

Discussion: Comments on G. Crowder, *The Philosophy of History: A Value-pluralist Response*

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Value Pluralism and Philosophy of History

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Abstract: In my reply to George Crowder's criticism of my essay on the Soviet Revolution in the last issue of *Analyse & Kritik*, I discuss two problems: the nature of a reasonable value pluralism and the relation between ethics and philosophy of history. Concerning the first, I insist on the necessity of an objective rank ordering of values; with regard to the second, I side with Kant, who builds philosophy of history on ethics, and reject the Marxist idea that ethics is itself grounded in philosophy of history.

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George Crowder's thorough critique (2017) of my essay (2017) deeply honors me. Needless to say, I am particularly gratified to see that concerning the concrete ethical appreciation of the Soviet revolution we vastly agree. This is not so, however, concerning the meta-ethical stance on which our judgements are based. On the one hand, this is consoling: It shows that people of good will can agree when discussing momentous political questions even if their meta-ethical convictions vary. On the other hand, it is likely that, in some areas, meta-ethical differences lead to quite different evaluations, and so it is not only the intrinsic intellectual merit of meta-ethical reflection but also the desire to forge a consensus on concrete ethical questions that leads me to answer his challenge.

My answer is complicated by the fact that not all the opinions that he ascribes to me are really mine. In fact, concerning both meta-ethics and the relation of ethics to the philosophy of history there is more agreement between us than he believes. So a large part of my answer is simply to develop my position in greater detail than was possible in the earlier essay, a position stated more extensively in other works (mainly in my largest book, *Morals and Politics*), but which in my article I simply had to presuppose. I shall signal both the convergence and the differences with Crowder's own approach. I must, however, abstract from the question whether his ascriptions of certain tenets to Hegel, Marx, or Rosenstock-Huussy

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are always convincing; for there is no way to tackle this additional hermeneutical issue in the space allotted me. I shall proceed in two steps: First, I shall discuss the axiological issue of how a legitimate value pluralism has to be conceived; second, I shall develop my conception of the foundational relations between ethics and philosophy of history.

I do not want, and never wanted, to found ethics on the philosophy of history. To be ethical in my eyes consists first in grasping an ideal realm of values and norms. These values and norms are not valid because they are, or will be, historically realized, but they ought to be historically realized because they are valid. The irreducibility of the ideal realm to factual preferences is the reason while I insist on speaking about *ideal* values, which have to be sharply distinguished from the social values studied by sociologists like Max Weber, which represent norms of behavior for the members of a certain community (see Hösle 2004, 70ff.). The Nazi party had its set of values, such as racial purity and the expansion of the *Lebensraum* for the German people, but these values were not ideally valid. I think that on this question Crowder and I are fundamentally in agreement, because he separates his pluralism “from relativists, for whom plurality fixes on perspectives rather than objective goods” (2017, 234). What the nature of this ‘objectivity’ is and how we can access it epistemically is a difficult issue, where we may well disagree; but there is no way to tackle it here. Second, I myself am a value pluralist—even if the philosophers that inspired my special branch of value pluralism do not include Isaiah Berlin, whom I admire mainly as a historian of ideas, but Hegel and Max Scheler, who agree on the necessity of material values and are committed to a rank ordering of them. Against Kant’s formalism and the utilitarian hedonistic monism I insist on the necessity of acknowledging a plurality of values and on the impossibility of transforming qualitatively heterogeneous goods and values into strictly metrical values with Archimedean property (2004, 118). Furthermore, I reject as fallacious the ideal that everyone should unite all virtues in his person. This is not just unfeasible. I argue that in such a world plurality as well as the virtue of acknowledging without envy others’ virtues precluded to oneself would be missing; so the ideal of uniting all the virtues itself is even inconsistent. On the cultural level, I analogously dismiss the ideal of a single world culture and defend the irreducible plurality of cultures (2004, 181f.; cf. 895f.).

However, the value pluralism I defend has two constraints, one of which is shared by Crowder, the other of which I am less sure he shares. The value pluralism we both defend is—unlike Nietzsche’s radical pluralism—universalistic in nature: “The universals can be seen to qualify and discipline choices among incommensurables.” (234; see 237) This means, for example, that while we acknowledge the right of people to realize different values according to their talents and needs, this right holds for *every* person. The value of enjoying one’s superior power while

depriving another person of her rights—clearly something that motivates many people—cannot be ideally valid. Kant was wrong while teaching that the principle of universalizability is sufficient to develop moral norms; but he remains right that it is a necessary condition. Thus, only a value pluralism that can be integrated into a Kantian framework can be acceptable. The second constraint concerns what Crowder calls the lack of commensurability. If this only means that there is no way of expressing the values of everything as multiples of a basic unit, I agree. Sometimes, however, I have the impression that what Crowder has in mind is not so much the relation between 1 and $\sqrt{2}$ but between 1 and i . But I must insist that the relation of ideal preference be both transitive and connected.¹ For only if two values are in principle comparable, does it make sense to discuss their relative rank—while the question whether a given real or a given imaginary number is larger than the other is meaningless, of course with the exception of 0. But does this commitment not have the consequence, abhorred by both of us, that everyone should follow the same values? Of course not. The musically talented person should pursue musical values, the philosophically gifted one philosophical investigation, because only in this manner each can increase the presence of ideal values in the world. The parent may identify with his child's football team (235)—as long as he recognizes the same right to the parents of children in the opposite team, and as long as he does not tamper with evidence so that the referee favors his own child. Still, the complexity of the rank ordering of different combinations of values—a complexity connected to George Edward Moore's 'principle of organic wholes'—as well as the different degree of allegiance that commits us to certain persons more than to others may well lead to conflicts that cannot be solved rationally. In my value theory there is ample place for the tragic and its pain (117ff.), stressed so well by Bernard Williams, to whom Crowder points (2017, 228). But I do claim that many, if not most value conflicts can indeed find a solution in a rank ordering—which often enough is obvious: human life, for example, is to be valued more highly than property. And I maintain that even the experience of the tragic is possible only because the normative preference relation is connected.

Even less am I committed to the belief that a political system that is on the whole superior should be introduced everywhere as soon as possible. Crowder is right that there are cultural presuppositions of liberalism; where they are not socially instantiated, liberalism cannot work.² But Crowder is also right when he

¹ Hösle 2004, 117; cf. analogously 78ff. on the relation between moral values proper and aesthetic or religious values. A relation R on a set S is connected if and only if $\forall a, b \in S: a \neq b \Rightarrow (a, b) \in R \vee (b, a) \in R$.

² This explains why I, unlike Crowder, do not want to exclude that for some agrarian societies the socialist way toward modernization was more natural than the liberal way would have been—not

maintains that this cannot mean that the liberal doctrine of human rights has no relevance for cultures still missing those presuppositions (235). The question of how to introduce a universalist ethics into cultures that are not yet open to it is a complex issue of applied political ethics. Nothing in my reflections on this issue (2004, 779ff., 826ff.) verifies the suspicion that a commitment to some possible (in principle) ultimate rank ordering of values makes someone particularly inclined to violence. For violence destroys far too many values. In the whole, my discussion of the right to resistance is moderate (2004, 794ff.), but I do recognize the radical difference that exists between violations of the law within stable mores and such violations in times of radical change (2004, 822ff.). In such revolutionary times things get indeed much more difficult, and one of the reasons why I admire Rosenstock-Huussy (whom I did not yet know in 2004) is that his focus on revolutions gets at the historical epochs that are most challenging for moral reflection.

This leads to the problem of philosophy of history. While Auguste Comte and Karl Marx wanted to justify political norms by their ultimate triumph in an irresistible historical progress, I distinguish sharply between two philosophies of progress—a descriptive and a normative one. The latter's greatest theorist is Kant (2015, 207f.); and to him I am particularly indebted, unlike Crowder suggests (2017, 224). The normative theory states: We have a moral duty to work toward the overcoming of scourges of humanity, such as abject poverty, exploitation, and war. We know that these are grave evils, even if we don't stand at the end of history, which we shall never do, as Crowder rightly affirms (2017, 228). Even if I have never had the least sympathy for Marxism, with its materialism that I find inconsistent and its politically dangerous neglect of the lasting achievements of classical liberalism, I confess that I like even less the evaporation of the belief in the duty to work for progress and the awkward transformation of Marxists into postmodernists in the last decades of the twentieth century. (One argument for my thesis criticized by Crowder (2017, 332) that the Soviet threat increased Western nations' willingness to redistribute wealth is indeed that the disappearance of the Soviet Union led to the reemergence of particularly aggressive forms of laissez-faire capitalism in the West. But of course he is right that there were non-Marxist social thinkers—I mention Lorenz von Stein and Pope Leo XIII.)

because of its intrinsic merits but because it fitted better with the relevant cultures. I can only reiterate my agnosticism concerning the question of whether a non-socialist, liberal modernization would have been possible for Russia. Sergei Witte was an admirable representative of a possible alternative development but the fact that he was twice forced to resign fits well with Hegel's famous doctrine that events truly expressive of historical forces happen twice.

As much as I favor Kant's normative theory as the starting point, I do agree with Kant that it entails a serious effort to interpret what has already happened in human history as pointing, despite all tortuousness, toward progress (which is both scientific-technical and legal: 2004, 551ff.). For we work only for what we believe has a chance. Such an interpretation is not hopeless, as long as it avoids three elementary errors: First, it goes without saying that we do not know what the future will bring. A self-annihilation of humankind through nuclear wars following ecological catastrophes is doubtless possible; its probability has increased again in the last three years. I never excluded such an ending of human history; as an idealist, however, I argue for the continuation of mind in other species on other planets in the case of such a disaster (see 1998, 62ff.). Second, the progress is not linear; thus, one aim of my essay was to contradict Rosenstock-Huessy's interpretation of the Soviet revolution as a natural extension of the earlier revolutions. And, third, I do think that the cyclical theories of history have a point and can be integrated into a helicoid model of progress. There is the recurrence of cultural decline; and I am afraid that the late modernity through which we are living is such an epoch. No less important than Hegel for a comprehensive philosophy of history is Vico—and in commending Vico as a figure deserving great respect, I indeed agree with Crowder's teacher, Isaiah Berlin (see Höhle 2016).

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