

Discussion: Reply to V. Höhle, *Value Pluralism and Philosophy of History*

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Pluralism, Kant and Progress

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Abstract: Vittorio Höhle's reply helpfully clarifies his ethical position but raises three questions from a value-pluralist point of view. First, is the Kantian starting point he proposes a monist position that undercuts the value pluralism to which he says he is committed? Second, in what sense does he accept the central pluralist idea of the incommensurability of values? In particular, what kind of constraint does he believe this places on the rank ordering of values? The formulations he offers are ambiguous between allowing contextual ordering, which is widely endorsed by pluralists, and permitting a comprehensive order that applies in all cases, which most pluralists would reject. Third, Höhle's commitment to the cause of progress is admirable, but how can this be squared with pluralism? Here, I return to the broad approaches to the problem of pluralist ranking that I identified in my original reply to Höhle.

Keywords: Vittorio Höhle, value pluralism, Isaiah Berlin, Immanuel Kant, incommensurability, progress, liberalism, Bernard Williams

I thank Vittorio Höhle for his courteous and fair-minded rejoinder (Höhle 2018). I am happy to stand corrected as to the proper interpretation of his position; in particular I accept that he does not mean to ground ethics in the philosophy of history. As a consequence, I also accept that our respective views may be closer than I had believed. It is especially interesting to me that Höhle sees himself as a value pluralist.

However, I wish to highlight three principal points at which Höhle's remarks raise questions from a pluralist point of view: (1) his Kantian starting point; (2) his account of value incommensurability; (3) his insistence on the possibility of progress. I do not have ready-made and tidy answers to all of these questions. My hope is merely that by focusing on them we may advance the conversation.

First, Höhle states that, rather than commencing with the outcomes of history, his ethical view begins by "grasping an ideal realm of values and norms" (186).

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These are to be contrasted with both the accidents of history and “social values” that merely reflect the de facto norms of a particular society. Further, Höhle conceives of his foundational ideals as taking a Kantian form, in the sense that they must be universalizable: a right said to be valid for one person must be valid for all persons in the same circumstances.

The appeal to Kant raises issues. On the face of it, this looks problematic because Kant is usually regarded as an ethical monist, and so starting with Kant looks odd for someone who claims to be a value pluralist. The categorical imperative seems to be just the kind of super-value, or overriding decision procedure, that denies the deep plurality to which Berlin draws attention.

However, when Höhle speaks of the Kantian element of his view he refers only to ‘a Kantian framework’ rather than a wholly Kantian content. The universals that are said to be plural and incommensurable have a Kantian form in that they must be universalizable. But that leaves open the question of the content of the universals. Höhle explicitly denies that Kantian ‘formalism’ is capable of generating substantial norms—consistency alone does not tell us what we should be consistent about (187).

But in that case what are these norms and where do they come from? Höhle refers to ‘an ideal realm’, which hints at a form of Platonism. That is no doubt not what he intends. Presumably his foundational ideals, although not simply equivalent to historical outcomes, emerge through or are expressed in such outcomes. If so, this position is close to Berlin’s view that a universal ‘core’ of morality can be identified by a ‘quasi-empirical’ investigation that identifies moral “concepts and categories that dominate life and thought over a very large portion (even if not the whole) of recorded history” (Berlin 2002, 45). In similar terms, Höhle identifies “poverty, exploitation, and war” as generic evils always recognized as such by human beings (Höhle 2018, 188).

Höhle might also seem to be close to Berlin in that he says he is a value pluralist. Again, this is immediately surprising, given the strictures on Berlin in *Morals and Politics* (2004, 181). So, what kind of value pluralist is Höhle? On the face of it his pluralism seems to share two essential features with the Berlinian view: the idea that the most fundamental human values are “universalistic in nature” (2018, 186), combined with the distinctive pluralist claim that such values are incommensurable. However, questions soon arise as to how alike Höhle’s value pluralism and Berlin’s really are.

For Höhle, to say that value pluralism is “universalistic in nature” is again to invoke Kant. “Only a value pluralism that can be integrated into a Kantian framework can be acceptable” (187). By this, Höhle means that to qualify as universal a value must be universalizable. Does this turn universal ethical consistency into a super-value overriding all others? If so, it would be an example of ethical monism

rather than pluralism. The categorical imperative is categorical because it applies under all circumstances. But pluralism asserts that there is no single rule for ranking values that applies under all circumstances.

The relation between value pluralism and Kantian universalizability is hardly self-evident, however. From the pluralist point of view I can see two broad options. One is to affirm that Kantian ethics are monistic, hence mistaken. Along these lines it might be argued that some ethical obligations are not universalizable but purely local or culture-based. A possible example is Edmund Burke's conception of rights as local and conventional rather than abstract and universal (Burke 1968[1790]).¹ Alternatively, pluralists might follow Bernard Williams in rejecting 'obligation' as a model for all ethical value, as Williams does when he attacks 'the morality system' that he associates with Kant (Williams 1985, ch. 10).

Another option, however, might be to accept Kant's universalizability as a requirement for any ethics but argue that this is consistent with pluralism. Even if universal ethical consistency applies in every case, it may be argued, this is such an abstract requirement that it leaves room for the same range of fundamental values, and for their incommensurability, as that asserted by pluralists. A further possibility is that the kind of consistency Kant describes is not a substantial value that outranks others but something more like a regulating principle according to which other values are organized.²

Which of these responses (or others) is best is an issue that I cannot settle here. I raise the matter simply to indicate something of the complexity implicit in Höhle's invocation of Kant.³ Moreover, the issues I have raised assume a conception of value pluralism, in particular of the incommensurability at its heart. Like Höhle, I am unsure how far he and I agree about this.

Höhle accepts the essential value-pluralist tenet that basic values are incommensurable, but what does he mean by this? It certainly includes the idea that values cannot be expressed "as multiples of a basic unit" (Höhle 2018, 187). On the other hand, Höhle is clear that, in his view, incommensurability does not mean that values are 'incomparable'; rather, they are 'transitive and connected'. Further, Höhle does not see incommensurability as preventing values from being ranked: "I do claim that many, if not most value conflicts can indeed find a solution in a rank ordering." Crucially, he is willing to propose at least some rank

¹ Even here a Kantian would respond that such rights are universalizable within the relevant moral community.

² See Martha Nussbaum, who argues that two of her "central capabilities", practical reason and affiliation, are "architectonic", "pervading" and "organizing" the others: Nussbaum 2011, 39.

³ For further discussion of the relation between Berlinian value pluralism and Kant, see MacIntyre 2015.

orders that seem to apply in all cases: “Human life, for example, is to be valued more highly than property.” In this connection he remarks that the source of his pluralism is not Berlin “but Hegel and Max Scheler, who agree on the necessity of material values and are committed to a rank ordering of them” (186).

I agree that the idea of incommensurability, when it is applied to relations among fundamental values, is not best captured by the notion of incomparability. It is hard to compare impressionism and bicycles, since they refer to such completely different orders of human experience. But the case is different when it comes to liberty, equality, justice and compassion, since these have in common a reference to ethical experience. They are, however, very distinct dimensions of that experience, and the idea of incommensurability tries to capture that level of distinctness.

How can it do that? I further agree with Höhle when he aligns incommensurability with the idea that fundamental values cannot be expressed ‘as multiples of a basic unit’. One classic form of ethical monism is Bentham’s view that all values can be reduced to dimensions of utility, further understood as pleasure. For the pluralist, by contrast, utility, or pleasure, is only one significant value among others, not a common denominator or building block for all other values. Liberty and equality, for example, speak with voices that cannot be reduced to aspects of pleasure.

However, the reduction of values to a common denominator is not the only kind of monism. Most pluralists would also regard as monistic a view that rejected a common denominator for all values but then insisted that distinct values can still be ranked in a comprehensive hierarchy or according to a single, uniquely correct rule. Berlin, for example, opposes the view of Plato and Aristotle, according to which there is a single superior form of human life that upholds philosophical contemplation as a supreme value. Along similar lines he rejects the historical perfectionism of Hegel and Marx.

Consequently, I am wary of Höhle’s statement that his value pluralism is compatible with ‘a rank ordering’ of values. I cannot agree with Höhle if he means that fundamental (or intrinsic) values can be rank-ordered in the abstract, or in accordance with a single rule that applies in all cases—for example, liberty always comes before equality. It is true that fundamental human values must always, or almost always, override merely instrumental or trivial concerns. Adequate nutrition is in general more important than achieving accuracy in pie-throwing. But among fundamental values—liberty and equality, for example—pluralists can allow no ranking rule that applies in all cases, or else there is nothing to separate them from a very significant and influential kind of monist. Moreover, this kind of abstract or absolute ranking of values is, frankly, implausible. No single fundamental value always outranks all others.

On the other hand, Höhle may mean simply that values may be ranked or traded off for decisive reason in particular concrete situations. In such cases it is a judgement tailored to the specific context that drives the ranking or trade-off, not an absolute rule for ranking. Many value pluralists have accepted this ‘contextual’ position. If that is all that Höhle intends, then it seems to me that there is little between us on the score of incommensurability after all.

Even if Höhle wants something more transcendent than a case-by-case approach, we may still not be that far apart. The defence of liberalism, although it does not require liberal values to be overriding in every case, does need such values to be emphasized across a range of cases. The liberal commitment to human rights, for example, must embrace multiple cases.

How is this possible under value pluralism? In my initial reply to Höhle I acknowledged that pluralism, as I understand it, does bring with it a problem. In the absence of a general rule for ranking values, how are we to choose among them, or even compromise between them, when they conflict? I sketched various responses to this problem in the value-pluralist literature, especially as it bears on the justification of liberalism.

These considerations can be applied to a question that Höhle rightly highlights, that of progress. Höhle asserts that there is a “duty to work for progress” (188), and I am sympathetic with that view. I also accept his distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ progress. While the former is presumably the idea that progress inheres in the nature of history—the faith of Comte and Marx—the latter accepts that progress is not guaranteed but urges that it be achieved nevertheless.

However, the pluralist question cuts across this distinction because it asks what ‘progress’ means on either view. If value pluralism places a question-mark over proposals to rank one set of fundamental values above another, and if different societies represent diverse sets of value rankings, then by what criteria can we judge that a later society is superior to an earlier society? Berlin brings this problem out in his initial interpretation of Vico and Herder, according to which each historical ‘civilization’ or ‘nation’ has its own unique identity and scale of values, so that it can be judged only by its own lights and in no other way (Berlin 2013). It follows not only that the notion of ‘linear’ or descriptive progress that Berlin attributes to the Enlightenment is mistaken (Jahanbegloo 1992, 34–35), but also that the whole notion of historical progress, even as an aspiration, is in question. In what way, on the pluralist view, is modernity an improvement, ethically, on the middle ages?

In line with my initial response to Höhle (Crowder 2017a), I believe there are three main lines of approach. The first assesses the performance of societies in terms of universal values, or values that, in Berlin’s formulation, have been held

by all or most societies over long periods of history. One way of getting at this is by considering things have been universally disvalued: the “generically human evils” (Gray 2000, 66). Along these lines I have already mentioned Hösle’s identification of poverty, exploitation, and war. Pluralists can certainly accept that the elimination or reduction of these would be a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, the actual record of the modern world in these respects has been uneven to say the least. More to the point, these universal criteria address only the most basic human concerns; they do not help us much with more sophisticated demands, such as freedom of speech and religion, which have not been valued by all or even most societies.

A second response is an appeal to context. In this respect one of the leading pluralist voices is that of Bernard Williams, who argues for the importance of historical context through his notion of “the relativism of distance” (Williams 1985, 162–165; 2005, 68–69). Between periods of history that are remote from each other, Williams argues, the moral distance is too great, ethical commonalities too limited, to allow judgements about progress or its absence.⁴ Within the context of ‘modernity’, however, ethical commonalities are such that we are in a better position to say whether a given social change represents an advance. That is because we can say that “now and around here [...] the historical conditions permit only a liberal solution” to the question of political legitimacy (Williams 2005, 8). So, we could say, for example, that the end of apartheid in South Africa constituted progress because it was demanded by the liberalism that is justified now and around here.

This argument is incomplete to say the least. The phrase ‘now and around here’ is never defined by Williams and is ambiguous. In a wider sense it may mean ‘modernity’. However, modernity is a very capacious concept, containing many political streams of which liberalism is only one. If liberalism is superior to its rivals, that cannot be simply because of its being modern, since modernity has produced, and continues to produce, illiberal and racist political streams too. On the other hand, ‘now and around here’ may refer more narrowly to the contemporary liberal democracies, in which case to judge that liberalism is the criterion for progress is no more than a truism.

A third alternative is to combine reflection on historical conditions with identification of norms implicit in the concept of value pluralism itself. As John Kekes writes, “the ideal is of a framework that fosters the realization of plural, conditional, incompatible, and incommensurable values” (Kekes 1993, 35). From a pluralist perspective the most desirable society will be that which promotes value

⁴ I question this thesis in Crowder 2017b.

diversity and personal autonomy to the greatest degree possible in the prevailing historical conditions. A society that has improved in these respects on those that have gone before is a society that has made progress. This is the approach that I believe is the most promising.

But again, my purpose in raising these issues has been not so much to resolve them as to point to their salience if one takes a pluralist perspective. Such a perspective raises questions not just for attempts to reduce values to measureable units—although that is a real contemporary problem, as the prevalence of cost-benefit analysis shows—but also for abstract or comprehensive schemes of ranking. Pluralism, then, appears to challenge not only the utilitarianism that Höhle is happy to reject but also the Kantianism and Hegelianism that inspires him.

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