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Value Pluralism and Public Ethics: Introduction

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'Πόλλ' οἶδ' ἀλώπηξ, ἀλλ' ἐχῖνος ἓν μέγα' - 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'.

Archilochus quoted in Berlin, *The Hedgehog and The Fox*, 22

The fragment from the Greek poet Archilochus, quoted in Isaiah Berlin's essay *The Hedgehog and The Fox* serves as a metaphor for the long-standing contrast and rivalry between two radically different approaches to public ethics, each of which is couched in a radically different vision of the structure of moral value. On the one hand, the way of the hedgehog corresponds to the persistent creed of value monism, reflecting a faith in the ultimate unity of the moral universe, and belief in the singularity, tidiness and completeness of moral and political purposes. On the other hand, the way of the fox corresponds to the nemesis of monism, the philosophical tradition of value pluralism, to which this collection of essays is devoted. This dissenting countermovement, which emerges most clearly in the writings of Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams and John Gray, is fuelled by an appreciation of the perpetuity of plurality and conflict and, correspondingly, by the conviction that visions of moral unity and harmony are incoherent and implausible. In the view of the value pluralists 'there is no completeness and no perfection to be found in morality' (Hampshire, 1989: 172).

For all of the scholarly attention that the philosophy of value pluralism has attracted, its positive contribution to the problems of public ethics remains obscure. Its proponents have spent more time rejecting monist approaches, seeking to emancipate us from the crookedness of our thinking and 'the distorting spectacles of theory' (Hausheer, 1979: xx), than they have spent clarifying what a more positive, distinctively pluralist approach to public ethics might look like. This special issue seeks to address this shortcoming and to help us thereby to move beyond the temptation of perceiving pluralism as a purely negative and destructive doctrine, and of characterising it instead as casting new and constructive light on the problems of contemporary public ethics. In this introduction, we shall outline the contribution of the essays included in the collection. We begin by elaborating the pluralist charge against monist approaches to public ethics.

In *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin poses a disquieting question which captures the spirit of the pluralist charge: 'Can it be', he asks, 'that Socrates and the creators of the central Western tradition in ethics and politics who followed him have been mistaken, for more than two millennia?' (1969: 22). The trouble with a large portion of Western Political Thought since Plato, pluralists contend, is that it displaces the moral messiness and fragmentation of morality and politics. For, it is fuelled by the conviction that:

> there exist true, immutable, universal, timeless objective values, valid for all men, everywhere at all times; that these values are at least in principle realisable, whether or not human beings are, or have been, or will ever be, capable of realising them on Earth; that these values form a coherent system, a harmony which, conceived in social terms, constitutes the perfect society' (Berlin, 2013: 152).

This hedgehog-style way of thinking about public ethics entails a quest to conceive and produce the Diogenic individual – 'the perfect specimen of humanity, without defect or blemish, lacking nothing that contributes to the ideal whole person and the ideal whole life' (Hampshire, 1989b: 135) – and/or the ideal society – 'a society which lives in pure harmony', in which its members, despite their *apparent* differences, agree on certain neat, substantive values, and principles, and 'live in peace' (Berlin 1990b:20), without resorting to or, indeed, experiencing 'violence', 'vice' or the frustration of their aspirations (Berlin, 2013: 151). At the core of that quest lies an *a priori* faith in the conceptual possibility, and normality of harmony: the seductive assumption of value-monism – 'the notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution in which all good things coexist' (Berlin, 1990a: 13); the postulation that 'all truly good things … cannot be incompatible' (Berlin 1969: x); or, the presupposition of 'a common basis' behind and 'an ultimate harmony among moral claims' (Hampshire, 1983: 118). There must, according to this assumption, exist an underlying harmony amongst human values, ideals, virtues, and principles and across all seemingly different spheres of value or ways of life. Conflicts among them are, if not mere chimeras, pathologies in political thought that can and should be overcome – mathematical puzzles begging for a perfect, rational solution. 'Perfect beings', Berlin remarks, would not know conflict: 'there can be no incongruity, and therefore neither comedy nor tragedy in a world of saints and angels' (1990c: 185).

Though deeply hopeful, monist visions, pluralists object, 'have a fairy-tale quality because the realities of politics, both contemporary and past politics, are absent from them' (Hampshire, 1989: 12; see also Williams, 2002; Shklar, 1964; 1967; 1990). For, a breezy reading of history and a quick survey of our current condition is bound to reveal that 'conflict is perpetual' (Hampshire, 2000: 51). Visions of perfection under the aegis of harmony thus present us with 'a world' which is 'beyond our ken' and with which we are not acquainted (Berlin, 1990a: 13). To proceed by embracing a vision of that sort, is to bend reality and begin from a point external to our experience and to the world we inhabit. Yet, it is 'on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act' (Berlin, 1990a: 13). 'We must', Berlin emphasizes, 'fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge'. And 'these certainly give us no warrant for supposing', even in theory, that 'a harmony of true values is somewhere to be found' (1969: 168 – 169). 'When uncorrupted by [monist] theory', Hampshire similarly emphasises, we identify 'a multiplicity of [conflicting] moral claims' (1978: 42). Our world scatters numerous differences and conflicts before us: a 'plurality of values which can conflict with one another, and which are not reducible to one another' (Williams 1981: 71); 'conflict between different admirable ways of life … between different defensible moral ideals, conflict of obligations, conflict between essential, but incompatible interests' (Hampshire 1983: 1); irresolvable clashes between 'values', 'systems of value', or 'entire worlds' (Berlin, 1980: 58–59; 63; 74).

The pluralist charge is prescient as it suggests that most Political Thought, by virtue of its monistic flavours, effaces the fragmentation and complexity of politics and of morality in at least two distinctive ways. First, monism effaces conflict, disagreement and difference at *the level of the polis*. The quest for perfection under the aegis of rational harmony and consensus on a substantive, yet abstract and external conception of the good and/or justice fails to grapple with the recognition that, even under the most ideal of circumstances, 'different men and different social groups' are bound to 'recognize rather different moral necessities in the same essential areas of moral concern' (Hampshire, 1983: 94; Berlin 1990, Williams 2002, Shklar, 1990). The monist will thus only succeed in generalising their own prejudices, or substantive moral and ideological sympathies and repackaging them as the dictates of reason. Rather, than seeking to articulate abstract conceptions of the *summum bonum*, or substantive accounts of justice – accounts which distort the radical peculiarity of the fabric of public life and of the idiosyncrasies of our lives –, pluralists direct our attention to the *summum malum* – the more minimal idea that politics should prevent concrete, and perennial evils and injustices

(Hampshire 2000; Shklar 1984, 1989, 1990; Berlin 1990a; Williams, 2002) – , to questions of legitimacy and stability, and as well as to the 'particularity of the particular case' (Hampshire 1983: 8) – the role of conventions, traditions, historical explanations and memory which entail an irreducible plurality of different and conflicting ideals, principles, and aspirations, and of different and conflicting conceptions of those ideals, principles, and aspirations. Secondly, monism effaces conflict at *the level of the individual*: it fails to grapple with insoluble conflicts and unenviable, often tragic, choices which political, or indeed human life, entails – conflicts and choices which entail the possibility of inescapable moral wrongdoing and the prospect of dirty hands: the committing, authorisation or toleration of something which is morally obnoxious, if not contemptible (Williams, 1978: 62; see also Walzer, 1973; Hampshire, 1990; Berlin, 1980; Shklar, 1990; Mendus, 2001; Tillyris, 2015; 2016; 2017)

The pluralist critique of monism and the endeavour to clarify what a public ethic sensitive to pluralism might entail, serve as the starting point for the collection of essays included here. In *Richly Imaginative Barbarianism: Stuart Hampshire and the Normality of Conflict*, Derek Edyvane suggests that that the implications of pluralism for public ethics are more complex than assumed. In doing so, he draws on Hampshire's rather neglected thought and draws a novel distinction between two distinct, often elided, models of value pluralism, each of which grants a different status to conflict. The first model – which Edyvane terms standard, by virtue of its association with the thought of Berlin and Williams – sees conflict in the polis as a by-product of pluralism, whereas the second – found in Hampshire's thought – perceives pluralism to be the consequence of conflict. Failure to appreciate this distinction, Edyvane contends, sows confusion and incoherence with regards to what a pluralist public ethic might entail. Such a claim is illustrated via an exploration of the ideal of toleration. Hampshire's model, Edyvane contends, offers the foundations for a novel way of thinking about accommodating diversity – the practice 'civility within conflict'.

In *The Avoidance Approach to Plural Value*, Luke Brunning sets off from the recognition that if the pluralist insight on the ever-present possibility of interpersonal conflict holds true, then we seem to find ourselves trapped in a tragic world – a recognition which might prompt resignation or pessimism. One recent approach to pluralism which might constitute a response to such pessimism is, what Brunning terms, the avoidance approach, which postulates that whilst values might conflict, one might pre-emptively ensure that situations in which such conflicts might occur are avoided or, at least, rendered less likely. Yet, Brunning contends, that

approach is unsatisfactory: it is rife with epistemic problems; it is fuelled by a misplaced sense of optimism which dislodges the unpredictability of life or the possibility of unforeseen tensions; and, more importantly, it is liable to generate the vice of timidity: the single-minded pursuit of a coherent, well-structured, and uncomplicated life-plan which is impoverished and not without costs. Rather than pessimistically resigning from the world when faced with the prospect of tragic conflict, Brunning contends, we should acknowledge the value of a diversified life, with the vulnerabilities which that life and the structure of moral value entail.

In *In Defence of Democratic Dirty Hands*, Christina Nick focuses on the problem of dirty hands in the context of democratic politics, and seeks to vindicate such a disquieting phenomenon by challenging a set of criticisms articulated by David Shugarman (2000) and Maureen Ramsay (2000a; 2000b). Such rejections of the idea of democratic dirty hands, Nick contends, rest on a misunderstanding of the problem of dirty hands and of the nature of democratic politics. Specifically, Nick argues that: i) the employment of dirty means in the pursuit of democratic ends need not be contradictory but, rather, in some cases, the only way via which cherished democratic principles can be realised; ii) the possibility or necessity of dirty hands need not corrode democratic politics; for, even in an ideal democratic polity, political representatives might be compelled to employ, sanction, or stomach certain actions which are morally unpalatable for the sake of the democratic polity which they serve.

The problem of dirty hands, specifically the question of what the inner life of the dirty-handed politician should be, is the focus of Demetris Tillyris's paper, *Dirty Hands and Suffering*. Most dirty hands theorists, Tillyris suggests, contend that the dirty-handed politician should be tormented by guilt which, as assumed, constitutes a feature of our moral experience and of responsible politicians. Yet, the connection between dirty hands and suffering, renders the problem and the aspiration of being ruled by virtuous politicians unsustainable. If dirty hands is a pervasive aspect of politics, the politician's awareness of the moral costs of her transgressions might collapse into acquiesce or incapacity to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary immoralities. Alternatively, awareness that dirty hands and suffering are inescapable features of politics might provoke political withdrawal. By drawing on what he terms the tradition of deep pluralism – the thought of Berlin, Hampshire, and Mendus –, Tillyris resolves this apparent instability by challenging the alleged affinity between dirty hands, suffering, and political responsibility. It is not implausible, he contends, for an individual to acquiesce to, and even be vitalised by, the conflicts and dirty-handed acts which politics entails and lead a virtuous political life.

Cristina Roadevin's article, *To Punish or to Forgive? Responding to Dirty Hands in Politics*, also explores the problem of dirty hands in democratic politics but from a different angle. Exclusively focusing on the state of mind of the dirty-handed politician, she notes, is a mistake; for, we should also pay more attention to the implications of dirty-handed actions and decisions for the democratic populace. *Contra* Walzer's claim that the demos should 'honor' the dirty-handed politician 'for the good he has done, and … punish him for the bad he has done' (1973: 179), Roadevin argues that neither punishing nor honouring agents with dirt on their hands are satisfactory responses. Rather, we should entertain the idea of no-fault moral responsibility which holds the dirty-handed politicians accountable, without attributing blameworthiness for their necessary immoralities. Such an idea yields the attitude of no-fault forgiveness which, Roadevin suggests captures the complexity of dirty hands: it conveys the public's moral distaste of the immorality committed but, at the same time, entails the recognition that dirty-handed agents have done something good, even admirable.

Finally, In *Internal Reasons and the Problem of Climate Change*, David Hall takes his cue from Mike Hulme's pluralist account in *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* – the recognition that the notion of climate change invites disagreement and a divergence of attitudes, beliefs and visions – and offers a novel way of approaching this pervasive problem from a pluralist lens. In particular, Hall develops a 'philosophical psychology' approach to this issue – an internalist conception of public practical reasoning – which rests on Bernard Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons – the suggestion that the only genuine reasons for individuals to act, or to formulate an intention to act, are those which relate to their existing motivations.

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