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Pluralism and Liberal Politics

Robert B. Talisse



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Preface

When viewed against the backdrop of the grand historical tradition of political philosophy, the present state of liberal theory may seem altogether uninspired. Since the 1990s, mainstream political theory has been in the grip of the self-avowedly modest philosophical program instituted by John Rawls known as *political liberalism*. Political liberalism begins with a criticism of traditional or “comprehensive” liberal theory. According to Rawls, comprehensive views have aspired to discover some philosophical, moral, or religious theory (what Rawls called a “comprehensive doctrine”), which could provide a justification of the liberal political order that could be acceptable to all citizens. Rawls contends that this project is rendered futile by the fact of reasonable pluralism, the fact that under conditions of enduring free institutions human reason does not converge on a single comprehensive doctrine (2005: 135). According to Rawls, there are many comprehensive doctrines, which are consistent with the free exercise of human reason yet inconsistent with each other; more importantly, there is a plurality of comprehensive doctrines, which are “reasonable,” that is, consistent with the core liberal idea that society is a system of fair cooperation among equals. Given this, the project of basing a conception of liberal politics explicitly upon the tenets of some or other comprehensive doctrine—even one that is decidedly liberal—is doomed. Any such doctrine would be rejected by a citizen holding an opposing, yet reasonable, comprehensive doctrine.

Rawls contends that the fact of pluralism undermines traditional modes of liberal theorizing. Consequently, Rawls proposed a liberal view that could accommodate pluralism by applying “the principle of toleration” to itself, and staying “on the surface, philosophically speaking” (2005: 10); he sought to develop a strictly *political* conception of liberalism that presupposed no reasonably contestable philosophical, moral, or religious principles.

Rawls’s *political* articulation of liberal justice has been subjected to serious criticism on multiple fronts, and it is not clear that political liberalism, as articulated by Rawls, is a viable program for liberal political philosophy. However, his critical insight about the impact of the fact of reasonable pluralism on liberal theory has proven difficult to resist. Consequently, a

conundrum: Rawls's pluralist criticism of comprehensive liberalism seems correct, yet it is not clear that there is an acceptable alternative theory. Given this, many theorists have turned to pluralism itself for a new kind of liberal theory, one that can be both comprehensive and pluralistic.

Unsurprisingly, pluralism is said in many ways. Throughout the philosophical literature, one finds the term used in a wide array of contexts and to name a broad collection of views. In most cases, the term *pluralism* is used simply as a code word employed to convey the sense that the person wielding it values toleration, open-mindedness, individual spontaneity, diversity, and the like. *Pluralism*, in these cases, is merely an honorific standing for other honorifics. We all value toleration, open-mindedness, spontaneity, and diversity, and we all recognize that they must be constrained in certain ways. In other words, we all agree that we must tolerate the tolerable, keep our minds open to alternative views that might possibly be true, encourage proper exercises of spontaneity, and welcome genuine forms of diversity. What we disagree about is the parameters: what is tolerable, what views besides our own might possibly be true, what kinds of spontaneity are allowable, and what forms of diversity are desirable. To declare in favor of pluralism in this sense is simply to affirm that one must tolerate that which is tolerable. No one denies that. Pluralism, when employed in this honorific sense is merely a rhetorical device, and thus vacuous.

Yet even when we look at the distinctively philosophical views that claim the name, we find that pluralism comes in many varieties. There are pluralist options in metaphysics, philosophy of science, epistemology, logical theory, and many other areas of philosophical inquiry. As should be clear from what has been said above, my concern in these pages is with pluralism in moral and political philosophy, pluralism about *value*. Here, too, one confronts a swarm of pluralisms. Accordingly, one of the principal tasks of the early chapters of this book is to identify and categorize the various forms of pluralism about value. Once an appropriately nuanced view of various forms of pluralism is in view, the aim will then be to evaluate them, both as philosophical accounts of value and as potential foundations for liberal politics.

Although the chapters that follow work together to mount a sustained argument against many forms of pluralism and in favor of a modest view I call *weak epistemological pluralism*, they are written so that they may be read as self-contained essays. In order to make each chapter intelligible as a stand-alone essay, I have had to allow for some degree of repetition and review. My hope is that those who read the book from beginning to end will not find this too off-putting. The essays also reflect my own philosophical tendencies, which might seem to some readers idiosyncratic. For example, I tend to see my philosophical work as fitting within a broadly pragmatist tradition. Accordingly, in these pages, I engage with pragmatism and pragmatist themes often. Some may find this puzzling. I, of course, contend that the discussions of pragmatism are highly elucidatory. Those who disagree

are urged to endure what may seem at first tangential. But, then again, the book is constructed so that one could skip around. In any case, these essays are a series of variations on the broad theme announced in the book's title. My concern is to explore what I identified above as the Rawlsian conundrum, to criticize a currently popular kind of reaction against it, and to suggest a different way of negotiating it.

Given the nature of the chapters that follow, a sketch of the book might prove helpful. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the book. It consists largely in an effort to specify with precision what pluralism is. I arrive at the view that pluralism is best understood as a thesis about the nature of value and the relations between values rather than a conception of the good life or a theory of right action; pluralism so understood comes in four varieties. Pluralists frequently contend that pluralism *entails* certain first-order moral commitments, such as commitments to toleration, individualism, liberty, and autonomy. In Chapter 1 I suggest that the thought that pluralism entails certain first-order commitments is false; in fact, a proper analysis of the matter confronts us with the sense that pluralism might be prescriptively barren. The chapter closes with a review of Rawls's conception of reasonable pluralism and his view of the impact of reasonable pluralism on liberal political theory.

In Chapter 2, I critically examine the historically influential pluralisms of Isaiah Berlin and William James. Both argue that pluralism entails that we should tolerate ways of life that are different from our own; indeed, Berlin argues that pluralism entails a commitment to negative liberty and thus to a liberal political order rooted in an ideal of negative liberty. I argue that neither Berlin nor James succeeds in establishing the entailment from pluralism to first-order moral prescriptions. The argument I propose is intuitive and can be sketched succinctly as follows. Pluralism is a theory about the nature of value and the relations between values of different kinds; pluralism is, in other words, a descriptive theory, a theory *about* values. Consequently, it is difficult to see how any first-order moral prescriptions are entailed by pluralism. In any case, in Chapter 2 I argue that Berlin and James both fail to establish the entailment from pluralism to toleration and liberalism.

In Chapter 3, I pick up on the discussion of James and turn to the claim, commonly affirmed by contemporary philosophers working in the idiom of classical pragmatism, that pragmatism is an inherently pluralistic style of philosophizing. After distinguishing two general kinds of pragmatism, I employ the taxonomy of pluralism from Chapter 1 to argue that the most common forms of pragmatism are inconsistent with pluralism of any stripe and must in any case reject the most distinctive forms of pluralism. The analysis shows that there is a kind of pragmatism that is consistent with a variety of pluralism. However, only the most modest variety of pluralism is consistent with pragmatism; moreover, this modest form of pluralism is not distinctively pragmatist. The result, then, is that the frequent claims by

contemporary classical pragmatists that their view is intrinsically pluralist are unclear and in need of elaboration.

Chapter 4 takes up the current trend in political philosophy aimed at resuscitating Berlin's project of deriving political prescriptions from pluralism. I examine the attempts of four prominent neo-Berlinians (William Galston, George Crowder, John Kekes, and John Gray) to repair Berlin's argument from pluralism to politics and find them all to be unsuccessful. Once again, the argument is that pluralism is a theory about the nature of value, and the relations amongst values of different kinds; as such, it has no immediate first-order prescriptive implications. Against neo-Berlinians such as Galston and Crowder who argue that pluralism entails liberalism, I argue that non-liberal and anti-liberal political programs are consistent with pluralism. Kekes, who argues that pluralism entails conservatism, is subject to a similar line of critique. Gray's view is that pluralism requires us to abandon the "Enlightenment" version of liberalism and adopt a Hobbesian "modus vivendi" liberal theory; but in the end Gray's version of liberalism looks a lot like the Enlightenment view he says pluralism defeats. The result is that the neo-Berlinians have not provided us with a non-Rawlsian alternative in liberal theory. At best, they have shown that pluralists who happen to favor characteristically liberal values can enthusiastically endorse a liberal political order.

However, that Berlinian pluralism does not entail any definite prescriptions for politics does not mean that this brand of pluralism fails as a conception of value. In Chapter 5, I evaluate the arguments proposed in favor of Berlin-style pluralism, focusing especially on the argument that only pluralism can capture or accommodate the common experience of moral regret even when we believe we have done the right thing. The argument runs that only if values are heterogeneous in the way the Berlinian pluralist contends can it be rational to regret a morally correct choice; regret is rational in such cases only when choice involves incommensurable values. The argument admittedly has an intuitive appeal, but ultimately it does not succeed. In fact, although Berlinian pluralists often assert that the main selling-point for their view is that it comports especially well with our everyday moral experience, I argue that Berlinian pluralism is in fact highly revisionary of common moral experience. The chapter closes with considerations that suggest that Berlinian pluralism is not an especially good fit with liberal citizenship.

Importantly, it is not an aim of this book to argue for monism. Again, I aspire to make a case for a position I call *weak epistemological pluralism*. Weak epistemological pluralism is a version of pluralism insofar as it claims that, as things stand—that is, given our current command of the morally relevant facts and our powers of moral reasoning—there are irreducibly plural values and conflicts among heterogeneous goods. Yet the weak epistemological pluralist refrains from attempting to explain these facts by appeal to a metaphysical account of value. The weak epistemological

pluralist simply holds that certain moral conflicts are *indeterminate* due to the fact that we do not know *how* to commensurate all the things that we justifiably hold to be objectively valuable. The weak epistemological pluralist hence rejects the distinctive claims of both Berlinian pluralism and monism. In other words, it backs away from pronouncements concerning the reducibility (or irreducibility) of values; instead, it calls for ongoing value inquiry amidst ongoing debates concerning the nature of the relations between values.

Accordingly, weak epistemological pluralism is a good fit with a certain kind of pragmatism. In Chapter 6, I propose a new kind of pragmatist option in liberal democratic theory, a view I call *social epistemic liberalism*. The view is developed against the backdrop of an argument that shows that the leading option in pragmatist political philosophy, Deweyan democracy, is nonviable because it cannot accommodate Rawls's insight about the impact of the fact of reasonable pluralism on liberal democratic theory. The social epistemic view attempts to accommodate the Rawlsian insight, while proposing a conception of democracy, which embodies some of the attractive features of Deweyan democracy. The social epistemic view thus can be described as *pragmatist political liberalism*.

Chapter 7 picks up on a difficulty internal to Rawlsian political liberalism, namely, the problem of defending liberal values to citizens who hold non-liberal visions of the good life. Stephen Macedo has proposed a variant on Rawlsian political liberalism that he calls "civic liberalism," which is designed explicitly to address challenges to central liberal civic values. I trace Macedo's examination of the famous case of *Mozert v. Hawkins County* and argue that, in the end, Macedo's civic liberalism does not allay the concern that, in the end, political liberalism cannot defend itself. Drawing on considerations introduced by Allen Buchanan, I argue that social epistemic liberalism is better placed to mount a defense of liberalism.

Much of the book's positive proposal is highly theoretical and abstract. The overall lesson is that we should be liberals because we have an overriding interest in getting morality—including moral theory, moral deliberation, and moral choices—right. Given weak epistemological pluralism, liberalism is the political counterpart of the commitment to ongoing moral inquiry. Yet while we are diligently conducting moral inquiry and trying to resolve morally indeterminate conflicts, politics must nonetheless get done. Moral choices must be made, and, more importantly, public policy must be decided. In the final chapter, I address a pressing instantiation of this bind between liberal theory and the actual practice of politics. Specifically, I address the issue of the role of religious conviction in liberal democracy. The problem can be stated succinctly. A wide range of religious views are live moral options for reasonable liberal citizens. Some of these views require, as a matter of religious obligation, policy preferences, and modes of public engagement that can be endorsed only from within the distinctive claims of that religious doctrine. Yet laws and public policies coerce *all* liberal

citizens and therefore must be justifiable to all. Indeed, one of the moral duties of liberal citizenship obligates citizens to seek such justifications. Hence the problem: The liberal conception of citizenship makes demands on citizens that can contradict their consciences. The aim of Chapter 8 is to work out a way of reconciling religious believers to their civic duties.

Many of these chapters derive from journal articles I published over the past decade. None of them is simply a reprint of what has already appeared, and much of what is here is original with this volume. Chapter 2 draws from my “Can Value Pluralists Be Comprehensive Liberals?” (*Contemporary Political Theory*, 2004) and the Fifth Chapter of *Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum, 2008), which I co-authored with Scott Aikin. Chapter 3 develops a line of argument originally proposed in “Why Pragmatists Cannot Be Pluralists” (*Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 2005), which was also co-authored with Scott Aikin. Chapter 4 brings together work from two articles, “Two-Faced Liberalism” (*Critical Review*, 2002) and “Does Value Pluralism Entail Liberalism?” (*Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2010). Chapter 5 derives from my “Value Pluralism and Liberal Politics” (*Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 2011). Chapter 6 is a revised version of my “A Farewell to Deweyan Democracy” (*Political Studies*, forthcoming). Chapter 7 develops my “Can Liberals Take Their Own Side in an Argument,” which appeared in *Philosophy of Education in the Era of Globalization*, edited by Yvonne Raley and Gerhard Preyer (Routledge, 2010). Finally, parts of Chapter 8 draw upon my “Religion, Respect, and Eberle’s Agapic Pacifist” (*Philosophy and Social Criticism*, forthcoming).

This material was presented in various forms to audiences at a wide range of conferences and colloquia. Early versions of Chapters 4 and 5 were delivered as papers at the Eastern, Central, and Pacific meetings of the American Philosophical Association. Sections of Chapters 1 and 5 were combined in my Presidential Address at the 2009 meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society; an early version of Chapter 5 was delivered as the keynote address at the 2008 Felician College Ethics Conference. A version of Chapter 6 was presented at the Nordic Pragmatism Network conference in Reykjavik in 2009. And parts of Chapter 8 were delivered to the Vanderbilt Social and Political Theory Workshop, the Philosophy Colloquium at City University of New York’s Graduate Center, and at the University of North Florida, all in 2009. I thank the audiences on those occasions for very helpful questions, comments, and challenges.

Much of the work on this book was conducted during a sabbatical leave for the 2009–2010 academic year. During that time, I benefitted from a Research Scholar Grant awarded by Vanderbilt University and from several months as a Visiting Scholar at the City University of New York Graduate Center. The manuscript was completed in the spring of 2011. In the course of writing and thinking, I incurred debts to many friends, students, and colleagues who generously provided comments, queries, objections, and suggestions. As partial repayment of these debts, I thank Brooke Ackerly, Scott

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1 Introduction

Pluralism and Political Theory

SEARCHING FOR PLURALISM

Halos and Smears

One of my main aims in this book is to subject several views that claim the name *pluralism* to philosophical criticism. Although I will eventually present a positive thesis about how we should understand value and liberalism, a sizeable portion of the book is devoted to the negative claim that we should decline to accept pluralism in its most distinctive varieties. I have come to learn in the course of developing my views on this matter that people tend to assume that in not embracing pluralism, one thereby commits to something pernicious, such as a view which values conformity, despises diversity, prizes orderliness, demands consensus, shuns difference, squelches discord, stifles creativity, and disables spontaneity. In the minds of many, pluralism is intrinsically tied to tolerance, open-mindedness, diversity, civility, and many other good things. The suggestion that we should resist pluralism, then, is taken as a call for rejecting tolerance, imposing homogeneity, and closing minds. The typical response to such a suggestion is understandably hostile and indignant. Arguments against pluralism are heard as arguments in favor of intolerance and conformism. Who would want to defend such things? Not I. Accordingly, I have learned to tread lightly. Before beginning in earnest, then, I must dispel the view that those who caution against adopting pluralism thereby adopt such pernicious views.

For simplicity's sake, let us say that those who associate the rejection of pluralism with the embracing of intolerance and conformism employ what we shall call the *indignant inference*. In the course of trying to tread lightly in discussions of pluralism, I have also learned that a certain commonsensical response to the indignant inference is doomed to fail. As I trust you have noticed, the indignant inference is plainly invalid. Even if one were to grant that pluralism is intrinsically tied to tolerance, open-mindedness, and the rest, the inference from the rejection of pluralism to the adoption of intolerance and conformism is a simple case of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. To explain, that pluralism entails that we must be tolerant—at present

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I am assuming for the sake of argument that it does have this entailment, not affirming that it does—does not imply that those who reject pluralism must also reject the idea that we must be tolerant. Consider an analogous example. Immanuel Kant famously argued that we are each bound to respect the dignity of every other person. Those who reject Kantian moral theory are not thereby committed to the rejection of the idea that we must respect the dignity of each person. Various forms of indirect utilitarianism hold precisely this, even though they uniformly reject Kantianism. Similarly, one can reject pluralism and yet still affirm the good of tolerance, open-mindedness, spontaneity, individuality, diversity, and all the rest.

The indignant inference is so *obviously* invalid that it is difficult to account for its prevalence. More importantly, I have discovered that swift demonstrations of the invalidity of the inference do little to defuse the sense that denying pluralism involves embracing something pernicious. Consequently, my strong suspicion is that those who associate the rejection of pluralism with intolerance and conformism invoke something more than the indignant inference. The rejection of pluralism is met with indignation, all right, but the thought, I suspect, is not so much that since pluralism has admirable entailments, those who reject it must also reject its entailments. Rather, the indignation derives from the thought that *pluralism* is a term that one should embrace. One should prize the *label* of pluralism; one should *want* to describe one's views as pluralistic. Consequently, it is thought that rejecting pluralism is a tactical error so egregious that only one who holds pernicious views could commit it.

To put the matter in a slightly different way, certain philosophical terms come with a built-in halo. One employs words like *inclusion*, *participation*, *empowerment*, *liberation*, and *diversity* only when describing the institutions, ideals, events, or policies one intends to praise and commend to others. Yet the force of such terms is not merely recommendatory; it is justificatory as well. For example, to succeed at attaching the description *inclusive* to a practice or institution is to be well on the way towards justifying it. Opponents of practices popularly characterized as, say, *inclusive* typically have the burden of showing how the practice in question is, indeed, *not* inclusive, or at least not *properly* so. It is difficult to find cases in which opponents of a purportedly inclusive practice assert that inclusion is undesirable or objectionable. This is because almost no one opposes inclusiveness, and nearly no one condemns diversity. Very few would inveigh against the ideals of empowerment and participation. Similarly, we use the word *liberate* in cases in which we want to convey the judgment that whatever has been released had been wrongly held. Accordingly, we speak of hostages being liberated, but when a known serial murderer is let off on a technicality, we say only that he has been released.

Such is the power of halo terms. They serve to describe how things stand in a way which embeds, often covertly, a positive moral judgment. When we disagree in such cases, we disagree over what should count as inclusive,