Value Pluralism: What It Is and Why Its Main Arguments Fail

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Abstract

Value pluralism is the philosophic position that there is a multiplicity of distinct goods that can neither be reduced to a common property nor be arranged into an ethical system that gives unconditional moral principles. Value monism is the position that there are common features belonging to all those things that are good which make them good, or at least that those goods can be arranged into a single, absolute moral system. According to pluralism there are a variety of competing moral systems, but no single system is authoritative. While pluralism is often dismissed as relativistic, this thesis argues that pluralism is distinct from relativism.

The thesis first reconstructs the central pluralist claims. Like other moral views, the basic position is expanded and modified by various researchers. It is the central contentions of any pluralist position that are under consideration. To that end, I argue that the two main arguments usually offered for value pluralism fail. I argue both that the purported incommensurability of value does not entail pluralism, and that the indirect argument for pluralism from rational regret is unsuccessful. The debate on the incommensurability of value applies to both pluralist and monistic theories of the good. Hence, incommensurability does not entail pluralism. Although the possibility of rational regret is sometimes treated as a result of the incommensurability of value, I treat it as a separate argument for pluralism because even if incommensurability is compatible with both pluralistic and monistic theories, the argument from rational regret can be assessed independently from its supposed link to incommensurability. I argue that the argument for pluralism from regret fails because regret is either compatible with monism, or it results in a radically prolific form of pluralism.
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1. Introduction

Given the various ends that we pursue, there seems to be a great variety of values, moral or otherwise. These include prudence, justice, knowledge, pleasure, happiness, education, and any of the variety of goods considered to be a part of human well-being. The values, or goods, represent a motley bunch of character traits, dispositions, experiences, and opportunities that might be considered essential to or constitutive of the good life. A question in moral philosophy is whether this variety is reducible to a common, fundamental source or feature, or rather, we should accept a pluralism about value that argues that these values cannot be organized into an ethical system that provides unique solutions to moral problems and that there is no common feature that makes all of these values valuable. In order to bring out the contrast between the pluralist and the monist I will quote several questions Moore asks in his 1912 *Ethics*:

Can we discover any general characteristic, which belongs in common to absolutely all right actions, no matter how different they may be in other respects? And which does not belong to any actions except those which are right? And can we similarly discover any characteristic which belongs in common to absolutely all ‘good’ things, and which does not belong to any thing except what is a good? Or again, can we discover any single reason, applicable to all right actions equally, which is, in every case, the reason why an action is right, when it is right? And can we, similarly, discover any reason which is the reason why a thing is good, when it is good, and which also gives us the reason why any one thing is better than another when it is better?¹

Putting the matter simply, the monist answers these questions affirmatively while the pluralist answers them negatively. This account of the difference between value monism and value pluralism needs to be expanded and clarified because, although Moore’s questions bring the issue into focus, the contemporary debate is not conceived as

a response to Moore.\textsuperscript{2} Hence, the pluralist position needs to be examined and assessed on its own terms and in relation to its main arguments.

To describe what I will do in this thesis we might borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein and say that I hope to achieve a surveyable representation of the topic. The first task is to articulate in a basic form what the debate between value monism and value pluralism is about.\textsuperscript{3} Pluralism often seems easily dismissible as relativistic. After establishing in general the terms of the debate, I will argue that pluralism might be distinguished from relativism in one significant way—and the general features of the debate must be examined, because if we can reject (or accept) the conception of pluralism basic to any of the detailed arguments we can thereby reject (or have reason to accept) the more nuanced and detailed conceptions. Pluralism might plausibly be a first step on the way to arguing for relativism, but the pluralist claim does not obviously entail or commit us to relativism; in fact, it is to be distinguished from a strong form of relativism. I intend to leave to the relativists the work of proving that entailment or commitment if it in fact obtains. I am concerned rather with getting clear on 1) the claim made by pluralism, 2) some of the apparent motivation for accepting or pursuing a pluralistic thesis, and 3) distinguishing pluralism from relativism. With that in place, we may assess the two main arguments appealed to in claiming a pluralist thesis and investigate whether or not those kinds of argument require us to adopt a pluralist position. I will argue that they do not.

\textsuperscript{2} Moore answered these questions negatively in \textit{Ethics} himself, but his response would not fit the account of pluralism to be provided below and hence I do not think he should be considered a pluralist as defined by the contemporary debate.

\textsuperscript{3} Henceforth, any reference to either ‘monism’ or ‘pluralism’ should be read as elliptical for ‘value monism’ and ‘value pluralism’ respectively.
To that extent, I argue that the main arguments for value pluralism fail to require us to adopt that branch of the monism-pluralism dichotomy.

This failure, however, does not make a case for accepting value monism. We do not thereby disprove pluralism or show as nonsense the pluralist thesis, but merely undermine the force of the main arguments offered in its favour. That does not amount to proof for a monistic thesis of value because we still have open the possibility of other arguments for pluralism which account for the seemingly great variety of values or the option of attacking the dichotomy altogether. I endorse the latter strategy. Both branches of the dichotomy hinge on the assumption that a reductive analysis of value is the route to a proper theory of value. It is only an assumption, because nowhere in the discussions of value pluralism have I found an argument for that method as applied to value, and I take it that it is not a universally accepted philosophic method that must be invoked. To reject pluralism and accept monism is to continue to accept this un-argued assumption.

There are two methodological considerations I want to make clear at the outset. First, though a lot of the literature on pluralism and incommensurability appeals to our intuitions in a variety of examples, I am concerned with the theoretical claims involved in pluralism, and moreover, discerning the basic commitments of any pluralist theory. To that end, my remarks will make little use of examples, except where necessary for clarification, and instead focus on the general and theoretical claims. These examples generally appeal to the distinctions we make in discussing goods or values, and on that basis—the recognition of perfectly ordinary and useful distinctions—generalize to the absence of common features of comparison or the impossibility of governing moral principles. In other words, the examples take advantage of distinctions we ordinarily
make in our descriptions of value to import substantive theoretical claims. I will argue that on the basis of those theoretical claims, the central arguments for pluralism are compatible with monism and hence, any thought experiment or example purporting to show the contrary will not have the traction that the pluralist purports. Without arguing for it (since that would require a survey of the examples, and an analysis in light of the theoretical claims I address below), I do not think that the examples often go very far to substantiate any of the central claims. Second, it is often unclear in the pluralist literature whether or not the focus is on a plurality of moral values or a plurality of moral principles. I will unpack this ambiguity as the discussion unfolds. However, my arguments are structured such that if either, or both, versions of pluralism are under consideration, the arguments are still applicable. The reason I do not focus on one aspect of this ambiguity is because the major pluralist works involve claims about both aspects. A thorough treatment of pluralism requires acknowledging the ambiguity, tracing its implications, and assessing the claims that are made.

Chapter two is concerned to explicate the main pluralist claims. It involves an examination of work by Isaiah Berlin, John Kekes, Michael Stocker, and Bernard Williams. I seek to highlight pluralism’s metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic/conceptual concerns. Pluralism claims either that values are fundamentally irreducible, or that there is no single correct system of value. Making the pluralist position clear requires a discussion of value conflict, and of the reasons for which pluralists consider all value to be conditional. I conclude the chapter by arguing that pluralism is not a strong form of ethical relativism, but that it may be consistent with weaker forms of relativism that I distinguish.
Chapter three argues that the two main arguments for value pluralism fail. These are arguments from the incommensurability of value and from rational regret. I argue that the issues in the debate regarding the incommensurability of value apply to both pluralism and monism. Hence, the incommensurability of value does not entail pluralism. The pluralist modifications of regret as ‘rational’ and ‘moral’ need to be examined to determine whether their argument from rational regret is successful. I argue that the argument from rational regret requires implausible modifications to and implications for the pluralist position. I provide a subsequent discussion where I argue that either the incompatibility of rational moral regret with monism is not a significant issue, or that monism is compatible with rational moral regret.
2. Value Pluralism

*A Metaphysical Theory*

Value pluralism, as usually understood, is primarily a claim about the metaphysics of value. In the course of the investigation, I intend to show how intertwined the metaphysical claim in pluralism is with epistemological concerns. The entire investigation is concerned with values and how many there fundamentally are, but in pursuing that question the epistemological concerns and assumptions will always be in the background.

Value pluralism is the thesis that values are irreducibly plural. That is to say that values cannot be analyzed or reduced to a common or more basic value or super-value. Value monism stands opposed to pluralism by asserting that values are reducible. I argue that the two main arguments for pluralism do not force or commit us to holding a pluralist conception of value. Those two arguments appeal to rational regret and the incommensurability of value respectively. Before trying to argue why neither rational regret nor a putative incommensurability of value force us to adopt a pluralist position, we require a clear conception of what the pluralist thesis amounts to in its core formulation. The work of Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams will provide much of this basic formulation. Berlin is identified as the main historical originator of the pluralist thesis, and Williams is particularly clear in arguing for pluralism on the basis of conflicting values. The theme of conflicting values is picked up by those arguing both on the basis of rational regret as well as those pursuing arguments for incommensurability. An examination of John Kekes will finalize the representation of the pluralist position.
and tie it most strongly with incommensurability and regret, as well as provide the means to try to distinguish pluralism from relativism.

Before examining any of the figures, however, we would do well to consider some basic facts and distinctions about values. A value must be distinguished from its bearer. Take for instance the value (presuming it is a genuine value) of gustatory pleasure. Suppose I have one biscuit. Whatever degree of gustatory pleasure I receive from eating this biscuit does not matter now, though it can for an incommensurablist. Now, suppose I have a second biscuit, which also provides me with gustatory pleasure. Obviously gustatory pleasure is not unique to only the first biscuit, but common among biscuits. The biscuits are bearers of value, while the value itself is gustatory pleasure. No one should be concerned that one biscuit is or is not reducible to another. This example aims to show that values are carried by objects, states of affairs, events, and situations, but are not identical with their bearers. Hence, for example, more than one action token or type can be just.

The pluralist concern is with values and not their bearers. Hence, value pluralism is the claim that values, whatever their bearers might be, are not reducible to a common value. It is therefore a metaphysical thesis. Regardless of whether we consider values to be natural properties, non-natural properties, abstract objects, or objects in name only, the metaphysical dispute between monists and pluralists rest on the questions of whether

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4 I add this caveat because I have not been able to find anywhere in the literature a method or decision procedure for deciding what values are genuine or only purported. This becomes significant if we want to claim not just that someone is mistaken about a value’s place in a system, but rather is mistaken that it is a value at all.

5 Gustatory pleasure can be had without eating biscuits as well. It is the value common to all those things of which we like the taste.
values, whatever they might be, are fundamentally one or many. This point highlights the close connections among metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic concerns regarding value. I have already claimed that the monism-pluralism debate is a metaphysical concern. Arguments from incommensurability postulate a plurality of values in order to accommodate epistemological issues involved in comparisons of value. We can further shift pluralism into an epistemological key by replacing our talk of values with a discussion of value-concepts. Likewise, we can draw in a semantic aspect of the issue by asking if the terms of our vocabularies for value have different meanings, if their meanings are reducible, and if so, which terms for value are synonymous. This is getting ahead of the investigation though, and we should first look directly at Berlin’s remarks.

**Background to Pluralism**

Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based.\(^6\)

This passage provides five interrelated points to work with.

1) We are concerning ourselves with ethical or moral thought.\(^7\) Already there is a distinction between moral values and other values that are not obviously moral, like gustatory pleasure. This discussion, though focusing on moral values, can be

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\(^7\) For Berlin, political philosophy is “ethics applied to society” (PI, 1).
applicable to prudential values as well, insofar as they are included in conceptions of living well.\(^8\)

2) Ethical thought requires or consists in some kind of systematic examination of data. This provides a question of appropriate method.

3) The data of our systematic examination are relations between human beings to each other and with concepts, interests, ideals, and systems of value.

4) Those relations are the source of human action and interaction.

5) Our values form systems—hierarchical organizations of values with reasons for the hierarchy being as it is.

Since we are concerned with value pluralism, the fifth point becomes our focus: granting that our values form a system, what is the nature, structure and the organization of that system? Berlin indicates that there is not just one system of value, but multiple systems. We must ask whether or not there are multiple purported systems of value. If there are, we can ask whether or not they are compatible with one another and can be systematically or hierarchically organized or integrated.

Of course, through various historical periods, and between and within cultures, there have been different systems of values. These systems are different insofar as the organization, hierarchy, and relationships among values have been different. As Williams argues, for example, shame has taken on a very different role in modern

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\(^8\) Hereafter, ‘value’ can then be taken to refer primarily to what would be considered moral values, but the arguments and claims about it either are the same as those regarding prudential values or could be extended to include prudential values in their account depending on the version of pluralism offered.
western lives compared to its role in classical antiquity. As another example, the value ‘courage’ has a markedly different role in the modern world than it would have had in the Crusades. Allowing for conceptual change enables us to account for advancements (or loss) in the moral understanding of particular values as well. Erotic love—which some cultures or groups might not consider a value at all—has undergone change in the Western cultures recently by our now permitting some sexual relationships as not merely acceptable, but equivalent in value to traditional relationships. We can sample the variety of values and their place in systems of value by reading period literature, studying history, and through any of the variety of sociological and anthropological disciplines.

So much then for the factual question regarding whether or not there have been different systems of value. I commend a full exposition of any particular value or any particular system to historians and sociologists.

Now, however, we are at a point where we have said roughly that there have been a variety of systems each held to be correct. We have not gone any way towards showing that there is more than one correct or true system of value. In fact, we have not even gone as far as to show that there is at least one true system of value—we might be moral anti-realists and deny the very existence of objective moral value. Given, however, that the problem in the debate is between monism and pluralism, I will assume for the sake of argument that there is at least one true system of value. Though it is nevertheless open to

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10 Obviously, by ‘traditional’ I do not mean to indicate that, for example, same-sex relationships are something new, or that through history Western cultures have had a unique set of beliefs regarding erotic love. ‘Traditional’ is relative to the narrative we frame regarding our sexual history (whoever, ‘we’ and ‘our’ denote).
answer “neither” to the question whether or not the nature of moral value is fundamentally one or many, to keep with the dichotomy as presented and consider the debate on its own terms, I will not consider the response that there are no values. I do not want to dismiss it as a possible answer though, because as we will see, the concern that pluralism is relativistic brings with it concerns about the denial of objective value; however, for the rest of this thesis I will be approaching the debate with the realist assumptions. Of course on that assumption if it could conclusively be shown that pluralism entails relativism or some form of subjectivism, then the moral realist seems forced to be a monist.

To connect the points just made about the concern being with morality and the various systematizations of our moral life, Berlin—appealing to both great literature and great philosophy—considers there to be a common assumption or rather a common ideal of inquiry:

In the first place, that as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and only one, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the third place that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole…In the case of morals, we could then conceive what the perfect life must be, founded as it would be on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe.¹¹

We might disagree with Berlin that the history of philosophy uniformly assumes that these are the ideals sought in the pursuit of inquiry and in solving our fundamental questions. We need not dispute, however, that what Berlin says here as applied to ethics is not only a conception that applies to moral theorizing, but that can be applied to

¹¹ Berlin, PI, 5.
philosophy as a whole. That is, though we may wonder if this model is representative of
the history of philosophy, we can be assured that it does represent a common and
powerful conception of the nature of philosophical theorizing. These assumptions, then,
as applied to moral theory, can be thought of as the application of a metaphilosophy into
a specific philosophic domain.

For Berlin, “what is clear is that values can clash”¹² and clash not merely between
cultures, but between groups or individuals of the same culture, and, moreover, within
one and the same individual. Imagine, for example, a person in a situation where they
must choose between being just and being merciful. Regarding the suggestion that if
only we had the right moral theory we could know how the conflict of values could be
harmonized and resolved, Berlin responds “that the meanings they attach to the names
which for us denote the conflicting values are not ours.”¹³ If the moral concepts of those
values can be reconciled, then they are not the concepts we have. Notice the shift:
Berlin’s claim has moved from asserting only that there is no single correct theory of
value or solution to resolve conflicts of values, to including the claim that though people
apparently seem to be talking about the same values and using the same moral concepts,
if they suggest the reconciliation of conflicting values, then their terms do not have the
same meanings as our terms or are not the same concepts we use.

Hence, if you subscribe to a meta-ethical view different from that articulated
above—the rejection of the view that we can expect to find single true answers to our
philosophic problems—then you cannot mean by your terms what those of the pluralist

¹² Berlin, PI, 10
¹³ Berlin, PI 11
bent mean, nor do you share their relevant concepts. This, however, is a strange result because Berlin acknowledges that if we did not have value concepts in common with others (groups, cultures, or individuals), we would be in our “own impenetrable bubble.” Our ability to communicate demands that “we cannot pretend not to understand them at all.”¹⁴ Not only do those substantive claims about meaning and concept possession require argument, but they conflict with Berlin’s own claim that we do share concepts and moral vocabulary. Without further argumentation, I do not see why we ought to accept those semantic and epistemic theses only because we disagree about the nature of value: indeed, values were what were supposed to be stable in the debate between monists and pluralists. That is, the disagreement was purportedly about the reducibility or irreducibility of values, not whether the monist or pluralist mean the same by their terms or possess the same concepts. Denying that monists and pluralists mean the same by their vocabulary or have the same concepts is to change the subject matter of the debate. The pluralists themselves must suppose that their theory—that values are irreducibly plural—is correct, or else they are only making the relativist claim that for their moral vocabulary and moral concepts, pluralism is the correct moral theory, but, for a different vocabulary or set of concepts, the monist theory could in principle be right. Hence, to stave off one relativist objection, the monist and pluralist must be operating with the same moral vocabulary and concepts.

¹⁴ Berlin, PI 9. This is like the point Davidson makes regarding alternative conceptual schemes. Our systems of value cannot be mutually exclusive or else we could not understand them at all. Cf. Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 47 (1973).
Two Pluralist Claims

At this point there are two claims being made by pluralism, and I think part of the difficulty in both assessing and responding to pluralism is the result of missing this distinction of claims. The first claim is that values themselves are irreducibly plural and cannot be reduced to a more basic value or super-value.\(^{15}\) Such a value might be well-being,\(^{16}\) utility, or something along the lines of maximizing the possibilities of good lives available to people.\(^{17}\) This claim, I think, gives the pluralist a genuine position to argue. They might concede that all genuine values do contribute to (or reduce to), say, well-being, but that this value is only nominally monist. That is, though we might form an ethical theory that is fundamentally based on some one value, that value is itself heterogeneous or composite. So the claim would be that, in this case, though we use a singular term or name (utility, well-being, etc.), the theory is actually pluralistic because the fundamental value is composed of other values such as those personal and social goods required to live a good life. Note, however, that here any appeal, in favour of pluralism, to conceptions of a good life cannot appeal to the given fundamental value for justification without begging the question for the pluralist; i.e., claiming both that the ultimate value is plural because a plurality of goods are required in any conception of the good life, and that these lives are good because they possess or display the fundamental value. This strategy, of claiming that the fundamental value is only nominally monist,


does not refute monism outright. There is a burden of proof on the part of the pluralist to show that all and every value put forward by monist theories is itself only nominally monist.

Here, however, is another challenge for pluralists. If they adopt the strategy of claiming that the monist ‘value’ is only nominally monist, they must be prepared to provide criteria for the identification and division into types of value. They must provide these criteria because otherwise it would not be clear on what basis values are being genuinely or only nominally distinguished. That is, if well-being is only nominally monist because it is composed of other values, we should demand an explanation of when any value is one value or only nominally one. For example, if liberty requires positive (and negative) freedom, is liberty a single value or only nominally a single value as well? Is justice a single value despite involving the values punishment and compensation? The monist, by contrast, only needs to show that for a given value that has other values as its components, the aggregation of those components results in a distinct value from any of the component parts. I do not have a programme for how they would do this in any given case.

The second claim made by pluralists is that there is no single correct system or theory of values. That involves at least the claims that there is no single correct moral principle that can be used to identify which value system is the correct one, and that there is no single correct principle to arbitrate moral conflicts. This is where the pluralists must differentiate themselves from the relativists, for it seems like the rejection of a principle to select the correct system of value or course of action might imply both that there is no one correct system of value and that the choice of one system over another is just a matter
of preference. Here we can suggest an internal criticism of pluralism: the pluralist seems unable to claim both that pluralism is the correct conception of morality, and that pluralism is the thesis that there is no single correct conception of morality. Later I will discuss in more detail the relationship with relativism. The point I am concerned to make here is that while it may seem like the second pluralist claim depends on the first claim, there is at least one version of pluralism that attempts to defend the first claim on the basis of the second. This is John Keke’s pluralism. An examination of his work will both illuminate the relationship of these two pluralist claims and provide the means to compare the pluralist thesis to relativism.

I said that I think part of the difficulty in assessing pluralism is a result of the difference between those two claims: the claim that values themselves are irreducibly plural, and the claim that there is no single correct system of values. The difficulty is that pluralists are often unclear about which claim they are specifically defending, and moreover, which arguments are intended to support each claim. This characterization is admittedly vague, but the vagueness is the problem: for example, Berlin at times discusses the clashes of values, but at other times discusses how the ends of human action might conflict—it is not clear though that human ends might not conflict even if monism were true. Take for example Keke’s claim that there are many genuine, incompatible, and incommensurable conceptions of the good life. Here we have a transition not from the plurality of values to the plurality of moral systems (or arrangements of ends), but the inverse: the claim that we have a plurality of organizations of the good life (more properly: of good lives) serves to ground the claim that values are plural. Granting that each claim is sometimes mustered as evidence for the other, we might wonder how to
begin analyzing the pluralist position. I think the best approach is to take what is common, the conflict of values, and try to understand the pluralist position by understanding what worries them about conflicting values.

Conflicting Values

First, though we might roughly divide conflicts of values into those between cultures, those between individuals of the same culture, and those conflicts within the same individual, we have to be cautious not to overemphasize these distinctions. Apparent conflict by no means entails real conflict. If one system’s organization of values were simply wrong, and another right, there would not be a real conflict of values. Leaving aside how we would determine that one is right and the other wrong, the point of moral theorizing is presumably to uncover moral truths, so we need only assume that in such a case of purported value conflict, there is a moral fact of the matter which is knowable and could reveal one system to be false. The possibility of being merely mistaken is present in the other two divisions of conflicts as well. Of two individuals, one (or both) may be mistaken regarding the place of specific values in their system, and a single individual might be mistaken about their values and system, believing there to be a conflict where there is none.

Hence the pluralist must be concerned only with genuine conflicts of values and not only apparent conflicts. There is another point that should not be overlooked. We might be tempted to an easy dismissal of the charge of cultural relativism when the conflicting values occur between or within individuals of the same culture. That is, the pluralist might deny one form of relativism by claiming that their concerns with conflict
are at a deeper and more fundamental level than that with which the relativist is concerned. This move, however, is blocked. As Williams points out, philosophic investigations into the epistemological or semantic issues of objectivity normally or primarily concentrate on the resolution of disagreement where the two parties, it is assumed, each have their own harmonious set of values and beliefs about value. The question comes to turn on sets of beliefs about value or systems of value. Hence, when two parties share the same “harmonious set of value-beliefs” there is still opportunity to be mistaken about the relationship of those beliefs, but disagreements relative to a single set of beliefs are not obviously different in kind from conflict or disagreements that occur between two sets of beliefs or two systems. Williams goes on to point out that whatever we might think about the resolution of two-party conflict, it is assumed that one-party conflicts of values are rationally resolvable. This assumption should be considered a significant element of the pluralist argument: if they are following Williams, they would reject that assumption, claiming that it is false that within a set of “value-beliefs” that all conflicts of value are rationally resolvable. In favour of this claim, I will quote Williams at length because it illustrates the pluralist’s attempted rejection of both skepticism and monism at once. Note, however, that the relation of skepticism and forms of relativism needs to be made out at greater length before we can consider the pluralist position as free from any skeptical or relativist charge.

The assumption is in fact unreasonable. For those, moreover, who combine it with scepticism about rationally resolving interpersonal conflict, it is doubly unreasonable, since some one-person conflicts of values are expressions of a complex inheritance of values, from different

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social sources, and what we experience in ourselves as a conflict is something which could have been, and perhaps was, expressed as a conflict between two societies, or between two historical states of one society. The same point also comes out in the opposite direction. A characteristic dispute about values in society, such as some issue of equality against freedom, is not one most typically enacted by a body of equally single-minded libertarians, but is rather a conflict which one person, equipped with a more generous range of human values, could find enacted in himself.\(^19\)

We are now left in a position with the claim that both two-party and one-party conflicts of values are without guarantee of being rationally resolvable. Not even a one-party conflict where the party is a single individual seems to admit of rational resolution. The pluralist has taken the apparent conflict of values as indication of the irreducibility of value or the absence of either a correct governing moral principle or system of values. Of course, the pluralist will not consider conflicts of values as merely apparent, but without an argument for why conflicts cannot be rationally resolved, we have left open to us (spectators of the debate) the possibility of objecting that 1) not all cases of conflict are genuine—there may be some principle we do not know that could settle the matter—and 2) even if a conflict is genuine, we could suppose that our pre-pluralist intuition is correct and that there is a way to rationally resolve the situation.\(^20\) That is, to object along the lines of 2 is to reply to the pluralist that it is not obvious that even in cases of genuine\(^21\)

\(^19\) Williams, CoV, 72-73.
\(^20\) It should be noted, in anticipation of the later discussion, that those concerned with the topic of incommensurability take very seriously the objection that if their thesis were correct, it might entail that there were no rational resolution to incommensurable choice situations (i.e., when two values conflict).
\(^21\) We would need some description of what a genuine conflict would be. Here is a first approximation: a merely apparent conflict is one in which a decisive resolution is available or easily accessible to whomever it concerns; a genuine conflict is one in which we actually do not know how, or do not have the resources, to resolve a particular conflict.
conflicts of values that they are in principle unable to be rationally resolved. If they are not in principle incapable of rational resolution, then we need a reason for why they would be in fact incapable of being so resolved.

A moment ago, when describing what the pluralist draws from the conflict of values, it might have seemed that I contradicted myself. I had described the pluralist position as being concerned with the irreducibility of value, but now it might seem that the pluralist could affirm the claim that there is no correct system of values and yet remain uncommitted on the issue of the reducibility of value. I do not think this is correct. Whether or not the pluralist in question is specifically concerned with one claim or the other, the cognate claim is in the background. Pluralists like Berlin will move from the irreducibility of value to the impossibility of establishing a single correct system of value. On the other hand, pluralists like Kekes, who focus on systems of value, take their arguments to indicate the irreducibility of value. The interconnection of the two claims will be made more obvious as the discussion of pluralism continues through incommensurability.

Conflict and Rational Resolution

None of the arguments presented so far on behalf of the pluralists have provided any substantial support for the position. The next task, then, is to try and uncover what feature or purported feature of conflicts of values prevent their rational resolution (since so far, it is only an undefended claim). That investigation will lead into a deeper discussion of Kekes’ pluralism and relativism.
In situations where someone is faced with a conflict of values, the values are considered incompatible insofar as the courses of action required to realize both cannot be jointly undertaken. In such situations we have the incompatibility of actions and values. Choosing one or the other however is thought to result in loss. As Kekes puts it, “it remains a fact of human life that as we seek one of two conflicting values, so we must put up with missing out on the other.” The sense of loss will play an important role in arguing for pluralism on the basis of rational regret. We will examine that argument later, but for now it needs to be noted that the pluralist takes the incompatibility of at least some values in at least some choice situations, along with the ensuing sense of loss when the choice is made, to be significant for their position.

In addition to the sense of loss there is the claim that “there is no common currency in which these gains and losses of value can be computed, that values, or at least the most basic values, are not only plural but in a real sense incommensurable,” and that this incommensurability is the cause of the conflicts. It is worth noting, leaving the details for a later argument, that while Williams does not think that loss entails incommensurability, Kekes seems to think it does. In order to move forward we require

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22 Kekes, MP 54.
23 This discussion will demand examining whether or not rational regret entails pluralism, whether incommensurability implies rational regret, and whether the argument for pluralism on the basis of rational regret can stand without embracing incommensurability.
24 Williams, CoV 76.
25 “If values were not incompatible and incommensurable, then all conflicts among values should have a decisive resolution, because reasonable people would recognize that the higher of the conflicting values is better and should be preferred. But, then, it would be unreasonable to feel a sense of loss or regret on account of having missed out on the lesser value” Kekes, MP 57. Notice how this quotation supports my claims regarding real conflicts of values: if monism were true, it is not clear how values would genuinely conflict, nor that any apparent conflict would not be rationally resolvable.
a provisional notion of incommensurability, leaving aside many details and arguments for the next chapter.

According to Williams, there are at least four claims that can be labeled as incommensurablist:

1) There is no one currency in terms of which each conflict of values can be resolved.
2) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value, independent of any of the conflicting values, which can be appealed to in order to resolved that conflict.
3) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value which can be appealed to (independent or not) in order to rationally resolve that conflict.
4) No conflict of values can ever rationally be resolved.\textsuperscript{26}

Williams himself denies 4 for being too despairing and Kekes is committed to the view that there is a method for reasonable conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{27} We can summarize 1-4 by saying that the pluralist’s anti-reductionist claim about values and value systems has yielded an epistemic thesis: despite thinking that we can know how to rationally resolve conflicting values,\textsuperscript{28} no such knowledge is available because genuine conflicts of values cannot be rationally resolved. This is a very strong thesis, and so far we have been given no arguments in its favour. It appears, however, that Williams and Kekes intend to embrace some weaker version like: “it is not the case that we can know how to resolve all conflicts of values because some cannot be resolved.” If they do embrace a weaker thesis,

\textsuperscript{26} Williams, CoV, 77.
\textsuperscript{27} Kekes, MP 76-99.
\textsuperscript{28} i.e. contrary to our experience of trying to find a solution when values seem to conflict.
we require a procedure for deciding which cases are in principle rationally resolvable and which are not, including an account of what is the cause of the conflict of value in the cases where they are resolvable and what it is in those where they are not. Moreover, if the incommensurability of values can be shown to require claim 4 and thereby also the strong epistemic thesis, then both Williams’ and Kekes’ defenses of pluralism can be shown to be internally inconsistent (for Williams because he considers 4 to be “too despairing” and for Kekes because he thinks there is a method of reasonable conflict resolution).

On the other hand, if there were some method of rationally resolving all conflicts of values, the pluralist would be required to argue for their position on grounds other than the claim that conflicts of values are the result of incommensurability. That is, we might push the line of reasoning offered by Kekes, which holds that “conflicts are the necessary by-products of the incommensurability and incompatibility of values.”29 Pushing that line, I suggest the following remarks. If conflicts of value are a necessary condition of incommensurability, then we need only admit that the incommensurability of value is sufficient for value conflicts. It may nevertheless be the case that there exists some other sufficient condition for the conflicts of values outside of incommensurability (and incompatibility), which would be compatible with monism.30 That is, as articulated,

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29 Ibid., 30.

30 I focus here on incommensurability, because some authors working in the field draw a sharp distinction between incompatibility and incommensurability. See for example, James Griffin “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang, 1997. It is not clear that the incompatibility of realizing two values in a particular choice situation indicates any intrinsic incompatibility among values: the respective instantiations or realizations of two values in a given situation might be incompatible without the values themselves being
incommensurability does not entail pluralism. Hence, if all conflicts of values were rationally resolvable and the pluralist was still committed to the incommensurability of value, then the pluralist would have to demonstrate not only that the incommensurability of value was a sufficient condition for conflicts of values, but also that it was a necessary condition and moreover that incommensurability was incompatible with monism.

*The Conditionality of Value*

I have mentioned loss, rational regret, and the incommensurability and incompatibility of value. Despite my promise to approach regret on its own later, I must say now that it is in no way obvious that arguments from regret require either pluralism or incommensurability, which is why it will be treated as its own topic and not a subdivision of incommensurability. I hope to have shown that at least one major argument in favour of pluralism rests on the incommensurability of value. The representation of the pluralist position we have reached so far can be concisely summarized by Kekes:

> The fundamental reason why pluralists are opposed to monism is that they reject the idea of there being an overriding value...The reason for thinking that all values are conditional is that there is a plurality of values, these

incompatible and without every such attempted realization being incompatible—here, the values are a victim of circumstance. Likewise, two realizations or instantiations of a single value in a given situation might conflict, but no one would want to claim then that the value conflicts with itself; rather, the realizations or bearers conflict. Moreover, if we assume intrinsic incompatibility we likewise assume pluralism. Hence, until we have been given a detailed account of incompatibility, we should only assume that it is being used in the weak sense of a choice situation not allowing both values to be realized. While Kekes seems to be concerned about conflicts of values being the necessary condition for the conjunction of incompatible and incommensurable values, other authors do away with incompatibility and focus on the relation between conflicts and incommensurability, or if another distinction is to be drawn it is between incommensurability and incomparability. These distinctions, however, anticipate the topic of the next chapter.
values conflict, the conflicts are often produced by the incompatibility and incommensurability of values, and it is this kind of conflict that rules out the possibility of there being overriding values. 

This passage introduces a new concept into our investigation, which correlates more or less with Williams’ claims 2 and 3 about incommensurability: the conditionality of value.

So far monism has not been defined except as a rejection of pluralism. As we saw, this might amount to either a rejection of the pluralist claim regarding the irreducibility of value, or a rejection of the claim that there is no single correct moral system. Kekes’ monist seems to be concerned only with the later claim and he considers it perfectly compatible with monism to recognize a plurality of values. What the monist is committed to, according to Kekes, is that there is an authoritative system of values organized into a hierarchy where the highest values “will justifiably override lower-ranked values and in which the standing of all values will be determined by their contribution to the highest-ranked value.” Pluralists deny both that there is any single authoritative system and that there are any overriding values. According to Kekes, the conditionality of value can be made out in the following way:

1) If a value is not overriding, then it is conditional.

2) A value is overriding if and only if it is:

   i. The highest, i.e., in conflict with any other value it ought to take precedence over the conflicting value; and

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31 Kekes, MP 20 and 47.
32 There are in fact multiple characterizations of monism (see, e.g. Kekes MP, or Stocker Plural and Conflicting Values, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)). A satisfactory representation of the pluralist characterization of monism is well beyond the scope of this thesis, let alone a satisfactory characterization of monism simpliciter.
33 Kekes, MP 19.
ii. Universal, i.e., its precedence over any other conflicting value ought to hold for all normal human beings; and

iii. Permanent, i.e., its precedence over any other conflicting value ought to hold at all times; and

iv. Invariable, i.e., its precedence over any other conflicting value ought to hold in all contexts; and

v. Either absolute, i.e., it ought not to be violated under any circumstances, or prima facie, i.e., it holds normally but may be justifiably violated if and only if the violation is required by the value in general.\textsuperscript{34}

We might be suspicious of the way Kekes formulates this notion of an overriding value. I am not confident that if there were a correct moral system, then values would indeed conflict with the highest value. The conflict of values might say something about our judgments, and not about the values themselves. That is, we might consider there to be a conflict, but if we only appealed to our authoritative system we would see the right course of action. The system would provide a decision procedure enabling us to resolve situations in which we take there to be conflict, but in fact there is a correct course of action. My concern, specifically, is that if we assume conflicts are intrinsic to value and not just a result of our attitudes and beliefs about value, then we might have already forfeited the debate to the pluralist. My remark might best be taken here as conceptual. If there were overriding values that could resolve courses of action involving value in every case, to what extent would it be appropriate to say that values conflict? We might

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 46.
say more appropriately that we are conflicted, or we perceive a conflict of value when there in fact is none.\textsuperscript{35}

Foregoing the previous concern, Kekes’ treatment of the conditionality of value is nonetheless a clear articulation of the pluralist rejection of the possibility of a single correct system of ethics. If all values are conditional, however, it is not clear how to rationally resolve conflicts of value without embracing some kind of subjectivist or interest-based reasoning.

\textit{Pluralism and Relativism}

Pluralism is committed to a plurality of moral systems on the grounds that values are irreducibly plural, and more importantly, because there is more than one way for those values to be instantiated. That is, the pluralist takes there to be more than one way to live well, both within a single tradition and between traditions. This repeats the earlier point about the difficulty in discriminating between inter- and intra-party conflicts. These competing conceptions of the good life put individual agents in a position where they have to choose one life over another without being able to realize both. Of course, this kind of discussion is of broader significance than cases where a particular value instantiated in a choice situation conflicts with another—e.g. where mercy conflicts with justice (or more narrowly punishment). The conflict at this level is between the organizations of a life as a whole. Moreover, we can have conflicts between moral

\textsuperscript{35} Briefly, and surely not exhaustively, conflict might be: 1) between our desires and what the moral system demands, 2) an illusion produced by complex choice circumstances, or 3) the result of a poor or mistaken grasp of the authoritative moral system. For a detailed discussion of pluralism, monism, and conflict, see Michael Stocker, \textit{Plural and Conflicting Values}, 241-262. Hereafter PCV.
systems, where one action or even organization of life is considered morally right in one, but wrong in another—such as one system that values artistic achievement over family loyalty, and another that values family loyalty over artistic achievement: Gaugin’s running off would be right in the former, but wrong in the latter.

Notice, however, that strictly speaking this discussion is not dealing exclusively with conflicts of values anymore. It is dealing with the conflicts of instantiations of value, or in terms used earlier, it is dealing with conflicts between the bearers of value. Various conceptions of living well do not seem to be conflicts of values. They are rather conflicts of sets or systems of value. That, however, leaves open the possibility of the systems containing different values. More narrowly, if the conceptions of living well make use of the same constitutive values, then it is obviously not the values that conflict, but rather, in the practical sphere, their instantiations or realizations. At the theoretical level, it would not be the instantiations or realizations that conflict, but rather either the system’s hierarchy or organization of values conflicting with conceptions of living well, or conceptions of living well conflicting with one another. These distinctions can be made equally within a single moral system or between rival moral systems.

The upshot of this discussion is that it is unclear what the pluralists are appealing to when they appeal to conflicts of values. Kekes for example is concerned specifically with the various conceptions of living well.\textsuperscript{36} Berlin, as discussed above, is concerned by the fact that humans pursue a great variety of ends. Michael Stocker sometimes discusses conflicts between values based on their intrinsic character (mercy and punishment), internal to a single value, and conflicts between means to achieving the same end, such as

\textsuperscript{36} Kekes, MP 11.
getting across town when the different modes of transportation include varying
considerations that bring values into conflict although these values do not conflict for any
internal reasons (e.g., cost and speed). Stocker deals with the nature of conflict most
comprehensively, but admits that he cannot show that conflict requires pluralism, nor that
he has shown that monism cannot accommodate conflict. Specifically, we have not seen
what “makes a conflict conflicting.” Instead of deliberating about the nature of conflict,
which is a question beyond the scope of pluralist concerns, I suggest that we take the
pluralist claim of conflict at face value: that values, for one reason or another conflict.
The problem of relativism arises with this question: given the pluralist claims regarding
the irreducibility of value, the plurality of both conceptions of good lives, and the
plurality of authoritative moral systems, is any decision between or within a system
simply arbitrary?—Is the moral worth of an action relative to the moral system of the
agent?

Pluralism does support part of the relativist intuition regarding the pervasive and
significant conditioning of culture or way of life to moral judgments. What it does not do
is resort to a kind of subjectivism whereby there is no matter of fact as to what would
count as a morally acceptable action and what would not. The first point to make is that
the pluralist is not claiming, through their denial of a single correct or authoritative moral
system, that there are no moral facts of the matter. Rather, they present a more nuanced
conception where, although we might not be able to arbitrate conflicts of value by appeal
to an overriding value, we can still appeal to the conditional values in order to rule out

37 Stocker, PCV 3, 178.
38 Ibid., 276.
particular courses of action and choices. That is, while pluralists seem unable, given their commitment to incommensurability and the conditionality of value, to offer a decision procedure for every situation in which conflict occurs, they can still provide comparative evaluations of individual moral systems (presumably up to barring them from membership in the class of genuine moral theories), as well as individual courses of action in some cases. That is, between systems or internal to a moral system, while some decisions will be indeterminate, others will be ruled out. This indeterminacy does not imply that what is right is up to the agent; it implies only that the moral systems or system are unable to yield a uniquely best solution to some moral problems. Susan Wolf, though she is not arguing for pluralism but only trying to distinguish it from relativism, makes this point by saying that “unlike the relativist, who believes that what is right for you is different from what is right for me, the pluralist holds that, for each and every one of us, the question of what is right in some cases lacks a unique and determinate answer.”

Pluralists need to show “that the importance they attribute to some values over others can be defended on context-independent grounds.” Kekes’ solution is to appeal to a distinction between deep conventions and variable conventions. Since I am trying to establish a general pluralist position, the details of Kekes’ argument on this point are not essential. What is essential is that there is a distinction between kinds of good or kinds of value. To avoid begging the question the pluralist cannot claim outright that these goods are irreducible or that there are no overriding values involved. Rather, they have to

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40 Kekes, MP 31.
present these distinct kinds neutrally with respect to the monism/pluralism distinction, but they can argue that if they are in fact irreducible and conditional, then distinction of kinds can provide those demanded context-independent grounds. Well-being accounts of morality as well as ‘conceptions of the good life’ accounts amount to about the same: they each have to establish or fill out what would be taken as necessary conditions of any good life or of well-being, usually through a discussion of primary and then secondary values. The primary values correspond to those identified necessary conditions that are the minimum requirements for living well, while the secondary values “vary with traditions and conceptions of a good life.” 41 Here, the question can arise as to whether or not it is possible to make the distinction between primary and secondary values without taking a stand on pluralism. There is a strong case that it can be. Pluralism denies that there is any overarching moral principle that orders values and can produce a unique decision procedure between values. Kekes refers to Gewirth as making a similar distinction between primary and secondary values. Gewirth, however, claims to have constructed a universal moral principle: the Principle of Generic Consistency. 42 Furthermore, his principle is supposed be able to establish the existence of human rights. 43 To what extent his account of well-being requires the plurality of value is well beyond the scope of the current project to investigate; however, even if the Gewirth’s

41 Kekes, MP, 42.
principle is unable to yield a determinate decision procedure in every choice situation, it does not obviously entail the pluralist theses.\textsuperscript{44}

Given the distinction between primary and secondary values we can distinguish at least three kinds of relativism: radical, conventionalist, and perspectival relativism. Radical relativists hold that the truth of all moral judgments is relative to a moral outlook. Conventionalists allow that some values are primary and hence objectively necessary to any conception of a good life, while only the truth of moral judgments regarding secondary values is relative to a moral outlook or individual conception of the good life. Perspectival relativists hold that the recognition of some (specifiable, but unspecified) secondary values is necessary, while the truth of the moral judgments pertaining to the remaining secondary values is relative to individual conceptions of the good life or moral outlooks.\textsuperscript{45} Primary goods are taken by pluralists to be objective insofar as they are the result of human nature: that is, necessary given the kinds of beings that we are for any conception of the good life whatsoever. Hence, the pluralist can counter the charge of radical relativism because they purport to have an objective, and not subjective, method.

\textsuperscript{44} Because the Principle of Generic Consistency is supposed to establish any and every agent’s right to well-being, it might be that on a correct analysis of well-being we are forced to adopt a pluralism about value. That he considers himself to have developed a supreme principle of morality goes against Kekes’ rejection of a version of monism that appeals to a strong sense of canonical principle as ranking all types of value cf. Kekes, MP 74-76. Moreover, while recognizing a variety of values, he thinks that the resolution of conflict between values “requires that there be some general criterion that can serve as a common denominator for weighing or assessing different values or ideals in relation to one another.” Gewirth, RM 15. Whatever may be said regarding Gewirth’s conception of morality, it differs from pluralism by appealing to a universal overarching principle for the rational resolution of moral disagreement and conflict. If I were to hazard my own comments on Gewirth’s work, I would say that the question of pluralism does not arise: valuing and pursuing ends is something we do, the moral worth of which must be discerned on the basis of the supreme principle.

\textsuperscript{45} Kekes, MP 48.
for arbitrating between some value claims: if the realization of a secondary value conflicts with a primary value, the primary value trumps the secondary.\textsuperscript{46} This alone is sufficient to distinguish pluralism from relativism: the pluralist is committed respectively to some moral beliefs and actions being false and wrong in virtue of violating the objective basic conditions necessary for any conception of a good life. Distinguishing pluralism from perspectival forms of relativism remains inconclusive until pluralists can provide a method of rational conflict resolution between values, conceptions of good lives, traditions, and moral systems. Hence, pluralism is to be distinguished from a strong form of relativism and it is up to concrete pluralist arguments to show that there is an objective basis for some secondary values, or that there is a method of rational (objective) resolution between competing moral conceptions.

\textsuperscript{46} Note however that in exceptional circumstances a secondary value might actually defeat a primary value because the secondary value either indirectly supports the primary value, or the conditions are such that the primary value was generally satisfied. Kekes, MP 50.
3. Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Regret

The main arguments invoked for value pluralism rest on the incommensurability of value and the claim that only pluralism accommodates rational regret. My goal in this chapter is to argue that incommensurability does not entail pluralism, and to argue that pluralism does not obviously follow from rational regret. I am discussing the two topics together, because though my arguments are mostly independent, it is commonly taken that regret is the result of, or closely connected to, incommensurability. If incommensurability can be shown not to entail pluralism, then the argument from the incommensurability of value to rational regret, and hence from rational regret to pluralism, does not succeed either.

Pluralists argue that conflicts of value are the result of the incommensurability and incompatibility of value. It is this incommensurability that prevents there being any overriding value. Hence, the pluralist argues that all value is conditional: i.e., as described in the previous chapter, there is no value which is the highest, universal, permanent, invariable, and absolute. It would seem, then, that the pluralist needs only to have a defense of incommensurability to ratify their view. The issue, however, is not straightforward. There is a continuing debate about whether or not values in fact are incommensurable. Moreover, within that debate there are further distinctions drawn, namely between incommensurability and incomparability, as well as a third distinction of non-comparability. These distinctions are in turn doubted. There is no agreement on whether or not there is a genuine distinction between incommensurability and incomparability. Some pluralists, Michael Stocker for example, draw a distinction between commensurability and comparability arguing that values are incommensurable,
but nonetheless comparable. The task of this chapter is not to settle any of the disputes in the field of incommensurability, nor to argue for or against any particular formulation of incommensurability. Furthermore, I am not concerned to argue that incommensurability/incomparability does or does not preclude rational evaluation and deliberation among alternatives. If it does, then pluralists must accept that if values conflict, there can be no rational resolution. Rather, my goal is to argue that neither the incommensurability nor the incomparability of value entails pluralism. That is, regardless of how disputes are resolved in the debate about the incommensurability of value, I argue that the incommensurabilist position is compatible with value monism. Given that pluralists tend to focus on incommensurability, and that some are concerned to differentiate incommensurability from incomparability, I will assume that the distinction is genuine.

Regarding rational regret, I will reconstruct the indirect argument from rational regret to pluralism and discuss the complications for the pluralist position with respect to regret and conditional values. This complication is essentially that the mere plurality of moral principles is not sufficient for rational regret, but rather we require that those plural principles conflict. While pluralism is compatible with regret, regret requires a stronger version of pluralism than that discussed so far. So far, the pluralist has contended that there is a plurality of moral principles that might conflict; for rational regret to serve as the basis of an argument for pluralism, those principles must conflict. I subsequently discuss whether rational moral regret is compatible with monism. There I take two lines. First I suggest a difference between moral regret and rational regret where moral regret is

47 Stocker, PCV 175-178.
incompatible with monism, but rational regret is compatible. Second, I suggest a way of conceptualizing reasons for regret that would allow monism to be compatible with both rational and moral regret. The result, if I am correct, is that the indirect argument for pluralism from rational regret does not succeed in showing that rational regret entails pluralism. Monism is compatible with regret.

*Incommensurability and Pluralism*

The first issue to note is that interest in incommensurability is not strictly in “values per se but in bearers of value that are alternatives for choice.” This should be concerning because at the outset I have claimed that the pluralist is concerned with the nature of value and not bearers of value. It would be detrimental to the pluralist programme if one of their main arguments in favour of pluralism did not actually refer to the same concepts or objects. In a straightforward way, incommensurability of bearers of value need not entail plural values. Suppose bearers of value can be incommensurable. Suppose you have two friends. The relationships with each friend are so different that they are incommensurable, i.e., they cannot be ranked using a common scale or in other words, you cannot say which friendship is more valuable for lack of a common unit. Hence, we have incommensurability at the level of bearers of value, but the only value in question is singular: friendship. Notice, however, that we might consider one friendship better, worse, or equal to the other. That does not obviously imply that they are not incommensurable, but rather that they are incommensurable (for lack of a friendship

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scale, currency, etc.) and comparable. This, however, foreshadows the discussion of incomparability and assumes that if values are comparable they can nevertheless be incommensurable. Take another example, this time from a pluralist:

If a lack of a common unit shows incommensurability, it shows this even in a single value—e.g. a particular sort of pleasure. In comparing the pleasure of two sips of this wine, we no more have a common unit than we do for plural values. We may often be able to rank the pleasurableness of the sips—judge which is more pleasurable. But we cannot say by how much the one is more pleasurable than the other. We can measure neither the distance between them nor their ratio, nor—to explain those inabilities—can we say in the requisite way, how pleasurable either is. Thus if incommensurability is a problem only for pluralism and not also for monism, it cannot be understood in terms of the absence of a common unit.  

There are three important lessons from this quotation. First, incommensurability can appear even with respect to a single value. Second, incommensurability is being assumed to refer to the lack of a common unit. Third, there is an argument against the pluralist that incommensurability precludes rational deliberation between the objects of comparison, but this would also be true for a monist if incommensurability is taken to refer only to a lack of a common unit. The first and third points indicate that whether the nature of value is monistic or pluralistic, the incommensurability of value is not relevant to the debate. Hence, because instances or bearers of a single value can (purportedly) be incommensurable, incommensurability does not account for why values conflict, nor for why there are no overriding values as the pluralist asserts. That is, while Kekes asserts that “conflicts are often produced by the incompatibility and incommensurability of values, and it is this kind of conflict that rules out the possibility of there being overriding

49 Stocker, PCV 176.
values,“ we may object that whatever the cause of conflict and the reason there are no overriding values, it has nothing to do with incommensurability. Michael Stocker’s treatment of conflict and incommensurability is more nuanced. He does not put the weight of the pluralist position on the incommensurability of value. This thesis, however, takes for granted that the two most frequent justifications of pluralism are incommensurability and rational regret. My concern is only to show that these two kinds of argument do not commit us to, nor justify, pluralism. Stocker might be able to independently justify pluralism, but that is outside the scope of the current effort. What we can glean from this discrepancy between a version of pluralism like Stocker’s and that of Kekes, is that the thesis of the conditionality of value is not in any way dependent on the incommensurability of value: other arguments are required to prove the conditionality of value.

If incommensurability entailed incomparability, and incomparability entailed pluralism, then the pluralist would have good reason to argue for pluralism on the basis of incommensurability. As mentioned, there is an active debate whether or not incommensurability does entail incomparability, and exactly what the limits of the two concepts are. Nor is there a consensus among parties in the debate on pluralism. Reiff, for example, holds both that there is no distinction between incommensurability and incomparability and that they are presuppositions required for particular conceptions of

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50 Kekes, MP 20 and 47.
51 In fact, in the cited discussion Stocker is concerned with rejecting arguments against pluralism as opposed to arguing in favour of it.
morality.\textsuperscript{52} Hence, if the pluralist appeals to incommensurability as justification for their moral theorizing they are only appealing to the presuppositions of their theory itself.\textsuperscript{53} Griffin holds that incommensurability is distinct from incomparability, but that “the monism-pluralism issue is not especially central to the issue of incommensurability,”\textsuperscript{54} though incommensurability is about scales of value. Chang defends the distinction between incomparability and incommensurability, but has little to say about pluralism.\textsuperscript{55} So, there is little agreement among these moral philosophers regarding the terms of their debate. Having seen that incommensurability does not entail pluralism on the interpretation of incommensurability being about common units, scales, or ‘currencies’ of value, I will investigate whether pluralism is entailed by incomparability.

\textit{Incomparability and Pluralism}

In general, two bearers/values are incomparable if there is no value relation that holds between them such that one is better than the other, worse than the other, or they are equal.\textsuperscript{56} These relations imply a covering value or higher synthesizing categories.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} Reiff is not arguing that the pluralist is in fact doing this. His investigation is concerned rather with the role incommensurability plays as a presupposition for the possibility of moral theories like those we are familiar with—either monist or pluralist.
\textsuperscript{54} Griffin, WB 90. It is worth noting that Griffin’s remarks in James Griffin, “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?” in \textit{Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason}, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 36 seem to indicate that he thinks we mean by incommensurability the stronger concept of incomparability.
\textsuperscript{55} Chang, IIPR. See also, Ruth Chang, “Are Hard Choices Cases of Incomparability,” \textit{Philosophical Issues} 22 (2012).
\textsuperscript{56} It might be considered that two values are incomparable if they cannot be shown to be better than, worse than, or equal to one another. I think this fits well with our ordinary
i.e., some value with respect to which the two objects of comparison are being compared. According to Chang, it is nearly unanimous that these three relations exhaust the logical relations for comparison; unsurprisingly she rejects the claim and advocates for a fourth relation. The pluralist position becomes more clear in this case than with discussion of incommensurability. Recall the four claims discussed earlier that could be labeled incommensurablist:

1) There is no one currency in terms of which each conflict of values can be resolved.

2) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value, independent of any of the conflicting values, which can be appealed to in order to resolve that conflict.

3) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value which can be appealed to (independent or not) in order to rationally resolve that conflict.

4) No conflict of values can ever rationally be resolved.$^{58}$

Incommensurability, as treated in the last section, connects well with only the first claim. Recall that the fourth claim was rejected by both Williams and Kekes. The second and third claims seem to pair well with what is labeled here as incomparability. Furthermore, the second and third claims make sense of Kekes’ position that values are

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use of ‘incomparable,’ but as a term of art in this literature it has to refer to the stronger claim: not merely that no such value relation can be shown, but that no such value relations holds. It has to refer to the stronger claim because incomparablists are not concerned that we merely cannot show, or know, that a given value relation holds, but rather, that no such value relation in fact holds. Therefore, according to them, values are not merely seemingly incomparable, or incomparable for all we might know, but rather are genuinely incomparable.

$^{57}$ This is Stocker’s phrase. Cf. PCV 175-178.

$^{58}$ Williams, CoV, 77.
conditional because incommensurable, if incommensurability is interpreted as incomparability. Though Stocker claims values are incommensurable yet comparable, Kekes’ formulation of the pluralist position is much more in keeping with incomparability. This can be gathered from his remarks that two values are incommensurable if and only if:

1) There is not some one type of highest value or combination of values in terms of which all other values can be evaluated by considering how closely they approximate it…; and

2) There is not some medium in terms of which all the different types of values can be expressed and ranked without any significant aspects left out, thus allowing for the intersubstitutivity of different types of value…; and

3) There is not some one principle or some principles that can provide an order of precedence among all values and be acceptable to all reasonable people.59

Kekes’ conditions for the incommensurability of value seem to parallel Williams’ second and third incommensurablist claims. Incomparableists make the claim that the relations ‘better than,’ ‘worse than,’ or ‘equal to,’ fail to hold relative to some covering value or other. Pluralists make the stronger, though compatible claim, that there is no highest covering value or ordering principle among values. The question now is whether or not incomparability entails pluralism. That is, perhaps Stocker is wrong and any account of value pluralism requires positing the incomparability of value. Stocker argues against the notion that relations between values must be quantitative (i.e. pertain to some scale or unit). The qualitative dimensions of various values are evaluatively relevant for

59 Kekes, MP 54.
comparison. I agree with Chang, who recognizes the qualitative differences of value as well. She indicates that there is an ambiguity in the terms ‘more valuable.’ Values (or their bearers) can be more valuable in a quantitative sense or a qualitative sense. That is, using her example, in a quantitative and nonevaluative sense someone could be friendlier than someone else. However, in the qualitative or evaluative sense, being friendlier might not be more valuable for a relationship (here, ‘valuable for a relationship’ would be the covering value or higher synthesizing category). Hence, “while a greater amount of a value makes something ‘more valuable’ in a nonevaluative sense, it need not make it ‘more valuable’ in an evaluative sense.” Chang takes this to indicate that since the quantitative sense of ‘more valuable’ is not always better in the evaluative sense, there is the possibility that “different quantities of a single value are incomparable [my italics].” This seems correct. Hence if quantities of a single value can result in incomparability, then incomparability of value does not entail value pluralism.

Moreover, if qualitative differences of a single value are taken into consideration, it is open to suppose (and is often argued in favour of incomparability) that even with respect to the single value, the qualitative differences are such that none of the three value relations hold, and hence the qualitative differences in bearers of a single value are incomparable. To quote Chang again, “value pluralism/monism cuts across bearer incomparability/comparability.”

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60 Stocker, PCV 180.
61 Chang, IIPR 17.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
Rational Resolution of Conflicts

I want to point out that though I have argued that arguments for incommensurability/incomparability do not entail pluralism there is nevertheless a silver lining for pluralists. It is often supposed (see Williams’ fourth claim for incommensurability above) that if values are incommensurable/incomparable it means that making a justified or rational choice among the conflicting values/bearers of value is impossible. This is part of a debate in incommensurability/incomparability and I will not step into it. However, if pluralism does not entail incommensurability/incomparability, then there might be the possibility of constructing pluralist arguments that are not prey to those objections of incommensurability/incomparability.

Rational Regret

For the purposes of this discussion I take regret in its familiar everyday sense, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a verb meaning feel or express sorrow or disappointment about something one has done or which one should have done and as a noun meaning: a feeling of such sorrow or disappointment. I intend it to mean what we ordinarily mean by the term, to be modified with the refinements in the subsequent discussion. As an emotion or attitude, our having or not having regret, as well as the degree of it we have in a given situation, can be rational or irrational.

The general indirect argument for pluralism from rational regret goes along the following lines. We can and often do have conflicting values. Sometimes (unfortunately often) we have to make a decision between competing alternatives. We are put in a choice situation where we must decide between alternatives. Often, when we decide among alternatives, we regret the forgone option. This regret is not irrational because we
have reasons to regret the forgone alternative. If monism were true, either there would be one value to which all other values reduced, or there would be a single ultimate moral principle to follow. In either case, regret would be irrational. That is, if the two alternatives were reducible to the same ultimate value and in the choice situation the agent chose the better of two alternatives, there would be no reason to regret the forgone option. Or, if there were some one absolute moral principle, and according to the principle you did the morally obligatory action, there would be no reason to regret the alternative action. The principle would not command you to do both actions. Whichever action you are obligated to perform according to the principle is the only action that would warrant regret: you should only regret broken obligations, and in this situation, if you have acted according to the moral principle, then you have nothing to regret. This monistic account is unacceptable to the pluralist because it does not do justice to the variety of distinct values constituting a good life. Nor does it allow us to have good reasons to ever regret a course of action if we acted in accordance with the dictates of (monistic) morality, thus rendering regret in such cases irrational.

This is good enough to start, but there are refinements and distinctions that need to be made. First, we need to establish just what is meant by regret, and why the adjective ‘rational’ is added. Rational regret, obviously, is regret that is not irrational—we can borrow Austin’s phrase and say that in the pluralist argument, ‘irrational’ is the word that wears the trousers. The argument for pluralism on the basis of rational regret hinges on the claim that to feel or have regret in a choice situation for the forgone alternative would be irrational on a monistic theory. It would be irrational, because if there were a single ultimate value and you chose the better of the two courses of action,
there would be nothing to regret in the forgone alternative that is not contained in the chosen alternative. In the case of a single principle, regretting not choosing an alternative that you were not morally obligated to perform is irrational because you have not broken any moral obligation. This last claim brings into focus the need for another consideration. Although the concern here is with rational regret, we need to add another modifier. The pluralist seems to be concerned with rational moral regret. Throughout this thesis the focus has been on value pluralism within ethics. I have remained largely silent on the possibility of a plurality of prudential values (such as rationality, knowledge, justification, temperance, etc.)

The pluralist claims under consideration do not factor in non-moral reasons. Hence an easy, though unfair, retort to the pluralist argument is that we can of course feel regret for a forgone option because a different value is at stake, this time prudential (e.g., knowledge) in the forgone option, but not a moral value. So, regret can be rational, because though we might have chosen the morally better, or the morally obligatory, course of action, there was something about the forgone alternative that it is rational to regret, but not to regret for any moral consideration. An example is in order. Suppose I have the choice to save a child from a burning museum or to save an ancient philosophic manuscript. At first pass, it seems like I morally ought to save the child— that is, barring any argument to the effect that it is morally required to save the

64 Indeed, it seems difficult to easily separate prudential from moral values since some of the discussions regarding constitutive features of the good life or of well-being include in their discussion both moral and prudential values. I think the easiest way to categorize them is intuitively: e.g., we tend to consider kindness to be a moral value, whereas we are less inclined to consider self-control a strictly moral value. Of course, depending on the circumstances, I think it is reasonable that some of these values can belong to both categories, or shift between categories. It is also worth noting that our consideration of some values as moral or prudential might be the result of a mistaken moral vision.
manuscript; let it be built into the example that whatever moral value there might be in saving the manuscript, it is both less than saving the child and some principle obligates me to save the child. In this example, though I might have no reason to morally regret saving the child, it still seems open and rational to regret the knowledge or historical value lost by forsaking the manuscript to the fire.

Above I argued that we might regret a choice between alternatives on the basis of a non-moral reason: that is, we chose one alternative or course of action because we were morally obligated, but there was some feature of the situation, that although not a moral reason, was a reason to regret having to choose the other alternative. This does not meet the pluralist concern directly though. They can respond to the objection that because they are concerned only with rational moral regret, the objection misses its target: if monism is true, then it would be irrational to morally regret the morally lesser of two alternatives; it is not irrational to regret the morally lesser alternative, hence monism is false. The pluralist contends that the only way to have moral rational regret is if the values involved in the alternatives either are fundamentally irreducible, or if the moral principles involved in the decision procedure are conditional. The first disjunct is fairly straightforward; moral regret is rational because the alternatives are dissimilar regarding the values they instantiate, hence the regret is for a moral value that is genuinely distinct from the chosen alternative.

The second disjunct is not as straightforward. Even if all principles were conditional (i.e., not overriding), it does not follow for the pluralist that moral regret is

65 This reply on behalf of the pluralist is itself problematic: for those advocating a plurality of conceptions of well-being, they have to include some non-moral values like knowledge and safety as well.
rational. That is, if in a given choice situation we accept the pluralist claim regarding the conditionality of value, and further claim that all moral principles on the basis of such values are conditional, it is not clear that moral regret would be justified by the pluralist’s own claims. The pluralist is committed to the claim that if there is a decisive choice between alternatives it is irrational to regret the forgone alternative. Kekes makes this point: “if values were not incompatible and incommensurable, then all conflicts among values should have a decisive resolution, because reasonable people would recognize that the higher of the conflicting values is better and should be preferred. But, then, it would be unreasonable to feel a sense of loss or regret on account of having missed out on the lesser value.”\(^{66}\) If only one principle were involved in the choice situation, whether or not it was conditional, and on the basis of that principle the decision between alternatives was made, then there appears to be a decisive resolution, hence it would be irrational to regret the lesser alternative. For the regret to be rational, according to the pluralist commitment, the choice situation has to involve not just the conditionality of moral principles, but multiple conditional and competing moral principles that pull the decision maker toward different alternatives. Why must these multiple principles be competing in the way described? If all the conditional moral principles in a choice situation unanimously resolved the morally right decision, then it would still be irrational to regret the lesser conclusion. It does not matter if there are one or one thousand moral principles involved in a choice situation; if the choice is decisively resolved, then according the pluralist, regret for the lesser alternative is still irrational.

\(^{66}\) Kekes, MP 57.
The above discussion illustrates that the pluralist, arguing for pluralism on the basis of rational moral regret, cannot appeal only to the conditionality of moral principles, but must appeal to conflicting conditional moral principles. That means that it is not the mere plurality of principles that is required for rational moral regret, but also their incompatibility. I have not found in the pluralist literature an argument to suggest that conditional principles must in fact conflict. That they might and sometimes will be incompatible seems to be a reasonable assumption, but it is a reasonable assumption only given the pluralist claims regarding the conditionality of value and the conditionality of moral principles, specifically, that there is no single correct system of value. However, it must be remembered that the argument from rational moral regret for pluralism cannot assume the conditionality of value or the conditionality of moral principles without begging the question in favour of pluralism.

At the beginning of this chapter, while reconstructing the indirect argument for pluralism, I said that if monism were true there would be either one value to which all other values reduced, or a single ultimate moral principle to follow. In either case, regret would be irrational. I have argued that the pluralist argument on the basis of conditional moral principles is implausible. The next task then is to see if rational moral regret is compatible with monism. That is, the task is to see if we can reject the premise in the pluralist argument that claims that rational moral regret is incompatible with a monistic theory of value. I will argue that moral regret is not compatible with monism, but that rational regret is.\textsuperscript{67} Moreover, I argue that the pluralist position regarding the first

\textsuperscript{67} The choice to argue along these lines is strategic: that even if rational moral regret is incompatible with monism, it is not as problematic as the pluralist envisages. I do think
disjunct mentioned above (the irreducibility of value) is untenable because it results in a radically proliferative pluralism.

Regret can be rational when only one value is in question. Take happiness for example: suppose you have a choice where you can give one person happiness or another, but not both. More than regretting simply being in a position where your choices are constrained in such a way, it is completely rational to regret giving one person happiness and not the other. The pluralist might claim that different people’s happiness are distinct generic goods. This raises again the issue of how to individuate values. Without a solution to that problem, I do not think we have a direct solution to whether or not different people’s happiness are instances of distinct values. To make some headway I suggest an indirect argument instead. If different people’s happiness constitute plural values, we seem to be forced to embrace a prolific pluralism. The drive to embrace pluralism comes from a noble mindset where each is to be given their due and to acknowledge the variety of ways and constitutive features that make lives go well. So, the pluralist needs types of value like friendship, happiness, kindness, courage, beauty, etc. However, here we are urged to embrace something much more radical: that the happiness of each person constitutes a distinct value. So, given Earth’s population alone, there are over 7 billion fundamentally irreducible values. Furthermore, that is assuming that the happiness is the same for each person and varies only indexically with the person to whom it belongs: we could also stipulate various qualitative differences between, say, 

that room may be made for the possibility of rational moral regret, but I am not certain. I am concerned only to show that even if rational moral regret is incompatible, we need not thereby be pluralists.

68 Stocker, PCV 248.
the happiness of seeing a long absent friend and the happiness of getting the winning score in a tennis match. So, as good pluralists we should multiply those 7 billion plural values related to happiness by the number of distinct kinds of happiness we can fancy. The pluralist situation is much worse when we consider values in addition to happiness.

A monistic response to the situation is to accept that different people can be happy. A monist might claim that in these situations there is only one good-making property or value at issue, happiness, and regret is rational because a choice has to be made where that property is instantiated for one person and not another. The monist, however, seems to be constrained as well. They can hold that it is rational to regret giving one person happiness over another, but it does not seem like the regret is moral regret. If they have acted rightly, the regret might be compassionate, and it might even be demonstrative of moral character (and morally better) to feel regret for the results of the decision, but the regret is not that the agent has acted contrary to the demands of morality. Hence, while regret is rational, it is not moral regret. Here, I suggest another indirect argument against the pluralist. To make sense of moral loss and hence moral regret the pluralist claims we require a plurality of values—including in whatever way the thesis of the conditionality of value is formulated. The monist, they claim, cannot account for moral regret. Here, I suggest a retort by the monist:

_Indeed, monism seems unable to account for moral loss when the morally right action is taken. Well, what of it? Cases of purported moral regret involve a conflation of moral sentiment and rational regret. The pluralist, however, in making room for moral regret, has given up the possibility of acting rightly. That is, if moral regret is a live alternative in the way the pluralist envisages because of the conditionality of value, that_
means that no decision can ever be considered moral tout court but rather is only always conditionally right or conditionally moral. Pluralists gain moral regret at the price of giving up the possibility of genuinely moral action. Hence, they cannot even claim that pluralism allows for moral regret when the morally right action is taken, because pluralism denies that unconditional moral action is possible.

It may also be the case that moral regret can be rational: that is, despite acting in accordance with the demands of morality we can recognize that good- or wrong-making features that contribute to a choice situation are merely overridden or defeated by the demands of morality, but not cancelled or negated. That is, we might be morally required to do one action, but we can regret either doing that action or failing to do another because of contributory good- (or wrong-) making features of the choice situation. Those features remain moral reasons, specifically moral reasons for action, despite a moral obligation requiring a different course of action. Because they retain their status as moral reasons, I think it is open to suggest that it is rational to have moral regret in such a situation. Nonetheless, since this is only a suggestion, I think it better to take the stronger line and respond to the pluralist by supposing that monism and rational moral regret are incompatible. Even so, taking the stronger line is not detrimental to the monist.

I suspect part of the problem with regret is the result of a conflation or confusion between goods and good-making properties, or, bearers of value and values. The debate between pluralism and monism concerns good-making properties or values. There is no dispute that various things can be good, and that values can be borne by different bearers. In fact, we ought to be suspicious that when we take, for example, different people’s happiness to constitute different values, we are breaking down the distinction between
values and their bearers. In each case, we are considering the good-making property of happiness. That a good-making property can be variously instantiated should not be a reason to suppose that there are nearly as many good-making properties as there are instantiations. Phrasing the problem this way again obscures the distinction between property/value to be instantiated and instantiation. Hurka defends the monist against the pluralist’s over-populated value theory:

A monist who values only happiness can say that although the happinesses of different people are different individual goods, what makes them good is in each case the same, namely, just their involving happiness. Since the different happinesses all share the same good-making property, he can say, they are instances of the same generic good.\(^69\)

We can modify Hurka’s claim here for a monism that does not value only happiness. We can replace happiness with utility, or pleasure, or presumably indefinitely many other goods. We might also attempt to substantiate a theory of good-making properties by their contribution to a theory of what is right/good along more Kantian lines. Whatever theory we choose for the monist, what must be denied is the conditionality of value. Hence, despite there being a plurality of goods/bearers of value, they all share the same good-making property: whatever criteria the favored theory of the good stipulates as the condition of moral action.

Given that those working on incommensurability claim they are concerned with bearers/goods and not good-making properties/values, the attempted connection of rational regret and pluralism should bypass the issue of incommensurability altogether. However, as discussed in detail earlier, the pluralists do not agree.

Despite the pluralist claim that rational regret is a result of the incommensurability of value, it will be recalled that I have already argued that the question of the incommensurability of value does not entail pluralism. That issue aside, I have argued that it is not irrational to experience regret when values conflict, but rather what would at most be ruled out according to monism is only rational moral regret. That does not seem to be an especially difficult result to live with: if we consider ethics as an enquiry into what is good or what is right, what we are searching for is a decisive resolution to moral questions. Moreover, we might be able to make room for rational moral regret by investigating the concepts of an overriding moral concern and a cancelling moral concern.
4. Conclusion

So far I have tried to present the main claims of value pluralism clearly and fairly. In the examination of those claims, the pluralist position relies on two main arguments: arguments from incommensurability and from rational regret. As these arguments go, values are plural because incommensurable, and value pluralism is true because we could not make sense of rational regret without it. I have argued that incommensurability does not entail value pluralism, and that however the disputes regarding issues of incommensurability are resolved, those issues apply to both monism and pluralism. Furthermore, the indirect argument for pluralism via rational regret is not satisfactory. I have suggested that the pluralist conception of rational moral regret gives up the possibility of genuinely moral action, that from the pluralist perspective moral regret is not rational even if pluralism is true unless the variety of conditional values conflict, and I have suggested that the pluralist conflates values and their bearers when they express their concerns regarding regret. I have accepted a stronger line of argumentation where monism is incompatible with rational moral regret, but is not incompatible with rational regret. This stronger line does not seem especially worrying to me. Moreover, I do think that we might be able to make sense of rational moral regret if we consider moral features of a situation as moral reasons: if those features are not cancelled by some other aspect of the situation, but merely overridden by a higher principle, synthesizing category, or value, then they retain their status as moral reasons and hence it seems perfectly rational that we should experience moral regret. In a way this latter suggestion regarding regret is marking the difference between an all-things-considered judgment of morality and the moral judgment of a particular action. If an agent is constrained to one alternative in a
moral problem, then they act rightly by carrying out the all-things-considered course of action, but that does not mean that it is irrational to regret the contributory loss of good-making features (or presence of wrong-making features) of the forgone (or chosen) alternative. This possibility does not imply pluralism.

Throughout this investigation I have attempted to engage the pluralist on their own terms and on the basis of their own claims. What I hope to have shown is that on the most general formulation of pluralism—to which I consider any and every pluralist to be committed if they are to be a pluralist—we have been given no good reason to think that pluralism is true. I have not prejudged what would be an acceptable monistic theory, nor have I defended any particular monistic theory. Here, I want to make some positive remarks, discussing some of what I think are the best intuitions of the pluralists, and suggesting the way to move forward with ethical theorizing after pluralism.

At the beginning of this thesis I said that the question pluralism sought to answer was whether value was one or many. The pluralists reject a reductive analysis of value to a single value or to a single, fixed, hierarchical system of value. They think pluralism is the answer because they think it captures the variety of conceptions and features required to lead a good life. Nevertheless, various conceptions of living well do not seem to need to be conflicts of values. They are rather conflicts of sets or systems of values. We have inherited, from a variety of sources, a complex collection of values. That some seem to conflict does not require the positing of distinct systems of value that are all correct. We can take on the task of trying to establish what we should value and in what degree. We can take moral theorizing as a process of learning and discovery of what we ought to value, rather than as an apologetics for moral indecision. There is no reason to suppose
that our complex inheritance of values is what we really ought to value, nor, without prejudging what the right moral theory would be, is there any reason to suppose that if we could develop a system of ethics it would be unable to account for the variety of good-making features required for living well.

The pluralist is certainly right in recognizing that our values frequently conflict. I am not as confident that our values often conflict in nearly such intractable ways as they seem inclined to suppose. Nonetheless we are left with a question of what we should make of the conflict of values. First, I should like to say that the phenomenology of the conflict does not seem to make the conflict look insurmountable. The experience of making difficult moral choices is one in which we believe there to be a solution, and we seek to find that solution. We lack an uncontroversial system of ethics and we are often conflicted in moral situations about what it is right to do. That, however, is no reason to give up the traditional task of moral theorizing and claim that there is no resolution to the conflict. Moreover, there is always a possibility that the sense of conflict is spurious. That is, supposing there is indeed a unique and correct system of ethics, the apparent conflicts might only represent our ignorance of morality and not some fundamental feature of ethical systems such as them being irreducibly plural.

Furthermore, if what I have suggested regarding good-making features and rational regret is at all plausible, we can account for conflicts of values. If an overriding moral reason does not cancel or negate the good (or wrong) making features of other actions, and those features continue to stand as reasons for (or against) action despite being overridden in a particular case, then I suggest that part of what we experience when we experience a conflict of values is a conflict of reasons. We do not know, or we have
trouble deciding, which features and reasons are the ones we ought to base our decisions on. Absent a working moral theory, there is no way to rule out that the conflict of values in such a situation is perfectly compatible with a monistic ethics. Likewise, we would be prejudging the issue if we were to assume that the only acceptable account of conflict was pluralism.

We might still be tempted at this point to think that the discussion of conflicting values indicates that values are fundamentally plural. First, it needs to be remarked that the foregoing discussion is directly in opposition to the versions of pluralism that posit a plurality of moral systems. What of the irreducibility of values and the discussion of pluralism as a metaphysical question? I am not sure what sort of work is done by the question of the reducibility or irreducibility of value. If we focus on describing our moral experience, we will know without a doubt that every day we use and are perfectly familiar with a wide variety of values. No one, at least no one that I know, thinks that friendship, justice, and mercy are the same thing. It is obvious that those concepts apply to different relations. What is not obvious is that they cannot be organized into a theory of the good with a systematic organization and decision procedure for moral action. Moreover, to take a line from Moore, we can ask of each of our values whether they in fact are good, to what degree are they good, when are they good, and how they fit into a theory of the good. I think this point also addresses the issue of our complex inheritance of values. It is a task for moral theorizing to decide exactly those questions in relation to the values we do in fact hold. We might, despite our inheritance, be mistaken in the role and place of those values in the moral life. Nevertheless, we need not invoke a pluralist thesis to accommodate our variety of values. We still have available to us the goal of a
theory of ethics that will provide both a criterion for right action, as well as a decision procedure.

This kind of openness to revision of the place and weight of the values we have is representative of the possibility for conceptual change. As our ways of living and judging change, we can expect that the role of some of our moral concepts—some of our values—will change as well. Descriptive ethics tells us what we do believe and how we behave. It also shows us that we have a variety of values and moral concepts. What it does not, and cannot, tell us is what we ought to believe and how we ought to behave. Similarly, it does not tell us what a perfected moral system should look like. That is the task of moral theorizing alone. There are enough skeptical and anti-realist moral theories without pluralism weakening moral realism by positing a plurality of irreducible and conditional moral systems surrendering moral realism’s claim to attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the good.

I have argued that the two main arguments for pluralism do not entail pluralism, and are not incompatible with monism. Moreover, both of the main arguments bypass the central concerns of pluralism. Incommensurablists hold that their work cuts across the monism/pluralism distinction, and regarding rational regret, it seems that the structure of our moral theory is independent of problems relating to the appropriate divisions of our attitudes. I have not sought to refute pluralism, nor have I sought to defend monism. Rather, I wanted to show that pluralism is not as obvious a candidate for a moral theory as has recently been believed.
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