

## Value Monism and its Consequences

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March 27, 2013

### **Introduction**

Value pluralists claim that a number of bad practical consequences tend to be associated with *value monism*. The latter believe that, because true answers to questions of value cannot be inconsistent with one another but must be capable of coexisting as a coherent whole, there must be one unified system of value that is discoverable through reason and in which all genuinely valuable ends can exist in harmony.<sup>1</sup> Their pluralist critics argue that, in practice, this belief can have at least a pair of bad practical consequences for those who are deemed by such theorists not to properly recognize their own true interests.<sup>2</sup>

In the first place, they claim that monists believe a correct choice of ends will be *lossless*, entailing no costs in terms of a lost or diminished capacity to realize ultimate values, due to the fact that “all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Berlin argues that those who deny the inevitability of such losses ultimately suffer from a failure of “humility”, which can lead to dire consequences for groups who lose out in the domain of political struggle, and whose “mistaken” views on their own interests are not taken into consideration as a result.<sup>4</sup>

Second, value pluralists often suggest that the belief in an idyllic future of harmonized values may be used to justify the radical, unchecked exercise of authority. Berlin, in particular, emphasizes that the notion of positive liberty has been used to justify cruel and oppressive forms of political coercion, exercised in the name of those who are coerced, with the aim of ensuring they might finally

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<sup>1</sup>Berlin. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 192.

<sup>2</sup>Berlin. “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will.” 212.; “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 212-14.

<sup>3</sup>Berlin. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 212.

<sup>4</sup>Berlin. “The Pursuit of the Ideal.” 18.

realize their rational nature and endorse such ends of their own accord.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with their monistic opponents, value pluralists believe that the “ends men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means” are *multiple, objective, conflictual* and *incommensurable*. That is, they believe there are multiple, independent ends in the world that might be pursued for their own sake; that these ends are objectively valuable, meaning their status as values does not depend on one’s vantage point but is apparent upon human reflection; that these ends cannot all be realized at once, meaning that in order to realize some, we will need to sacrifice others; and that there is no universal standard of measure according to which we may rank order or otherwise compare the relative standing of such ends in our all-things-considered moral judgments about the practice of politics. Berlin argues that to assume these premises are true is to deny the conditions by which the bad consequences described above may be considered justified, and he treats this as a practical reason to accept such metaethical principles in favor of monistic alternatives.

In this essay, I examine the concept of value monism as value pluralists have defined it in order to determine the conditions under which it will lead to the bad consequences they describe. In particular, I attempt to identify systematic distinctions that might be drawn *within* the class of monistic views that separate more and less troubling versions of the thesis from such a practical standpoint. This analysis reveals important problems with the value pluralist characterization of monism's bad consequences.

In the case of their first objection, I find that not all views they would categorize as “monistic” are inconsistent with the recognition of costs associated with foregone alternatives that follow from one's choice of ends. More importantly, however, I find that there is no necessary connection between viewing one's choice of ends as lossless, and the belief that one should seek to mitigate the bad consequences of such choices from those whom they affect. With respect to the second, I argue that the most significant factor that determines whether our views are more or less likely to support the use of

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<sup>5</sup>See Berlin on Rousseau: “European Unity and its Vicissitudes.” 176.

unchecked authority is not primarily the theory of value on which they are based, but the content of the moral aims they would privilege in practice.

This analysis is an important step along the way to showing that the practical objections raised by Berlin and other pluralists against value monism are over-general and misdirected. If these bad consequences do not necessarily follow from monistic accounts of morality, and at least some monistic views are no more likely to lead to bad consequences than pluralistic alternatives, then the target of value pluralist criticism should not be monism itself, but whatever feature is lacking from “bad” monistic views that allows them to support such consequences.

### **Monism vs. Perfectionism**

Although value pluralists tend not to distinguish among different kinds of monistic views, there at least two different versions of monism. Conventional monists, who endorse *monism proper*, assume that our ends can be compared in terms of a single, overriding unit of measure, such as utility, which they believe we should seek to maximize in society and in terms of which they believe trade-offs between all lesser ends ought to be measured. Perfectionists, on the other hand, believe there are multiple sources of value, but that they can all be realized simultaneously.

In what follows, I will assume that there are at least two species of monism, each of which presupposes the possibility of a final, realized state of justice in which a “final solution” is possible, meaning those ends that are considered to be of objective worth can each be fully realized or realized to a maximum degree without conflict. The first is monism proper, according to which there is only one, overarching source of value, meaning a final “correct” solution to the problem of justice will be achieved once we figure out how to maximize the amount of that value realized in society. The second is perfectionism, which presupposes that, as a matter of logical necessity, it must be possible to fully realize the complete set of plural values, and a perfect society in which justice is fully realized will do so.

Based on these descriptions, the nature of monism proper should be clear enough. However, at least one source of ambiguity remains to be clarified with respect to perfectionist views. For it would seem there are at least two ways in which one might claim to be a perfectionist.

Perfectionism starts from the presupposition that genuine values cannot conflict with one another. There are two possible ways in which one might think this is true. The first would be to believe that, given a list of all the possible values that fall within what Berlin describes as the “human horizon”, it is in principle possible for all of them to be realized simultaneously, and to a “maximum degree”. Call this *brute perfectionism*. Berlin and his followers argue that this idea is incoherent on its face for, when taken to their logical extremes, many of these values must come into direct conflict with one another, meaning that when we seek to realize some value in this way, it must necessarily entail loss with respect to another. For example, one might argue that, past some point, negative liberty must conflict with fairness, for it is radically inconsistent for someone to believe on the one hand that their negative liberty ought to be preserved to a maximal degree, meaning that coercion is never justified except perhaps for the sake of mutual security, and on the other, that the requirements of fairness are such that coercion may be justified in order to ensure an equitable distribution of wealth in society.<sup>6</sup> It is hard to think of any philosopher who endorses brute perfectionism, due to the ease with which obvious objections like this may be raised against it.

But consider an alternative view – call it *coherence perfectionism* - which also starts from the presupposition that true propositions must cohere, but assumes we might exclude certain values from being counted as genuine, based in part on their incompatibility with a particular conceptual whole. On this view, genuine values will comprise a complete and internally coherent vision of a just society. Therefore, when they are confronted with values that do not cohere with such a vision, coherence perfectionists believe it must either be the case that these new values are not genuine, or that the

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<sup>6</sup>Of course, this assumes that present inequalities do not pose a security risk. That is, it assumes that it is the inequalities, themselves, and not their effects, that motivate this person's concerns about fairness.

coherent cluster of values we currently endorse must be adjusted so as to account for these new additions (meaning some other values may need to be expelled, or re-interpreted). An example will help to show how value interpretation occurs on such a perfectionist view.

Say, perhaps, that we define liberty in terms of our ability to reflectively choose ends for ourselves as rationally autonomous beings, and that we are interested in understanding the relationship of that concept to equality. A coherence perfectionist believes that, if we think this account of the nature of liberty is correct, then a conceptually correct account of equality will cohere with it. Thus, they might conclude that what it means to be the equal of one's fellow citizens is to say we are each equally capable of exercising this capacity for autonomous choice, and that this has specific distributive consequences. Such a process of interpretation may be repeated for any number of other values, and in any number of directions, and a coherence perfectionist will believe that when liberty or equality or progress or other values are “genuinely” realized, they will all cohere in such a way as to comprise an overall conception of justice.

It is important to note that what I am describing is not a coherence theory of truth, for those who accept such a view about the nature of value think the members of the coherent set of values in which they believe are correct as a matter of correspondence with some externally knowable set of fact about value (and not merely in light of their coherence). However, they also believe that the values comprising such an overall scheme must cohere if they are true, meaning that the conceptual incoherence of one or more values with the whole will in most (though perhaps not all) cases be taken as a sign that those values are not genuine values.

Berlin appears to have such a view in mind when he takes monists to task for assuming that the realization of genuine values can have only good consequences. For example, he argues that, according to a view like this one, “the definition of freedom is always represented as something good without qualification – always leading to the best possible consequences, always likely to promote my 'highest' self, always in harmony with the true laws of my own 'real' nature or those of my society, and

so on.”<sup>7</sup> However, he claims, this disregards the various ways in which any particular interpretation of a concept like this may clash with other values, including other ways in which the same concept might be interpreted. For example, to endorse a conception of “liberty as personal autonomy” as in the case above, Berlin claims it will entail costs in terms of the extent to which we can preserve citizens' negative liberty. According to Berlin, in a case like this, a perfectionist would argue that the aspects of negative liberty that are inconsistent with their overall view must not be part of liberty's genuine description, meaning they should not be thought valuable at all. Thus, he and his followers believe that such theorists cannot consistently acknowledge that when we choose some values over others, it entails a genuine loss, and that this failure of “humility” can have bad consequences for those whose interests are by the wayside as a result of political struggle, and who may face profound costs as a result.

### **Monism and Loss**

But must those who endorse monistic views about the nature of value really believe that their choices are entirely lossless? And does whether or not they do view them as lossless from their own point of view actually determine whether or not they are concerned about the practical effects of such choices? I will consider the cases of monism proper and coherence perfectionism in turn.

Thomas Hurka demonstrates that those who accept monism proper do *not* need to believe their choices are lossless, or at least not in all cases. He argues that such monists might experience “rational regret” for their inability to simultaneously choose second-best options that are good, where “goodness” is measurable across options in terms of the same basic units, but are not as good as their best option at the moment of decision. In order to show this is the case, he distinguishes so-called “inclusion cases” from “non-inclusion” cases. When one chooses a greater good over a lesser in an inclusion case, one nonetheless provides the latter in the process of providing the former. Take, for example, a case in which “you can give some person either five units of pleasure by playing her a

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<sup>7</sup>Berlin. Introduction to *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty*. 49.

certain song or ten units of pleasure by playing her that song and then another.”<sup>8</sup> Hurka argues that, if you choose to give her the ten units of pleasure, you cannot rationally regret not having pursued your second-best option since you were required to carry it out in the process of exercising your best choice. However, in non-inclusion cases, where the lesser good that is foregone in favor of the greater is *distinct* in relevant ways but nonetheless comparable with it in terms of the amount of pleasure it would have brought to the chooser if chosen, he argues that such a choice may be attended with rational regret, even if it is clearly not rational to choose the lesser good given our moral standards. *(I will not be able to discuss his case any further here, but suffice to say that I believe Hurka makes a convincing argument for the claim that it is possible for utilitarians and other monists of this kind to recognize that there is a kind of loss associated with making choices between at least some kinds of potentially valuable ends.)*

At the same time, although they may be able to conceptualize such choices in terms of regrettable loss, the extent to which conventional monists will take the costs such choices impose on others into account and think they are required to mitigate such effects will depend entirely on the extent to which doing so contributes to maximizing overall utility. In other words, if the costs associated with depriving some individuals in society of the right or ability to pursue particular ends are too great, such monists may believe they are not worth undertaking, or that those who suffer as a result need to be compensated. Thus, while those who endorse a version of monism proper *may* experience rational regret as a result of choosing in favor of one value over another, and must pay attention to the costs of such choices in order to determine whether or not they contribute to the goal of maximizing overall utility, whether or not they are obligated to actually mitigate any damages of this sort or compensate those whom they affect depends on the state of the world they encounter, and is not a matter of firm moral principle.

On the other hand, coherence perfectionists *do* believe that their choice of ends is in principle

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<sup>8</sup>Hurka. “Monism, Pluralism, and rational Regret.” 583.

lossless, by definition, but might view themselves as having at least one and possibly two persistent reasons to think they should seek to mitigate the practical costs they impose on others through such choices.

The first reason is weaker, but applies to all views of this kind: regardless of the specific theoretical content of their views, it is not clear why coherence perfectionists should act as though they can be completely certain of their moral conclusions. In fact, it is not clear why such theorists should think it is even possible that they might *one day* be justified in believing their decisions are infallibly made. Therefore, it would seem the most a reasonable monist of this kind should claim is that they find the reasons favoring their preferred conception of justice to be superior to those favoring other kinds of positions. If this is all that can be claimed on behalf of their position – that on balance, in light of the available information, those reasons come out superior – then it seems not only conceivable but altogether *reasonable* for their conclusions to be accompanied by a degree of intellectual modesty. This is not necessarily to say that the difficulty of arriving at a decision should lead to reluctance when it comes time to impose the costs it will require. However, it does mean they may reasonably think of such costs as a kind of “necessary evil”, to be avoided if it is possible to do so.

Some might find this reason too weak, however, as it presupposes that if coherence perfectionists *could* prove their moral conclusions were correct with absolute certainty, then they would be justified in imposing them on others, and would not need to pay attention to the costs they impose on such individuals and groups in the process. A far stronger response to the value pluralist critique relies on the fact that perfectionist views may be distinguished according to the specific content of their moral conclusions: according to some perfectionist views, we may have strong *moral* reasons to pay attention to such consequences. Value pluralists criticize monistic views in general for their tendency to ignore the costs of imposing moral choices on others, but it would seem that a subset of coherence perfectionist views should demand attention to the costs of such choices on moral grounds. For example, many moral views may actively require such attention on the basis of the fact that they



include a duty to treat others with dignity and respect as free and equal persons, for whom such choices of ends are of profound importance. Ironically, this would be true even if those who hold such views have good reason to be completely certain their moral position is correct, meaning those they are obligated to tolerate hold moral views that are demonstrably wrong.

### **Monism and Tyranny**

The second concern commonly raised by value pluralist thinkers about the consequences of value monism relates to the likelihood that moral views assuming such facts about the nature of value have tended to be used by the powerful to justify the exercise of unchecked authority against those who disagree with them about the proper ends of life. In particular, Berlin argues that value monism is frequently connected with a desire to “liberate” those who fail to recognize their true interests from the effects of their ignorance, and that this is taken to be justified on the grounds that we all share an interest in *positive liberty*.

The term “positive liberty” has not always been used to describe the same concept. When Berlin and his value pluralist followers employ it, they are referring specifically to “the wish, on the part of the individual, to be his [or her] own master”,<sup>9</sup> According to such theorists, this notion is closely tied, in practice if not in principle, with a “rationalist” impulse to identify a division within the self between its higher, rational nature which endorses (or would endorse) and pursue its true interests, and its lower, degraded form, which is dominated by impulse and desire and needs to be “rigidly disciplined if it is to ever reach its true nature.”<sup>10</sup> They claim that this idea, that we might identify the true and rational interests of individuals on their behalf, has been used to justify cruel and oppressive forms of political coercion exercised through the use of unchecked authority in the name of those who are coerced, with the aim of ensuring they might finally realize their rational nature and endorse such

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<sup>9</sup>Berlin. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 178.

<sup>10</sup>Berlin. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 179.

ends of their own accord.<sup>11</sup> For, as Berlin famously argues, “If one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind happy and creative and harmonious forever – what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, second main source of moral concern with value monism is that those who believe in the possibility of a single, correct means by which to answer questions of justice have, as an empirical matter, been more likely to suppose the realization of their ideals justifies the use of extreme and unjust forms of political coercion in order to advance the cause of positive liberty.<sup>13</sup>

Just like in the case described above, it is important to note that coherence perfectionists may endorse many different kinds of moral views, and some of these views may be more likely to promote such bad outcomes than others. Berlin appeals to the historical record of the entire class of monistic views in order to justify his claims about the consequences of value monism. However, if there are differences among such moral views in light of which some are far more likely to support the exercise of unchecked authority than others, and we believe that such moral content can have concrete practical effects, then we might conclude that his analysis does not pay attention to the right variables. Just as we saw above, it is perfectly consistent for someone who accepts coherence perfectionism to view themselves as duty-bound to treat their fellow citizens with dignity and respect, and to see this as a good reason to seek to mitigate the effects of their choices on those with whom they disagree, to the extent this is possible. Clearly, this should eliminate the tyrannical exercise of power as an option that is morally available to such individuals.

Value pluralists argue that, as an empirical matter, monistic views have tended to produce

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<sup>11</sup>See Berlin on Rousseau: “European Unity and its Vicissitudes.” 176.

<sup>12</sup>Berlin. “The Pursuit of the Ideal.” 18.

<sup>13</sup>It should be noted that, among prominent value pluralists, George Crowder questions Berlin's contention that “once we concede a gap between the actual will and the 'real' will, the door is open to totalitarian temptation. As he notes: “Berlin's view here is too narrow. Even though he does not dismiss all positive liberty, he tends to exaggerate the case with which its more individualistic versions can be collapsed into its more collectivist and authoritarian forms.” Crowder. *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*. 84.

violent and oppressive political outcomes. However, before we can condemn those who endorse such views as a whole, we must examine the empirical consequences of such differences *among* perfectionisms. If we find systematic differences within this class of views, such that certain kinds of moral views are more likely to lead to such consequences than others, then it will turn out to be moral, and not metaethical differences that lead to the bad consequences of which Berlin is so wary.

## **Conclusion**

As it currently stands, it would seem that the practical objections raised by Berlin and his pluralist followers are over-general and potentially misdirected. Such theorists are right to worry about the bad consequences that could follow from different kinds of views we might hold about the nature of morality. However, it appears that, at least with respect to the two kinds of concerns examined in this essay, their practical argument against the complete range of monistic views is underdetermined. In particular, it seems that there is nothing to prevent many of those who accept a monistic account concerning the nature of value from taking value pluralists' moral concerns about consequences onboard, and incorporating them as part of their own moral theories. There is clearly nothing about the conceptual structure of coherence perfectionism that should be thought to actively prevent those who accept such views from adopting appropriate "precautionary principles", whereby they attempt to mitigate the potential costs of their moral choices on those with whom they disagree as a matter of moral course, and thus there are good initial reasons to think that a subset of such views should be no more likely to give rise to the bad consequences described here than those of their value pluralist critics.

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