Politics and the Limits of Pluralism

Introduction

In modern political philosophy, ethical claims are frequently regarded as being important for the design of political institutions and procedures. This is especially true of contemporary liberalism, whose exponents have often sought to derive institutional and procedural conclusions – or, as I shall refer to them, conclusions about political design – from claims of this nature. Such is the case, for example, with Rawls's insistence on the ‘priority’ of deontic concepts – specifically that of the right – over teleological ones. Many other contemporary liberal theorists have thought that political design should be constrained or shaped by ethical and meta-ethical considerations. This chapter focuses on one ethical claim, value-pluralism, which has played a prominent role in recent liberal theory.

Liberal moral and political philosophers, including Berlin, Walzer, Williams, Hampshire, Gray, Larmore, Raz and others, have held that value is plural, and that this has important consequences for political design. A representative recent view is that of John Gray:

Agonistic liberalism is an application in political philosophy of the moral theory of value-pluralism – the theory that there is an irreducible diversity of ultimate values ... and that when these values come into conflict or competition with one another there is no overarching standard or principle, no common currency or measure, whereby such conflicts can be arbitrated or resolved. This anti-
monistic, anti-reductionist position in ethical theory may appear innocuous ... but ... appearances are thoroughly deceptive.$^3$

The part played by pluralism$^4$ in recent political philosophy is noteworthy in more ways than one. Those, like Gray, who talk of the ‘fact’ of value-pluralism assume the truth of a position which in meta-ethical theory remains the object of keen disagreement – namely, that value is a thing of a sort, about which it is correct – not merely intelligible – to think that there are facts. Sometimes, claims of this kind are held alongside a Humean, or at any rate non-cognitivist, position on the nature of value in general. The assumption that pluralists have only to prove their case against monists ignores the vulnerability of both protagonists to anti-realist positions in the philosophy of value. But more salient for my purposes is the assumption that these ‘facts’ about the structure of value have important consequences for political design.

I shall argue that there is reason to doubt whether pluralism, if true, really has these consequences. First, I shall consider a number of possible formulations of the doctrine of value-pluralism, with the justifications which might be offered in its defence – in particular, interpretations of the claim that pluralism is true because some values are ‘incommensurable’ with others. Gray and a number of other liberal writers$^5$ dismiss monism as a false theory of value. My aim, however, is not to show that monism is true, or even that pluralism is false, but to indicate that the monist’s resources are greater than is often supposed. Though the arguments of pp. 81–92 are directed against certain well-known arguments for pluralism, the ulterior aim is not to promote monism in its stead, but to argue that since monism is consistent with (alleged) evaluative phenomena which are often thought to support pluralism, it is doubtful whether the issue between pluralism and monism is important to this project; or at least, if this issue is important, the case remains to be made. I then consider the consequences of pluralism for political design. The claim that there are diverse conceptions of the good in civil society should be distinguished from the claim, with which it has been conflated, that the diversity of the conceptions extends to the goods or values which they are conceptions of. The claim that there is this diversity is consistent with monism, as indeed is the claim that conceptions of the good have value as such. Moreover, commitment to democracy as the legitimate political decision-making procedure may involve metaphysical commitments, but there is little reason to think of these as ‘pluralist’: in important respects they favour monism. Liberals such as Rawls have been much concerned with the diversity of