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## Value Pluralism and Public Ethics: Introduction

*Derek Edyvane and Demetris Tillyris*

‘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 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 1989a: 177).

For all 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 that 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 great error that has infected and distorted Western political thought since Plato resides in 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 of thought about public ethics entails a quest to conceive and realise in moral practice 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). It also entails a particular understanding of the ideal society as a site of moral harmony. In the perfect society of the monists, there is consensus on fundamental values and moral principles, and its members live peacefully without violence, vice or the frustration of their aspirations (Berlin 2013: 151). At the core of these suppositions 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 1990: 13). There must, according to this assumption, exist an underlying harmony among human values, ideals, virtues and principles as well as across all seemingly different spheres of value or ways of life. Conflicts between ways of life and the values they embody are, if not mere chimeras, pathologies of political thought that can and should be overcome – mathematical puzzles begging for a perfect, rational solution.

From the pluralist perspective, these optimistic monist visions have about them a ‘fairy-tale quality’ due to their apparent aversion to the realities of politics, both past and present (Hampshire 1989a: 12). Neither history nor contemporary experience provide any evidence of the unity that animates the monist perspective. On the contrary, the facts on the ground suggest that ‘conflict is perpetual’ (Hampshire 2000: 51). To proceed beholden to an image of unity and harmony is thus to bend reality and to begin from a point external to our experience and to the world we seemingly inhabit. Yet, it is ‘on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act’ (Berlin 1990: 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' (Berlin 1969: 168–169). Our world scatters deep differences and conflicts before us: 'conflict between different admirable ways of life ... between different defensible moral ideals, conflict of obligations, conflict between essential, but incompatible interests' (Hampshire 1983: 1). And so it is from this predicament, amid persistent moral conflict, that our reflections on public ethics must begin.

On this view, monism effaces the fragmentation and complexity of politics and of morality in at least two ways. First, it effaces conflict, disagreement and difference at *the level of the polity*. The quest for perfection, harmony and consensus on a substantive conception of the good 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). The danger of thinking otherwise is that the monist will succeed only in generalising their own prejudices, repackaging them as the dictates of 'reason'. Rather than seeking to articulate abstract conceptions of the common good or justice – accounts that distort the radical peculiarity of public life and the idiosyncrasies of our lives – pluralists urge us to attend to the negative and particular case (Hampshire 2000: x). Instead of chasing abstractly identified ideal visions of the good society, we must direct our attention to the evidence of history and memory and to preventing the perennial evils and injustices it discloses (Berlin 1990; Hampshire 2000; Williams 2002). Secondly, monism effaces conflict at *the level of the individual*: it fails to grapple with the insoluble and often tragic choices that political or, indeed, human life, entails – conflicts and choices that entail the possibility of inescapable moral wrongdoing and the prospect of dirty hands: the commission, authorisation or toleration of actions

that are morally distasteful, if not utterly contemptible (Williams 1978: 62; see also Berlin 1980; Hampshire 1989a; Mendus 2009; Tillyris 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019; Walzer 1973). This collection of articles explores how our understanding of public ethics would change if, instead of denying conflict or treating it as a transient inconvenience, we faced it directly and acknowledged the profound and enduring role it plays in human life and affairs.

Specifically, the first two articles take their cue from the pluralist emphasis on the perpetuity of difference, disagreement and conflict *at the level of the polity*. In his contribution, Derek Edyvane suggests 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 discrete, 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 known as 'civility within conflict'.

David Hall sets off 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 problem – an internalist conception of public practical reasoning – that 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 that relate to their existing motivations.

The remaining four papers start from the perpetual possibility of irresolvable and tragic conflict *at the level of individual* and seek to elaborate its implications for problems of individual morality and political ethics. In his article, Luke Brunning concedes that if the pluralist insights on interpersonal conflict hold true, then we seem to find ourselves trapped in a tragic world – a recognition that might well prompt resignation or pessimism. One recent approach to pluralism that 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 that 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 that 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.

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 that are morally unpalatable for the sake of the democratic polity they serve.

The problem of dirty hands – specifically, the question of what the inner life of the dirty-handed politician should be – is also the focus of Demetris Tillyris’s article. Most dirty hands theorists, Tillyris suggests, contend that the dirty-handed politician should be tormented by guilt that, 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 among 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 that politics entails and to also lead a virtuous political life.

Cristina Roadevin's contribution 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 that holds the dirty-handed politicians accountable without attributing blameworthiness for their necessary immoralities. Such an idea yields the attitude of no-fault forgiveness that, 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.

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