

The Non-Sequitur of Value-Relativism: A Critique of John Gray's "Post-Liberalism"

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In recent years, John Gray has transformed himself from a liberal theorist to a critic of liberal theory. Unlike most critics of liberal theory, however, Gray criticizes it not because it is *liberal*, but because it is *theory*. In fact, Gray is a strong defender of liberal society and practices, but his defense is self-consciously historicist rather than theoretical. The main statement of Gray's critique of liberal theory and defense of liberal practices is his essay "What is Dead and What is Living in Liberalism."² What follows is primarily an exposition and critique of this article's argument.

Gray's essay has two purposes. First, he wishes to argue that "liberalism, as a political philosophy, is . . . dead" (284). What Gray calls "liberalism as a political philosophy," he also calls "doctrinal" liberalism, "fundamentalist" liberalism, and "foundationalist" liberalism. This phenomenon is characterized by the ideas of universalism, individualism, egalitarianism, and meliorism. Doctrinal liberalism is the view that individual rights and human equality are universally valid moral principles, which serve as the standard for legitimating all political regimes, regardless of time, place, or cultural differences. Doctrinal liberalism, in short, is the view that liberalism is a rationally defensible way of life for all human beings and the yardstick for historical progress.

Gray's second purpose is to argue that what is living in liberalism is modern "civil society," a form of life characterized by individualism, egalitarianism, pluralism, tolerance, meliorism, and even a form of universalism. Now, at first glance, it seems that Gray has simply taken "liberal ideology" and renamed it "civil society," but kept all of its central features intact. The difference, however, is that doctrinal liberalism has universalistic aspirations, whereas Gray's concept of "civil society" is self-consciously historicist. Civil society is not a set of universally valid principles, but rather a set of concrete institutions and practices that evolved in the West and now embrace the globe. Gray's concern, then, is to defend the concrete institutions and practices of liberal civil society while deflating the universalistic aspirations of liberal ideology.

Gray claims that doctrinal liberalism is dead because it cannot survive the test of Isaiah Berlin's radical value-pluralism. Berlin's value-pluralism plays a dual role in Gray's argument. The first role is deconstructive. Value-pluralism is used to destroy doctrinal liberalism. The second role is constructive. It is used to offer a positive argument for historicized liberalism. For Gray, the way up and the way down are the same. I shall deal with each in turn.

Gray begins his critique of liberalism with an analogy which is offered to illustrate value-incommensurability.

Consider the drama of Sophocles and of Shakespeare . . . In what sense are the plays of Shakespeare, say, better or worse than those of Sophocles or Racine? It is true that these art object belong to the same recognizable genre - that of drama; yet it seems thoroughly absurd to try to rank them on any single scale of excellence (289).

The theme of incommensurability among artistic goods affirms...that there is no one form of great art that is best, since there is no overarching standard whereby such a judgment could be made. (*Ibid*)

Gray claims that this incommensurability is grounded in the fact that "the arts are not in the business of representation and of measuring, with ever greater accuracy, a wholly independent subject matter." The arts are, instead, "historic creations of a highly inventive species, embedded in and emerging from specific forms of social life..." Gray then draws his conclusion: "The analogy in ethics and politics should be plain" (290). That is: ethical and political values, like aesthetic values, are "not in the business of representation and of measuring, with ever greater accuracy, a wholly independent subject matter." Ethical and political values, therefore, are not commensurable, just as the plays of Shakespeare and Sophocles are not commensurable. Just as there is no single standard to which we can refer to rank Shakespeare over Sophocles, there is no single standard - eg. a "Platonic" Form of the Good or the Aristotelian "man's life *qua* man" - to which we can refer to rank ethical and political values.

Furthermore, the plurality of values is not just incommensurable, it is irreducible. Although Gray does grant that man's generic features limit the range of possible moral and political values, within these bounds there is no single touchstone for determining whether an ethical or political value is genuine or not, just as there is no single touchstone to which we can refer to determine whether or not a particular work is true art or not.

Now, this analogical argument for value-pluralism and incommensurability simply does not follow. Even if one grants that art is not in the business of representing reality and, therefore, cannot be measured by this criterion, "the analogy in ethics and politics" is not as "plain" as Gray thinks it is. Gray, for instance, simply begs the question against those Aristotelian naturalists who think that there is an immutable human nature which serves as the standard of the good, in virtue of which we can rank different values, virtues, and forms of life, ruling some of them out altogether. On this theory, ethical and political theory *is* in the business of representing reality - the reality of the human good. It should, furthermore, be noted that there is no necessary contradiction between "representing" reality and being "historic creations of a highly inventive species, embedded in and emerging from specific forms of social life..." For instance, such eminent philosophers as Heidegger, Gadamer, and MacIntyre stress the historical embeddedness and tradition-ladenness of knowledge, but they do not regard historicity as primarily an *impediment* to knowing reality, but, primarily, as a *means* of knowing it.

Liberal meliorism - the Whiggish view of history that ranks societies as they approach the liberal order - is the first casualty of value-pluralism (299). If Gray is right, then it makes no more sense to claim that the transformation from monarchy to democratic liberalism represents progress than it would to claim that there has been progress from Sophocles to Shakespeare.

Gray then turns his attention to liberal universalism and egalitarianism (299-306). If the irreducible and incommensurable plurality of values and ways of life includes forms of life which require hierarchy and domination, then liberal egalitarianism cannot claim universal validity. Liberal egalitarianism is at best a local, Western phenomenon, not a universal value.

Liberal individualism is the view that only individuals and their actions have intrinsic value; all other values are derivative of individual values. Gray argues, however, that the plurality of values includes forms of life that are anti-individualist. Given this, individualism is not a universal value. Rather, individualism is but a local, Western phenomenon; individualism is, in short, the product of a particular - and individualist - form of life. But if individualism is itself a form of life, then the value of the individual is not intrinsic after all. Rather, it is conferred by the individualist form of life. What is of ultimate value, then, are forms of life - even when, paradoxically, these are individualistic.

Having used Berlin's value-pluralism to tear down doctrinal liberalism, Gray uses it to build up a self-consciously historicist liberalism. The core of this historicized liberalism is the idea of "civil society," a concept derived in part from Hegel's notion of civil society and in part from Oakeshott's notion of civil association. Gray holds that civil societies are "tolerant of the diversity of views, religious and political." In them, "the state does not seek to impose on all any comprehensive doctrine," thereby allowing "diverse, incompatible and perhaps incommensurable conceptions of the world and the good [to] coexist in peaceful *modus vivendi*" (314). Gray adds that "a second feature of civil society is that . . . both government and its subjects are restrained in their conduct by a *rule of law*" (315). A third characteristic of civil society is "the institution of private or several property" (315). Gray offers an Hobbesian argument for private property, claiming that, "given pervasive value-pluralism" a society "is most likely to enjoy civil peace" if it allows more individual than collective decision-making through the institution of private property (315). Gray correctly observes that civil society, though potentially global in extent, is compatible with many different forms of government. He also observes correctly that civil society cannot be identified simply with the capitalist marketplace. Civil society in the Hegelian sense, at least, (and possibly in Gray's sense) embraces labor unions, cooperatives, civic organizations, hospitals, libraries, foundations, churches, think-tanks, charities, and all other voluntary, spontaneously-ordered, non-governmental institutions.

Gray then turns to re-situating the four essential features of liberalism within civil society. Modern civil society is individualist - not because individualism is a universally valid form of life, but because it is a valid aspect of "our" form of life. Modern civil society is egalitarian insofar as it presupposes the rule of law, which presupposes equality before the law. Modern civil society is meliorist - not because it is the universal standard for all other forms of life, but because its own self-understanding serves as the standard by

reference to which it seeks constantly to improve itself through immanent criticism and reform. Modern civil society is universalist because civil society itself is universalist; civil association, unlike national sovereignty, is not confined by lines drawn upon the map; the free association of individuals and the free exchange of goods and ideas is spontaneously self-globalizing - unless suppressed or distorted by political intervention.

For Gray, modern civil society is also *libertarian*. Liberty is "the animating value of civil society, not in virtue of its foundational place in any liberal doctrine, but as a characterization of a form of life that can be realized fully only in a society constituted by autonomous institutions and activities" (322). The liberty in question is *negative liberty*: "a condition, status or sphere of action protected from interference or coercion" (322). Negative liberty is important because *autonomy* is important. In a section entitled "From Radical Value-Pluralism to Liberalism via Autonomy," Gray restates Berlin's case for liberalism, supplementing it with Joseph Raz's Berlin-influenced writings on autonomy. In Gray's words, Berlin's argument is that

if there is an irreducible plurality of objective values that are sometimes incommensurable, then liberty may reasonably be privileged among these values, since when they possess liberty men and women may freely choose between uncombinable ends and make their own combinations of those conflicting values among which a balance may be struck. (323)

But why, one might ask, is it a value to freely choose one's own combination of values? Gray's answer is two-pronged. First, he replies, in effect, Why not? - "since there is no one rational ordering or combination of incommensurables, no one could ever provide any *reason* for a particular ranking or combination of incommensurables" (323). Gray's second reply, derived from Raz, is that autonomous choice is a value because autonomy itself is valuable. Why? Well, because "autonomy is accepted by most of us a vital ingredient in the good life" (324). For Gray, autonomy is valuable simply because "we" value it - simply because "we" *think* that it is valuable. (Note how Gray's language becomes cozy and familiar here. Apparently innocent of any conscious effrontery or presumption, he speaks of what "we" value; he speaks of - and on behalf of - "our" form of life.)

I discern three main problems with Gray's value-pluralism: (1) it is hard to know what, precisely, Gray means by value-pluralism and incommensurability; (2) the most plausible construal of Gray's position makes his opponent look like a straw man; and (3) his arguments for liberty and autonomy are non-sequiturs.

1. The Problem of Meaning. Gray does not merely claim that there is a plurality of different values. He claims that these values are *uncombinable* and (sometimes) *incommensurable*. The two concepts are distinct but overlapping. Combinable values can be realized together. One can, for instance, be both a husband and a Rotarian. But one cannot be both a husband and a Catholic priest. Commensurable values can be ranked on the same scale, in relation to the same standard. Incommensurable values cannot. Some values can be combined and commensurated. Some values can be commensurated but not combined. Some can be combined but not commensurated. Some can neither be commensurated nor

combined. The problem though, is just what is incommensurable here? Just what is uncombinable?

Gray speaks of values. He speaks of virtues. Sometimes he speaks of virtues as generic traits of character (e.g. charity), but other times he speaks of the virtues of certain social roles (the virtues of a mother or a nun). Gray also speaks of "ways" or "forms" of life. Sometimes he refers to different cultures, while other times he refers to particular ways of life within cultures or ways of life which cut across cultures. Elsewhere, Gray speaks of conflicts within values, e.g. between positive versus negative liberty and equality of rights versus equality of condition. Gray makes the intriguingly dark, Nietzschean claim that "In this pluralist view, not only are all genuine goods not necessarily harmonious, but goods may depend for their existence upon evils, virtues on vices" (291). Finally, Gray speaks of incommensurabilities and uncombinabilities between entire conceptions of the good - a category which overlaps with the others in ways that are unclear. How *all* of these fit together is unclear.

2. The Straw Man Problem. Gray's account of value-pluralism is not only muddled. When one tries to unscramble it and produce concrete examples, it also looks banal, trivial, even risible. For instance, Gray announces with great gravity that the excellences of a whore and a nun cannot be combined. This is true. But so what? Who would deny it? What traditional ethical theory depends on denying this obvious truth? What liberal theory depends on its denial? I can think of none. No serious moral theorist and no serious political thinker would argue that we can be all things at all times, so it seems that the opponent that Gray and Berlin contrast themselves with is a straw man.

Given the unclarity and banality of Gray's account, it is hard to credit the revolutionary, even apocalyptic implications that he ascribes to value-pluralism. Gray claims, for instance, that "In Berlin's theorizing, the pretensions of philosophy are radically humbled" (288). Pluralism destroys philosophical foundationalism, i.e. it "radically restricts the ambitions of 'philosophy' by denying to it any prescriptive authority," leaving it to the task of "clear[ing] away the illusions that obstruct a clear vision of practice" (321). Value-pluralism, moreover, "in its deepest implication . . . destroys the very idea of perfection" (291). Pluralism "strikes a death-blow at the classical foundation of our culture, expressed not only in Plato and Aristotle, but in the Stoic idea of the *logos* and Aquinas's conception of a world order that was rational and moral in its essence . . ." (291). Pluralism, finally, "undermines a no less foundational element in our civilization . . . the notion of the *meaningfulness of human history*, conceived in terms of redemption or of improvement" (292). All this from the observation that one cannot be a nun and a whore at the same time? An instance of the Law of Excluded Middle hardly qualifies as a death-blow to the intelligible structure of the universe.

3. The Non-Sequitur Problem. The most serious problem with Gray's arguments for liberty and autonomy is that their conclusions simply do not follow from value-pluralism.

First, the fact that many people have different values implies nothing about the nature of values. Yes, people hold a plurality of values. Yes, these values can be uncombinable and incommensurable. But so what? This fact does not phase the value realist. All the

Platonist or Aristotelian need say is that many of the values that people hold are *wrong*. Some people value things that are not *worthy* of being valued. These values can, moreover, be rationally shown to be wrong. And their adherents can be rationally persuaded to adopt better, truer values.

Reason can, in short, be used to reduce the plurality of values in the direction of unity. That's what reason does. Reason takes a plurality of competing accounts of a single reality and weeds out the false ones. Reason ranks competing accounts of reality in terms of their coherence, their plausibility, and their conformity with experience. Gray, however, simply *assumes* that the plurality of values is "irreducible." This implies, *a fortiori*, that it is irreducible by rational criticism and discussion. It implies that there is nothing that we can say about any particular value to recommend that it be adopted to the exclusion of other, incompatible values - nothing, save our arbitrary *choice* to value it, take it or leave it. Values, in short, are personal, idiosyncratic, not publicly-justifiable.

Let us label this theory of value for handy future reference. Since Gray holds that things become valuable by being valued, and since valuing something is an act of the subject, Gray holds that value is bestowed upon things by an act of the subject. Let us call this a "subjectivist" theory of value. A closely related, though less precise term is "relativism."

Given this starting point, Gray constructs an elaborate version of what I call, following Donald N. McCloskey, the "Valley Girl" argument for liberalism. There is a plurality of different values. All values are subjective. The conclusion is that it is wrong to take one's values and "ram them down someone else's throat." Rather, one should tolerate, respect, even cultivate the plurality of subjective values. *Ergo*, liberalism.

This argument for liberalism is a non-sequitur. The premises are (1) there is a multiplicity of values, and (2) they are publicly non-justifiable. But, from these premises, it does not and cannot follow that liberal values - e.g. tolerance, persuasion, and freedom of choice - can be publicly justified. No values can be publicly justified - given the premise that no values can be publicly justified.

To underscore the non-sequitur involved, let's look at another version of the same argument:

If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of objective, immortal truth . . . then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity . . . From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.³

Here we have Benito Mussolini arguing for fascism from the plurality of subjective values. But, of course, his argument is just as much a non-sequitur as the liberal argument, for one cannot argue that fascist values - e.g. intolerance, violence, suppression of freedom

of choice, ramming one's values down another person's throat - are publicly justified by the absence of publicly justifiable values either.⁴

To this kind of objection, Gray might reply that there is no reason not to allow people to choose their own values, "since there is no one rational ordering or combination of incommensurables, no one could ever provide any *reason* for a particular ranking or combination of incommensurables" (323). The trouble with this reply, though, is it does not follow either. Mussolini could simply retort that, in the absence of a reason for any particular ordering of values, there is no reason *not* to force a particular ordering on people.

Gray might also reply, following Raz, that the autonomous choice of values is a value because autonomy itself is valuable. And autonomy is valuable, because "autonomy is accepted by most of us a vital ingredient in the good life" (324). But, again, this amounts to saying that autonomy is valuable simply because "we" value it - simply because "we" *think* that it is valuable. But this, too, is a blatant non-sequitur. The fact that we value something tells us nothing about whether it is *worthy* of being valued.

Gray's argument for liberalism from value-pluralism is, in sum, a species of the argument from value subjectivism or relativism. It is, therefore, a non-sequitur.

4. The Problem of Objective Values. Now, Gray's response to this critique is that it ignores the *objectivity* of his and Berlin's value-pluralism. Like Berlin, Gray recognizes that his position looks like relativism,⁵ but he denies it strenuously because the values in question are not subjective, but objective.⁶ In his essay "Berlin's Agonistic Liberalism," Gray responds acidly to Leo Strauss's accusation that Berlin is a relativist:⁷

The distinctiveness and radicalism of Berlin's species of objective pluralism are easily missed. Its distinctiveness was missed by Leo Strauss, when, with characteristic obtuseness and perversity, he condemned Berlin as a relativist for whom all values were culture-specific and, in the end, subjective. Throughout his writings, Berlin has constantly stressed that, though their embodiments in specific forms of life will vary across cultures, ultimate values are objective and universal - as are the conflicts among them. Berlin's variety of pluralism is a species of value-realism, not of skepticism or relativism. (*Post-Liberalism*, 65-66).⁸

On both Berlin's and Gray's accounts, the objection of relativism simply misses the point. I disagree. The claim that Berlin and Gray are relativists is neither perverse nor obtuse - nor false - because Berlin's conception of objective value is so weak that it cannot be distinguished from subjectivism; therefore, it *does* reduce to a form of the subjective value argument and is, therefore, a non-sequitur. I have made the case against Berlin's account of objective value at length elsewhere, therefore I shall offer only a compressed critique here.⁹

In his essay "The Pursuit of the Ideal,"¹⁰ Berlin offers three slightly different accounts of what constitutes an objective value. First, Berlin claims that objective values are those that can be understood by more than one person, whereas subjective values cannot: "Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand . . . the values,

the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space . . ."11 Second, Berlin claims that the multiplicity of conflicting values is constrained by human nature, which is objective: "Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them."12 Finally, Berlin claims that objective values are ends in themselves: "There is a world of objective values. By this I mean those ends that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means."13

But this conception of objective value is not sufficient to deflect the charge of relativism. Berlin's first claim - that objective values can be publicly understood but subjective values cannot - seems to miss the point of the objection against him. Above I claimed that Berlin and Gray are value relativists and subjectivists because they hold that the multiplicity of conflicting values is *in principle irreducible*. To claim that the multiplicity of values is irreducible *in principle* implies, *a fortiori*, that it is not reducible through rational investigation and argumentation. It means that there is nothing about any particular value that can recommend its adoption to the exclusion of another, incompatible value. This amounts to saying that all values are equally groundless. The issue, then, is not whether values can be publicly *understood*, but whether they can be publicly *justified*. Berlin is a relativist not because he claims that values are not publicly intelligible - which he does not - but because he claims that they are not publicly *justifiable*.

Berlin's first account of objective value is, then, extremely thin. It completely leaves out the *normative* aspect of the claim that a value is objective. In ordinary usage, however, there is a more robust sense of objectivity at work in the claim that a value is objective. An objective value is not one that merely offers itself for public inspection and understanding; it claims rational credence as well. On Berlin's account, however, an objective value is indistinguishable from an arbitrary preference that can be publicly inspected and understood - take it or leave it.

Berlin's second account - that the variability of conflicting values is constrained by human nature, which is objective - fails as well. Just because the variability of values is constrained by something objective does not mean that the values themselves are objective in the robust, normative sense discussed above. *Everything* that human beings do is somehow conditioned and constrained by human nature, including the varieties of torture, murder, sado-masochism, and drug addiction. But that does not mean that everything that we do has something to recommend it to rational credence.

Berlin's final account - that objective values are ends in themselves - also fails. Simply because something is pursued as an end in itself does not mean that it is objectively valuable. Cocaine addiction can be the organizing principle of a life, the end in itself towards which all other values are subordinated as means. But this hardly implies that it is an objective value in the robust sense.

In sum: Berlin's claim that the starting point of his case for liberalism is the plurality of objective, not subjective, values founders on the thinness of his conceptions of objective value. On Berlin's account, an objective value is indistinguishable from an arbitrary preference that can (1) be publicly inspected and understood, (2) be held by a human being,

and (3) serve as the central organizing principle of a life. This, however, is value subjectivism and relativism. Gray's claim that he is an objective pluralist fails, therefore, his argument from value-pluralism to liberalism founders on the non-sequitur of value-relativism.

Notes

1. The author thanks Donald W. Livingston, Tibor Machan, and Glenn A. Magee for their help with this essay. The usual disclaimer applies.
2. John Gray, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1993), henceforth cited in the text.
3. Benito Mussolini, *Diuturna*, 374-77. Quoted in Henry B. Veatch, *Rational Man* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 41.
4. In arguing that Mussolini's argument is a non-sequitur, I am presupposing that Mussolini's claim of "the *right* to create for [oneself one's] own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable" (emph. added) is the claim that there are *positive reasons* for this course of action. If, however, one understands a "right" to do X in a more Hobbesian sense, i.e. as something that one has in the absence of compelling moral reasons not to do X, then Mussolini's argument is not a non-sequitur, for value-relativism amounts to the assertion that there are no compelling moral reasons to do - or to refrain from doing - anything; therefore, we have the "right" to do everything.
5. Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in his *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Knopf, 1991).
6. *Ibid.* For a discussion of relativism and pluralism more detailed than in "The Pursuit of the Ideal," see "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.
7. Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
8. Gray's essay was originally published under the title "The Unavoidable Conflict: Isaiah Berlin's Agonistic Liberalism," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 5, 1991, 3.
9. Gregory R. Johnson and Glenn A. Magee, "Berlin on Liberalism and Objective Value," under review.
10. "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10-11. Cf. "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought," 80-84.
11. "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.
12. *Ibid.*