

Value Pluralism, Realism and Pessimism

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Abstract

Value pluralists see themselves as philosophical grownups. They profess to face reality as it is and accept resultant pessimism, while criticising their monist rivals for holding on to the naïve idea that the right, the good and the beautiful are ultimately harmonizable with each other. The aim of this essay is to challenge this self-image of value pluralists. Notwithstanding its usefulness as a means of subverting monist dominance, I argue that the self-image has the downside of obscuring various theoretical positions that do not fall into either the pluralist or monist camp. Yet such positions do exist, as shown by my discussion of Albert Camus and Hannah Arendt. Near contemporaries of the pioneering value pluralist Isaiah Berlin, the pair, just like him, sought to be realistic about the lived experiences of political disasters and moral disorientation in the twentieth century. Moreover, they shared with Berlin a keen interest in real-world moral dilemmas, which seemed to them (as well as to Berlin) to have made traditional morality obsolete. But the three thinkers' perspectives on 'reality' hardly converged, and neither Camus nor Arendt became a value pluralist as a result of their reflections on moral dilemmas. This, however, by no means indicates the pair's immaturity. Rather, it shows that there are more than one way of observing fidelity to our actual experience and that value pluralists' commitment to realism and resultant pessimism is not as uniquely mature as they would have us believe.

Keywords

value pluralism; moral dilemmas; Hannah Arendt; Isaiah Berlin; Albert Camus

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Value Pluralism, Realism and Pessimism

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Introduction

According to its proponents, value pluralism is a philosophy for grownups. While their monist rivals since Plato onwards have refused to face reality as it is and held on to the comforting thought that the right, the good and the beautiful are ultimately harmonizable with each other, pluralists profess to uphold ‘fidelity to our actual experience’ (Gray 2013, p. 98) and acknowledge that objective human values sometimes of necessity conflict with each other. On this account, the monist is a dreamer, a child and a naïve optimist; the pluralist, by contrast, is a realist, a responsible adult and a sensible pessimist. Widely recognised as the founder of the contemporary value pluralist movement in the Anglophone world (e.g. Galston 2002; Levy 2007; Müller 2012), Isaiah Berlin gave classic expression to this contrast when he characterised the rivalry between monism and pluralism in terms of progressing phases of maturity. On the one hand, he compared wishful monist thinking to ‘a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past’ (Berlin 2002, p. 217). On the other hand, he approvingly described his own pluralist position as ‘a little dull’ and yet ‘civilised’ and true to our ‘ordinary experiences’ (Berlin 2013c, p. 20; Berlin 2002, p. 217, p. 213). John Gray similarly presented value pluralism as ‘an account of ethical life as we find it’, contrasting ‘stoical and tragic’ pluralist liberalism with its allegedly naïve monist rivals that are ‘Panglossian in their optimism’ (Gray 2000, p. 35; Gray 2013, p. 36). Notwithstanding their numerous differences, Gray and Berlin shared and indeed pioneered the value pluralist commitment to realism and resultant pessimism. In spite of their, especially Gray’s, sympathy for romanticism and the counter-Enlightenment, both pluralists adopt an Enlightenment

conception of philosophy reminiscent of Kant's classic essay 'What Is Enlightenment?': philosophy helps men and women release themselves from immaturity (Kant 1996).

The aim of this essay is critically to scrutinise this allegedly intricate connection between value pluralism, realism and pessimism. I shall not consider the truth or falsity of value pluralism *per se*. Rather, my goal is to challenge the *self-image* of value pluralists. Notwithstanding their professed willingness to face uncomfortable truth, value pluralists often tell themselves a rather comforting story about their own maturity relative to allegedly immature monists. This, however, is too easy a contrast because one may occupy a number of positions that do not fall into either the Berlinian pluralist pole or its Platonic monist opposite. In this essay, I shall focus on two figures that represent, albeit in differing ways, such positions: Albert Camus and Hannah Arendt. Of course, they are by no means the only ones that might be contrasted with pluralists on the one hand and monists on the other. Nevertheless, Camus (b. 1913) and Arendt (b. 1906) deserve special attention because both were Berlin's (b. 1909) near contemporaries and, just like him, sought to be realistic about the lived experiences of political disasters and moral disorientation in the twentieth century. More specifically, they examined the same type of real-world moral dilemmas that preoccupied Berlin. Yet the three thinkers' perspectives on 'reality' hardly converged, and neither Camus nor Arendt became a pluralist¹ as a result of their reflections on moral dilemmas. Additionally, Camus and Arendt are of special interest because they were no less pessimistic than value pluralists. In fact, I hope to

¹ In this essay I use the term 'pluralism' to mean *value* pluralism. Although Arendt may be called 'pluralist' in some other senses (see Flathman 2005), she certainly did not endorse value pluralism (or monism, for that matter). She never took sides in the pluralism/monism debate partly because she died in 1975, a few years before this debate emerged as an important issue in Anglophone philosophy. It is interesting to speculate on what she might have said had she lived two more decades and familiarised herself with the value pluralism/monism debate. As a matter of fact, however, this debate was unknown to her and the pluralism/monism rivalry remained alien to her thought.

show that the least optimistic among the three thinkers considered in this essay was Arendt.² This is the case because she believed that totalitarianism, if fully developed, would possess the power to *create* the worst kind of moral dilemmas at will, while the pluralist and the existentialist³ held less austere views about totalitarian domination and oppression.

This essay will be in three sections. The first one is devoted to value pluralism. After considering its proponents' self-image in detail, I shall examine how Berlin, anticipating later pluralists, made use of real-world examples of moral dilemma to substantiate his pluralist ideas. In the following two sections, I shall turn to Camus and Arendt, and reconstruct their conversation on moral dilemmas, beginning with Camus's important 1946 essay, 'The Human Crisis'. In this piece, Camus tells a WWII-era story about a mother who was coerced by a Nazi officer into choosing which one of her children should be shot. While this example may be interpreted as revealing the truth of value pluralism, Camus extracts a different lesson, as indicated in his reiteration, a decade later, of the mother's story in *The Fall*. I shall then discuss Arendt's appropriation of Camus's story in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁴ Like Camus, Arendt uses the example of the mother's 'choiceless choice' (Langer 1982) not to substantiate the truth of value pluralism but for a different purpose. But in her case, unlike in Camus's, the purpose is not to consider an aspect of 'absurdity' but to highlight the novelty of totalitarian domination. The juxtaposition of the three thinkers' reflections on moral dilemmas shows that value pluralism is neither as realistic nor pessimistic as its proponents like to believe.

² Needless to say, this does not necessarily mean that Arendt was more realistic than Berlin and Camus. Who among the three was most pessimistic is one question; whose stance on pessimism was most realistic is another. This essay is concerned with the first question. (Parenthetically, the second question cannot be answered on a general level because different contexts demand different levels of pessimism.)

³ I use the term 'existentialism' in a broad sense to include Camus without minimising his disagreement with other existentialist figures such as Sartre.

⁴ Arendt also discusses moral dilemmas in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1965), which has attracted intense debate. A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, although I shall mention it briefly later.

Berlin and the Self-image of Value Pluralists

In the concluding part of 'Two Concepts of Liberty', Berlin famously defends his pluralist convictions in the following terms:

Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past. 'To realise the relative validity of one's convictions', said an admirable writer of our time, 'and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian'. To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow such a need to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity (Berlin 2002, p. 217).

In these oft-cited few sentences Berlin at once mobilises three sets of dichotomies to defend value pluralism against its monist competitor: adulthood and childhood, civilisation and barbarism, and maturity and immaturity. Each of these dichotomies is conceptually linked to the idea of growth and development. A child grows to be an adult; a barbaric society develops into a civilised society; and an immature tree grows into a mature one. Some such growths occur more naturally than others. For example, the physical growth of a child occurs if her basic needs are satisfied. By contrast, her mental development usually requires more work and effort, including external guidance by parents and teachers. Berlin clearly conceives of the transition from monism to pluralism as more akin to a person's mental development than to her physical growth. According to Berlin, echoed by Kekes (1993), Parekh (1996), Gray (2013) and others, the main currents of philosophical and religious traditions of the West have been predominantly monistic. Consequently, most men and women (in the West at any rate) are, if undisturbed, likely to inherit monist presumptions without even realising their existence.

Furthermore, Berlin and his pluralist allies continue, most men and women have an incentive to let their monist presumptions go unchallenged. Whether they are aware or not, they are predisposed to value monism because it is comforting to believe that the true, the good and the beautiful always harmonise with each other; that we are never confronted with a choice between multiple values; that the only choices we face in life are choices between a value and a disvalue; and that a single normative theory or ‘morality system’ such as utilitarianism can in principle, if not in practice, solve all issues in ethical life (Williams 1985). If there is something to the writer Kazuo Ishiguro’s observation that ‘at some level most of us [...] have a deep nostalgia for childhood, a time when the world seemed a kinder and nicer place’ (Ishiguro and Lawley 2002), it is monism that satisfies this nostalgia. Yet, pluralists argue, the comfort monism provides is and should be recognised as illusory because it betrays ‘our fidelity to our actual experience’ and prevents us from seeing things as they are as distinct from what we want them to be. ‘The world that we encounter in ordinary experience’, Berlin writes, ‘is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others’ (Berlin 2002, pp. 213–14). According to Berlin, one of the first thinkers to realise this and began to drive men and women out of their ‘comfortable beds of dogma’ was Machiavelli (Berlin 2013c, p. 14). His greatest achievement lies in his discovery of ‘the uncomfortable truth [...] that not all ultimate values are necessarily compatible with one another’ (Berlin 2013a, p. 89; see also Berlin 2013c, p. 33). Following Machiavelli’s lead, Berlin presents his readers with a stark choice: either to continue to flee from reality and remain in a monist cradle or to face reality as it is and reach moral, political, intellectual and psychological maturity.

Why *should* we agree with Berlin and his fellow pluralists? Why *should* we think that pluralists are mature and clear-sighted, while monists are immature and blind to reality? To persuade his audience, Berlin deploys several distinct lines of argument, including an extensive attack on value monism (by way of critically discussing positive liberty) and his brand of intellectual history as proxy for philosophical argument. These modes of persuasion are

certainly important aspects of Berlin's work, forming an essential part of what Jacob Levy calls the 'suggestive and imprecise but captivating way' in which Berlin recruited a generation of moral and political philosophers to the pluralist camp (Levy 2007, p. 23). By contrast, when it comes to *direct* argument in support of value pluralism, it is the use of concrete examples or cases that emerge as particularly forceful in Berlin's work. For example, he asks his readers to imagine a society where some parents want to introduce 'a uniform system of general primary and secondary education' to promote social mobility, while others are opposed to this policy because they want to retain greater familial control over children's education (Berlin 2002, p. 45). How should those competing claims be adjudicated? Similarly, and more tragically, Berlin asks us to imagine 'an ordinary enough problem in a hospital', where a large number of patients suffer from kidney diseases and yet only some of them may receive sufficient treatment due to the lack of medical resources. Who should be given priority in this situation? (Magee 1982, pp. 17–18) Presented with concrete cases of moral conflict such as these, Berlin's readers are expected to be compelled to accept the central pluralist claim that the conflict of values is sometimes insoluble even in a decent society such as post-war Britain with its welfare state and NHS hospitals.

Let me be more precise about the *type* of examples or cases Berlin uses to support value pluralism. The first thing to note is that his examples are less imaginative than many of the imaginary cases in modern normative philosophy such as Philippa Foot's trolley and Judith Jarvis Thomson's violinist (Foot 1967; Thomson 1971). Of course, Berlin stylises his examples to leave factual ambiguities aside and keep readers' attention focused on the message of his cases. But if 'a case is an abstraction, an edited version of a fact' (Davis 2012, p. 3), Berlin's cases are only minimally edited. This does not mean that he is in principle opposed to the use of imaginary cases in philosophical argument in general or in moral argument in particular. In fact, he sometimes invents highly imaginative cases such as the wood-worshipper—a person who worships trees 'only because they are made of wood'—and the pin-pusher—a person who enjoys 'pushing pins into other people' for fun, while being utterly blind to the pain his pin-

pushing causes them—for various purposes (Berlin, 2013c, p. 12; Berlin 2013b, p. 315). Yet, when he discusses moral dilemmas specifically, Berlin seeks to make his cases ‘ordinary enough’ (Magee 1982, p. 17). He does so because the chief function of *this* set of examples is ‘illustrative’, that is, to render his theory of value pluralism ‘clearer and more understandable’ (Brun 2017). To take the example of the resource-scarce hospital, Berlin introduces it not to determine how the limited medical resources ought to be allocated but to show *vividly* that the scarcity of resources gives rise to a moral conflict, that multiple ethical principles are involved in the conflict, and that those principles are so irreconcilable with each other that the conflict may not be resolved without significant sacrifice. In other words, the example is designed to show what an insoluble moral dilemma might *look like in practice*. As George Crowder writes, ‘pluralists typically argue that incommensurability is borne out by our everyday, pervasive and persistent experience of conflict among values’ (Crowder 2002, p. 69).

Of course, Berlin is a famously unsystematic thinker and his numerous reiterations of the pluralist thesis do not always square with each other. Those inspired by his work have consequently developed different versions of value pluralism, and some are more pessimistic than others about the (in)solubility of moral conflict. For example, Gray takes Berlin to endorse a strong value pluralism at the heart of which is ‘the idea of radical choice—choice without criteria, grounds, or principles’ (Gray 2013, p. 83); whereas Crowder repudiates Gray’s interpretation, presents Berlin as ‘a liberal rationalist’, and takes him to defend a ‘moderate’ pluralism ‘that allows at least some room for rational choice’ (Crowder 2004, p. 176, p. 139). There are many other points of disagreement among Berlinian pluralists, whose internal dispute has given rise to a small academic industry over the last few decades. The details of this debate do not need to concern us here. The aim of this essay is not to revisit the well-trodden ground but to provide a new, wider and comparative perspective on the forty-year-old value pluralist movement. Seen from this angle, what is worth highlighting is the movement’s overall commitment to mature and sensible pessimism, resulting from its commitment to realism,

although individual contributors to the movement disagree with each other as to what such pessimism exactly means and entails (see further Crowder 2004, pp. 172–76).

Let me now turn to another illustrative case discussed by Berlin. He asks his interviewer Steven Lukes to consider the following situation:

you are a leader of some Jews in Lithuania [under Nazi occupation]. A Nazi official comes to you from the Gestapo and he says, ‘You are in charge of the Jews here, they trust you, you manage their lives, you are the head man of the Jewish community, appointed by us. Give us their names and addresses, we wish to know this. Of course we could discover this without you, but it would take us longer, and that would be rather a nuisance for us. If you do this for us, we’ll let you go, and you can take seventy-two other people with you. If you don’t do it, you know what will happen, to you as well as to all the others’ (Berlin and Lukes 1998, p. 107).

What should this community leader—call him L—do in this situation? Berlin considers various options available to L and concludes that all options are equally and fundamentally inadequate. In essence, the available options fall into one of the two categories. One is to refuse to comply with the Nazi officer’s demand and die by either execution or suicide; the other is to cooperate with the Nazi officer with the aim of saving at least some innocent souls.⁵ The former course of action is worthwhile to the extent that it would allow L to commit no wrong and to defend his dignity to death. Yet it is not a satisfactory option because L would lose his life and miss the opportunity potentially to save seventy-two people. The second course of action is similarly unsatisfactory. Although it is worthwhile to the extent that it might allow L to save at least some innocent souls, it is morally deficient to the extent that L would have to let himself be used as

⁵ I follow the important distinction, introduced by Trunk (1996, pp. 570–75), between semi-voluntary ‘collaboration’ and thoroughly coercive ‘cooperation’. Berlin’s discussion here strictly concerns cooperation.

an instrument of evil. It would, in other words, invite the question, ‘When is the lesser evil worse than the greater?’ (Caute 2013, p. 270)⁶ In short, each of the two types of possible responses available to L embodies *some* good but neither overweighs the other, and choosing one option necessarily entails a loss of the good represented by the other options. Needless to say, the *ideal* solution is to change the situation altogether so that the options available to L will change. If, for example, his community is able militarily to defend themselves until the Nazis are defeated, L’s dilemma is resolved and tragedy removed. But during the Nazi occupation the situation was unchangeable *as a matter of fact*. Consequently, L was confronted with what Holocaust historians call a ‘choiceless choice’, in which ‘critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of “abnormal” response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim’s own choosing’ (Langer 1982, p. 72). In Berlin’s lingo, L’s situation was tragic and there was no way out.

What is this example supposed to show? Or, rather, what does Berlin want us to learn from the example? The first thing to note is that he does not consider moral dilemmas in the context of the Holocaust, such as L’s, to be *sui generis*. Of course, L’s is an extreme case that does not arise in more ordinary circumstances. But it is in relevant respects comparable to other, and more mundane, cases such as the one occurring in a resource-scarce NHS hospital. Both L and the nephrologist are, albeit in very different ways, faced with the same *type* of dilemma and of ‘the agony of choice’ (Berlin 2002, p. 12). Both are burdened with the task of choosing between good and good or between evil and evil rather than between good and evil. The general pluralistic structure of human value thus manifests itself in both L’s situation and the nephrologist’s, although it does so far more violently and tragically in the former than in the latter. To say this is by no means to minimise the extremity of the Holocaust. Rather, it is to propose a meta-ethical perspective properly to appreciate the nature of moral conflict arising in that exceptionally terrible context. In fact, one of the critical roles of Berlin’s pluralist

⁶ This, according to Caute (2013, p. 270), was ‘one of Berlin’s favourite topics for light-hearted debate’.

perspective is to reject the moralistic view, often attributed to Arendt,⁷ that victims of the Holocaust such as L still had meaningful options and could choose between good and evil—between, for example, resistance and collaboration. This is a false view, according to Berlin, and his pluralist perspective tells us why it is a false view.

One further aspect of value pluralism is worth highlighting. According to its proponents, what value pluralism aims to capture is not a sociological fact of modern life but ‘the actual structure of the normative universe’ more generally (Galston 2002, p. 30). While value conflict and moral dilemmas may appear more frequently in modern democratic societies characterised by ‘the fact of pluralism’ (Rawls 1996), the truth of value pluralism is not time- or space-specific but remains constant in both modern and pre-modern times. That is why Berlin briefly considers and yet dismisses the possibility that his value pluralist ideas are ‘only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilisation’ (Berlin 2002, p. 217). Value pluralism is about the human condition, period, not a description of some historical or sociological facts (See further Benhabib 2018, pp. 164–84). Indeed, what distinguishes value pluralists from non-pluralists is their willingness to commit themselves to value pluralism in ‘comprehensive’ terms. Although they are aware that value pluralism ‘is itself the object of reasonable disagreement in our culture’ (Larmore 1996, p. 155), they are not thereby deterred from defending the objective truth of value pluralism. On their view, the kind of value conflict that L’s example illustrates is not unique to the extraordinary context of the Holocaust or to the historical context of modernity. Rather, the possibility of a tragic value conflict ‘can never wholly be eliminated from *human* life’ (Berlin 2002, p. 214, emphasis added).

⁷ Berlin subscribes to this moralistic reading of Arendt, as evidenced by Berlin and Lukes (1998, pp. 107–8). Whether this reading is correct has been a central issue in the so-called ‘Eichmann controversy’. For further discussion see my forthcoming book provisionally entitled ‘Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin’.

It is this moral objectivism and cognitivism that neither Camus nor Arendt are ready to accept, despite (or because of) their willingness to be realistic about the lived experiences of moral and political life in the twentieth century.

Camus and Realism

In March 1946, Camus embarked on a US tour and gave a public lecture in New York. His focus was on the ‘the spiritual experience’ that his generation in France and Europe had gone through during the first half of the twentieth century. At the heart of this experience was Nazi occupation and World War II. Camus and his contemporaries ‘entered the war as one enters Hell’ and ‘had to live the most heartbreaking of contradictions’ (Camus 1946–47, pp. 20–21). Those experiences gave rise to the title of his lecture: a ‘human crisis’. By this Camus meant a thoroughgoing moral crisis, which he illustrated by telling examples. One example is reminiscent of Berlin’s L and goes as follows:

In Greece, after an action by the underground forces, a German officer is preparing to shoot three brothers he has taken as hostages. The old mother of the three begs for mercy and he consents to spare one of her sons, but on the condition that she herself designates which one. When she is unable to decide, the soldiers get ready to fire. At last she chooses the eldest, because he has a family dependent on him, but by the same token she condemns the two other sons, as the German officer intends (Camus 1946–47, p. 21).

In this story the tormented mother faces what might be seen as a paradigmatic example of choiceless choice. She is not allowed to bring about the best outcome, that is, to have all of her three sons saved. Nor is she allowed to refrain from choosing altogether. ‘When she is unable to decide, the soldiers get ready to fire’. She is coerced into confronting a moral dilemma comparable to that of Berlin’s L. In this situation the Greek mother tries to ‘choose’ the least

bad option by relying on a kind of direct consequentialism and weighing the foreseeable consequences of each of her son's death. This reasoning at least yields an answer: given the dependence of the eldest brother's family on him, allowing him to be killed is worse than allowing either of his (presumably single) brothers to be killed. Camus thinks that the inadequacy of this response is self-evident—so much so that he does not say a word to explain why it is inadequate. But a detailed discussion of this inadequacy would be beside the point because Camus is not interested in criticising consequentialism. Rather, he is concerned to describe an instance of 'spiritual experience' that illustrates the moral crisis his generation has experienced. Consequentialist or otherwise, moral reasoning in the Greek mother's situation would indicate either the desirability of an option that is not within her reach, or the highly debatable comparative advantage of one option over the alternatives in a situation where all available options are utterly inadequate. Whatever the mother decides to do, the little gain she makes entails tragic sacrifices that cannot be offset or compensated for by the gain. The goodness of having one son saved emphatically does not cancel out the badness of having the other sons killed.

To those of us trained in analytic ethics, this may sound like a classic value pluralist story. But Camus does not see the truth of value pluralism in his example of the Greek mother. Instead, he sees the radical contingency of the world, which is an important aspect of what the writer famously calls 'absurdity'. Here it is revealing to turn to Camus's 1956 novel, *The Fall*, in which he reiterates the story of the Greek mother and yet changes some details to dramatize the moral of the story. Gone is the mother's consequentialist reasoning.⁸ Added instead is a sentence on the unintelligibility of the world. Camus now has the protagonist of the novel, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, say:

⁸ The mother's consequentialist reasoning is also omitted in another telling of the story in *The Rebel* (Camus 2000, p. 134).

Do you know that in my little village, during a reprisal operation, a German officer courteously asked an old woman to please choose which of her two sons would be shot as a hostage? Choose!—can you imagine that? That one? No, this one. And see him go. Let's not dwell on it, but believe me, Monsieur, any sort of surprise is possible (Camus 2004, pp. 281–82).

Clamence does not tell *to whom* 'any sort of surprise is possible'. Camus too shows considerable ambiguity on this question, shifting between a 'we' of his generation and a 'we' of humanity as a whole. On the one hand, Camus tells a time- and space-relative story as gleaned from the lived experiences of his generation in Europe. Having spent their formative years in the Continent's age of catastrophe, this generation lived in a surreal world in which choiceless choices and other abnormal experiences occurred regularly to annihilate 'the traditional morality of our society' (Camus 1946–47, p. 20). Estranged and disoriented, Camus and his contemporaries 'had to adjust their personal position to the realities of murder and terror' (Camus 1946–47, p. 20). It is *to them* that 'any sort of surprise is possible'. Camus sometimes supports this idea with a kind of Weberian historical analysis, observing that the traditional morality came to be slowly undermined with the advent of modernity until it finally broken down with the two World Wars. Germany's fate is symptomatic of a pan-European crisis of modernity: 'Deprived of the morality of Goethe, Germany chose, and submitted to, the ethics of the gang' (Camus 2000, p. 129). Camus thus sometimes presents himself as an analyst of the *condition de l'homme moderne*.⁹

On the other hand, he sometimes tells a less time- and space-relative story, suggesting that absurdity is an essential part of the *human* condition. Lived experiences in twentieth-century Europe are still significant to the extent that they deprived Camus's generation of the false certainty on which their parents and grandparents had been able to rely to live 'normally' and contentedly. No longer capable of falling back on such false certainty, his generation is

⁹ This, needless to say, is the title of the French translation of Arendt's *The Human Condition*.

forced to witness the world's absurdity face-to-face: 'any sort of surprise is possible'. This makes them disoriented. But, by the same token, it places them in an epistemically privileged position to gain greater access to the human condition. Thus, Camus sometimes claims that his work is not only a diagnosis of modernity and his century but also commentary on 'existence in general'. He writes in his carnet entry of December 1942, discussing his plans for his 1947 masterpiece, *The Plague*:

I want to express by the means of the plague the suffocation from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. At the same time, I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give the image of those whose share in this war has been that of reflection, silence—and moral suffering (Camus 1966, p. 35).

Camus's ambiguity to some extent resonates with Isaiah Berlin's cautionary remarks on 'our declining capitalist civilisation' (Berlin 2002, p. 217). Just as Berlin wonders, if momentarily, if his observations of value conflict tell something about this particular civilisation rather than about the human condition in general, Camus wonders if his observations about the world's unintelligibility reveal not so much 'existence in general' as specifically European modernity with all its peculiarities and contingencies. But the similarity between the pluralist and the existentialist ends there, for Camus is epistemologically more sceptical than Berlin. While the British philosopher appeals to historical and anthropological studies to substantiate, within his empiricist framework, value pluralism as 'a necessary, not a contingent, truth' (Berlin 2002, p. 215), the French writer devotes much of his effort to reflecting on modern and contemporary European experiences, refraining from speculating on deeper conceptual issues. 'Between history and the eternal', Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 'I have chosen history because I like certainties'—or, more accurately, because Camus wants to 'risk nothing that is hypothetical' (Camus 2004, p. 562, p. 541). From a

Camusian perspective, the pluralist talk about the objective structure of human value is based on an unwarranted faith in the power of reason, which claims to know what is unknowable by experiential data. Repudiating such a faith, Camus seeks to rely solely on ‘lucid reason *noting its limits*’ (Camus 2004, p. 532, emphasis added). What matters to Camus is that a human crisis is occurring here and now. Whether it is an ineliminable aspect of human life is a question about which one can only hypothesise.

Of course, there are similarities as well as differences between Camus and Berlin. The pair shared, among other things, a keen interest in actual moral dilemmas arising in the totalitarian context. The existentialist and the pluralist are equally shocked by the sheer fact that choiceless choices confronted a number of innocent ordinary men and women, who could be and sometimes were their neighbours, friends or relatives. Not for nothing did Berlin praise Camus’s *Plague* and *The Outsider* in the following terms: ‘These works seem to me to have made a profound impression on the moral ideas of a very great many people, and rightly so—far greater, in my view, than even the collected works of his opponent Sartre’.¹⁰ Nonetheless, as Berlin and Camus reflected on what to learn from the disorienting experiences of their century, they reached contrasting conclusions. Whereas the former sees the truth of value pluralism in real-world moral dilemmas such as L’s, the latter sees no comparable truth in similarly tragic dilemmas such as the Greek mother’s. When Camus asks why a human crisis should exist in the world, he hardly sees the actual structure of the normative universe revealing itself to give him an explanation. Rather, the writer realises that ‘the world itself replies with an enigmatic silence’ (Hayden 2016, p. 29). The world in which Camus finds himself is one ‘where everything is given and nothing is explained’ (Camus 2004, p. 603). This realisation turns him into a thinker of absurdity rather than a value pluralist. Yet this does not mean that the existentialist is less realistic than the value pluralist. Rather, they reach different conclusions as they in their own ways attempt to observe ‘fidelity to our actual experience’.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin to Miriam Gross, 26 November 1993. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Berlin 239, fols. 195–196; cited here with the permission of the trustees of Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

Arendt, Realism and Pessimism

Twentieth-century experiences of political disasters and moral disorientation are no less central to Arendt's work than to Berlin's or Camus's. In fact, she criticises a number of her contemporary philosophers, writers and intellectuals for failing to face those experiences squarely without minimising their novelty and underestimating their significance. Having been unable fully to recognise that the emergence of totalitarianism 'has broken the continuity of Occidental history' (Arendt 1968, p. 26), most of her contemporaries, according to her, rely on tradition-bound concepts and categories to explain away unprecedented events such as Hitler's leadership and Eichmann's 'banal' evil. Of course, some have failed better than others, and Arendt counts French existentialists among the least tradition-bound and muddle-headed. Yet, she continues, even they do not adequately 'own up to the experience of horror and take it seriously' (Arendt 1994, p. 445). Aspiring to be different, she sets herself with the task of amplifying French existentialists' readiness to face up to the burden of our time and to 'learn everything from scratch [...] without the help of categories and general rules under which to subsume our experiences' (Arendt 2003, p. 25; see further Mrovlje 2019, pp. 100–3). On her view, *she* is the one that genuinely seeks to be realistic about the complexity of moral and political life in the modern world.

The Origins of Totalitarianism is Arendt's most systematic attempt at understanding what she considers to be *the* central experience of the modern world: totalitarianism. Of particular relevance in the present context are the final two chapters of this highly complicated book,¹¹ in which the author analyses specifically totalitarian domination—'total domination'—as distinct from more traditional forms of oppression. She analyses it in terms of gradual dehumanization of human beings and identifies three stages of domination that together transform men and women into 'living corpses' (Arendt 1973, p. 447–53). Each stage represents the destruction of something fundamental that makes human life human. The first

¹¹ I mean the final two chapters of the third edition of *Origins*, that is, 'Totalitarianism in Power' and 'Ideology and Terror', the latter originally published as Arendt (1953).

preparatory stage is the killing of ‘the juridical person in man’ or, more idiomatically, disenfranchisement (Arendt 1973, p. 447). Imposed on a relatively normal, non-totalitarian society, this layer of domination deprives targeted victims of their citizenship, their legally guaranteed rights and institutionally recognised places in the world, making them vulnerable to further domination. The final stage, which occurs strictly inside concentration camps, is the elimination of spontaneity and individuality by means of ‘an absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies’ (Arendt 1973, p. 454). What is left of a person subjected to this cruellest of violence is ‘Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions’ (Arendt 1973, p. 456). And in-between those two stages lies the destruction of the moral capacity to tell right from wrong. Once one goes through this second stage of total domination, one’s conscience is destroyed and one may be absorbed into a totalitarian system in which ‘the distinguishing line between persecutor and persecuted, between the murderer and his victim, is constantly blurred’ (Arendt 1973, p. 453). One may, for example, be coerced into playing a role in camp administration, thereby getting implicated in one’s enemies’ crimes. The second stage thus serves as a bridge between the preparatory and final stages of total domination, between a relatively normal society, where a totalitarian movement begins its programme of domination, and concentration camps, where the programme is completed.

It is in analysing this second, and specifically moral, aspect of total domination that Arendt introduces her examples of moral dilemma. This is entirely appropriate because, on her view, it is by forcing their victims to agonise over moral dilemmas that totalitarian masters destroy the victims’ capacity to tell right from wrong. Appropriating Camus’s ‘Human Crisis’, Arendt writes:

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family—how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder

and murder. Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed? (Arendt 1973, p. 452)

The concluding question is a rhetorical one in that Arendt's point is precisely that moral dilemmas such as the Greek mother's are insoluble. On this there is no disagreement between Arendt, Camus and Berlin. Where they disagree concerns what conclusion to draw from observing such insolubility. As we have seen, the conclusion Berlin draws is the truth of value pluralism, which explains the precise sense in which tragic moral dilemmas such as L's are tragic. Camus, for his part, sees the unintelligibility of the world underpinning the sense of moral disorientation pervasive among his contemporaries. The conclusion Arendt draws differs from both. She insists on the *artificiality* of tragic moral dilemmas, emphasising that the creation of choiceless choices is itself an outcome of totalitarian design. The totalitarian masters impose moral dilemmas on their victims with the explicit aim of murdering 'the moral person in man' (Arendt 1973, p. 451). Furthermore, as I have discussed, Arendt locates the artificial creation of moral dilemmas in a larger process of total domination with surgical accuracy; this second stage of domination is preceded by disenfranchisement on the one hand and followed by the physical destruction of human individuality and spontaneity on the other hand. For Arendt, tragic moral dilemmas such as the Greek mother's have little bearing on the human condition or on modernity per se. Rather, it reveals a central aspect of the unprecedented phenomenon of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

It is important to note here that Arendt conceptualises totalitarianism in unusually strict terms. Not only does she exclude fascist Italy, imperial Japan and other such regimes from the totalitarian family and reserve the 'totalitarian' label for Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. She also argues that these two countries were not 'truly' or 'fully' totalitarian in much of their bloody histories. Arendt's remarks on this issue are not free of inconsistencies and ambiguities. All things considered, however, she believes that Nazi Germany became properly totalitarian

only after the beginning of World War II, while Soviet Russia was no longer totalitarian once Stalin died in 1953. In other words, Nazism had not established ‘a truly totalitarian rule’ even at the time of the Kristallnacht in November 1938 (Arendt 1973, p. 311); nor was the Soviet Union totalitarian when Khrushchev sent tanks to Hungary to crush the 1956 uprising. Whether Arendt defines totalitarianism too narrowly is a matter that continues to divide historians today. This issue does not need to concern us here. The relevant point in the present context is that her somewhat idiosyncratic conception of totalitarianism decisively shapes her perspective on reality and experience. As she sees it, ‘fidelity to our actual experience’ first and foremost requires a refusal to blur the boundary between novel totalitarianism and its traditional precursors, a refusal to gloss over ‘the empty space between the no longer and the not yet’ (Arendt 1994, p. 159), so that actual experiences such as the appearance of Nazi camps are not subsumed under tradition-bound concepts and categories such as slavery and massacres that have been commonplace since antient times.

From an Arendtian point of view, then, Camus’s decision to let the medieval plague stand for Nazi occupation is highly misleading, although, so far as we know, she did not criticise him directly on this score (See further Isaac 1992, pp.15–17). The issue is not that, as Sartre pointed out, Nazi occupation was not a natural phenomenon like the outbreak of a plague but an act ‘by human beings, who did what they did because of the kind of society that human beings had created’ (Gerassi 2009, p. 115). Rather, the Arendtian objection concerns Camus’s juxtaposition of *medieval* plague with *twentieth-century* totalitarianism, for comparing these is likely to minimise the latter’s novelty, representing an unrepresented event as though we had been familiar with it. A similar objection may be raised to Berlin’s pluralist account of value conflict. While it is not anachronistic to see structural similarities between L’s moral dilemma during the Holocaust and the nephrologist’s moral dilemma in a resource-scarce NHS hospital, such comparison, in Arendt’s view, would amount to a false analogy between the familiar and the unprecedented. Of course, one may criticise Arendt’s conception of totalitarianism as *too* narrow and argue that she overstates the unprecedentedness of totalitarianism. This Berlin in

fact did, pointing out, for example, that Eichmann's evil is comparable to that of 'Inquisitors in sixteenth-century Spain, who, Herzen says, probably went to bed with quiet consciences and the smell of roasted human flesh still in their nostrils' (Berlin 2015, p. 298). For Arendt, Eichmann is a 'new type of criminal' (Arendt 1965, p. 276); for Berlin, he is not. Again, historians continue to disagree on the novelty of Eichmann's crimes and this debate does not need to be settled in this essay. The relevant point here is that 'fidelity to our actual experience' is conceptualised variously by Arendt, Camus and Berlin, depending on their differing senses of (dis)continuity among a diversity of contexts in which moral dilemmas arise. In other words, they hardly disagree on the general importance of being realistic about lived experiences of moral and political life; yet they disagree with each other as to what being realistic means in practice.

Finally, Arendt's decision to reserve the totalitarian label for Nazism and Stalinism *at their most violent* has an important corollary for the question of pessimism. Consistent with her strict separation between totalitarianism proper on the one hand and 'traditional' tyranny, authoritarianism and dictatorship on the other hand, Arendt considers fully developed totalitarian regimes to possess invincible domineering capacity. Her well known theory of action with its emphasis on the significance of acting *before it is too late* is accompanied by a deeply pessimistic idea that once totalitarian rule is securely established, the prospect of resistance from within is virtually reduced to nil (See further Aharony 2015). Simply put, living corpses do not resist. This view starkly contrasts with Camus's portrayal of Bernard Rieux, the protagonist of *The Plague*. Of course, Rieux and others in plague-struck Oran are confronted by 'terror and its relentless onslaughts', including the tormenting death of an innocent child and the hasty dumping of mutilated bodies into death-pits (Camus 2004, p. 271). Yet Oranians are by no means dehumanized in Arendt's sense. On the contrary, 'refusing to bow down to pestilences', they 'strive their utmost to be healers', although they hardly have the power to contain the plague by themselves (Camus 2004, p. 271). Oranians thus demonstrate the quintessential Camusian virtues of revolt, solidarity and the affirmation of the worth of human

life, and Rieux emerges as an exemplary Camusian hero embodying ‘the everyday courage of the self to carry on’ (Medina 2008, p. 288). From an Arendtian perspective, however, this is an unduly optimistic vision, based on the failure to appreciate the totality of total domination. According to Arendt, Camus’s effort to re-assert ‘the old virtues in the spirit of a desperate defiance of their senselessness [...] bear the hallmark of a heroic futility’ (Arendt 1994, 438–39). Notwithstanding his professed willingness to face the human crisis as it is, Camus on Arendt’s view blinks when confronted with the depth of the crisis.

Berlin is on the latter side in this Arendt/Camus divide. He certainly does not wish to understate the harshness of totalitarian society, highlighting ‘the most appalling and degrading conditions’ under which totalitarian subjects are forced to live (Berlin 2004, p. 117). Yet, as in the case of Camus, the severity of totalitarian oppression as Berlin describes it falls short of Arendtian total domination. On the one hand, Arendt proposes the ‘medieval pictures of Hell’ as the most appropriate image to characterise total domination (Arendt 1973, p. 447). On the other hand, Berlin uses a much more benign image of ‘a long dark tunnel’ to characterise totalitarian society (Berlin 2004, p. 118). Consider the differing implications of these two images. If totalitarianism is like Hell, as Arendt says it is, those inside are expected to suffer ‘eternal’ or ‘unending’ torments (Dante 1996, p. 55). If it is like a tunnel, as Berlin says it is, those inside can reasonably expect to see an exit. Given this difference, it is hardly surprising that Berlin, *unlike* Arendt and *like* Camus, scarcely sees totalitarian subjects as living corpses awaiting death. Rather, he describes them as human beings who, albeit under severely adverse conditions, live eminently human lives ‘with moments of gaiety and enthusiasm, and of actual happiness’ (Berlin 2004, p. 117). Most importantly in the present context, totalitarian subjects, according to Berlin, build negative solidarity ‘born of common suffering’, rather like Camus’s Oranians who are brought together by the shared threat of a deadly plague (Berlin 2004, p. 117). True, Berlin is not quite as optimistic as Camus when it comes to the viability of solidaristic action under severely oppressive conditions. His negative solidarity, unlike its Camusian counterpart, is mostly confined to the private sphere, where the oppressed *endure together*.

Nonetheless, Berlin hardly shares Arendt's view that 'no space for [...] private life' is left under totalitarian rule (Arendt 1973, p. 474). On the contrary, it is by withdrawing into the sphere of privacy that totalitarian subjects retain their humanity and preserve the strength to wait to see the end of the totalitarian tunnel. Despite his professed pessimism, then, Berlin is more optimistic when it comes to resilience, if not resistance, under totalitarian rule. Oppressed though they are, totalitarian subjects on Berlin's view do not need to 'abandon every hope' (Dante 1996, p. 55). Quite the opposite, it is reasonable for them to echo 'the proverbial Russian fatalism: "This too will pass"' (Baehr 2010, p. 55).

Conclusion

Since its emergence in the late twentieth century, value pluralism has been advocated by philosophical dissidents, protesting at various ethical and political outlooks that tacitly rely on unexamined monist presumptions. In so doing, they have not only grouped together under the generic category of monism a heterogeneous group of ideas from utilitarian morality to Marxian utopianism. They have also constructed a powerful and yet one-sided history of moral and political philosophy as a competition between immature monism and mature pluralism, the former allegedly incapable of doing justice to the complexity of moral and political life, and the latter purportedly capable of overcoming this critical defect. While this historiography has served the pluralists' goal of subverting monist dominance well, it has the downside of obscuring various theoretical positions that do not fall into either the pluralist or monist camp, conveying the wrong impression that pluralists are the only intellectual adults seeking to bring philosophy down to earth. As I have shown, however, pluralists are by no means the only ones to pursue this goal. Camus and Arendt, among others, also attempted to form new ideas attuned to the complexity of moral and political life at a time when real-world experiences such as the tragic dilemma of the Greek mother seemed to them (as well as to Berlin) to have rendered traditional morality obsolete. That neither Camus nor Arendt became a value pluralist as a result of their quest for such new ideas by no means indicates their immaturity. It shows, rather, that

‘fidelity to our actual experience’ can be conceptualised in a multiplicity of ways, entailing varying degrees of pessimism. To recognise this is not to refute (or affirm) the truth of value pluralism. Nonetheless, it indicates that the self-image of value pluralists is inaccurate as well as self-serving and that their commitment to realism and resultant pessimism is not uniquely mature as they would have us believe.

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