation of collective freedoms can be prevented from being established exclusively or from becoming predominant from the perspective of the state as a collective subject which views itself as hegemonic, to the detriment of minority national collectives. Value pluralism also makes it easier for pragmatic agreements to be reached among political actors who are generally sceptical of the potential of theories, but who also wish to maintain a minimum consensus which is more open to cultural interpretation and more resistant to the passage of time than that which characterises traditional liberalism and constitutionalism.

2) Secondly, regarding plurinational federalism, value pluralism allows the liberal and federal logics related to the protection of rights and freedoms to be more easily recovered. It also facilitates regulation of the mutual recognition of internal national pluralism in a democracy and the content of self-government, as well as the regulation of reform processes by national collectives that lack any kind of normative hierarchy. It is, therefore, a theoretical perspective that facilitates the legitimacy of and changes in federal rules over time, when neither the majorities nor the minorities have exclusive claim to their interpretation.

These two advantages are related to the predominance of freedom in Berlin’s work, both individual and collective freedom, and negative and positive freedom. Obviously, there are other values and other basic legitimising principles (the different meanings of

political equality, respect for minorities, constitutionalism and the rule of law, efficiency and stability, etc.). However, it is possible to say that *negative collective freedom* plays a key role in guaranteeing that external coercion between the different national collectives within a plurinational democracy is avoided.

The increased complexity of an increasingly plural and globalised world also requires greater complexity in federal agreements inside democracies. One of the historical advantages displayed by different kinds of federal agreements, even federations, is their potential flexibility and their adaptability to different specific realities. In fact, since World War II, comparative politics has shown that adaptability is an essential requirement for the stability and success of any federal agreement that is established. This adaptability also extends to plurinational federations, which, while sharing certain common features with other federations, also display major historical, cultural, constitutional differences and within the party system compared to uninational federations (Germany, Australia, etc.).

The model of plurinational federalism based on value pluralism which I have defended in other publications (*Multinational Federalism and Value Pluralism*, Routledge 2005) is thus aimed at improving the quality of plurinational democratic federations. This is achieved by taking into account five factors related to a form of political liberalism which is suited to the realities of national pluralism: 1) a more complex notion of political equality which takes national differences into account; 2) a pluralistic conception, in national terms, of the different *demos* in the federation; 3) the inclusion of the “ethical” dimension of practical rationality; 4) the accommodation of a variety of partially competitive nation-building processes; and 5) the combination of universal and particular legitimising regulations present in all democracies.

Faced with all the most complex meanings of freedom, equality and plurality that are appearing in our societies, today’s liberal democracies do not yet have institutions and

procedural rules that are capable of accommodating the internal complexity of values, interests and identities that characterise these societies. The adoption of the perspective of value pluralism as a moral structure fosters a less arrogant theoretical attitude, one that is more sensitive to practice and to contextual features than that which is fostered by conceptions that date from the Enlightenment, especially traditional liberalism and socialism. Berlin reminds us better than anyone else that no doctrine or ideology can offer a solution to all of humanity's practical problems. When that kind of solution has been offered, it has created totalitarian horrors, both from the right and from the left.

In the early 21st century, I believe that it is no exaggeration to say of Berlin's thinking what Nelson Riddle said about the American composer George Gershwin while Riddle was adapting his songs for an Ella Fitzgerald record released in 1959: "He wrote tomorrow's music yesterday".