

Moral Pluralism and Conflict

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Institutions have often been characterized as responses to conflict, and assumptions about the nature of conflict have frequently determined the structure and scope of political activity. Two prevalent interpretations of conflict portray it as either a contest of interest or a competition for resources. Yet there is another view of conflict that regards it in terms of a contest of values, something that raises a different set of questions and issues. These issues involve concerns about the incommensurability and incompatibility of values, and challenge contemporary arguments that rely upon the ordering of preferences or that urge the pursuit of a normative consensus. As I argue, both preference based theories and theories of deliberative democracy prove to deal inadequately with the challenges of moral pluralism and value conflict.

Introduction

The study of conflict has long been a concern for those interested in politics. Institutions have often been characterized as responses to conflict, and assumptions about the nature of conflict have frequently determined the structure and scope of political activity. Two prevalent interpretations of conflict portray it as either a contest of interest or a competition for resources. In each instance conflict is thought to entail a situation of instability that is to be overcome through the proper arrangement of political institutions. While such interpretations are instructive, they are not the only way to conceive conflict. For there is another conception of conflict tied to the idea of moral pluralism that provides a different account of how it arises. This account departs from conflict explained in terms of interests or resources, and thereby prompts a reconsideration of how conflict can be understood and how it relates to institutions. Indeed, my argument is that moral pluralism involves a distinct form of conflict that not only defies attempts to address conflict in terms of preferences and their satisfaction, but also undercuts contemporary arguments about deliberative democracy. To show how this is so I will do the following.

First, I will review both conflicts of interest and conflicts over resources. As I will argue, conflicts of interest involve concerns about security, while conflicts over resources prompt consideration of the fair terms of cooperation. Although the two types of conflict are logically distinct they have been frequently conflated. This has led to a recent tendency to treat both concepts in terms of preferences, as it is believed that fostering the conditions that allow individuals to satisfy their preferences pre-empts conflict. Reviewing such arguments will help clarify the limits of these conceptualizations of conflict, and thereby indicate why it is useful to consider the idea of conflict from the perspective of moral pluralism.

Second, I will review the constituent features of moral pluralism and consider how these features can lead to conflict. As I will argue, the incompatibility of values serves as the potential source of value conflict, while the incommensurability of values renders problematic, if not impossible, the sort of bargaining and deliberation that are found in much contemporary theory. Consequently, because moral pluralism involves a set of ideas that generate a unique type of conflict neither preference-based approaches nor theories of deliberative democracy adequately address the problems it poses.

Two Concepts of Conflict

As mentioned, two particular conceptions of conflict are notable in the context of political theory, and while scholars have frequently regarded these concepts jointly it remains the case that they are analytically distinguishable. Hence it is necessary to differentiate them before reviewing how they are addressed by contemporary theorists.

The Conflict of Interest

Conflict understood in terms of the conflict of interest involves what can be termed the “postulate of self-regard.” The postulate of self-regard holds that individuals are primarily concerned with their own interests, which is to say, that individuals are primarily egoistic. Hume, for instance, speaks of the individual’s “*natural temper*” which consists in “selfishness,” while Hobbes claims that the “voluntary acts of every man” aim at the “good to himself” (Hume, 2006: 88; Hobbes, 1994, 82). The implication is that the individual’s interests take precedence over all else, as the individual’s self-concern determines what he ought to do. Individuals are not motivated by conceptions of the “good” or “duty,” but, instead, by personal experience. Such experience can be generated as a reaction to physical sensations, as Hobbes argues, or grounded upon the passions, as Hume holds (Hobbes, 1994, 6-7; Hume, 2006, 13-4). Regardless, the result is that behavior is shaped by the individual’s response to subjective considerations.

There are several significant consequences of the postulate of self-regard. The first is that the exclusive pursuit of personal ends generates a competitive attitude towards others. As Hobbes notes, “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy” they will “endeavor to destroy or subdue one another” (Hobbes, 1994, 75). A second consequence is the instrumental character relationships assume, as individuals are regarded in terms of how they may help or hinder the pursuit of one’s own goals. And a final consequence is the inability to judge situations impartially, as one’s interests entail a biased appraisal of one’s interaction with others. This particular consequence has been highlighted by Locke, who considers the want of an impartial “umpire” to exaggerate the natural tendency to judge in one’s own interests, and subsequently treat others harsher than deserve (Locke, 1993, 273, 351, 352; compare Hume, 2006, 90).

Two particular justifications for government can be distilled from these consequences. First, government exists to provide security. Because the self-concern of individuals promotes competition, which, in turn, serves as a

basis for hostility, it becomes necessary to institute an authority which can, to paraphrase Hobbes, “overawe” all. Since our “natural passions...carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like” no individual can guarantee his own safety. Hence, it is necessary to authorize a “common power” which can ensure that individuals are “secure” from “the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another...” Government, then, exists to provide for “peace and defence” (Hobbes, 1994, 106-9).

The second justification addresses the issue of partiality. As Locke argues, one function of government is to serve as an impartial arbiter between individuals; for it is only when individuals relinquish the power to determine when they have been wronged and what the response should be that security can actually be attained (Locke, 1993, 324-5). Hume provides a similar justification when he states, “The same persons, who execute the laws of justice, will also decide all controversies concerning them; and being indifferent to the greatest part of the society, will decide them more equitably than every one wou’d in his own case” (Hume, 2006, 126). To the extent that government can impartially settle disputes, it can provide the same peace as Hobbes’ “awe inspiring” Leviathan. Either way, given the postulate of self-regard and conflict of interests, the justification of government is grounded upon a concern for security.

The Conflict over Resources

Conflict understood in terms of the conflict over resources involves what can be called the “postulate of scarcity.” The postulate of scarcity refers to the problems posed by limitations upon material resources. Given a disjuncture between human needs and the resources required to satisfy them, a condition of scarcity can be said to obtain. So understood, the postulate of scarcity has an integral place in modern political thought, as it signifies one of the main problems theorists endeavor to redress (Macpherson, 1979, 21-22; Schaefer, 1983, 280f; Xenos, 1987, 226f). Because resources are scarce and human needs *must* be met, competition arises. As Hobbes puts it: “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end...endeavour to destroy or subdue one another” (Hobbes, 1994, 75). Hume makes a similar point when he observes that the scarcity of possessions augments the problems that arise from “our selfishness.” (Hume, 2006, 89) It is, he observes, “the slender means” provided by nature to meet the “numberless wants and necessities” which drives individuals towards society; for within society individuals can coordinate their actions (Hume, 2006,

87-88; Xenos, 1987, 227-228). If individuals hesitate or refuse to form society under such conditions, then they can expect a perpetuation of the instability that that threatens their possessions.

Given the postulate of scarcity and the problems it poses political institutions assume two particular responsibilities. First, they assure individuals fair conditions of cooperation. According to Hume, such conditions are fostered by the establishment of rights, which ensure an individual's "constant possession" of property (Hume, 2006, 91). Hobbes provides similar justification for government when he speaks about "propriety," which is how he characterizes the situation in which "every man may know what goods he may enjoy, and what actions he may do, without being molested by any of his fellow-subjects..." (Hobbes, 1994, 114). That is, the government provides a legitimate right to property which allows the individual to enjoy their possessions without fear of interference from others (Hobbes, 1994, 160-161). Conflict over resources is redressed by the government, then, to the extent that the government "secure[s] every ones Property" (Locke, 1993, 353).

The second responsibility of government is to promote the fair allocation of resources. In this respect, Hobbes claims "the first law is for division of the land itself, wherein the sovereign assigneth to every man a portion, according as... he shall judge agreeable to equity and the common good" (Hobbes, 1994, 160). Similarly, the sovereign has the power to "appoint in what manner all kinds of contract between subjects...are to be made, and by what words and signs they shall be understood for valid," which is to say, the government has the authority to establish laws governing the exchange of goods, market transactions, and rights of inheritance (Hobbes, 1994, 163). The point is put differently by Hume and Locke, although goal remains the same: create the conditions for the fair allocation of resources. For Hume, the issue is one of collective action: how can the government prompt individuals to see beyond their own narrow interests, and coordinate their behavior for the common good? (Hume, 2006, 126) For Locke, the fair allocation of resources is directed by the process of labor itself. Because individuals already possess a legitimate right to the goods they can appropriate and use, the government's responsibility is to ensure that appropriation is allowed to proceed naturally – according to the value added theory of labor – and little else. (Locke, 1993, 353, 412). The government, then, has a role to play in guaranteeing the fair allocation of resources, but primarily by refraining from allocating resources *itself*. Locke's response to the postulate of scarcity thus differs from that of Hume, although both see the government

as guaranteeing the conditions required for the fair allocation of resources. To the extent that this is so, both also understand government as helping overcome conflict grounded upon the postulate of scarcity.

Contemporary Interpretations and Responses

Despite the efforts of earlier theorists the dilemmas posed by the two concepts of conflict persist. Part of the reason the issues have proven so tenacious stems from particular methodological problems; the vision of the individual assumed by theorists such as Hobbes and Locke has been characterized as “atomistic” (Taylor, 1985). According to this line of criticism, previous theorists depend upon a simplistic account of human psychology. The contention is that the explanation of behavior utilized by early modern theorists treats individuals as passive regarding the formation of their interests, as individuals primarily respond to sensory experience. This “mechanistic” account of behavior is strongly contestable on both empirical and theoretical grounds, as contemporary scholars have become more sensitive to the significance of social context upon interest formation and the ethical consequences of “psychological egoism.” Suffice it to say that the initial responses to the two concepts of conflict have been found wanting, and this has prompted renewed attempts to overcome the challenges these concepts pose.

As regards contemporary responses, there has been a general tendency to reinterpret the assumptions underlying the two types of conflict and then address them in terms of preference satisfaction. Conflicts over resources, for example, are articulated in terms of the “circumstances of justice,” or what Rawls has defined as those “normal conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary” (Rawls, 1971, 126). Because resources are now regarded as a part of the circumstances of justice the concept of the conflict over resources is redefined. As Rawls argues, the initial distribution of “primary goods” that everyone needs is not something anyone has any control over. Individuals find themselves born into a situation, and hence find their goals conditioned by circumstances beyond their initial control. To this extent, the allocation of resources – their scarcity or abundance – is to be understood in terms of a “natural lottery,” a concept that indicates how contingent circumstances provide the backdrop within which individuals live their lives (Rawls, 1971, 101-102). Consequently, the issue, when it is characterized in this way, is no longer one of competition so much as of cooperation. As Rawls puts it, given the morally arbitrary allocation of talents and goods, the main

importance of basic institutions is their ability to “determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls, 1971, 58).

Just as the concept of the conflict over resources is reinterpreted, so the concept of the conflict of interests is also recast. Whereas previously interests were defined in terms of a “natural temper” towards “selfishness,” contemporary theorists describe them in terms of preferences. As Gauthier explains it, preferences are to be understood as “interests of the self” rather than “interest in the self” (Gauthier, 1986, 7). This characterization of interests as preferences is more than definitional; it is meant to preempt the “atomistic” charge that individual interests exclude a concern for others. For “interests of the self” are thought to allow for the possibility of cooperation in a way “interests in the self” do not, as the former idea does not assume that individuals are solely concerned *only* for themselves. We have interests we pursue, and these interests potentially converge with the interests of others. To the extent that this is so, there is potential for cooperation as individual interests are not automatically opposed to one another.

Given this conception of preferences the theoretical concern then revolves around the question of how are preferences to be satisfied. The satisfaction of preferences is generally stated in terms of “maximization.” The idea of maximization is a problematic one, but the general idea is that preferences are satisfied to the extent that they have been fully realized. Conflict potentially arises here in two ways. First, the maximization of one individual’s preference may preclude someone else’s ability to similarly maximize their own preference. Given the “circumstances of justice” it is presumably impossible for everyone to fulfill their preferences. Hence, who actually satisfies their preferences becomes a contentious issue. Second, it is not always clear how preferences are to be evaluated. Although there may be a shared belief that some preferences are more important than others, it is generally very difficult to specify the truly significant ones. The problem, here, is how to determine interpersonal comparisons which would allow individuals to determine which preferences are the most weighty. However, regardless of which of these problems arises, the restatement of interests as preferences turns upon one particular issue: the ranking of preferences.

The ranking of preferences depends upon several conditions, the first of which has been thought to involve distinguishing between two types of preferences: “coherent” and “considered.” Coherent preferences are those preferences which are held in a consistent fashion. As Gauthier argues, there are two particular

means of achieving coherent preferences: ordinal measures and interval measures (Gauthier, 1986, 39f.). Ordinal measures involve a “weak” ranking of preferences, “from first to last, best to worst, most to least, with ties permitted,” and assumes both “completeness” (that individuals prefer one option over another, or are indifferent to both) and “transitivity” (that a more preferred option holds against any lesser preferred option) (Gauthier, 1986, 39). As Gauthier puts it: “Completeness and transitivity are together sufficient to ensure that the preference relationship weakly orders any set of possible outcomes” (Gauthier, 1986, 41). That said, ordinal measures do *not* indicate how strongly the preference is held. To determine the strength of the preference requires an interval measure, which determines not merely possible outcomes (as ordinal measures), but *probable* outcomes (or “lotteries”). In essence, interval measures assign probabilities to outcomes given conditions of uncertainty and risk when one is unsure of the actual likelihood of the outcome. Thus, individuals can be said to hold coherent preferences when they are able to rank their preferences (by way of ordinal measurements), as well as determine their significance by determining their probability of occurrence (by way of interval measurements).

Considered preferences are those which address both the “behavioral” and “attitudinal” dimensions of preference, as seen in choices and confirmed verbally. The importance of considered preferences is rather straightforward, for they embody the correspondence between behavior and attitude which allows for the calculation of preferences. Such calculations have taken the form of “maximin” reasoning, as with Rawls, or “minimax” reasoning, as in the case of Gauthier. The thing to note about these arguments is that both “maximin” and “minimax” arguments assume that once preferences have been assessed determinate rankings of values and goods can be provided, *as regards social interaction*. That is, once individuals can determinately assess their preferences, then, through a process of instrumental calculation, they can engage the preferences of others. For Rawls, the calculation involves attempting to maximize one’s most favorable “worst case scenario,” while for Gauthier the calculation involves minimizing one’s maximum level of concessions (Rawls, 1971, 143; Gauthier, 1986, 137). Either way, the determination of preferences as outlined above is said to allow for the redress of conflict between preferences given the circumstances of justice.

The ability to rank preferences generates three basic arguments as regards political institutions. The first argument concerns the determination of rights, and involves the specification of fundamental liberties. This is most clearly seen

with Rawls' discussion of the lexical ordering of the two principles of justice, where the maximin rule determines the priority of basic rights and freedoms. As Rawls argues, given certain restrictions of information (described in terms of the "veil of ignorance"), individuals would rank liberties according to those which "widen their opportunities, and enlarge their means for promoting their aims..." (Rawls, 1971, 143). Put differently, under conditions of uncertainty, where no one knows the exact outcome of their decision, an individual's considered preference will be to play it safe. The lexical ordering of the principles of justice thus provides an ordinal measure of liberties, but one grounded upon considerations stemming from the considered preferences of individuals in an extreme condition of uncertainty (Rawls, 1971, 175). In this instance, the ability to rank preferences entails the ability to similarly rank basic rights, and thereby provides substantive moral content to a society's political structure.

The second argument generated by preference orderings concerns the conditions of cooperation. For Rawls, these conditions are provided by the principles of justice, which are, again, lexically ordered. This ordering of the principles provides a framework that resolves disputes, and also provides a compass for appropriate political judgments (Rawls, 1971, 195f.). The goal is to encourage a "sense of justice" which grounds social stability, and dilutes individual proclivities to injustice, or the pursuit of personal interests at the expense of others (Rawls, 1971, 4-6, 454f.). Similarly, for Gauthier the application of the minimax rule to "co-operative interaction... [and] constitutes a constraint on the direct pursuit of individual utility" (Gauthier, 1986, 145). By minimizing one's maximum relative concession one refrains from engaging in those actions which exploit others and eventually render cooperation impossible (Gauthier, 1986, 195). Thus, to ensure that one avoids being "compliant victim" political institutions are necessary, as they guarantee the rights which ensure the fair terms of cooperation, as well as sanction those who would take advantage of others (Gauthier, 1986, 258-267, 345-355). Ultimately, individuals agree to abide by a "proviso" which constrains their behavior and thereby facilitates mutually advantageous interaction (Gauthier, 1986, 200-217). Gauthier's point is fundamentally the same as Rawls: having determined the order of preferences allows one to specify the conditions of fair cooperation.

The final argument concerns the allocation of resources. The idea is that ranking preferences allows for the proper distribution of goods within society. Rawls draws attention to this consequence of his lexical ordering of principles when he says: "The serial ordering of principles expresses an underlying

preference among primary social goods” (Rawls, 1971, 63). This “underlying preference” involves arranging the two principles of justice so that “basic liberties” are secured for all citizens, while the “distribution of income and wealth” is to the advantage of all, even if this allows for a certain amount of economic inequality (Rawls, 1971, 61-62). The point, for Rawls, is to assure fundamental rights, without allowing these rights to be used to justify the exploitation of others. The actual distribution of “income and wealth” can differ between societies – be based upon market mechanisms or directed by state institutions – but no one’s basic liberties are to be infringed by this distribution. Consequently, resources and goods are properly distributed to the extent that they conform to the lexical ordering of the principles of justice (Rawls, 1971, 265f.). This argument is similar to one made by Gauthier, who wants to ensure “not only that no individual actually benefits at the expense of another, but also that no individual benefits differentially from the particular social structure selected” (Gauthier, 1986, 263). Principles have to be selected which “provide that each person’s expected share of the fruits of social interaction be related... to the contribution he would make in that social structure most favourable... to the fulfillment of his preferences...” (Gauthier, 1986, 264). Given that these preferences have already been settled according to the stipulations of the minimax rule, it is no surprise to find that the “principles of social interaction... are the same principles of rational agreement that underlie co-operation” (Gauthier, 1986, 265). Like Rawls, then, Gauthier argues that the distribution of goods and resources is fair to the extent that it conforms to the ranking of preferences, as determined by the minimax rule. Consequently, the arguments of both Rawls and Gauthier indicate how ordered preferences justify the distribution of resources, as ordered preferences underlie the political principles that regulate the allocation of goods.

Moral Pluralism and the Conflict of Values

Moral pluralism can be defined in terms of the heterogeneity of values, and the variety of ways values can be organized or arranged (what can be called “moral constellations”). Values themselves can have an intrinsic or instrumental worth: they can be ends in themselves or means to another end. For example, liberty is something desirable in itself, but also something desirable because it provides a means to other goals (Taylor, 1985, 199; Raz, 1986, 6-14; Nozick, 1974, 49f.). Often the significance of a value comes from its place within a moral constellation, which may assign a value instrumental or intrinsic importance.

Liberty, for instance, is regarded as intrinsically important for liberalism, but only instrumentally important for utilitarianism. The significance of liberty, in these instances, is determined by its place within the particular moral constellation: there is a “presumption for liberty” with liberalism but not for utilitarianism, which is more concerned with the calculation of pleasure or well-being (Raz, 1986, 8f.). In each case there is an architectonic moral vision which expresses certain value commitments (to liberty or to pleasure/well-being), and which grounds our commitments. However, despite the significance a moral constellation imparts to a value, values can independently exhibit intrinsic or instrumental significance. Honesty, for instance, can be the “best policy” because of the consequences of being truthful, or it can simply be the “right thing to do.” In this case, the relevance of the value comes not from its situation within a given moral constellation but from other considerations. Moral pluralism, then, can be said to involve two distinct concerns: the diversity of values themselves, and the diversity of moral constellations.

Incommensurability and Incompatibility

Of the many ideas frequently associated with moral pluralism, the two most important are the concepts of incommensurability and incompatibility. The standard characterization of incommensurability involves what is called the “Trichotomy Thesis,” which holds that two positions are incommensurable if neither can be regarded as better than the other nor can they be considered equal. The elaboration of the thesis is that “the trichotomy of relations *better than, worse than, and equally good*” exhausts the possible relations between two or more objects (Chang, 1997, 4; Griffen, 1997, 35; Raz, 1986, 322; Seung and Bonevac, 1992, 799). If nothing positive can be said about two or more objects in regards to these three relations, then the objects can be considered incommensurable. As Raz explains it, we can imagine a situation where A is better than B, but not better than C. However, B *is* better than C. In such situations, there is a failure of transitivity, as neither A, B, nor C definitively trump the other. A’s superiority to B does not carry over to its relationship with C, nor does C’s superiority to A translate to its being better than B. This failure of transitivity is taken to be the “mark of incommensurability” which exemplifies the Trichotomy Thesis.

Incommensurability is frequently said to entail complete incomparability, as the lack of a common measure is thought to lead to an absolute inability to compare objects rationally (Raz, 1997, 124f.). Such a claim has been rejected by others, who argue that points of comparison – “covering values” or “value

measures” – can be stipulated in absence of a “slide-rule” type of standard (Anderson, 1992; Chang, 1997; Seung and Bonevac, 1992). Taylor elaborates the issue further by considering how individuals “articulate” goods for comparative purposes. According to Taylor, articulation is a process of practical reason that specifies points of identification between “different life goods” so that we can “judge them as more or less important” (Taylor, 1997, 178-179). The importance of Taylor’s point is that it indicates a conceptual difference between the idea of incommensurability and the idea of incomparability, and that one can make comparative evaluations even in the absence of a metric. Thus, for present purposes, incommensurability will refer to the lack of a common measure, as well as the failures of comparison that result. Such incomparability is not comprehensive, as Raz suggest, although it remains conceptually significant.

Where the idea of incommensurability addresses the problems of comparison that arise according to the Trichotomy Thesis, the idea of incompatibility addresses issues of “exclusivity” and “opposition.” The basic thought is that given two or more values, the achievement of one may entail the loss, or sacrifice, of the other. According to Nagel, the exclusivity of values is “the impossibility in principle of realizing one value while realizing the other, or without frustrating the other” (Nagel, 2001, 106). In other words, the exclusivity of values is a situation wherein individuals (or societies) are confronted with two values or goods, but can only attempt to attain one of them, the other being necessarily barred from pursuit. As Nagel explains it: “One can’t lead both a rural and an urban life, or a life of hard physical exertion and of intellectual contemplation” (Nagel, 2001). The decision to follow one sort of life, or aspire to one set of values, necessarily excludes the ability to follow another type of life, or another set of values. Again, in such instances, incompatibility arises as a form of exclusivity. Incompatibility as a form of value opposition arises when values are fundamentally opposed to one another. As Nagel characterizes it, value opposition arises “when each value actually condemns the other, rather than merely interfering with it” (Nagel, 2001, 106-107). An example of such opposition can be found with the values of liberty and equality. As Berlin notes:

If a man is free to do anything he chooses, then the strong will crush the weak, the wolves will eat the sheep, and this puts an end to equality. If perfect equality is to be attained then men must be prevented from outdistancing each other, wheter in material or in intellectual or in spiritual achievement, otherwise inequalities will result (Berlin, 2000, 22).

Nozick's "Wilt Chamberlin" hypothetical clarifies Berlin's claim, and illustrates the oppositional nature of liberty and equality. For as Nozick rightly notes, if individuals are allowed to dispose of their possessions as they see fit then the pursuit of equality is confounded (Nozick, 1974, 160f.). In this instance, incompatibility takes the form of value opposition. Since both liberty and equality are constituted in such a way as to not merely exclude one another, but also oppose one another, the two values compete. As Berlin make clear this competition assumes more than the "exclusive" form of incompatibility, where the pursuit of one value excludes the other. The competition, as Nozick indicates, is unavoidably oppositional. Consequently, the idea of incompatibility highlights more than the fact that values can be discrete. The idea of incompatibility also brings to the fore the fact that some values can be diametrically opposed, and that such instances necessarily entail a rivalry of values.

Moral Conflict as a Third Concept of Conflict

The conflict associated with moral pluralism has a particular character as a result of the ideas of incommensurability and incompatibility. Simply put, the idea of incompatibility serves as the source of conflict between values, a conflict the idea of incommensurability renders difficult to resolve. There are two dimensions to this conflict, one as relates to the conflict of values themselves, the other which relates to the conflict of moral constellations. Presumably the two dimensions are linked together through the idea of incompatibility: because certain values are incompatible, the moral constellations associated with them can also be incompatible. However, regardless of whether the conflict involves values or constellations, issues of incommensurability become problematic. For failures of commensuration preclude the sort of attempts to overcome conflict which are employed for the conflict of interests and conflict over resources. That is, the idea of incommensurability precludes the type of arguments concerning preferences contemporary theorists use to redress other concepts of conflict. Consequently, the concept of conflict associated with moral pluralism invites a reconsideration of how political institutions are justified.

As mentioned, the first dimension of conflict concerns the conflict of values. The conflict of values stems from the incompatibility of values. As Kekes explains it, "The incompatibility of values is partly due to qualities intrinsic to the conflicting values. Because of these qualities, some values are so related as to make living according to one totally or proportionally exclude living according to the other" (Kekes, 1993, 54). Berlin provides another example of

the incompatibility of values when he says: “a world of perfect justice...is not compatible with perfect mercy...either the law takes its toll, or men forgive...” (Berlin, 2000, 22). The incompatibility of values can be seen in debates in the United States about school busing. Parents who are against busing typically justify themselves in terms of the value of liberty, in this case the liberty to educate their children in schools of their choice (usually neighborhood or private schools). Similarly, proponents of busing argue in terms of equality, the argument being that the education system perpetuates disparities of wealth and privilege, primarily by insulating upper class neighborhoods (and schools) from the poor. The exclusivity and oppositional nature of the positions is evident, something that highlights the normative dimension of the controversy. In turn, this normative dimension clarifies the intransigent and persistent nature of the debates. Because the values at stake are oppositional, the hope for resolving these issues to the satisfaction of all involved is remote, as only one of the two values can be realized. And because the disputants appear to recognize this at some level, their interaction is frequently unyielding. Regardless, the significant point is that the incompatibility of values fuels a type of conflict that turns upon notions of exclusivity and opposition, and this conflict is not without political import.

Given that moral constellations are the arrangement of values, the conflict that results from the incompatibility of values has an impact upon moral constellations as well. An easy way to grasp the effect of the incompatibility of values upon moral constellations is to refer to the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, a conflict whose normative dimension was ideologically expressed in terms of liberalism and Marxism. Liberalism, with its commitment to liberty as defined in terms of individual rights, is theoretically incompatible with Marxism, whose commitment to equality is defined in terms of a communist economic system. The ultimate expression of this fundamental incompatibility was a political, economic, and military rivalry that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century, and in several instances threatened to boil over into outright hostility.¹ More recently, similar incompatibilities of values

¹ Of course it is possible to argue that the Soviet Union was not truly Marxist, and thus that the Cold War did not actually involve a confrontation between liberalism and Marxism. However, I do not believe such a view would affect my claim that incompatible values can generate a distinct form of conflict, and that the Cold War is a useful example of such conflict. For even if one concedes that the USSR was not genuinely Marxist, it is still the case that the opposition between the Soviet Union and the United States involved a contest of values that cannot be completely explained in terms of military strategy or economics. One might try to specify Soviet values in more conventional “Russian” terms of some sort, by showing how the Soviet Union utilized traditional language and customs for its own ends (as the historian Richard Pipes does in much of his own research), but the oppositional and incompatibilities with the West would still be evident.

can be found with moral constellations that take a religious form, especially those that relate to fundamentalism. Here the incompatibilities revolve around central claims of dogma, such as the messianic claims of Christianity concerning Jesus, which are disputed by Judaism or Islam. From the perspective of moral pluralism, it is doubtful that the three great monotheistic traditions can ever be fully reconciled. The reason why is straightforward: to be a Christian means affirming that Jesus *was* the messiah, a claim neither Judaism nor Islam countenance. No matter what overlap may exist as regards their ethical teachings, the core claim of Christianity excludes and opposes the core beliefs of Judaism (which holds the messiah has yet to appear) and Islam (which denies any claims concerning the incarnation of God). In this instance, the incompatibility of values potentially entails a result similar to what was experienced during the Cold War: an intractable conflict between moral constellations, whose source lies in the exclusive and oppositional nature of the values the constellations are grounded upon. The incompatibility of values thus yields an incompatibility of substantive moral positions.

In light of the problems the incompatibility of values pose, the question then becomes how to address moral conflict. That is, what can be done in response to the conflict of values? Nothing in the discussion so far precludes a reinterpretation of these issues in terms of preferences, which, as seen, is a maneuver contemporary theorists use to explain the concepts of the conflict of interest and the conflict over resources. It is equally plausible to interpret values in terms of preferences, and the conflict of values as a conflict of preferences, as was done with the conflict of interests. Such an approach would consider values subjectively, as evaluative statements expressing approval or disapproval. This, in turn, would allow value conflict to be treated as a problem of preferences, which means that values, as preferences, could be ranked and ordered according to the arguments provided previously, which is to say, in terms of coherent and considered preferences, whose articulation is to be understood in terms of ordinal and interval measurements. Such has, in fact, been argued by Gauthier, and is an argument that needs consideration (Gauthier, 1986, 46-59). For if Gauthier is correct, and values can be re-described in terms of preferences, then there is no need to articulate a third conception of conflict. Suffice it to say, I do not think this is the case. For the idea of incommensurability indicates the limitations of a preference-based approach to moral conflict, and thereby justifies treating values as distinct from preferences.

As noted previously, arguments concerning preferences involve attempts to order preferences. Preferences require measurement of some sort to determine their significance and rank them accordingly. The standard arguments concern the use of ordinal and interval measurements, which allow for the determination of coherent preferences. To boil these arguments down to their constituent elements: coherent preferences involve the ability to rank preferences according to ordinal and interval measures, of which ordinal measures are primary. To specify the limitations of a preference-based approach, then, requires specifying how incommensurability ultimately confounds the determination of coherent preferences by calling into question the ability to rank preferences ordinally.

The way in which incommensurability confounds the determination of coherent preferences stems from the Trichotomy Thesis. As noted, the Trichotomy Thesis holds that the relations *better than*, *worse than*, and *equally good* exhaust the possible relations between two or more objects. If nothing positive can be said about two or more objects in regards to these three relations, then the objects can be considered incommensurable. Another way of phrasing this is to say that the objects – in this case, values or moral constellations – are “on a par,” or exhibit “parity.” Parity is said to obtain when objects are “roughly equal,” or when no one of them can be specified as being absolutely or unequivocally better than another. They are, as Griffin puts it, “all in the same league, as it were” (Griffin, 1997, 38). The thought is that in some instances one object can be judged as being better than another, but in other instances the reverse is true.

The complication parity poses ordinal measurements is that objects which are on a par cannot be unconditionally characterized as “the best,” or “first,” or “greatest.” Although the sources of parity vary, the basic idea is that values differ in significance according to the specific context. Hence, there is no way to claim one value should always trump another, as what may hold true in one context might not be valid in different one. Paradigmatic instances of such parity can be found with civil rights cases: the equal treatment of African Americans, for example, trumps the liberty of restaurant owners to segregate their clientele. However, liberty trumps equality if affirmative action initiatives are proven to entail reverse discrimination. As these brief (and overly simplified) examples indicate, the claim that one value always “wins” is incorrect and the point should be clear: if the significance of values is always contextual, then the completeness requirement of ordinal measurements is rendered moot. For the idea of parity preempts the attainment of a “complete” ranking of preferences. This, in turn, carries consequences for transitivity. For if completeness cannot

be attained then the requirement for transitivity likewise falls, as there is no established ranking which holds “down the line.” To be clear, parity does not exclude *instances* where one value (or constellation) trumps another. There can be compelling reasons which lead one value to be more significant than another. But parity *does* preclude the conclusion that such instances are definitive of those values (or constellations) in *every other* situation.

To summarize: if the Trichotomy Thesis is true, then the determination of coherent preferences is impossible. For the idea of parity that follows in the wake of the Trichotomy Thesis undermines the ability to establish the ordinal measurements necessary for the achievement of coherent preferences. Parity, as the result of the Trichotomy Thesis, undercuts the ability to satisfy the completeness and transitivity requirements of ordinal measurements, which means, in turn, that coherent preferences are indeterminable. The idea of incommensurability, then, confounds the attempt to interpret values as preferences, by challenging the conception of measurement associated with the ranking of preferences. If this challenge stands, then moral pluralism and the conflict of values that it invokes cannot be redressed through the preference-based arguments applied to other concepts of conflict.

Implications of Moral Pluralism and Value Conflict

If the incompatibility of values leads to conflict, while incommensurability entails the inability to definitely rank values, then particular consequences surely follow. Of these, I will consider two briefly, one of which concerns the tractability of conflict, the other of which concerns debates about deliberative democracy. As should by now be evident, moral pluralism yields a slightly different take on conflict, which means that it should similarly yield different implications concerning political institutions. Politically speaking, one of the most significant consequences stemming from moral pluralism is the idea that conflict is intractable, hence, “eternal.” This point has been forcefully made by Berlin, when he said: “That we cannot have everything is a necessary, not a contingent, truth” (Berlin, 2002, 215). Berlin’s basic point is that the conflict of values is a constitutive part of the human condition. We cannot imagine, Berlin indicates, a situation in which we are not faced with the conflict of values. Rather, we can *only* imagine such a situation, which is more the result of a longing for harmony and order than of a considered reflection about our factual circumstances. For when we consider the circumstances of our concrete, empirical, existence, we have to “recognise the fact that human goals are many,

not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another” (Berlin, 2002, 216). As Berlin notes, the conflict of values is an observable, verifiable, truth. However, as he also indicates, the conflict of values is not simply the result of contingent circumstances or historical accident. Instead, the conflict that adheres to moral pluralism is a consequence of the nature of values themselves. Because some individual values are incompatible – because certain values are by their nature oppositional and exclusive – the conflict between them is ineradicable. The tension between certain values is a result of what those values are – how they are defined, what they stand for, and the ends they lead to. Consequently, so long as we acknowledge the merit of those values – of either their intrinsic or instrumental worth – then there will be potential conflict between them. Again, as Berlin puts it, the incompatibility and incommensurability of some values is “not merely empirically but conceptually true” (Berlin, 2000, 23). If the incompatibility of some values *is* “conceptually true,” then value conflict is intractable, an enduring element of the human – hence political – condition. The issue is not a sociological one concerning the diversity of human experience; it is not a statement about a “fact of pluralism.” Rather, the issue concerns the logical relations between values and moral constellations such that the exclusivity of values leads to conflict.

The degree to which the incompatibility and intractability of values presents a problem can also be seen with the challenge value conflict poses deliberative democracy, a normative theory of collective decision-making that highlights consensus as a condition of political legitimacy (Cohen, 1997, 407). Regarding the issue of moral pluralism, proponents of deliberative democracy tend to focus on the possibility of consensus: to what extent is consensus possible given the condition of moral pluralism? Deliberative democrats note that moral pluralism can lead to conflict, but how this conflict is addressed depends upon how pluralism is conceptualized. Deliberative theorists generally rely upon an interpretation of pluralism that highlights discursive elements that are amenable to deliberative goals. Such a take on moral pluralism is found in the later work of Rawls, for example, when he specifically addresses the question of stability within a democratic society.² As he notes in *Political Liberalism*, concerns about stability arise in the face of a diversity of “comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls, 1993, 4).

² Although some might want to dispute the characterization of Rawls as being a “deliberative democrat” in light of his commitment to liberalism (the idea being that deliberative democracy is not the same thing as liberal democracy), there is a distinct and undeniable deliberative turn in Rawls’ later work. Thus, I think it is fair to look at his arguments in tandem with those theorists who are more directly known as proponents of deliberative democracy.

According to Rawls, the issue is not merely the plurality of such doctrines but those features that render them compatible with a democratic order. As he says, “a democratic society is marked by the fact of *reasonable* pluralism” (Rawls, 1993, 36, emphasis added). Such a statement is meant to draw attention to those aspects of pluralism that require arguments to be stated in “terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse...” (Rawls, 1993, 218). Similar characterizations of moral pluralism are also evident in the work of Habermas, Cohen, and Gutmann and Thompson, each of whom highlight those aspects of pluralism that are susceptible to reasoned discourse (Habermas, 1996, 18; Cohen, 1997, 76-77; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, 14).

The idea that pluralism is defined in terms of its discursive features is central to the deliberative project. For the discursive features of pluralism are supposed to be amenable to deliberative engagement, and potentially allow actors to achieve the mutual understanding necessary for consensus. For Rawls, these features are subject to a concept of “public reason,” where “citizens’ reasoning...is now best guided by a political conception the principles and values of which all citizens can endorse” (Rawls, 1993, 10). Similarly, for Habermas these features are “unavoidable idealizations” that “transcend” communication, and provide the means to structure discourse (Habermas, 1996, 4f.). The thing to note is that deliberative theorists require arguments to involve “reasons all can accept,” or be couched in terms that others can affirm (Bohman and Richardson, 2009; compare Rawls, 1993, 137, 227, 241; and Habermas, 1996, 166). This qualifier is especially important for it clarifies the forms of interaction deliberative theorists hold will unfold between actors. Here a distinction is drawn between issues of consensus and bargaining, with consensus being regarded as the ideal outcome to achieve.

Two types of consensus can be distinguished within discussions of deliberative democracy. For the first, individuals converge on consensus for the same set of reasons. As Habermas characterizes this form of consensus: “only those reasons count that all participating parties together find acceptable” (Habermas, 1996, 119, compare Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, 14, 55-57). For the second, individuals converge on consensus for reasons that reflect their own personal perspectives, irrespective of the reasons held by others. Rawls characterizes this type of convergence as an “overlapping consensus,” where “citizens may within their comprehensive doctrines regard the political conception of justice as true, or as reasonable, whatever their view allows” (Rawls, 1993, 151).³ No matter

³ Compare: “Now to state the main point: in the overlapping consensus...the acceptance of the political conception is not a compromise between those holding different views, but rests on the totality of reasons specified within the comprehensive doctrine affirmed by each citizens” (Rawls, 1993: 170-171).

which form it takes, this “convergence thesis” is important for the deliberative approach, as it indicates the compatibility of values that consensus is taken to instantiate. At some level – either deeply personal or broadly political – divergent values are assumed to be reconcilable in a substantive way. As Rawls characterizes it, there is a “concordant fit” between different types of values such that consensus is feasible (Rawls, 1993, 171). However, when values are not so reconcilable and consensus is unlikely, then bargaining becomes the suggested alternative. Here the reconciliation of values requires that moral considerations be bracketed so actors can more easily forge an agreement. The assumption is that where consensus is impossible bargaining is supposed to allow for the possibility of agreement upon other grounds. And as Gutmann and Thompson make clear, even within the context of bargaining discursive considerations apply, as the ideal of reciprocity – or the obligation to provide reasons others can come to share – places limits upon the arguments actors utilize. For in this case although the outcome of deliberation is something other than consensus the ideal of mutual understanding retains its importance (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, 12, 71f.). The hope, then, is that some sort of convergence is possible, even if it is not the concordant fit of consensus.

As should be obvious, the type of moral pluralism deliberative theorists conceptualize is one wherein value conflict is tempered. Rawls, for example, distinguishes between pluralism and reasonable pluralism, and intentionally refrains from talking about the former as it entails irrationality or “unreason” (Rawls, 1993, 36-37, 65). Unfortunately he thereby gives the impression of avoiding the challenges moral pluralism truly poses, while steering the discussion in a direction that is favorable to the conclusions he desires. The same seems to be the case for other deliberative democrats (such as Habermas, and Gutmann and Thompson), who, as seen, also provide accounts of pluralism that are conditioned by their concerns about discourse. The issue is not how moral pluralism, defined in a very specific way, can yield outcomes amenable to deliberation. Rather the issue is how moral pluralism, uninfluenced by concerns about deliberation, actually relates to the pursuit of consensus and activity of bargaining.

When one does not define pluralism according to deliberative ideals, the implications of moral pluralism for consensus and bargaining are less benign than deliberative theorists hope. One of the problems relates to the link deliberative theorists posit between mutual understanding and consensus, the suggestion being that mutual understanding serves as the bridge to consensus. There are three potential complications here, one regarding the possibility of mutual

understanding; the second regarding whether or not mutual understanding actually generates consensus; and the third regarding consensus itself. As regards the possibility of mutual understanding, there is a genuine concern that an individual's own commitments pre-empt the ability to understand the claims another makes. The idea here is that moral constellations frame issues in such a way as to render alternative positions incomprehensible. As Barnes and Bloor argue, there is no "special core of concepts" that serves as a "bridgehead" between different moral views (Barnes and Bloor, 1982, 35-38). From this perspective, incommensurability entails mutual unintelligibility, as there is no "equivalence postulate" that facilitates translating one set of views or values into another (Barnes and Bloor, 1982, 22f.). Instead, one's views are determined by the values that one adheres to, to the point of excluding competing views from consideration. Without a common frame of reference there simply is no way to grasp the values of others.

Although Barnes and Bloor provide an extreme argument regarding the possibility of mutual understanding, it nevertheless remains the case that deliberative theorists tend to misconstrue the consequences of such understanding. A pluralist such as Berlin argues that insight into other positions is possible by way of imaginative insight, but also indicates that such insight does not render the incompatibility of values less troublesome (Berlin, 2000, 12). In fact, it may worsen the problem, as one more fully comprehends the sources of the incompatibility. As noted previously, the relation between some values is exclusive, since the pursuit of one entails the exclusion or loss of another. When individuals recognize such incompatibility, the likelihood of consensus may be lessened as they strengthen their commitment to their own position. That is, given a situation of incompatible values, cognitive bolstering may be the result of mutual understanding rather than consensus, as one reinforces one's beliefs to sustain them rather than seek common ground with others. Here lies what I believe to be the real dilemma for deliberative democrats, as one can understand what others affirm, yet still reject their position while hardening one's own. In other words, one can achieve mutual understanding without necessarily being led to pursue consensus. This underscores the second complication that moral pluralism poses for deliberative democrats: mutual understanding does not have the logical ties to consensus they suggest.

As regards the issue of consensus, if values are incompatible in the way pluralists hold, then consensus itself becomes an elusive ideal. For where values prove mutually exclusive the convergence thesis is more difficult to maintain. Either

consensus is found along a much narrower range of values than deliberative theorists realize, or consensus is simply not possible. As a simple empirical matter, it is difficult to see how such convergence is feasible within the confines of the modern nation state. The sheer number of citizens renders it unlikely that consensus can be found according to “reasons all can accept” without those reasons being especially general. While general reasons can possibly ground some form of consensus, they are unlikely to generate more substantive reasons for acting (or for holding more developed moral commitments). Everyone may agree about the sanctity of life, for example, but deeply disagree about the death penalty or abortion. Consensus, in such instances, does not in itself generate the sort of norms that resolve either of these controversies. For in these debates individuals on each side derive conclusions that are mutually exclusive from what are ostensibly shared assumptions. Both pro-choice and pro-life proponents claim to revere life (the mother or the unborn), while proponents and opponents of the death penalty do the same (victims and their families or the condemned). Yet what results is anything but a resolution of the matter. Consensus in such instances is too thin to settle the disagreement. This highlights the problem the deliberative approach faces: if mutual understanding does not necessarily entail consensus, and consensus itself cannot generate specific norms for conflict resolution, then pluralism poses a deeper challenge to deliberative democracy than thought.

Even the idea of an overlapping consensus, where individuals converge on the same values but for different reasons, seems of little help. For as Rawls’ discussion makes clear, overlapping consensus ultimately requires that certain types of reasons be excluded from consideration (Rawls, 1993, 152f.). This draws attention to my earlier point, that deliberative theorists conceptualize pluralism in a way that generates the conclusions they want. For the exclusion of reasons or arguments that are not conducive to consensus is meant to guarantee the desired outcome. What is wanted, however, is an argument about how to address those views (and the reasons which support them) that confound consensus. It does not seem that the idea of overlapping consensus adequately addresses the problem of value conflict, because it defines pluralism in such a way as to minimize, or even exclude, such conflict at the outset. For the reasons individuals have for adhering to the overlapping consensus can indeed vary; but they cannot vary so greatly as to undercut the possibility of consensus. Put differently, an overlapping consensus addresses the problem of the incompatibility of values by requiring that individuals hold values that ultimately

cannot *be* incompatible. The reasons used to explicate one's commitments cannot be such as to alienate others, a requirement that effectively precludes concerns about value incompatibility and intractability. However, as is obvious, such an approach is dissatisfying, as it seems to sidestep the problem.

Then there is the idea of bargaining. As noted, bargaining involves the attempt to forge an agreement in the absence of consensus. This, on the surface, suggests the possibility of addressing value conflict in a way that is sensitive to the problems mentioned. Where values are incompatible, some allowance must be made for the possibility that there might not be a final settlement of the issue. Gutmann and Thompson mention this in their own work on deliberative democracy, and I believe their observation is correct: where value conflict is potentially ongoing, any resolution must be regarded as impermanent (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).⁴ The idea is that an issue can be reopened for further reconsideration as warranted, for in a situation where the exclusivity of values generates irresolvable issues the best way to proceed is to acknowledge this fact and allow for the possibility of revisiting the problems as necessary. However, there remains the problem of how to deal with value conflict through the actual activity of bargaining. If the approach is to deal with other forms of conflict as surrogates for value conflict, then the approach is open to objection. For, as argued earlier, attempts to substitute concepts such as preferences for values involve methodological problems that fail to capture how values relate. But if one can determine a means of dealing with values as values, and allow that the outcome will be conditional in the manner suggested, then one can address the issue in a way that does not involve the problems discussed thus far. I believe such an approach is suggested by Gray's discussion of a *modus vivendi*, where compromise rather than consensus is the goal (Gray, 2010, 32). Here value conflict is governed by the realization that the problem is permanent, and cannot be overcome by insisting that all affirm the same ends. Rather, one acknowledges the partiality of one's own position, and thereby acknowledges that one's position is no more privileged than another's. Instead of seeking an elusive consensus, one accepts the limitations given by the relation of the values themselves, and seeks an outcome that is less final than provisional. If

⁴I take this to be a distinct claim from the one Gutmann and Thompson make about the discursive dimensions of bargaining, which seems to me to contain the same errors that Rawls and Habermas make about deliberation and consensus. To suggest that value pluralism may entail provisional outcomes seems plausible given how I understand pluralism. To suggest that this outcome proceeds according to an ideal conceptualization of deliberation seems less so. Regardless, I think the two claims can be disentangled, and the more plausible one retained.

bargaining is understood this way – as the pursuit of a *modus vivendi* arrangement – then I believe it offers a response to value conflict that is acceptable. If it is not – if bargaining is instead understood as a form of negotiation involving the re-description of values into other terms – then I believe it, too, will fail to provide an adequate response to value conflict.

That deliberative democracy faces serious challenges from the perspective of moral pluralism is clear, and potentially unsettling in a deep way. For while the direct challenge is to the deliberative ideal of consensus and the possibility of bargaining, a further challenge seems to arise for the ideal of democracy itself. Although it is well beyond the confines of the present study, a potential implication is that given the condition of moral pluralism democracy, as an institutional arrangement, is no more theoretically privileged than any other political practice. Typically the debates about deliberative democracy have addressed the question of what form of democracy is most suitable to a situation of moral pluralism. Critics of deliberative democracy have often proposed what has been termed an “agonistic” form of democracy, which stresses the contestatory nature of democratic institutions (e.g. Connolly, 2002; Mouffe, 2000; Mouffe and Laclau, 1985). While agonistic theorists take seriously the issue of value conflict, it nevertheless remains the case that moral pluralism raises a further, more significant question regarding the value of democracy itself. The assumption that democracy is the best means of managing conflict is especially problematic, for it is neither logically nor empirically true that value conflict can only be addressed – or is even best addressed – within the confines of democratic institutions. The issue here is similar to the one John Gray notes regarding the relations between moral pluralism and liberalism: if there are no logical ties between them, then the belief that one is the best response to the other remains contestable. In this case, the dilemma involves institutional arrangements rather than ideological commitment; for if there are no necessary ties between moral pluralism and democracy, then arguments that seek to redress value conflict through democratic means may be more tenuous than thought. I have indicated what these problems are in the case of deliberative democracy, but it is not difficult to see how these problems can be extended to the ideal and practice of democracy more generally. It may be that such concerns can generate novel arguments on behalf of other institutions (such as the judiciary or bureaucracy), or that they highlight other considerations (such as historical circumstances) that explain the importance of democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the sort of problem faced by deliberative democrats – that moral

pluralism and value conflict may cut against their ideal – is potentially a problem for *all* proponents of democracy, deliberative, agonistic, or otherwise. While I have no answer to this question at this precise moment, it may be enough to note this issue for now, as the basis for further study in the future.

Conclusion

As I have argued, the form of conflict associated with moral pluralism is conceptually different from other visions of conflict, and this entails substantive consequences. Conflict understood in terms of the competition of interests or over resources has been traditionally used to explain the advent of political institutions. As I argued, conflicts of interest define conflict in terms of a postulate of self-regard, while conflicts over resources do so according to a postulate of scarcity. In their contemporary form these two conceptions of conflict have been interpreted in terms of preferences, the idea being that reinterpreting interests as preferences and conditions of scarcity as “circumstances of justice” allows for a better treatment of the issues involved. Of these issues, how to rank preferences been the main concern of many contemporary theorists who interpret conflict in terms of preferences. Along these lines distinctions are made between types of preferences, with further discriminations being drawn as regards ways of measuring preferences. So far as contemporary arguments go, the assumption is that if preferences are properly measured then the conflict can be redressed. Consequently, the sort of conflicts traditionally defined in terms of interests and resources can be dealt with.

Next I argued that there is a third conception of conflict associated with moral pluralism. Moral pluralism – defined in terms of the heterogeneity of values and moral constellations – raises issues concerning the incommensurability and incompatibility of values. Incompatibility highlights the exclusivity and oppositional nature of values, and specifies both the impossibility of pursuing all values as well as the intractable nature of value conflict. The idea of incommensurability, on the other hand, highlights the impossibility of measuring values as one might measure preferences. Because incommensurability depends upon the Trichotomy Thesis, which, in turn, involves an idea of parity, attempts to use interval and ordinal measures to order values are confounded. Parity, which challenges the transitivity and completeness requirements of ordinal measures, prevents attempts to rank values as one might rank preferences. Thus, the sort of responses which are today used to redress the forms of conflict associated with interests and resources are inappropriate as regards the conflict of values.

So far as politics goes, I argued that moral conflict necessitates a reconsideration of how institutions are justified. As I indicated, one of the consequences of the incompatibility and incommensurability of values is that the pursuit of normative consensus is not a viable political goal. Because the conflict associated with moral pluralism is ultimately intractable, arguments that urge a normative consensus as the goal of politics are mistaken. At most one can hope for a *modus vivendi* arrangement, where there is an agreement about institutions grounded upon their ability to regulate conflict. Anything more – anything requiring, for instance, that individuals affirm the same moral commitments – is simply unwarrantable. If value conflict as I have sketched it out is correct, then the most that can be accomplished, politically, is to provide institutions which moderate value conflict, in the full realization that value conflict is a constituent part of human experience. To wax poetic: if value conflict is true, then the general will is a romantic myth.

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