Political Theory in an Age of Disenchantment: 
The Problem of Value Pluralism: Weber, Berlin, Rawls

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Abstract
Max Weber’s ideas of value pluralism and disenchantment haunt modern political thought often without explicit acknowledgement. The problem of value pluralism in the work of Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls is explored. Is there an uncritical, even if implicit, acceptance of the idea of a connection between ‘the fact of pluralism’ as Rawls calls it and the idea of disenchantment?

Keywords: Pluralism, disenchantment, Weber, Berlin, Rawls.

1. Value pluralism

Socrates: Haven’t we also said that the gods are divided, Euthyphro, and disagree with one another, and feel enmity towards one another?1

It has become almost commonplace to refer to the emergence of a ‘value-pluralist movement’ in contemporary moral and political theory.2 William Galston has conveniently listed what he takes to be the main elements in the value pluralist standpoint. These are that (1) value pluralism is not to be confused with relativism; (2) that there is no available measure for the ranking of value, that there is no common measure nor summum bonum that is the good for all individuals; (3) that, nevertheless, there are some goods that are basic in the sense that they must form part of any reasonable human life; (4) beyond this there is a wide range of legitimate diversity of goods, purposes, and cultures; (5) value pluralism is to be strongly contrasted with all forms of monism in the sense of theories that reduce values to either a common measure or attempt to create a comprehensive hierarchy. It can be argued, following this suggestion, that ‘the wide diversity and deep conflict among different conceptions of ends prevalent in modern societies and different patterns of

life and institutions that go with them’ is the distinctive problem which modern politics has to face.  

There are several aspects of this problem that need to be clarified. Pluralism is spoken of both as a fact and as a theory. When spoken of as a fact the idea of pluralism refers to the idea that the modern world is simply faced with a wide range of competing religious and secular ethical standpoints. However, this ‘fact’ is itself embedded in a theoretical interpretation according to which, for some reason or another, the modern world seems to experience this antagonism of values in an especially intense manner. The most influential metaphors that colour the whole modern conception of pluralism are those of ‘disenchantment’ and ‘polytheism’ offered by Max Weber.

The argument being advanced here is that much of modern Western political thought has been haunted by the ghost of Max Weber. This has not been generally acknowledged in any explicit sense and has often taken on a kind of subterranean existence. However, most attempts made by contemporary political theorists to respond to the Weberian challenge have not been convincing. This seems to suggest a troubling situation in modern political thought. It could be argued that, while accepting that pluralism is a genuine problem, as long as we are held captive by Weber’s metaphors of ‘disenchantment’, ‘steel (iron) cage’, and ‘war of the gods’ then we are destined to remain in a theoretical impasse.

Following a suggestion made by Raymond Geuss, it can be argued that there is, in reality, a tension at work in contemporary political thought between two competing conceptions of pluralism. Both versions of pluralism accept the general thesis of the existence of plural and conflicting values. According to one view, pluralism can be interpreted in a moderate way so that it is either supportive of, or is, at the least, compatible with most forms of Liberalism. The other version is more ‘existentialist’ in character. Here the dilemmas of choice, decision, and sacrifice between competing and conflicting values are regarded as being of central significance. This more existentialist version of pluralism is much less sanguine about its coherence with liberalism. It also tends towards a tragic vision


of history and politics. The main difficulty here with regard to the consistency of a connection between liberalism and pluralism is this: if pluralism is the right way to think about conflicting values then why privilege the liberal values of liberty or equality?

Geuss illustrates the difference between these two versions of pluralism in the following way. He argues that, according to the liberal version,

> there is a plurality of goods among which one must choose without there being any clear criterion for judging one good to be uniquely the best. The tacit image of the world presupposed by the liberal version is of a place full of goodies with plenty for everyone: let all enter into the banquet of life and take their pick. There are limits to how much any one person can eat, and so eating some things carries a cost, the cost of not being able to eat other things that might in principle be equally tasty. The existentialist version is less sanguine: it is not just the case that one must choose, but choosing one good carries with it a cost that goes beyond the mere opportunity cost of missing out on other goods; this cost may, and usually will, include inflicting pain or visiting evil on oneself, or on others. The existentialist table is a small one; the crowd around it large.7

The further point that Geuss makes is that ‘the conceptual framework of contemporary politics’ is a ‘highly complex abstract object’ for which both versions of pluralism are relevant. If this is correct, then the more existentialist version ought not to be ignored or devalued. The suggestion being made here is that the more ‘existentialist’ version of pluralism is exemplified by the work of Max Weber. Furthermore, recent recognition of the problem of pluralism has failed to find a satisfactory response to the challenge laid down by Weber. More troubling too, perhaps, is the suspicion that no compelling answer acceptable to all is currently available.

On the one hand, we have a vision of ‘polytheistic pluralism’ represented by the work of Max Weber and, on the other, an array of contemporary political thinkers who have attempted to respond to this problem. In general terms the response has largely been to accept the hypothesis but, in one way or another, to avoid the, especially political, conclusions that Weber drew. To put it very simply, the issue seems to break down to one very simple question: given ‘the fact of pluralism’ are there any general principles to which we can all agree? The message that Weber delivers is generally a pessimistic one. There is very little of substance that we can, or, indeed, ought to agree on. Most contemporary political thinkers, and especially those generally thought of as being in the Liberal camp, have spent much of their energy in trying to argue for some

grounding for general principles as a counterweight to the demands of pluralism. In order to explore this idea a brief look at Weber and the views of two representative liberal political theorists, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls, will be discussed.\(^8\)

2. Weber: ‘polytheism’ and ‘disenchantment’

Max Weber’s central claim is that we live in a world in which there is more than the possibility of ‘unbridgeably divergent ultimate evaluations’ (die Möglichkeit prinzipiell und unüberbrückbar abweichender letzter Wertungen).\(^9\) In a famous passage Weber argues that

the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another. Mill, whose philosophy I would not otherwise wish to praise but who was right on this point, said in his old age: if one proceeds from pure experience, one arrives at polytheism. That is superficially formulated and sounds paradoxical, but there is truth in it…different gods struggle with each other and will do for all time. It is just like in the ancient world, which was not yet disenchanted with its gods and demons, but in another sense. Just as hellenic man sacrificed on this occasion to Aphrodite and on another to Apollo, and above all as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city—things are still the same today, but disenchanted and divested of the mythical but inwardly genuine flexibility of those customs.\(^10\)

Weber’s pluralism is thorough. Value conflict occupies the centre of Weber’s diagnosis of the culture of modernity. In a forceful statement Weber asserts that

the fate of an epoch that has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself. It must recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us.\(^11\)

\(^8\) Clearly many other political thinkers could be examined in these terms: Jürgen Habermas is an obvious example.


The pluralism of values includes an irresolvable conflict between our ethical theories: in this case especially consequentialism and deontology.\textsuperscript{12} The ‘crucial point’ for Weber is that there are two ‘fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims’: the ‘ethic of principled conviction’ and the ‘ethic of responsibility’.\textsuperscript{13} These ethical theories and the maxims derived from them are in a state of perpetual conflict that cannot itself be resolved by ethical means alone. Throughout his work, Weber stresses the unavoidable nature of conflicts between irreconcilable values and ethical standpoints. Of course, Weber recognizes that most of the time we go through life without being aware that to a large degree our world is made up of overlapping and interpenetrating realms of value. However, there are times when we are sharply reminded of the fact that our lives are bound up in ‘irreconcilably antagonistic values’. In saying this, Weber is pointing out that the difficulty involved in the case of plural and conflicting values does not simply reside in the intuitively familiar case of what Bernard Williams refers to as ‘two-party conflict’ but with the more intractable case of ‘one-person conflict’.\textsuperscript{14} In other words, Weber recognizes and stresses a point made in recent moral philosophy to the effect that much inquiry concerned with problems of objectivity has concentrated on a two-party conflict

where the problem is that of resolving disagreement: it is generally assumed that the parties each have their harmonious set of value-beliefs. Accompanying that, usually, is an assumption that, whatever may turn out to be the case with two-party conflicts, one-person conflict at any rate must be capable of being rationally resolved.\textsuperscript{15}

Weber’s account of the conflict of values can be described as being moderately existentialist. There is a kind of ‘existentialist’ emphasis upon the necessity for the individual to be aware of the need, whenever it arises, to make decisions, ‘ultimate decisions’, between ‘God’ and the ‘Devil’. Weber refers to Plato when he speaks of living a life that rises above ‘our routine daily existence’. We have to choose our own fate, in order to become aware of the meaning of our existence. Presumably he has Plato’s image of the cave in mind. However, as far as politics is concerned it seems clear that there are no philosopher rulers (kings) to


\textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{Moral Luck}, p. 222.
show us the way out.  

Although it is sometimes argued that there is something ‘Platonic’ in Weber’s talk of intellectual aristocracies, or of charismatic political leaders, this cannot be quite right. This kind of interpretation runs aground on Weber’s own understanding of the nature of philosophy. In the wake of Nietzsche’s devastating criticism of the European intellectual tradition as far as Weber was concerned the age in which philosophers could legislate the truth was long gone. There is no Archimedian point outside of the war of the gods. The image of the philosophical tradition displayed in Weber’s work is Platonic rather than Socratic. However, Weber is, in a way, ahead of his own time in that his own practice points to a vision of philosophy that is, in Jasper’s words, without permanent results and without proof. Weber’s own practice is Socratic rather than Platonic.

A central message also in Weber’s texts is that no available rational scientific decision procedure is available that can save us from the difficulty of making a choice between competing values. In fact, Weber allows that when it comes to the problem of the relationship between means and ends, as well as that of the conflict between incommensurable values, there is the possibility of compromise as well as choice. The basic point that Weber wants to make is that in our practice of choice or of compromise we cannot, or ought not, rely upon the support of any kind of decision procedure provided by science, human or natural. However, although it is true that Weber does speak of the possibility of compromise, the overwhelming impression that he gives is that it always takes place within a context in which, when it comes to the ‘war of the gods’ there is no alternative to some kind of, often tragic, choice or sacrifice.

It is important to note that it is a fundamental misunderstanding of Weber’s intentions to argue, as does Hilary Putnam, that Weber is to blame for introducing a modern version of the fact-value distinction, according to which an argument against the objectivity of value judgments was based on the idea that it is impossible to establish the truth of a value judgement that would be acceptable to all possible rational persons. Weber’s argument, according to Putnam, is ‘a disguised form’ of a majoritarianism. Putnam interprets Weber as resting his claims, concerning the fact-value distinction, on the belief that we can ‘get the agreement of educated people on “positive science” whereas we cannot


get such an agreement on ethical values’. In fact, Weber is quite clear that his argument has nothing to do with the number of persons who might or might not agree about an ethical description. He points out that there are many examples available where we can see more agreement about, for example, a description of someone as ‘dishonest’ than we might find among specialists concerning the interpretation of a natural scientific fact.

This account of the ‘polytheism of values’ offered by Weber is bound up with his vision of ‘disenchantment’. Although Leo Strauss has delivered a penetrating criticism of Weber’s account of the problem of value pluralism there is one aspect that needs to be retrieved. Although it is more than plausible to argue, as Strauss does, for the internal conceptual connection between the account of the conflict of values and the general place of conflict and power in Weber’s political thought, it is important to note that one of the interesting points that Weber stresses, and one we would have expected Strauss to applaud, is the autonomous nature of the realm of moral and political values. Consequently, Weber, in a way that is echoed in much recent moral and political theory, is pointing to the specific nature of conflicts of value and, hence, to the autonomy of the political. Value conflicts have a specific character that is not to be understood as a reflection of something else such as conflicts of class or of national interests.

At the heart of Weber’s conception of pluralism and disenchantment there lies the, often concealed, influence of Nietzsche. It is this influence that separates Weber’s pluralism from that of later (liberal) theorists such as Berlin and Rawls.

Weber accepted without reservation Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the time: God is dead. He treated it as the ‘basic fact’ that we are fated to live in a ‘godless time, without prophets’. All objective order of values deriving from the Christian conception of God breaks down. Weber is the first to have drawn the most radical scientific conclusions from Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism. It is the fate of our epoch to have eaten of the tree of knowledge: that is, with Nietzsche to have turned the consistency of the Christian pathos of truth, of intellectual honesty, itself against all hitherto-prevailing values.

20. For example, in John Rawls’ idea of ‘the burdens of judgement’ and, in a different way, Paul Ricoeur ‘The Political Paradox’ in his *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).
In the Nietzschean interpretation it is the death of God that sets the modern world apart. It is, at one and the same time, a catastrophe and a challenge. For Nietzsche the ‘greatest recent event—that “God is dead”, that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe’.22

This is the most important intellectual context for Weber’s account of value pluralism. Accepting the Nietzschean interpretation meant that we live in an age which has witnessed both the death of absolutes and our faith in the possibility of absolutes. Under the shadow of western nihilism the highest values devalue themselves. The political implications are immense. All claims made by political faiths and ideologies are open to sceptical self-destruction. In Leo Strauss’ interpretation, Nietzsche is responsible for ‘the third wave of modernity’ which introduced a deep historical consciousness into European thought. This, in turn, is marked by a tragic and pessimistic vision of the essential insolubility of fundamental political problems and the absence of any meaning for progress or of a final reconciliation in history.23 This analysis of modernity also points to a crisis in political philosophy. The classical tradition of political thought, from Plato to Marx, is now undermined.24

Weber, it is clear, accepted Nietzsche’s diagnosis of his age. It is a basic and unavoidable fact that God is dead. Weber is the first political thinker to draw the radical conclusion from this. The world in which we live is one that is subject to a radical disenchantment. Weber, in particular, accepts Nietzsche’s account of the origin of Christianity as a universal religion of love based upon the Sermon on the Mount which stands in radical opposition to other moral orders. Weber and Nietzsche both reject this ethic. For them human life is an endless struggle between man and man. There is no objective order of values that we can appeal to in this struggle. The role of the ‘cultural science’ or ‘science of reality’ that he appeals for is one that attempts to understand the present situation and its genealogy. Weber also adheres to Nietzsche’s ‘perspectivism’. All scholarship is undertaken from a particular value-laden standpoint and there is no possibility of achieving any kind of synthesis of all possible standpoints. There is no ‘view from nowhere’.

For Weber himself one important source of meaning is to be found in the struggle between the many new and old gods who have emerged from their graves. It is in the clash of ultimate standpoints above all else that the individual can be forced to ‘give an account of the ultimate

24. This is a basic theme in Hannah Arendt’s work.
meaning of his own actions’. As far as Weber was concerned the ‘highest ideals’ are always formed in the struggle with other ideals which are equally sacred to others as ours are to us.

Perhaps we can argue here that Weber’s own disenchantment did not go far enough. Under the influence of Nietzsche (and also Machiavelli) there is a kind of metaphysical belief in the creative power of political struggle. Weber himself sought redemption through commitment to a calling (Beruf). Ultimately, there is some truth in seeing Weber as both a German Socrates and as German Machiavelli. His pluralism is enlisted in the struggle against the illusions of the age but it is itself tied to a resigned acceptance of the permanence of power, rule and conflict. Above all, it is a warning against all attempts at re-enchantment. The political implication is that there is no necessary connection between the acceptance of pluralism and support for either Liberalism or constitutional democracy.

3. Berlin’s pluralism

In the world of contemporary Anglo-American political theory the discovery of the problem of pluralism is generally attributed to the work of Isaiah Berlin. In particular the publication of his inaugural lecture, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, delivered on occupying the Chichele Chair of Political and Social Theory at the University of Oxford in 1958, is taken as the textual origin of this ‘movement’. Although this essay was, at first, noticed primarily for the famous distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ liberty that Berlin did so much to popularize, it subsequently became clear that this conceptual distinction itself rested upon a more interesting and controversial thesis of value pluralism.

The post-Berlinian discovery of the significance of pluralism is in many ways a repetition or rediscovery of ideas advanced by Max Weber, that is barely acknowledged, if at all. Although Berlin did not provide a systematic elucidation of his idea of pluralism, it is a theme that is present throughout his work. In the concluding section of his essay on the ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ entitled ‘The One and the Many’ Berlin attacks

the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive

values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.27

The vision of value pluralism for which Berlin argues is one that bears the imprint of the time in which it was formulated. For Berlin, it is clear that the argument for pluralism has a political message as well as being an epistemological thesis concerning the nature of moral knowledge. This is more than apparent in the way in which he connects this topic with the argument that monism, the opposite of pluralism, has been responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals-justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society.28

There is and can be no a priori guarantee that a complete harmony of values is possible. Berlin appeals to our ‘ordinary experience’ which includes, in his case, reflection upon history and, especially, the horrors of the twentieth century to show that the ‘world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others’.29 It is clear that an important rhetorical component of Berlin’s advocacy of pluralism is a powerful anti-utopianism conceived against the background of the Cold War.30

Two problems of particular significance have emerged in recent discussions of Berlin’s pluralism. They are (1) the problem of the nature of choice or decision between competing values and (2) the question of the nature of the relationship, if any, between pluralism and liberalism. It is also clear that the answer that we give to either of these questions is going to have some bearing on the answer that we give to the other. It is also apparent that acceptance of the thesis of value pluralism must have some implications for the way in which we think about the nature and limits of political theory.

Given the centrality of the idea of pluralism in Berlin’s thought and his deep and extensive knowledge of the history of political ideas it is odd that there are very few references to Weber in his work. Berlin confessed

in an interview that when ‘I first formulated this idea, which is a long time ago, I’d never read a page of Weber. I had no idea that he said these things. People often ask me, but surely Weber was the first person to say this. I answer that I am sure he is, but I had no idea of it.’31 One can excuse Berlin’s lapse of memory here, but he seems on other occasions to have shown more awareness of Weber’s work than he indicates. For example, in his introduction to the famous essay on liberty Berlin remarks in a footnote that ‘the classical—and still, it seems to me, the best—exposition of this state of mind [i.e. pluralism] is to be found in Max Weber’s distinction between the ethics of conscience and the ethics of responsibility in “Politics as a Vocation”’.32 One possible reason for Berlin’s failure (and this was true for many of his generation in British intellectual life) to consider Weber seriously was his general disapproval of the intellectual claims of sociology. As far as Berlin was concerned Weber was a sociologist and contemporary sociology was to be condemned as a pseudo-science. When questioned about the work of Raymond Aron, a fellow Liberal political thinker (and sociologist) of the same generation, Berlin states that although he found some of Aron’s work to be of great value he could not say the same about his early works on the German philosophy of history and sociology. Nevertheless, Berlin does bring himself to say that he ‘never read much Weber, one of my great deficiencies, which I could remedy but never have. I have never ceased to lament not reading enough Max Weber.’33 This is an interesting and revealing comment in light of the fact that Aron was, in these works and elsewhere, struggling to come to terms with the challenge that Weber’s pluralism makes to much of the orthodoxy of contemporary political thinking.34

In a similar fashion John Gray has recognized that there is a case for seeing ‘a more plausible affinity’ between the ideas of Weber and Berlin. Unfortunately, however, he argues that Weber failed to provide ‘any account of the sources of such clashes [of values] in moral psychology, in philosophical anthropology, or in conflict between different cultural

33. ‘Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes’, *Salmagundi* 120 (1998), p. 96. It also ought to be mentioned that Berlin does recognise elsewhere that ‘the founders of modern sociology’—Marx, Weber, Durkheim—were not guilty of arguing for a doctrine of historical inevitability. See, Berlin, *Liberty*, p. 158.
forms’.35 This outrageous view was criticized by Ernest Gellner. Gellner pointed out that this is one of ‘the most bizarre charges ever made’. Weber’s ‘justified fame rests precisely on the unrivalled richness of his exploration of different cultural forms, which underlay the diversity of values. He didn’t merely talk about warring gods, he explored them with unequalled depth.’36

It is also worth mentioning that Berlin was aware of the work of Leo Strauss. This is significant because Strauss’ political thought is, to a large degree, a dialogue with Weber’s value pluralism, or, as Strauss would see it, value relativism.37 In Strauss’ view no one ‘since Weber has devoted a comparable amount of intelligence, assiduity, and almost fanatical devotion to the basic problem of the social sciences. Whatever may have been his errors, he is the greatest social scientist of our century.’38 However, the problem for Strauss was that Weber’s account of value pluralism was derived from a version of ‘historicism’. The problem with historicism, as far as Strauss was concerned, was that it led to a rejection of the classical tradition of political philosophy which itself was founded upon a doctrine of natural right. If natural right is rejected ‘not only because all human thought is held to be historical but likewise because it is thought that there is a variety of unchangeable principles of right or of goodness which conflict with one another, and none of which can be proved to be superior to the others’ we are inescapably led to the thesis of nihilism.

Strauss pointed out that there are two striking facts concerning Weber’s Wissenschaftslehre. One is that Weber spends, throughout his whole work, hardly more than 30 pages discussing the basis of his position on the nature of value pluralism. The other relevant fact is that as Weber himself indicates ‘his thesis was only the generalized version of an older and more common view, namely, that the conflict between ethics and politics is insoluble: political action is sometimes impossible without incurring moral guilt’.39 Weber’s account of value pluralism, as far as Strauss was concerned, rested upon an acceptance of a view of human life in which there is no solution to the conflict between values. The insoluble conflict of values itself is ‘a part, or a consequence of the comprehensive view according to which human life is essentially an inescap-

38. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 36.
39. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 64.
able conflict’. Peace, on this account, is either unachievable or undesirable. It is unachievable simply because conflict and its inevitability is one of the basic concepts in Weber’s political thought. It is undesirable because a ‘perpetual peace’ is incompatible with a truly human existence. It would create the conditions for the rule of ‘the last men who have invented happiness’.

Berlin, in an interview, clearly demonstrates the difference in viewpoints here. He makes it quite clear that he has no sympathy for Strauss’ critique of modernity. Strauss and his followers are guilty of believing in eternal, immutable, absolute values, true for all men everywhere at all times, God-given Natural Law and the like... He and they appear to me to believe in absolute good and evil, right and wrong, directly perceived by means of a kind of a priori vision, a metaphysical eye—by the use of a Platonic rational faculty which has not been granted to me.

Strauss, in turn, found in Berlin’s version of pluralism all the dangers and confusions that characterize modern political thought. The problem with Berlin’s account, according to Strauss, is that his attempt to combine pluralism with liberalism ‘cannot live without an absolute basis and cannot live with an absolute basis’. Strauss’ argument is that, although Berlin’s essay on liberty might serve as ‘an anticommunist manifesto’, the theoretical failure of his pluralism is indicative. The difficulty is that Berlin wants to say both that there are two equally valid forms of liberty, positive and negative, but in defence of liberalism he favours the second. He can only do this by introducing a notion of the ‘absoluteness’ or ‘sacred’ character of the distinction between the two values of positive and negative liberty. Berlin’s pluralism, and by implication all forms of pluralism, cannot avoid the relativist predicament. Strauss’ criticism of Berlin and of Weber has to be understood in terms of ‘the Weimar problem’. The idea that the world is constituted by a plurality of values which are in conflict with each other, none of which can be shown to be superior to the others was a fundamental intellectual factor in the downfall of the Weimar Republic and it is also the basic problem at the heart of western liberalism.

40. Strauss, Natural Right and History, p. 65.
44. Peter Lassman, ‘Disenchantment and the Liberalism of Fear’, in Mark Evans...
In order to attempt to escape the predicament that Strauss outlines Berlin oscillates between two positions. On the one hand, he states that supervenient upon the plurality of political and moral values we have to assert that there is, indeed, a permanent and stable core. In fact, he finds himself defending ‘the kernel of truth in the old *a priori* Natural Law doctrines’. Reflecting upon the lessons to be learnt from the European wars of the twentieth century, Berlin rejected what he saw as the existentialist and extremist argument that ‘there are no human values, still less European values’. Our reaction to the ‘excesses of totalitarianism’ have shown us that this is not a valid diagnosis. In response Berlin argues that the pluralism of values that he has defended also has to admit the presence of ‘a scale of values by which the majority of mankind—and in particular western Europeans—in fact live…as part of what in their moments of self-awareness constitutes for them the essential nature of man’.

However, at other times, Berlin accepts that for the individual ultimately one just has to take sides, to decide for one value rather than another. This is a problem for Berlin insofar as he wants to combine his concept of pluralism with a defence of liberalism. The question that arises is this: If liberty is just one value among others why give it priority? At the conclusion of his lecture on the ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ Berlin quotes Schumpeter (without naming him): ‘To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian’. Berlin continues, that ‘to demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow such a need to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity’. The relativist predicament can only be avoided if we recognize that ‘some values—however general and however few—enter into the normal definition of what constitutes a sane human being…In this sense, then, pursuit of, or failure to pursue, certain ends can be regarded as evidence of—and in extreme cases part of the definition of—irrationality.’. However, in the eyes of his critics this seems to get us no further. The relativist predicament has not been avoided. In a tragically-config-

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ured moral universe, such as Berlin assumes, is the ideal of freedom any less subject than competing ideals to the ultimate incommensurability of values?'\(^49\)

Other critics of Berlin have noted that his version of pluralism is unconvincing in its attempt to evade the agonistic nature of polytheism that Weber stressed. The idea that there is no common standard of values is seriously compromised in Berlin’s account.\(^50\) Berlin’s attempt to come to terms with pluralism and to make it compatible with liberalism marks the outer limits of a political theory that denies the politically pessimistic conclusions that Weber drew while not venturing into the kind of systematic theorising represented by John Rawls in his ‘Theory of Justice’ and ‘Political Liberalism’.

4. Rawls, political liberalism and reasonable pluralism

The general and striking point about much contemporary theory is the way in which it seems to accept the general contours of Weber’s vision of the pluralism of values in a disenchanted world, but not the main consequence: the difficulty, if not impossibility, of finding general agreement on fundamental political questions among rational and reasonable people. Modern political theory is, to a large degree, caught in a trap of its own making. It seems that the dream of a rational foundation for politics must presuppose some form of agreement over ‘ultimate values’. In the absence of such agreement the idea of a rational foundation for politics must be drastically limited.

The clearest example of the way in which much current political theorizing is carried on within what might be called the framework of Weberian ‘disenchantment’ is clearly shown in the work of John Rawls. This is also true of many of his followers and critics. For example, Michael Sandel, one of Rawls’ major critics, sees the modern predicament as one in which, following Weber, ‘the universe of the deontological ethic is a place devoid of inherent meaning, a world “disenchanted”…a world without objective moral order’.\(^51\)

Rawls in his ‘Political Liberalism’ takes it as a central problem facing modern political theory that a modern democratic society is characterized not by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of


incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime.\textsuperscript{52}

There are two interesting aspects of Rawls’ argument that are worth examining. One is his account of the reason for this pluralism of what he calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’. The other is his argument for the specifically modern nature of this pluralism. Rawls’ theory of ‘political liberalism’ is intended as a response to what he sees as two ‘general facts about the public culture of a constitutional regime’. They are what he calls ‘the fact of pluralism’ and ‘the fact that this diversity can be overcome only by the oppressive use of state power’. The basic fact that Rawls wants to explain is that of ‘reasonable disagreement’: ‘Why does not our conscientious attempt to reason with one another lead to reasonable agreement?’\textsuperscript{53}

The explanation that Rawls gives rests upon what he calls ‘the burdens of judgement’. Rawls is saying that over and above such sources of disagreement as conflicts of interest, irrationality, and ignorance it is an inevitable fact that the operation of human reason between reasonable people will not necessarily produce agreement. Rawls lists the following considerations: evidence may be conflicting and complex and therefore difficult to assess; we might disagree about the weight to be assigned to different considerations even if we agree as to their relevance; all of our concepts are to a large degree (and not only moral and political concepts) vague and indeterminate and their use, in hard cases, relies upon judgement and interpretation; in a modern diverse society people will bring a great diversity of personal experiences to bear upon such judgements. These factors are generally applicable to the operation of theoretical reason, whereas practical reason is constrained by two additional factors. It is difficult to make an overall assessment in a case where there are differently weighted normative considerations at work on both sides. More fundamentally, perhaps, Rawls refers to Berlin’s view of pluralism according to which

any system of social institutions is limited in the values it can admit so that some selection must be made from the full range of moral and political


\textsuperscript{53} Rawls, \textit{Political Liberalism}, pp. 54-55.
values that might be realized. This is because any system of institutions has, as it were, a limited social space. In being forced to select among cherished values, or when we hold to several and must restrict each in view of the requirements of the others, we face great difficulties in setting priorities and making adjustments. Many hard decisions may seem to have no clear answer.  

In an earlier version of this argument Rawls refers to both Berlin and Weber. However, he argues that there is a marked difference between them on the question of pluralism. In Rawls’ opinion

Weber’s view rests on a form of value skepticism and voluntarism; political tragedy arises from the conflict subjective commitments and resolute wills. For Berlin, on the other hand, the realm of values may be fully objective; the point is rather that the full range of values is too extensive to fit into any one social world; not only are they incompatible with one another, imposing conflicting requirements on institutions, but there exists no family of workable institutions with sufficient space for them all. That there is no social world without loss is rooted in the nature of values and the world, and much human tragedy reflects that; a just liberal society may have far more space than other social worlds, but it can never be without loss.

Rawls’ interpretation of Weber’s pluralism might be debatable. Larmore has pointed out that

Weber had nothing if not a tragic awareness of the other values that modern society has neglected or forsaken in rationalizing world views and social relations. His pluralism, like Berlin’s did not question the objectivity of moral value, but rather its homogeneity, or the idea that there can be a systematic moral theory that will provide a way of settling moral disputes without denying some of our deepest moral commitments.

However, his own theory seems to have an affinity with Weber’s vision of a disenchanted and polytheistic world. For Rawls the problem of pluralism, or strictly speaking, reasonable pluralism has a specifically modern dimension. Rawls, in a way that is reminiscent of earlier liberal thinkers such as Constant, invokes a contrast between the different problems faced by modern and ancient political philosophy. The modern world has been influenced decisively by three developments. The Reformation, the development of the modern state, and the growth of modern science have all had the effect of undermining a shared belief in the

54. Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 57.
nature of the highest good. The historical origin of liberalism is to be found in the long controversies over religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rawls, it has been pointed out, accepts Weber’s (and Schmitt’s) idea that the Enlightenment has, paradoxically, not given us the rule of reason but an era of apocalyptic radical choice between gods and demons.57

Briefly put, Rawls answer to ‘the fact of pluralism’ comes in the form of an attempt to offer what he calls a ‘freestanding’ political conception that does nor itself rely upon any ‘comprehensive moral or political doctrine’. Appealing to his concepts of ‘an overlapping consensus’ and ‘public reason’ Rawls sought to defend his version of a liberal constitutional order by defining a highly circumscribed ‘domain of the political’. The fundamental postulate upon which Rawls’ account rests is that it itself is not another controversial ‘comprehensive doctrine’. Needless to say, Rawls’ critics have not been convinced.58 Rawls’ own strategy means, for example, that he cannot claim truth for his own theory because that would raise controversial moral and epistemological problems.

The significance of Rawls’ work here is that he has recognized the existence of pluralism as a fundamental problem faced by all modern political theory. However, the price paid for his attempt to construct a systematic theory seems to be a questionable and unproductive narrowing of the scope of political thought.

5. Conclusion: Weber’s ghost

Much modern political thought since Weber is, to a large degree, held captive by a set of images of decline and of loss. Ideas that the modern age is in ‘a period of decline, a loss of values, a forgetfulness of being and a general disenchantment’ ought not to be accepted as easily as they have been.59 They are as contestable as are any other political ideas. Although the question of the pluralism of values is one that seems to be unavoidable, it is not clear that it has to be necessarily linked to the idea of a historical development of disenchantment as Weber describes it. Nevertheless, it does seem that most contemporary political thought does work with the idea associated with Weber that there is something peculiarly modern about pluralism and also that it is linked to disen-

It can be argued that there is an ambivalence within most discussions of pluralism. The concept of pluralism is used both as a theory of value and as an account of reasonable disagreement. Charles Larmore, arguing in defence of a Rawls-inspired political liberalism has argued that the connection drawn by Rawls and others between the acceptance of pluralism and liberalism cannot hold. The reason for this, according to Larmore, is that pluralism is itself a controversial doctrine and, therefore, cannot serve as a support for the form of liberalism that seeks to steer clear of such controversial doctrines. The stakes here are high. Larmore has admitted that the liberalism that he and Rawls argue for is ultimately based upon a hope that ‘despite this tendency toward disagreement about matters of ultimate significance, we can find some way of living together that avoids the rule of force’. If this conviction will not hold then ‘liberalism may necessarily be just one more partisan ideal’.  

The response to pluralism in modern political thought has moved uneasily between the kind of existentialist view put forward by Weber and the attempt to contain it on the basis of an appeal to some body of generally acceptable beliefs. It seems that if modern political thought is caught in the pluralist predicament then accepting the ‘existential’ element in pluralism is to deny the possibility of any kind of systematic theory that can rise above the ‘war of the gods’. The voice of the theorist is therefore not that of a spectator but that of a ‘participant observer’.