

Pluralism

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An Approximation to the Concept

Pluralism is an interpretation of social diversity. It can be rendered as a cultural, political, or philosophical stance. In any of these versions, pluralism offers an account of social interaction understood as an interplay of conflicting and competing positions that cannot be seamlessly reduced to one another, ranked in one single order permanently, or reduced to a single institutional arrangement. Any kind of pluralism (cultural, political, or philosophical) presupposes at the very least an empirical thesis about irreducible diversity. Social diversity, from the pluralist perspective, does not go away. Yet each of these kinds of pluralism pivots around different types of conflict – including ethical values, social or cultural practices, epistemological worldviews and/or political interests – and each accounts for these clashes from a different angle and with different implications. Whereas cultural and political pluralisms articulate the social difference that stems from habits, beliefs, or interests, philosophical pluralism goes further and adds an interpretation of the origin, character, and experience of value heterogeneity. It offers a full account of the anatomy of normative difference, of its awareness, and of its impact on social agency. These three kinds of pluralism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Philosophical pluralism always entails the acknowledgment of empirical diversity at the heart of cultural and political pluralism. Cultural and political pluralism, in turn, may or may not sprawl into a philosophical thesis.

Before exploring the differences within the pluralism family, it is necessary to draw the boundaries of pluralism vis-à-vis other competing philosophical views of social diversity. With this in mind, the next section

examines the relation between pluralism and other accounts that heed the existence of social difference, namely monism, relativism, skepticism, and subjectivism. The section on types of pluralism that follows looks inside the boundaries of pluralism and maps out three alternative kinds: cultural, political, and philosophical pluralism. Then the section on pluralism and political doctrines analyzes the relation between philosophical pluralism and two political doctrines, liberalism and radical democracy. The concluding remarks canvass two vital and longstanding (though as yet unanswered) questions undergirding the debates about pluralism: Can we prove the existence of pluralism? And, if so, is pluralism a good thing?

Pluralism and Its Relatives

Like pluralism, many other currents of thought have also provided an interpretation of social diversity. Monism, relativism, skepticism, and subjectivism are philosophical positions that stem, similarly, from an awareness of value diversity. Pluralism can dovetail or overlap with these alternative philosophical stances and has often been conflated with them. What is new about pluralism? What does pluralism add to the understanding of social diversity that is absent from any of these other accounts of value difference? An examination of the relation between pluralism and adjacent positions should highlight the distinctive tenets of pluralism, that is, the concomitant significance that pluralism attaches to social diversity. Let's begin with the view that pluralism opposes, namely monism.

Pluralism versus monism

Monism, also called absolutism (Kekes 2000: 47–65) or unitarianism (Connolly 2005: 1–10, 41), stands for the existence of an ultimate value, dominant currency, goal, or standard that sits atop the hierarchy and facilitates a

rational ranking among the various competing social preferences, goals, values, or practices under consideration. The supreme good or standard of monistic theories serves as a clear-cut and decisive benchmark of normative and social evaluation and it is the most basic value that explains the worth of all other relevant goods. Monistic theories are systematic and complete.

The structural organization of monistic views has important implications for the kind of rational deliberation that they admit. If there is a “dominant end” (Rawls 1999: 480–91)—that is, one ultimate end at which all human action aims, an end to which all of our ends are subordinated, an overarching aim for the sake of which all our other ends are pursued – then it is in principle possible to arrive at a rational decision with no normative residue or loss. Teleological theories (roughly, theories that hold that everything has an end that determines the most accomplished condition thereof) are often monistic. Thus consequentialism, utilitarianism, and perfectionism, all amenable to a teleological structure, are clear examples of theories that lend themselves to a monistic kind of ethical deliberation. Pluralistic theories, on the contrary, lack this overarching criterion of evaluation, which bears important consequences for the type of normative deliberation that is suitable to them.

Hence, if, according to monism, social diversity provides the parts of a puzzle that eventually come together neatly and without residue in a normative amalgam, for pluralism, social diversity offers the unalloyed elements that are never constitutive of a single overall system that embraces them all.

Pluralism versus relativism

Moral relativism can be a normative or a meta-ethical position. Pluralism is usually conflated with the metaethical version of relativism, that is, with an account of the rightness and wrongness of moral judgments that attaches normative warrant to different cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, some thinkers have claimed that pluralism and relativism are

cognates (for instance, Barry 2001: 133). According to relativism, cultural diversity begets a contingent understanding of the truth of moral judgments, and thus moral deliberation cannot ever be universally, rationally, and objectively justified.

Pluralism departs from this view in two consequential aspects: its account of culture and of its role; and its conception of incommensurability. Regarding the role of culture, pluralism acknowledges that social diversity precludes universal, conclusive, permanent, and complete rational decisions regarding values, interests, or beliefs. In this sense, pluralism and relativism concur. However, pluralism, unlike relativism, does not attach ultimate normative authority to cultures. Culture, in the pluralistic view, does not stand as the final source of appeal for normative assessment. Nor do cultures delineate the central normative space around which value decisions need to be attained. From a pluralistic perspective, cultural diversity is either a sociological fact or a manifestation of a deeper philosophical view about value diversity. In either case, culture by itself is not necessarily the final instance of a normative warrant. In other words, culture does not determine the province of pluralism in its scope or justification.

Second, the most distinctive trait of pluralism is the idea of incommensurability (more about this idea below), which departs from the same notion usually associated with relativism. Relativism involves normative disruptions among cultures, a discontinuity that implies incommensurability among them. That is, since moral judgments make reference to the cultures in which they emerge and the latter in turn are untranslatable into each other, it is not possible to assess the relative worth of conflicting judgments – moral judgments and their corresponding cultures are incommensurable. This idea diverges from the one that is the backbone of pluralism. For the pluralist, the notion of incommensurability is not attached to or hemmed in by cultures. Rather incommensurability is an attribute that applies to the character of values themselves, regardless of cultural boundaries. So, whereas for relativism

incommensurability pertains to (sub)cultural provinces, for pluralism incommensurability cuts across cultural borders and applies to the universe of values that are significant to human experience. William Connolly (2005: 41–2) alludes to this point when he argues that relativism understands culture concentrically, whereas pluralism is attentive to connections that exceed and disrupt the concentric image of culture. Hence, as a philosophical view, pluralism is an account of the incommensurability of values rather than cultures.

Moreover, the key notion of incommensurability, central to the debates around relativism, presupposes necessarily the idea of incomparability. To say, in the relativist mood, that cultures are incommensurable with one another is tantamount to claiming that the rightness or wrongness of moral judgments that originate in different cultures cannot be compared across them. There is no point in engaging in moral disagreement from distinct cultural vantage points, since the lack of an encompassing background renders the disagreement unintelligible. Indeed, from a relativistic point of view there is no disagreement at all. Alternatively, under the pluralist umbrella, incommensurability may or may not involve incomparability (more on this below). For the pluralist, to claim that values are incommensurable among themselves does not mean that an ordinal normative arrangement among them is unattainable. Although the pluralist is precluded from offering a sealed, absolute, reductive normative standpoint, she can offer a tentative, provisional, and transitory value stance that orders competing, conflicting, and, more importantly, incommensurable values in an ordinal way. Hence, whereas pluralists can settle (if only temporarily) for an evaluative arrangement among incommensurables, relativists cannot order incommensurable cultures in any way.

Finally, according to relativism, moral judgments that emanate from different cultures are untranslatable into each other. Hence the endorsement of one culture over another does not entail any form of normative loss, since it is not possible to translate or compare

crossculturally. The idea of normative residue and loss, however, is concomitant to the pluralist notion of incommensurability. To claim that values are incommensurable necessitates the idea that any normative decision entails a loss.

Thus relativism takes culture as a source and ultimate instance of appeal in moral argumentation. Pluralism, alternatively, is a thesis about the diverse, conflicting, and incommensurable character of ethical experience. Although this latter position sets constraints upon normative justification (it cannot, for instance, admit the form of rational deliberation proper of monistic views), it is nonetheless inconclusive about which kind of rational deliberation is possible. Unlike relativism, however, pluralism does not preclude the rational justification of our normative views. Although the pluralist's notion of incommensurability sets limits to the kind of normative deliberation that it can incorporate, unlike relativism, pluralism is not hemmed in by the impossibility of a rational justification of ethical assessment.

Pluralists differ vastly, however, over the kind of normative rationality that is possible under this worldview. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, maintains a cognitivist position, meaning that moral claims are truth-assessable. He argues that, in holding moral beliefs and in engaging in moral argument, we seek evidence for our opinions. We can alter other people's attitudes and behavior through rational moral argument – and not, as the non-cognitivist would hold, because moral claims express emotions (emotivism) or because they serve as universalizable commands (prescriptivism). Not only does Berlin treat moral claims as assertions that carry truth values, but he also holds that some of them have the truth value “true.” Hence, unlike some antirealists who embrace an “error theory” (Mackie 1977: 35–49), conceding that moral claims have truth values while denying that any of them is true, Berlin holds a cognitivist stance and asserts that some of the moral claims are true.

The kind of rationality that Berlin embraces as the proper mode of practical reasoning involves the use of imaginative insight – what

he calls the “sense of reality,” without which “the bones of the past remain dry and lifeless” (Berlin 1997a: 69). This faculty plays a pivotal role in Berlin’s thought; for it alone, granted a generic human character, allows delving into the past and across cultures to carry on a rational assessment of values without being swayed by the commands of formal, empirical, or universalizable thinking. For him, the practical reasoning that can wrestle with the open character of our experience and yet guide our intuitions is a sense of reality – a historical sense that eludes any perpetual rule-thinking about that reality that can never be left too far behind. The sense of reality is an inscrutable capacity – not because it is lofty, mysterious, or obscure, but for the opposite reason, that it penetrates too deeply into our experience. At times, Berlin (1980: 116) calls it “judgment” and fleshes it out as the empirical knack of weaving together independent concepts and general presuppositions. At others, he describes it as “our capacity for understanding the habits of thought and action that are embodied in human attitudes and behavior ... what is called knowledge of life” (1980: 128). The sense of history is an indefinable perception, an imaginative insight capable of delving into and communicating a form of life. In Berlin’s words, “To try to analyze and clearly describe what goes on when we understand in this sense is impossible” (1997b: 24). This skill is a form of practical reasoning that sets Berlin’s pluralism apart from both relativism and realism.

For many other pluralists, too, imagination acquires a primary role in normative thinking. Stuart Hampshire (1989: 60–3) leans toward relativist thinking when he argues that, unlike rational thinking, which is a pattern of thought potentially common to the species, imagination is a pattern of thought that is tied to a particular language and culture. For him, the justice or injustice, rightness or wrongness of actions and practices cannot be assessed except in relation to particular cultural norms.

John Rawls claims that formal principles play a limited role in determining moral choices. Rational choice must often rest on

self-knowledge, that is, on a careful attempt to ascertain which one in a diverse set of ends matters most to us. We should use what he calls “deliberative rationality” (1999: 365–72), a process that allows us to reflect carefully, under favorable conditions, in light of all the relevant facts available to us. For him, there is no formal procedure that will routinely select the rational course of action. Likewise, John Kekes (2000: 66–80) avoids formal kinds of normative thinking as well, arguing that a reasoned choice among conflicting “modes of reflection” (modes that are usually called worldviews) does not presuppose a general reason to determine the superiority of one of them over the others, which prevents rational normative assessment to be fettered to universal thinking.

Some other pluralists put special emphasis on the assessment of one’s particular circumstances. According to William Connolly (1995) and Chantal Mouffe (1993), “critical responsiveness” and “self-assertion” are, respectively, the right pluralist critical attitudes over rationalism and ethical systematization. As Connolly argues, this form of thinking is not on a par with relativism, which asserts that the justification of a substantive stance rests on cultural context, habituation, or personal preference and should be assessed within that normative framework.

In short, pluralism may require a specific kind of contextualized, historical form of practical reason. It forgoes absoluteness in the realm of justification. A particular case is not always an instance of a general, universal principle of rationality. This form of normative thinking sets it apart from both monism and relativism. Unlike monistic views, it can never yield universal, everlasting conclusions. Unlike relativism, it makes room for meaningful normative assessment among incommensurable views. If, according to relativism, social diversity begets a culture-centric view with dividing walls that thwart the idea of ethical disagreement, for pluralism it yields instead a value-centric perspective that cuts across cultures and does not necessarily result in a disrupted normative understanding.

Pluralism versus skepticism

Skepticism is a philosophical outlook that requires the unending suspension of judgment on any relevant matter, on the grounds of a permanent uncertainty of our beliefs. Pluralism, in acknowledging the existence of ineliminable diversity and the impossibility of a final rational ranking of values, interests, or beliefs, comes close to a skeptical view. Yet value irreducibility and incommensurability, two of the hallmarks of pluralist reasoning, do not lead necessarily to the suspension of judgment in ethics or in politics. Nicolas Rescher (1993: 80) argues that pluralism and skepticism part ways on precisely that particular point. He holds that skepticism is a view that asserts that no one position is ever fully justified. Consequently, from the skeptic's perspective, one should suspend judgment altogether if one wants to avoid error. Alternatively, Rescher asserts, pluralism does not claim that any position is never justified; nor does it hold that the existence of mutually valid alternatives commits us to the suspension of judgment. Pluralism, according to Rescher, entails not the absence of commitment in the face of equally viable alternatives, but the possibility of sticking to one of them and of rationally justifying that decision. Unlike skepticism, pluralism does not presuppose that no position is ever fully justified; it claims instead that multiple positions can be rationally justified. Whereas skepticism claims that we can never be fully certain of the truth of our beliefs, pluralism holds that many outlooks can be rationally defended. According to skepticism, the lack of epistemological certainty brackets the possibility of true beliefs. Alternatively, from the pluralist point of view, the absence of one single overriding normative truth leads to various equally warranted alternatives. Hence, if the existence of social diversity gives rise to epistemological abstinence in the case of skepticism, it brings along warranted difference in the case of pluralism.

Pluralism versus subjectivism

Subjectivism (known also as emotivism in a late, more sophisticated version thereof) holds that moral judgments are simply the expression of

our emotions. Morality, according to the subjectivist, is an articulation of our feelings. Reason, by itself, cannot propel us to act morally; only emotions do. According to this view, there is no universal moral truth, but judgments that vary in accordance with our feelings and emotions of acceptance or rejection of the issue in question. All that we have when it comes to acting morally are expressions of our emotions and sentiments – what is right or wrong is informed by how we feel about it, whether we approve or disapprove it, or whether we encourage or discourage it (Stevenson 1944; Smith 1976; Hume 1978).

Pluralism casts doubts on the possibility of accounting for our normative experience from the perspective of rational, universal abstract thinking. In this sense, it belittles the role and scope of formal reasoning in value assessments. Unlike subjectivism, however, it does not prioritize feelings over reason. As mentioned above, pluralist thinkers embrace alternative forms of practical rationality, usually accompanied by empathetic and imaginative capacities. Yet practical reason plays a formidable role in the pluralistic outlook, something that one cannot assert for many versions of emotivism. Moreover, whereas subjectivism (or emotivism) is a position about the nature of moral judgments, pluralism (in particular philosophical pluralism) is a view about the nature and character of what normative judgments are about, namely values. In short, if social diversity, according to the subjectivist perspective, evinces the emotional character of both moral motivation and ethical judgments, for pluralism it indicates the limits of formal reasoning in normative understanding, but it does not dilute reason altogether.

Types of Pluralism

Inside the pluralist family different types of pluralism coexist and various thinkers have offered alternative classifications of pluralist strands. John Kekes (2000: 4), for instance, claims that pluralism can be

ontological, having to do with the ultimate constituents of reality; epistemological,

concerning the standards of reasonable belief; axiological, pertaining to the values that make lives good; anthropological, regarding the cultural forms that human lives may take; or political, advocating arrangements that recognize the legitimacy of many conceptions of a good life.

Nicholas Rescher (1993: 99) offers six dimensions (conceptual, substantive, logical, methodological, ontological, and evaluative disagreement) on the basis of which we can categorize possible forms of pluralism. Likewise, Kirstie McClure organizes the pluralist debate around three successive “generations” in political pluralism – the Anglo-American pluralism of the beginning of the twentieth century, the pluralism of Robert Dahl and others in the 1950s and 1960s, and a current poststructuralist pluralism that challenges the state as the primary focus of political agency and struggle, in a way in which the previous two generations did not (McClure 1992; Schlosberg 2006; Dryzek, Honig, & Phillips 2006: 142–60).

This entry organizes the various pluralist approaches around a threefold classification: cultural, political, and philosophical. Each of these three forms of pluralism is not necessarily an exclusionary stance. Cultural and political pluralism may or may not entail a philosophical standpoint, but they can certainly be embraced together, as they very often are. Philosophical pluralism, on the other hand, implies an endorsement of incommensurable cultural and political heterogeneity. Indeed, philosophical pluralism is a viewpoint that begins with the empirical fact of social plurality assumed by both cultural and political pluralisms, but it accounts for that fact in a way that includes some broader interpretation of the character of values, our epistemological capacities, or our historical and political makeup. I will describe each of these three forms of pluralism one by one.

Cultural pluralism

From a cultural or sociological point of view, pluralism refers to the fact that cultures are expressions of a variety of values, practices, and beliefs. Cultural variations yield in turn ethical

diversity. From Protagoras (Plato 1992) to Michel de Montaigne (1973) to Max Weber (Gerth & Mills 1946), all have acknowledged the relevance of cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism is a sociological view about the existence of heterogeneity in practices, beliefs, and value systems, which may or may not turn into a philosophical position about the nature of values and our experience of them.

Some thinkers admit to the existence of cultural pluralism and integrate it into a political arrangement and a philosophical theory about justice but abstain from asserting anything conclusive about the fundamentally pluralistic nature of values or their impact on social agency. That is, cultural pluralism does not necessarily involve a metaethical view about the irreducibly plural character of values. This is the path taken by John Rawls (1996) in *Political Liberalism*, which presupposes the existence of “reasonable pluralism,” a sociological account of disagreement in contemporary liberal democracies. The recognition of the centrality of cultural pluralism in present-day societies induced Rawls to rethink the conflation of a comprehensive good based on the paramount value of moral autonomy and the conception of justice that regulates the basic political institutions in pluralistic contemporary social orders. Yet his sociological pluralism does not presuppose a view about the plural structure of normative experience, but simply a recognition of ethical and cultural heterogeneity and of its impact on the justification of a just political order (see also Larmore 1996: 152–74).

Some other theorists have integrated cultural pluralism into a philosophical view about modernity and the rational limits of ultimate decisions about value. Max Weber’s “polytheism of values” (Gerth & Mills 1946: 77–156, 323–62) offers an account of irreconcilable and incommensurable conflict among values. His polytheism points to the fact that each of the value spheres that characterize modernity (religion, art, sexuality, economy, science, and politics) is organized on excluding ultimate criteria that cannot be translated into other spheres.

Each field is justified on grounds of irreconcilable ultimate values, and thus modernity brings along the impossibility of a definitive, objective, scientific solution regarding the purpose and meaning of a worthwhile life. Ultimate weltanschauungs clash and ultimate choices have to be made. In Weber's words, "the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice" (Gerth & Mills 1946: 152). Starting from cultural pluralism, Weber derives a philosophical view about human experience in the context of modernity that seeps across the ethical life, the purpose of scientific knowledge, and politics.

The Weberian themes of pluralism, sphere fragmentation, domination, and the insidious effects of technical knowledge upon power relations are further pursued in Michael Walzer's work on pluralism (1983), which construes a theory of justice on the basis of the idea of "complex equality," articulated in democratic principles with communitarian roots. Spheres of justice are autonomous, embodying their own internal principles that regulate their relevant social good (wealth, power, health, and so on). Justice, in pluralist societies of this sort, requires that one's position regarding one social good – say, power – does not "dominate" one's position regarding a different social good – say, health. Thus cultural pluralism is accompanied by a theory of justice with a philosophical understanding of the character of values, namely that the shared understanding of the value of a social good determines its proper distribution.

Cultural pluralism has also been the building block of discussions on ethical theory. In particular, some thinkers have focused on whether its existence chips away at the scope of rational normative argumentation. In other words, the debate has centered on whether cultural heterogeneity sets limits to the possibility of moral knowledge. Relativism and universalism, two clashing philosophical views about the rightness and wrongness of our moral judgments and the possibility of moral truth,

presuppose the empirical recognition of cultural pluralism. Some moral philosophers, the universalists, have argued that cultural pluralism is not inimical to the possibility of finding universal moral truths, while others, the relativists, believe that cultural pluralism is evidence of both normative and metaethical relativism.

Chandra Kukathas, for instance, argues that cultural diversity "does not preclude the possibility of moral criticism or of developing universal moral standards. Nor does it make it impossible to compare moral values or to acquire moral knowledge" (Kukathas 1994: 2). Cultural pluralism, for Kukathas, does not raise a problem for moral theory, as there are fundamental commitments and shared beliefs among cultures that make moral argumentation possible. Likewise, Alan Gewirth (1994: 25) examines the argument that positive moralities challenge the existence of one normative morality that applies universally, and he concludes that cultural pluralism is not epistemically relevant to rational moral knowledge.

Moral philosophers David Wong (1984) and Hilbert Harman (1975, 1978, 1985) stand at the opposite end of the debate. They both argue that cultural pluralism spawns relativism. Harman believes that whether someone is wrong in doing something always depends on an understanding or agreement of the particular culture in question and not on basic moral demands that apply to everyone.

Political pluralism

If the focus of cultural pluralism is empirical diversity manifested in values, practices, and beliefs, the core concern of pluralism in political science lies in the organizational and institutional articulation of competing individual and group interests. Like cultural pluralism, political pluralism may or may not presuppose a philosophical view about the plural character of values and its impact on human agency.

Drawing upon the view of William James (1976 [1912], 1977 [1909]), the first wave of pluralists in political science attacked the unitary source of state power on grounds of both an empirical and a philosophical view about

value diversity. They challenged the sovereignty, monopoly, and unity of the state as the sole representative of the plurality of interests. Starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, political scientists such as Arthur Bentley (1908), Ernest Barker (1957 [1915]), Harold Laski (1917), and Mary Parker Follett (1918) offered a view of politics as a conflict among plural interests emanating from both the state and private associations, all considered to be at the same level.

A second wave of pluralism in politics took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s and focused almost exclusively on the institutional design for the aggregation of conflicting interests. More particularly, the concern of its representatives was the “political processes” by which plural interests could be accommodated among different associations. There was an empirical rather than philosophical view about competing positions aggregated in a variety of associations (including the state), intended to provide an alternative explanation to C. Wright Mills’ power elite view of American politics (Mills 2000 [1956]). Robert Dahl, for instance, claimed that power was dispersed among many interest groups that tended to balance their relative bargaining position (Dahl 1961; see also Truman, 1951; Almond & Powell 1978).

An important backlash emerged against this latter version of political pluralism. Critics objected that it presupposed a naively distorted conception of the state, overlooked forms of political contestation, and actually consolidated an unequal, differential power among conflicting groups. Moreover, they all rejected the reduction of pluralism to competition among individual and group interests (Schattschneider 1960; Connolly 1969; Wolff, Moore, & Marcuse 1969).

The most recent representatives of pluralism in political science still claim that politics is the “process” by which the state (and, in some versions, the global order) responds and channels the plurality of material and ideal interests. Yet they have also incorporated previous criticisms and have advanced a

more nuanced view. They thus acknowledge the relative power leverage of different groups and the unique, commanding position of the state in shaping and inducing preferences among competing groups (Schlosberg 1999; Eisfeld 2006; McFarland 2004, 2007).

Philosophical pluralism

Philosophical pluralism does more than simply admit the permanent existence of social variety (either political or cultural); it moors empirical diversity to a philosophical view about the character of values and the experience, knowledge, and awareness we have of them. According to philosophical pluralism, cultural, moral, and political diversity is an unavoidable and permanent byproduct of the character of the values that comprise it, of our limited epistemological capacity, or of the historical and political construction of human experience. Hence, from the philosophical point of view of pluralism, social diversity is explained by either or both of the following theses:

- a. Value pluralism maintains that the character of values is plural, conflicting, incommensurable, incomplete, (in)comparable, and nonreductive. Value pluralism can also involve an epistemological stance that asserts that the knowledge, experience, and awareness of values are always limited, open, and incomplete.
- b. Radical pluralism highlights the constructed, historical, and political tenor of our experience and identity, which is always varying, limited, constraining, and exclusionary.
 - a. Value pluralism. Let’s characterize each of the value dimensions entailed in value pluralism. *Incommensurability* refers to the lack of a single standard that can accurately measure trade-offs among all items under consideration. More specifically, in the normative realm, incommensurability points to the impossibility of subsuming all values under an exclusionary ethical standard that applies to all contexts and

for all times. One single common currency or criterion cannot gauge, translate, exchange, and cardinally order the universe of human values permanently. Trade-offs of values always imply loss. One can assess in any given situation that a normative arrangement is to be preferred over another. We could prioritize, say, courage over strict compliance or rule-following at any given point, but this evaluation is always tentative, contextualized, partial, and incomplete. In short, the rejection of one and only one discerning parameter to measure all instances of a set is a central piece in the account of value incommensurability. This tenet, in turn, implies conflict, antireductionism, and incompleteness.

Conflict points to the plural, exclusionary, and fragmented composition of values (Nagel 2012: 128–41). Perfect liberty cannot coexist with complete equality; pure modesty cannot persist with superlative overachievement, nor could it make sense without the contrasting comparison of the wide range of competing values. This exclusionary character of values is unavoidable not only in the banal sense that we cannot have everything we want, but in the more fundamental understanding that values acquire their full meaning in a contrastive manner, against the entire arch of normativity – we cannot make sense of values and their experience without their opposites and their exclusions. Indeed, trying to tame this fragmented and exclusionary character of values by insisting on rational coherence contradicts human experience (Hampshire 1989: 12).

A further necessary corollary of incommensurability is the *irreducibility* of values. Values cannot be collapsed into one another or exchanged seamlessly with each other – or with a paramount value sitting atop the hierarchical structure. Nor are the conceptions of the good that embrace them interchangeable (Hampshire 1989: 118). Values are conflicting, plural, and incommensurable, and they cannot for that reason be translated into or reduced to one another without a residue. One principle, one value, one goal, one worldview can never account for the totality of human experience.

The immense, contradictory, and varying flow of human life renders it irreducible and unaccountable from the perspective of one single outlook. We cannot pursue all those values that we consider worthwhile, and this impossibility comes not so much from the constraints of space, time, and social scarcity, but mainly from the fact that no one worldview can consistently encompass all those values at once.

Value irreducibility imposes, necessarily, normative *incompleteness* on any vision of life. This is why Isaiah Berlin refuses to accept sealed and utopian systems of thought that purportedly solve value conflicts in favor of moral and political clarity and certainty (Berlin 1980: 77). Berlin denies the possibility that all ethical questions have one and only one correct answer, that there is a path toward attaining one single truth, and that all ethical truths must be compatible with each other – he simply distrusts the search for universal certainty in the form of a self-contained system of thought. “One of the intellectual phenomena which made the greatest impact on me,” he says, “was the universal search by philosophers for absolute certainty, for answers which could not be doubted, for total intellectual security. This from the very beginning appeared to me to be an illusory quest” (Berlin 2000: 4). Likewise, Stuart Hampshire argues that there is no ideal of humanity that embraces all virtues in one unique narrative. There is no such thing – a single picture of human perfection – but the individual capacity to shape one’s own experience on the basis of one’s imagination (Hampshire 1989: 115).

According to many pluralists, philosophical views that defend a systematic and complete order of things usually attach to reason a primordial role in the understanding of ethical life. Once non-rule-abiding faculties – such as imagination and memory (Hampshire), sense of reality (Berlin), and truthfulness (Williams: see Williams 2002) – are allowed an equally important and shared place in normative thinking, the ordering of reasons in a systematic whole turns out to be always provisional. As Hampshire puts it, “The openness of the

imagination, coming from the uncontrolled interactions of unconscious memory, always leaves a margin of the unplanned and the unexpected” (Hampshire 1989: 133). This is what he tellingly calls “the inexhaustibility of description”: any moral situation that we face “has an inexhaustible set of discriminable features over and above those which I explicitly notice at the time because they are of immediate interest to me” (Hampshire 1983: 106). Multiplicity, preconscious memories that feed our decisions, the condensed character of the thinking that is difficult to reconstruct as a neat collection of arguments or conclusive supports of the decision – all these amount to the inexhaustibility of description (Hampshire 1983: 108).

This ethical openness is, then, inescapable and involuntary. Dogmatic, authoritarian, and totalitarian perspectives are equally incomplete as tolerant views, if not more. Value underdetermination and openness are not first-order normative stances. They cannot be redressed even asymptotically, by including more values into a set. Inconclusiveness is an intrinsic trait of the anatomy of values – understood either as moral entities independent of us or as historical constructions. It derives from the constraints and exclusions dictated by the logic of values and by the restrictions that any outlook of life entails.

Philosophers (both in favor of and against value pluralism) have parted ways on the idea of *incomparability*. Some thinkers use incomparability and incommensurability interchangeably (Raz 1986: 321–66); some argue that incommensurability entails incomparability (MacIntyre 1988: 370–1); others claim that incommensurability requires comparability (Davidson 1984; Chang 1997: 1–34; Berlin 2000: 13); while others maintain that there is not a necessary relationship between them.

According to Isaiah Berlin, for instance, practical reason works on the grounds that comparisons can be made between incommensurables. For him, moral matters can be rationally assessed, moral judgments can be true or false, discussion about values and forms of life is imperative and inescapable, and, as a result

of all of these, some ultimate ends can be integrated with one another, if only temporarily. Insofar as men and women are endowed with imagination, they can conceive of a value system different from theirs as meaningful. They can see other human beings engaging in different practices, make sense of those values, understand and communicate them – because they share in the experience of being a person. Fueled by opposing comprehensive views, persons disagree, object, antagonize, and go to war; and yet they can recognize the others’ forms of life as a human pursuit. “That is why pluralism is not relativism – the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men’s subjective fancies” (Berlin 2000: 12).

Incomparability relates to the notions of “translatability” and “interpretability,” which appear only intermittently in the literature on philosophical pluralism but more often in discussions about relativism. The analysis of translatability alludes to the existence of a “conceptual scheme” and its implications for moral argumentation. Davidson’s (1984) idea of untranslatability entails both incommensurability and incomparability. In rejecting the notion of “conceptual scheme relativism,” he objects to the thought that some other cultures may have relied on conceptual schemes that are incommensurable (that is, incomparable) with ours. According to Davidson, the idea of an untranslatable language or of incommensurable systems of belief lacks justification. The point, defended by many relativists, that one cannot translate diverse cultural languages and variant points of view actually is, for Davidson, proof that there is no such thing as a conceptual scheme detached from experience and that there is indeed “a common coordinate system” that allows us to make that precise point. Davidson objects to the position that our relation to the world presupposes a distinction between a “conceptual scheme” and an “empirical content.” For him, there is no rationale in distinguishing between a subjective viewpoint given by language and an empirical component provided by the world. Our attitudes and

dispositions are always already related to the world, to an extent that makes the idea of a conceptual scheme (and, a fortiori, the idea of conceptual relativism) idle.

Philosophical pluralism and the value pluralist thesis that we have been examining can find their origins not so much in the anatomy of values themselves as in the way we get to understand and relate to our surroundings. We approach the normative world through a conceptual scheme that is itself comprised of values that are incommensurable, fragmented, and conflicting. Philosophical pluralism, in this case, results more from the constraints of practical reason than from the fragmented, exclusionary, and incommensurable character of values – understood as independent entities or as historical constructions. In this epistemological twist of value pluralism, values compose a mental scheme that constitutes us and shapes our ethical orientation.

Many pluralists endorse both the value-based and the epistemological theses about pluralism simultaneously. John Kekes, for example, argues that pluralism applies to “modes of reflection,” that is, ways of understanding the significance of facts (Kekes 2000: 66–79), and he also states that it relates to the nature of values (Kekes 1993: 9). Berlin, too, endorses a form of epistemological pluralism along with the value pluralism described above. After taking the cultural pulse of human action across the ages, Berlin concludes that we can outline a semipermanent depiction of what it means to be a person – what he calls the human semblance – which enables rational argumentation among different views. Although open, undecided, and loose, this conception is composed of multiple and permanent concepts and categories that have sprung from and organized human experience. Because of its enduring nature, this cluster of categories makes rational argumentation possible, providing a common formal condition from which to assess questions of value. Because of its open nature, it lays the basis for antireductionism and lends support to pluralism in the normative domain.

Hence the realm of value is the realm defined by our humanity, a conceptual scheme that we cannot help but recognize if we are to act in accordance with the idea of a person as we conceive of it today; we understand the limits of our humanity through the web of these categories. According to Berlin, this categorial framework is a central and less varying feature of our historical experience that makes communication possible; widespread and stable ways in which we think, decide, perceive, and judge (Berlin 1980: 164). These concepts and categories are then unavoidable: without them we would lack the equipment to understand ourselves. Because outside them we cannot grasp the meaning of human actions, they are binding and imposing; and in consequence they turn out to be semipermanent, or considerably more stable than other features of the empirical world, thus providing an objective basis for argumentation among persons.

b. Radical pluralism. Value pluralism is a position about the character and logic of values. It is a thesis about their incommensurable, conflicting, irreducible traits. This account of the anatomy of values can go hand in hand either with a metaethical position called “moral realism” or with a historical appreciation of the unfolding of human experience. As an appendix to moral realism, value pluralism states that values are in a certain way – plural and conflicting; that they exist out there; and that they are therefore commanding and imposing. Thomas Nagel, Charles Taylor, Charles Larmore, John Gray, and George Crowder among others see value pluralism this way (Gray 1995: 118; 1996: 72; 2000: 6; Dworkin, Lilla, & Silvers 2001: 106, 113, 117; Crowder 2002: 3).

Yet value pluralism does not need to be part and parcel of a moral realist position. The incommensurable, conflicting, irreducible, and incomplete character of values can be reclaimed as a historical, social, and political construction. For instance, some believe that Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, and Bernard Williams see value pluralism as a historical product rather than as a moral realist spinoff. It is precisely the political

and historical thrust of values, human agency, and identity that is the core of a more far-reaching, poststructuralist version of pluralism, called here “radical pluralism.” History and politics over universal morality, power over choice, political agency over the autonomous self, and exclusion over diversity are some of the planks of a radical pluralism that attaches a more dramatic twist to the philosophical understanding of social diversity than the moral realist version of value pluralism does.

Subjectivity and agency, on this view, are vulnerable to endless and interminable transfiguration – not as an act of individual choice or self-creation, but as a constant interplay between subjugation and domination on the one hand and, on the other, appropriation of the political contingency that shapes us but never completely congeals us (Butler 2006). Radical pluralism transforms the boundaries of political agency, disbanding the contours of the modern and liberal understanding of the subject as a bearer of rights. Kirstie McClure argues that pluralism reconstitutes political identity and agency as well as “questions about the character, scope and potential sites of political action” (McClure 1992: 110). Radical pluralism incorporates the demands of political pluralism in that it displaces the state as the exclusive locus of politics, and it adds a strong philosophical layer to the understanding of social diversity by showing how pluralism both results from the imprints of power and affects political subjectivity. The multiple identities of the political subject can be contested, as they are “contingently constructed and reconstructed through the reiteration of cultural codes and through participation in the social practices through which these codes are enacted in daily life” (McClure 1992: 123). Radical pluralism does not fragment the social but claims that the relational identities are contingently and pragmatically constructed (Mouffe 1993: 7).

Pluralism and Political Doctrines

The kind of politics that pluralism opens the way for has been the subject of heated debate. Different doctrines have been defended as the

proper heirs of pluralism, among them liberalism, radical democracy, pragmatism, and conservatism. For instance, John Kekes puts contextual thinking and pluralism together in a way that dodges relativism and prioritizes conservatism (Kekes 1998). Pluralism is always understood in the context of a particular tradition (1998: 62–7), and this, according to Kekes, links pluralism to a conservative politics. For him, practical reasoning under pluralism must be contextualist, and an appeal to context is an appeal to tradition.

Other thinkers, such as Richard Rorty, have made a case for the reinforcing relationship between pluralism and pragmatism. Rorty’s pragmatism – which articulates an “antirepresentationalist” view of truth and beliefs, “antifoundationalism” in knowledge, “antiessentialism” of reason, and a Darwinian understanding of human beings – stretches across his liberal political theory that embraces a philosophical pluralism (Rorty 1989, 1991, 2007). Against this view, some other pragmatists have claimed that although consistent with each other pragmatism and pluralism are incompatible, for the strong value ontological commitments of pluralism fly in the face of pragmatic assumptions (Talisie & Aikin 2005a, 2005b; for a reply, see Misak 2005).

The most prominent association, defended and attacked with equal vehemence, has been that between pluralism and liberalism. In the remainder of this section I will discuss the relationship between pluralism and the two most consequential political doctrines in present-day society: liberalism and radical democracy.

Pluralism and liberalism

Opponents and defendants of the association between pluralism and liberalism have equally cast doubt on the character of the connection at stake between them. Much has been written in dissecting the kind of link that could meaningfully relate them both – by way of searching into historical, conceptual, and logical connections (Crowder 1994). The supporters of liberal pluralism, too, face trouble in nailing down the

specifics of the association. Berlin himself does not clear much of the ground when he claims that “Pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts ... I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected” (Berlin & Jahanbegloo 1991: 44).

Many scholars have read and criticized the relationship of pluralism and liberalism as one of the philosophical foundations that focus on the idea of choice. Following this reading, George Crowder and Jonathan Riley advocate significantly reformulated proposals to make the justificatory relationship work. Others, like John Gray and John Kekes, believe that value pluralism signals a dead end for the liberal project.

George Crowder, John Gray, John Kekes, and Michael Sandel argue that, if all values are equally ultimate, then freedom of choice cannot enjoy a privileged status (Sandel 1984; Kekes 1993; Gray 1996, 2000). If pluralism brings about an argument in favor of value indeterminacy, then choice cannot come out on top of all other values. Gray, in particular, emphasizes that proponents of the association between pluralism and liberalism like Isaiah Berlin value the capacity to choose above anything else; he believes, however, that, granted the truth of value pluralism, choice and its cognate idea of negative freedom cannot take precedence over everything else. “To hold that only liberal ways of life are valuable,” claims Gray, “or that they are always more valuable than illiberal ways of life, is to ascribe to freedom of choice a pre-eminent value that is undefended and implausible – especially if the truth of value-pluralism is assumed” (Gray 1996: 152; see also 160–1 and Gray 1995: 114). Against Berlin, Gray argues that negative liberty can be only one good among many (Gray 2000: 32). Indeed Gray’s suggestion that, granted the truth of pluralism, no value whatsoever can come before others ushers the end of any grounded substantive moral or political reasoning of universal scope. He sentences the liberal project to death on the grounds of its unattainable universality. Value pluralism and

liberalism are rival doctrines precisely because the former challenges the universal ambition of liberal morality.

Crowder also opposes the compatibility between liberalism and pluralism that springs from cherishing choice. He rebuffs the argument (which he attributes to Berlin) that, if values conflict and are plural and incommensurable, then we must *value* the freedom to choose: “His [Berlin’s] more explicit argument is that pluralism gives us a reason to value choice” (Crowder 2002: 78; see also 81–2). Crowder, however, objects to this argument as an instance of the naturalistic fallacy. From the fact that people must make hard choices, Crowder claims, it does not follow that we must value such choices or the freedom to make them: “[from the fact] that something is unavoidable it does not follow that it is desirable” (Crowder 2003: 5; see also Crowder 2002: 298).

It is unclear, however, whether supporters of the affinity between liberalism and pluralism rest their case on the idea that choice takes precedence over anything else, let alone on the worth of choice. Rather, advocates of the bolstering connection between pluralism and liberalism seem to argue that, if pluralism holds, then choice needs to be exercised. In other words, they believe that sheltering the capacity to choose should stand in virtue of its being the precondition for experiencing a pluralist world. Choice would not make an action necessarily more valuable, in the same way in which breathing does not make our life more worthwhile. The modern awareness of value pluralism has brought a compelling case against its suppression – but how we choose, when we choose, and whether we choose are not part of the case for its protection. For choice to be treasured in the sense that Crowder’s argument assumes, it has to be linked to higher virtues or powers that turn choices into worthy outcomes. But choices, according to some of the supporters of liberal pluralism, are necessary, yet not necessarily valuable. “One chooses as one chooses,” states Berlin, “neither life can objectively

be called superior to the other. It is a matter of what one wants to do and be” (Berlin and Jahanbegloo 1991: 45). Herein would lie the difference between acknowledging the necessity of choice and valuing choice. More generally, the critics of the central role of choice in the association between liberalism and pluralism seem to be calling into question the preconditions of pluralism (choice) in the name of pluralism.

Pluralism and radical democracy

The viability of a sustainable relationship between pluralism and liberalism has been attacked from other fronts as well. Champions of radical pluralism believe that a contested, antagonistic democracy, rather than liberal politics, emerges as its buttressing companion (Mouffe 1993: 8). In extending the idea of political agency of the social subject across the board (the family, the street, the church, the economy, sexuality, and so on), the political is constantly redefined and resignified (McClure 1992). Hence, unlike liberal pluralism – which, according to the radical view, tames differences by relegating them to the private realm – the radical account of pluralism beckons a democratic politics that continually contests those assumed boundaries. Radical pluralism gnaws away at the idea of the modern subject, on which liberalism stands; and it embraces a more contesting democratic politics, which redraws identity as an intersubjective construction constrained by power relations of exclusion. At the opposite end of liberal individualism, radical pluralism takes identity to be a collective and relational process (Mouffe 1993; Connolly 1995).

The politics that derives from radical pluralism is more antagonistic than the one allowed by any other kind of pluralism (Mouffe 1993: 127). The radical view claims to take pluralism seriously, wrestling with the exclusions that it produces and wearing down the ideas of neutrality, secularism, and rational consensus characteristic of the liberal politics that dovetails with other forms of pluralism (Connolly 1995: xiii; 2005: 38–67). Radical pluralism deepens the democratic character of politics

and ferrets out the discursive, constructed character of the moral presuppositions of liberal pluralism, namely rationalism, individualism, and universalism (Mouffe 1993: 7). Radical pluralism is the normative consequence of understanding that social objectivity is constructed through acts of power (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). Hence, according to this view, any social objectivity entails acts of exclusion. We moved away from an empirical description of pluralism to a philosophical one, which sees values as political (rather than moral) constructions and as carriers of the same exclusion that gives birth to them.

Radical democracy sees politics as entailing ineradicable conflict, which cannot be eliminated by reasoned consensus. According to the radical democrats, proponents of liberalism and deliberative democracy alike overdo the consensual, rational aspect of politics while underplaying its more unsavory effects. For the radical pluralist, these views of politics limp along in denying its conflictual dimension. Consent does not do away with remnants – remnants of inclusion and coercion, remnants of agreement, remnants of emotions and social dispositions, remnants of rational justification, remnants of reasoned disagreement and antagonism. Take these remainders of exclusion away, as any political theory that puts rational agreement as the source of political justification does, and we are left without the political.

Radical democrats claim that pluralism, rightly understood, challenges all the political and ethical boundaries that liberalism sets in place – from the idea of moral and political agency to the public and private divide to the boundaries that circumscribe the mechanisms of power. Pluralism generates indelible marks of exclusion and domination that remain hidden and always unrecognized under the liberal view. According to radical democrats, in the name of pluralism, liberals agree on impartial procedures that shadow the arresting aspects of pluralism. Bonnie Honig advances this view when she objects to the overemphasis of the voluntary aspect of politics and the state-centered vision of

the political in liberalism, in particular in Rawls's work. She claims:

Rawls problematically disempowers citizens by reconciling them without remainder to the juridical authority of the state ... Rawlsian rationalism is not a benign and agreeable means to institutionalize a private realm pluralism but a betrayal of a deeper (more disagreeable?) pluralism that mires these liberals in a politics they never quite celebrate, though neither do they condemn it tout court. (Honig 1993: 159)

The Truth and Goodness of Pluralism

Two additional open questions are largely presupposed in the longstanding discussion on pluralism: Is pluralism true? And, if so, is pluralism a good thing? As part of the closing remarks, I will canvass tentative answers to these seminal questions.

Can we prove the truth of pluralism?

Berlin, Hampshire, and Williams see pluralism as historically grounded. For them, the historical growth of human experience evinces the existential relevance and ineluctability of pluralism. Hampshire in particular moors pluralism to human experience and memory. Each person, he argues, has her own history, which makes individuality an inescapable condition in human experience (Hampshire 1989: 119). The uniqueness of our history, reiterated by the pervasiveness of memory, which propels us to live a life almost in metaphors, makes the idea of singularity an unavoidable tenet of human life (1989: 121). That singularity and that individuality are always ungraspable, irreproducible, and unsystematized, all of which becomes palpable at the moment of death and love. At the moment of death, Hampshire claims, because the sense of loss cannot ever be recovered by reproducing the individuality of the person who passed away. At the moment of love, because sexual love is the desire to know and take possession of someone else's individuality – we want to embrace and know that individual consciousness – “through the body that expresses that consciousness” (1989: 123–5). Pluralism, in this view, is tied to individuality, an inescapable tenet of human

experience. It is a “sense of one's own singularity” that arises from the fact that each of us has had different experiences (1989: 115).

Human experience speaks to the truth of pluralism in yet another way, which I would refer to as “the insufficiency of reason.” A nonpluralistic world would eventually come together in a seamless way. Trade-offs, transactions, and substitutions of values would have attached a measurable significance that would serve as the basis of any rational decision-making. Yet reason has proven to be incapable of organizing our normative experience that way. Once again, Hampshire makes this point nicely. He holds that originally morality appears in our experience as a conflict of claims, and that reason alone is never sufficient to justify a decision in a moral conflict: “our divided, and comparatively open, nature requires one to choose, without sufficient reason, between irreconcilable dispositions and contrary claims...” (Hampshire 1983: 118). The incompleteness derived from the uniqueness of individual experience, the boundaries of imagination, and the insufficiency of reason all speak to the persistency of value conflict and incommensurability.

Some other thinkers, alternatively, have tethered the existence of pluralism to our epistemological capacity. John Kekes, for instance, makes the case that “the history of metaphysics, epistemology, morality, and cultures is a history of competing attempts at the imposition of rival hierarchies, and the failure of all such attempts provides ample support for pluralism” (Kekes 2000: 69). For him, “modes of reflection” are plural because they are irreducibly different. He believes that “no mode of reflection can share the significance that another mode of reflection attributes to the facts” (2000: 71). In the same vein, the “radical empiricism” of William James suggests that inevitably each of us experiences different things differently (1976: 14–15).

Is pluralism good?

Assuming that these and other cases in favor of the existence of pluralism hold true, we could wonder whether that is something we should

celebrate. Recently a Harvard geneticist has claimed that scientists could make a Neanderthal clone baby if they had an “extremely adventurous female human” (Church & Regis 2012: 11; see also the interview with Church, Spiegel Online International 2013) as a surrogate. If we are true pluralists and pluralism is good, we should welcome this expansion of diversity. Should we?

If pluralism is good, then, it seems, more diversity should always be good – and good *per se*. Yet this conclusion may rush things a bit too much. Two interrelated issues undergird this claim. First, the question of whether pluralism is good; and, second, the question of whether, if that were the case, more of that good would always be better. The answer to the former question should lay the grounds for the latter, for it matters why pluralism could be deemed an intrinsic good in order to discern whether, how, and to what extent that good should be pursued.

From the philosophical perspective, pluralism entails an irreducible, open-ended exercise in practical reason. In any of its versions (value, epistemological, or radical), philosophical pluralism yields necessarily tentative and inconclusive ethical decisions. From this perspective, pluralism opens the possibility of a permanent rewriting of normative dispositions. Alternatively, settling the issue by determining that expanding social diversity is always good turns the open question on which pluralism depends into a closed one. In other words, to claim, in the name of pluralism, that more social diversity is a good in itself, that it should therefore be pursued and, *ipso facto*, maximized goes against the pluralist spirit. It gives a closure to the most fundamental question on which pluralism stands, namely what to make of the unsettled condition attached to a normative orientation to life that wrestles with the inextricability and inescapability of difference. Hence that way of confronting the permanently mutable character of social and political existence runs afoul of the pluralist spirit.

An important aspect of the pluralist orientation to life consists precisely in the contingent

assessment of how to rejigger and navigate through indetermination, heterogeneity, and incompleteness. Sentencing that more diversity is a social good that should be unconditionally aspired to signals the knell of pluralism, it belies its spirit. For this reasoning incorporates diversity in a monistic way: it embraces plurality at the expense of plurality, it puts a closure to the open question that pluralism can never leave too far behind, that is, which kind of value decisions we should make in confronting inescapable difference. The monistic pluralist turns diversity into the paramount goal that trumps anything else and presumably makes it the proxy for normative arrangements. In this account, diversity becomes a commodity rather than an inescapable human condition. It evades the existential state of uncertainty ushered in by pluralism in favor of an instrumental view of social diversity.

This way of assimilating diversity not only flies against the spirit of pluralism but is also inconsistent with its letter. For the ultimate lesson of a pluralist outlook is that any social order affords a scarce and constraining normative space that sets limits to how much diversity it can spawn. From a pluralistic perspective, the idea of an indefinite aggrandizement of diversity is empirically impossible and conceptually meaningless – as meaningless as the aspiration to permanently squelch it.

In short, pluralism holds that social diversity and the disagreement that grows from it are unending. The attempt to permanently quench difference misrepresents and distorts human experience. Values have percolated throughout human history in a way that renders them irreducible, our worldviews are always limited, and our agency is political and thus exclusionary more than voluntaristic – whatever the specific spin and explanation, philosophical pluralism acknowledges that social diversity is part of living a human life. We cannot escape that condition by adopting an unqualifiedly favorable inclination toward promoting diversity. Endorsing pluralism does not enforce upon us an indiscriminating willingness to churn out more social diversity – always. Hence, opposing

the Neanderthal experiment does not, for that reason only, commit us against pluralism. Rather, pluralism commits us to the inescapable place of making value decisions about the difference that confronts us.

Pluralism embraces heterogeneity but does not push for its maximization. Can pluralism stand for anything good even when it does not promote it? It is conceivable to be a staunch pluralist who admits of normative underdetermination as an inescapable aspect of leading a life, and yet believes that this is a regrettable hallmark of human experience. A rueful pluralist. Most pluralists, however, seem to cherish rather than surrender to pluralism. If so, what is there to like about it? A favorable view of pluralism should draw attention to the fact that pluralism makes life interesting – a project, not a given. It confronts us and meets us always in a place of searching and questioning, a place of partial and incomplete understanding, a place of creation and appropriation rather than of finitude, standardization, and consistency.

What is good about that? It puts a specific form of normative deliberation at the core of human experience. Insofar as ethical evaluation cannot be reduced to one single goal set for us beforehand, or to any calculation of the most efficient means to achieve one overarching value, pluralism is an antidote to instrumental rationality, a reminder that value decisions will never escape us and that we are bound to normatively orient ourselves unceasingly. Pluralism hurls us into the inescapability and inconclusiveness of ethical repositioning. It brings value back in – value indetermination over efficiency and optimization. It keeps open, and on the surface, questions about meaning and understanding. It reminds us that questions about where we go, how we do it, and why will forever haunt us, and it points to the insufficiency of reason to fully guide us in solving those problems. As Joseph Raz has put it: “Incommensurability speaks not of what does escape reason but of what must elude it” (Raz 1986: 334). Pluralism is an infusion of value in our lives, an interminable quest for ethical orientation. It is a secular form of enchantment.

SEE ALSO: Absolutism; Agonistic Democracy; Berlin, Isaiah (1909–98); Connolly, William E. (1938–); Consequentialism; Conservatism; Liberal Democracy; Liberalism; Liberal Theory; Mouffe, Chantal (1943–); Poststructuralism; Pragmatism; Rawls, John (1921–2002); Relativism; Utilitarianism; Weber, Max (1864–1920)

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