Secularism Liberalism And Relativism

I

For over three decades now, secular liberalism\(^\text{i}\) has been confronted by a form of politics, which we have taken to describing, without too much precision, as “identity” politics. This paper takes philosophical stock of that confrontation, and then goes on to address a very natural worry about whether there is a form of relativism about values, which is implied by that confrontation.

It seems more and more urgent to declare oneself a secularist (and I hereby do so), in a time when wars are waged by a government dominated by the thinking of the Christian right, terror is perpetrated in the name of Islam, occupation of the territories of a continuously displaced population is perpetuated by a state constituted in explicitly Jewish terms, and a beleaguered minority is killed in planned riots by majoritarian mobilizations reviving an imagined past of Hindu glory. But even as one declares it, it would be complacent not to acknowledge that both philosophical understanding and worldly knowledge require that a claim to secularism cannot any longer deny that it is only one claim among others. Secularism does not seem to have either a philosophical right on its side which makes it rise by the light of reason over other opposing claims, nor does it seem to have a natural place at centre stage on grounds of our world’s manifest modernity. This is not to say that it does not have the right on its side, only that that right will have to be more hard won than by philosophers’ appeal to the pure light of reason or glib assertions of our modernity.

In a series of papers, over the years, I have tried to say why traditional or, what I in this paper will call, ‘classical’ arguments for secular liberalism have not quite taken in how the claims of religious and cultural identities are not so easily put aside, and how that right might be won on behalf of secular liberalism along more modest, alternative, non-classical lines.\(^\text{ii}\) Roughly, my diagnosis and proposal has been this. Classical arguments for secular liberalism have assumed that there are reasons that all rational people should be bound by, which justify basic secular and liberal ideals. But there are no such reasons. The only reasons there are for secular liberalism are reasons
that appeal not to something that all rational people will find compelling, just in virtue of their rationality, but rather reasons that appeal to substantive value commitments that some may hold but others may not. If that is right the task of achieving secular ideals in a world in which there are strong religious and cultural identities that often are at odds with those ideals, is to look for reasons that might appeal even to those with these identities. “Hard won” would seem a quite apt description when such are the tasks to be achieved.

The difficulties here are not merely practical, though they certainly are that. It is also a theoretical point that it won’t do to say that those who are not convinced by secular liberal ideals are falling to be illuminated by some clear light of reason. It is a theoretical fallacy to declare the opponents of secular liberalism irrational by standards of rationality which all rational people accept. Finding them wrong requires finding them wrong by the light of some of their own values. This is what I, following Bernard Williams, called ‘internal’ reasons by which one can show them to be wrong, by contrast with what I have been saying is simply unavailable: ‘external’ reasons which all rational people are supposed to accept, not because of any substantive values they hold but because these external reasons precisely make no appeal to other substantive values of theirs, make appeal only to their capacities to think rationally.

In this paper, I will rehearse these points briefly, and will then focus more on what seems like a prima facie implication of these points. The question is this: if there are no external reasons, if all we have are reasons and arguments internal to the moral psychologies of agents, are we theoretically obliged to concede a relativism about values, such that secular liberal values have only a relative truth on their side? My own view is that what seems to be a prima facie implication of my own previous arguments and conclusions, is not in fact so. Relativism is not implied, despite appearances, by the denial of external reasons. This is so because of two related things. First, a conception of the significance of history for the moral subject, and second a highly non-standard version of humanism that underlies such a conception of the significance of history.

I should like to dedicate this essay to the memory of my colleague and friend Edward Said, a great humanist, who had just finished a book on humanism before he died last month.
Let me first briefly rehearse some of the arguments and conclusions of the previous papers, before I address their prima facie implications for relativism.

It is best—for the sake of abbreviation-- to work with some specific clash between some particular principle of secular liberalism and the commitments of some particular identity. I will fasten on the issue of tolerance and its potential clash with a religion’s objection to blasphemy.

Liberalism's most honoured slogan says this. "Individual citizens must be left unimpeded to pursue their conceptions of the good life."

The slogan divides into two. The first half (‘Individual citizens must be left *unimpeded*) mentions a certain value commitment to non-interference in the lives of citizens, whether by the state or by other collectivities or even by other individuals. The second half (‘to pursue their own *conceptions of the good life*) mentions other sorts of commitments, more substantive ones (whose pursuit the first half requires to be left unimpeded), values such as, say, those of Islam or Christianity or socialism or more specifically of a life in the theatre or philosophy or watching and playing cricket. Of course there may be many qualifications and escape clauses which are often added as ‘built-in’ exceptions to the slogan's basic message, but those need not concern us now. The point is that the slogan is absolutely defining of liberal doctrine, and it seems to make a basic division of two sorts of commitments in its two halves. It is the essence of the doctrine that it subscribes to such a notion of non-interference. Such non-interference may and is often been put aside for some very specific sort of substantive pursuits such as the unconstrained accumulation of property or of income without payment of taxes etc., but we know that it would not be liberalism we subscribe to if we did not see the force of this slogan as operating in the realm of such things as speech and writing, and in the realm of worship, and so on.

It is worth noting that the point of distinguishing between the two halves of the slogan is to distinguish between two sorts of commitments which are of a different order rather than a different grade. The value of non-interference cited in the first half of the slogan is of a *qualitatively* different order than the substantive commitments cited in the second half. The two are not to be
weighed on the same scale. What makes for the special character of non-interference among the various commitments we might have is of course a question that has had famous and familiar answers in the longstanding history of liberal doctrine. But that there is a difference of kind here is not something that liberals can deny and remain liberals, even if it is very hard to say what exactly makes for the qualitative difference

Classical liberalism has placed a very strong demand on the value of non-interference to account for its special character, its qualitative distinctness, among our values. What is that? Let’s, as I said, focus on non-interference in the realm of speech and writing in order to answer this question. Let me bring out the very strong nature of the demand by looking at one argument. There are other arguments in the history of liberal thought which reveal the same demand, but I will restrict myself to just one because it seems to speak with such authority to the most fundamental liberal ways of thinking not just about politics, but about the nature of knowledge, truth, and intellectual and normative inquiry.

Perhaps the most famous argument in the history of liberal theory for freedom of speech and writing is John Stuart Mill's meta-inductive argument in his careless masterpiece, On Liberty. It has two premises, which can be crudely stated as 1) our own past opinions have been wrong, and 2) our present opinions may therefore also be wrong, despite our conviction in them. From these premises it concludes 3) that we should tolerate dissent against our current opinions just in case they are wrong and the dissenting opinion is right.

It is a conspicuous feature of this argument that it appeals to no substantive moral or political values in its premises in order to come to its conclusion. It proceeds from an induction (‘meta’-induction because it is not based on observations of past phenomena in the world but on observations about our own past beliefs) straight to its evaluative conclusion. Perhaps it assumes the value of pursuing the truth, since it concludes that dissenting opinions should be tolerated because they might be true. But even that is a cognitive value not a moral or political one. (More on this value, below.) There is a lesson in this. What it shows is that the strong demand that classical liberals place on the moral and political value of non-interference is precisely that it should be something we embrace on the basis of what any rational person will accept (in this case the basic facts of past error and its corollary, our present epistemic fallibility), and not on the basis of particular substantive
moral and political values which some may have and others may not. If it were based on something that is only variably held (as the other more substantive values are) then the fear would be that non-interference would itself (like the other more substantive values) be that much more contestable. Hence, this strong demand on how we may justify the value of non-interference, rules out any justificatory strategy which appeals to the fact that non-interference as a value is well supported and well reinforced by substantive value commitments that particular citizens might have. Only what all rational subjects will accept is permissible as a basis for justifying free speech as a liberal principle --that is what makes for the special character of the value mentioned in the first half of the liberal slogan. Precisely its complete independence of the sorts of things mentioned in the second half of the slogan.

It may not be possible to completely undermine Mill's argument which has such a grip on liberal theory, in a short space. But I will say just a few things to raise a very serious question about it, in the hope that it will at least display what must be addressed by those who find the argument gripping.

A specific difficulty is that when we say in the first premise that our past opinions have been wrong, we are saying it from the point of view of our present opinions, so it is hard to see how we can be diffident in holding our present opinions in the way that the second premise requires us to be. It’s all right to be diffident about our present opinions, if that is what we must be, but to the extent that we are diffident, the first premise is that much shakier than Mill presents it. This is because, as I said, the judgement expressed in the first premise is based on our current opinions. If the premises are so shaky, how can we possibly find the conclusion of the argument credible?

Now, someone may defend the argument by saying that Mill does not think that all of our current beliefs might be wrong. In particular, he does not require that we have any lack of confidence in our current judgements about our past beliefs being false. So the first premise is not shaky. According to this defence of Mill, we make epistemological progress, and cumulatively build up on a fund of truths via rejecting past convictions in the course of the history of inquiry. It is just that there are still a vast number of present beliefs which we are convinced of which may well be false, given the meta-induction. So just to give an example, it might be said that there is no need to lack confidence in our judgement that our past belief that the earth is flat, is false. As was claimed by Karl Popper (another philosopher, who -like
Mill tried to display the virtues of a free and open society on the basis of abstract arguments that all rational subjects would accept) we make epistemological progress by confidently rejecting certain convictions (such as the one about the earth being flat) as false. So, in general, this line of defence of Mill says that adopting freedom and tolerance opens up our convictions to falsification via the allowing of dissenting views and we can make progress in knowledge by this process of falsification, which tolerance enables.

But this defence of Mill’s epistemological assumptions in his argument for freedom is of no real help to him. It should follow from this defence, that Mill would now allow that at least as far as the belief that the earth is not flat (i.e., the belief that we confidently hold, the belief that our epistemic progress has established conviction in via the falsification process made possible by tolerance) is concerned, we should not tolerate dissent towards it. This is because we do not have any diffidence in this belief --and it was diffidence in our convictions that was the basis on which he argued for free speech. It is only because beliefs are not something we are confident in having established as true, that the argument for free speech is supposed to go through. So: if there are beliefs about whose truth epistemic progress via falsification allows confidence, then to that extent, free speech (as argued for by Mill) need not be necessary regarding at least them. But, of course, Mill will not allow that there be exceptions made to freedom of speech for some beliefs. He is not therefore going to allow that our convictions (now held with confidence) that certain beliefs are false are immune from his conclusion about tolerance and free speech. That is simply not a ground in Mill for putting tolerance aside. The defence may be right in trying to free Mill of a non-credible epistemology, but even if it is right in doing so, it has not done so in a way that strengthens a weak argument.

The more general difficulty with Mill’s argument and its epistemological assumptions is that the pervasive diffidence which we are supposed to have in our opinions, according to this argument, is due to a conception of truth which has it that we can never know when we have achieved the truth for any belief. It is clear from the argument’s premises that it is because we can never know we have attained the truth, that it comes to its conclusion.

Such a view of truth would make truth fall outside of the goals of inquiry because it would make no sense to say that we must strive to attain truth in inquiry, if we never know when we have achieved it. The problem here is
not the standard one of how we cannot intend to attain what we know we cannot attain. The argument does not presuppose that we cannot attain the truth, only that we cannot know when we have attained it. The problem here is rather that we would have to think of inquiry into truth on the model of sending messages in a bottle out to sea. What sort of an epistemological enterprise is that? Inquiry would have no knowledge or control of its own success, making all success a sort of bonus or fluke.

Again, a defence of Mill might be mounted by saying that quite apart from the detailed premises of the meta-inductive argument for free speech, which may have the problems I mention, the spirit of the argument lies in a salutary, general principle that toleration permits the airing of opposing views that may force us to be less dogmatic in our own convictions. So it is of epistemological advantage that we are tolerant. Opening up our beliefs to assessment by alternative and dissenting points of view is the opposite of dogmatism, and to oppose dogmatism is rational, it is an epistemological merit. It is our basis for valuing free speech, and it is a basis that all people who are rational should see the force of.

But it is not at all clear that it is rational to oppose dogmatism along these lines. Rather, the rational thing, the thing which has epistemological merit, is to be open to criticism of specific beliefs when evidence or reason is given to put it into doubt. It is no particular epistemological merit to allow for doubt on the general grounds that some belief or other of ours might be false. This latter and absolutely non-specific qualm does not give the inquirer any instruction in his or her inquiry. It does not tell her of which belief she should open her mind up to being critical. She can therefore proceed with inquiry without in any way being affected by the qualm, waiting for some more specific reason to be critical, if and when it shows up. Hence, there is no epistemological merit in the general qualm, as there would be if we if we were given qualm when a specific belief is put into doubt for some specific reason, counter evidence etc. Though it is possible in some sense (logically possible, I suppose) that any of our beliefs is false, that possibility is of no epistemic interest, since it gives the inquirer no instruction that makes any difference to how he or she should proceed with inquiry. And as the pragmatist rightly says, what makes no difference to inquiry, makes no difference to epistemology.

It will not do, in the face of all these issues arising out of Mill’s argument for liberalism, to say, “You are right. There is no need to think that inquiry
will have truth as a goal, if we can never know when we have attained any particular truth. But perhaps then we should cease to think that truth is a goal of inquiry. We simply try and achieve something less than truth.” This move (made by Rorty -see footnote 4) does not help Mill at all because now, the question will arise: what then is Mill’s argument for tolerance targeting in the meta-induction? Is it not essential to the argument that it find one, or place one in a position of never being confident that we have what we epistemologically seek? If truth, the property of beliefs we never are confident we have achieved, is no longer a goal of inquiry, if it is replaced by something weaker which we can be confident of having achieved when we have achieved it, then Mill loses his premises altogether.

In general, Mill seems to presuppose as a value that it is good to seek the truth, and that it is a goal of ours that we seek it, and the argument for tolerance turns on our never being sure that we have achieved it. And in my critique, I have been saying that the idea that we are never sure that we have achieved it, is in deep tension with the presupposition of the argument that truth is a value and that we have it as a goal of inquiry that we seek the truth. To respond to the critique by saying that we do not have truth as a goal of inquiry, is to give up on Mill’s premises and argument altogether. Even if that is the right way to go in epistemology, it does no favours to Mill on the question of liberty.

None of the foregoing is to suggest that we do not have or even that Mill does not have good arguments for tolerance and free speech. In On Liberty, Mill presents quite other arguments for it, but these are quite unlike the meta-inductive argument we are discussing. In them, we are not being presented with an argument that all rational people will accept by the sheer fact of being rational, and without appeal to any substantive values of theirs. Rather, substantive values are central to showing why one should embrace freedom of speech as –to take just one such argument in Mill-- when he says that it is good to live in a society with diverse opinions in the air (as we might say today, a ‘multiculturalism’ of opinion). Now, diversity of this kind is a value, a further value, and a substantive value. The value of non-interference in speech is being reinforced and justified by appeal to another value, the value of a diverse society. Rational people may accept the conclusion that non-interference in speech should be adopted if they have this further value or they may not, if they don’t have this further value. Therefore a justification of free speech that appeals to a further substantive value does not strike them down with conviction just on the basis of their
being rational creatures. Whether it strikes them down with conviction depends on whether they have other substantive values which support it. However that is a strategy of justification of free speech quite measurably different from the methodological strategy of the meta-inductive argument. It is a strategy that is bound to be disappointing to the classical liberal, who will fear that to make something as fundamental as free speech depend on something as contestable and variable among people as the substantive value one places on diversity, is to make free speech more vulnerable in our society than it should be. Basic liberal values should have stronger grounds, according to the classical liberal. But if my claims against Mill are right, there aren’t any.

This conclusion raises a large question.

How can secular liberalism now cope with the phenomenon of identity politics, without the resources of external reasons? When the politics of identity confronts liberalism with individual or group convictions and commitments that are sometimes (though by no means always) manifestly illiberal, what resources does secular liberalism have to deal with this confrontation?

Various examples can be raised, but let us fasten on Muslim or Islamic identity, since it is so much in the air in recent years. Let’s also continue with the theme of free speech already present in the texts by Mill we have been discussing. Take, then, the Muslim commitment to the censorship of blasphemy, as for example in the aftermath of the publication of Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. (Other commitments might be cited as well: such as the fact that Muslim identity also often implies commitments, legal commitments in the form of personal laws, that are at odds with secular liberal commitments. Thus for example, sharia laws covering marriage, divorce, and alimony to a considerable extent run counter to secular liberal commitments to gender-justice, a problem that has surfaced often in the context of secularism in India and elsewhere.)
A terminological aside is necessary about what I will mean by ‘identity’. Let us say identities in politics, in the *subjective* sense of identity, come from deep value *commitments* that individual or groups have – to their religions, or to their nationalities, or to their race, or to their gender, etc. *Objective* identities, by contrast, do not come from value commitments, they simply turn on facts, which need not be endorsed and made into commitments at all, facts about such things as descent, where or to whom one is born, where one is domiciled, the colour of one’s skin, one’s chromosomes, etc. Objective identity will not be taken up in this paper at all. Of course, subjective identities often are a result of *endorsement* by agents of the facts that make for their objective identities, endorsements, which therefore *transform* those facts into value commitments. Thus someone who belongs to a certain race by descent (an objective fact about him) may make his racial identity subjective by *endorsing* this fact about himself, i.e., by valuing the fact that he belongs to that race, and so making it into a value *commitment*. I will be focusing on subjective forms of religious identity, in particular Islamic identity.

To return to our question: if one cannot effectively give arguments in the form that Mill and other classical liberals do, to establish liberal principles of free speech, what resources does one have left against identitarian commitments when these latter imply commitment to specific values such as censorship of blasphemy?

Nothing in the critique of Mill that I have presented, and nothing in my more general methodological conclusion drawn from that critique, suggests that liberalism has *no* resources left against these illiberal tendencies which may emerge in identity politics. All it suggests is that classical liberals have sought in the wrong places for such resources, by looking for justifying arguments for liberal principles which make no appeal to our other (more substantive) moral and political value commitments. But those places don’t exhaust the resources available.

The lesson here is obvious. If the efforts of the classical liberal, which we have just criticized, are paradigmatically the efforts to provide *external* reasons (as I defined these earlier) then what we are left with are the resources provided by *internal* reasons in any response we can give to Muslims on the question of censorship of blasphemy, gender-injustice, and so on.
Here is where our large subject looms. There is bound to be a widespread and quite natural tendency to think that if internal reasons are the only reasons one can bring to bear on a disagreement over values, then something like relativism about values is necessarily in the offing. If so, the thought that the liberal is not yet out of resources against, say, Muslim identitarian politics might seem too optimistic because now anti-liberal Muslim commitments, such as to the value of censorship of blasphemy, may have their own sort of truth (relativistically characterized truth) on their side.

This tendency, I said, is a natural one. And what is most interesting is that it is natural for both the ‘external reasons’ or ‘classical liberal’ theorist, who is prone to the theoretical anxiety that if the sort of (externalist) normative power she has all along claimed for Reason is being denied, then there is nothing to do but sink into an identitarian mayhem, as well as for another sort of liberal theorist, the ‘relativistic pluralist’ (such as perhaps Isaiah Berlin) waiting in the wings to triumphantly assert that to call this 'mayhem' is tendentious, and that classical liberals were all along too steep in their claim for the exclusive wisdom of their commitments to the first freedoms, and that other sorts of opposing values may have an equally good claim for their own particular sorts of opposing wisdom. That is to say both the classical liberal theorist and his relativistically-oriented pluralist liberal opponent, despite their deep disagreements, share a tendency to assume that if there are no external reasons, there is not much left by way of Reason in situations of moral and political conflict. They, of course, take opposite sides once they make this shared assumption (one concluding that loss of conviction in the plausibility of external reasons leads to a sort of relativistic mayhem, the other concluding that this is just how things are with fundamental disagreement about values and to call it mayhem is a classical liberal prejudice), but they do share the assumption.

If the shared assumption is right, then a secular liberal ought to be made anxious by the loss of external reasons, since relativism does imply that she cannot hold her views with the kind of confidence that she might like, that she must allow that ways of life which she finds morally and politically quite reprehensible have their own sort of right on their side. But the shared assumption should not be allowed to pass without scrutiny.

What sort of relativism are these two opposed doctrines assuming to be implied by the loss of external reasons? It is this. When there are no external reasons and two parties are disagreed over some value commitment, there
may in principle be no scope for either party to give internal reasons to one another. Internal reasons are dependent on support coming from our substantive values, not something given to us by the very fact of our rationality. Therefore unlike external reasons, there is no guarantee that internal reasons will be available since they are dependent on further values which may not be present in perfectly rational agents. And it is prima facie possible that in some sorts of value-disagreement, there will, in principle, be no such values for the parties in the disagreement to appeal to. In that case we will have the kind of impasse mentioned in the formulation, just given, of relativism. The expression ‘in principle’ is doing some serious work in this formulation of relativism. Relativism is a theoretical or philosophical position, it is not just a practical difficulty about how it is sometimes very hard to persuade someone you disagree with on some evaluative matter. The theoretical position is that each party in the dispute may be utterly unreachable by the other.

This may indeed be cause for alarm in politics and morals, and, as I said, it is in particular a cause for pessimism about the resources being claimed for liberalism in the face of identity politics, once it has lost its basis in external reasons. But before we can assess how alarming it exactly is and how pessimistic to be, some more detailed understanding of the resources we are left with, the resource of internal reasons, is required.

What is it to find internal reasons to persuade another? Internal reasons are reasons we give to another that appeal to some of his own values in order to try and persuade him to change his mind on some given evaluative issue, such as a commitment to censorship of blasphemy. So if a Muslim does have such a commitment, a liberal can only appeal to some other value of his which is in tension or in conflict with his commitment to the censorship of blasphemy. To put it very explicitly, one will have to find that such Muslims are committed a) to censorship of blasphemy and yet that they are also committed b) to various other values which may lend support to the value of free speech. And for the liberal, to use internal reasons against such Muslims, is to stress b) to them in an effort to bring them around to discarding a). This is of course a strategy very alien to classical liberalism because b) is not the sort of thing that all rational agents necessarily embrace.

In general, then, the strategy of internal reasons is a strategy that can only work when those against whom it is brought to work, are internally
conflicted. (It is important to add that conflicts within values need not always take the form of there being blatant inconsistencies among them. In fact it may seldom be that. Much more likely and much more pervasive are conflicts of a more subtle kind, tensions or dissonances between values. vii )

We can now pull the strands together. Relativism in this context, we have just said, is a doctrine that holds if there is a certain kind of impasse. It holds if there are, in principle, no internal reasons that two parties in a disagreement over values, can give to one another. And if the prospect for giving internal reasons turns on the possibility of there being an internal conflict in at least one of the parties involved in a disagreement over values, then that implies that relativism would hold true, only if both parties in such a disagreement are completely unconflicted, that is, if they have perfectly and maximally coherent value-economies. In other words, in order for relativism, of the sort we are worrying about to be true, it would have to be the case that someone with whom one is disagreed over values is not merely never inconsistent (as I admitted blatant inconsistency might be hard to attribute to political and moral subjects), but they would also have to be wholly without any tension or dissonance in their values and desires. That alone makes for a principled impasse.

But it is hard to think that ordinary human subjects are so completely without internal conflict in this broad sense. The idea of such a total lack of inner conflict is an extraordinary condition to find in any value-economy. Relativism, conceived on this condition, would find instance, it seems, only when two parties in a dispute over a value were monsters of coherence. Perhaps some imagined rational automata are maximally coherent in their value commitments but the idea that ordinary human moral-psychological economies are so, is barely conceivable. Thus, so long as Muslims and other anti-liberal elements that surface in identity politics are susceptible to conflicting relations among their commitments, so long as they are not possessed of maximally coherent value economies, the scope of internal reasons to establish secular liberalism even in the face of identity politics is maintained. Maximal coherence being a barely conceivable condition, there is no need to despair about the scope for liberal politics to succeed without classical externalist reasons and arguments.

The point cannot be quite left where it is.
Let it even be conceivable that, at a given time, a particular illiberal evaluative economy is highly coherent and unconflicted — at any rate, let it be conceivable, as it surely is, that any conflict or tension that it does contain among its value commitments is not as a matter of fact helpful in bringing it around to shedding its anti-liberal commitments. It is perfectly possible that even if Muslims are internally conflicted on some matters, these may be matters which are not relevant to secular liberal efforts to give internal reasons to them to get them to change their mind on censorship of blasphemy. This still does not hobble the scope of secular liberalism because political philosophy cannot consider moral subjects and political citizens as standing outside of history, in some timeless, unconflicted psychological economy.

Being historical subjects, history and the incoming states of information it provides to these subjects in its course, may well introduce conflict in them by introducing tensions and dissonance in the relations between their value commitments. Let me just give one example. It is now fairly well documented that the large increase in pro-choice attitudes among hitherto even relatively conservative women in America in the third quarter of the last century, was a result of their having deliberated their way out of a conflict in their own commitments, a conflict that emerged fully only in that period of history, when as a result of the rise of service industries and the relative decline of heavy manufacturing goods industries, a more gender-distributed work force was created. A historical change which provided for greater prospects for employment for women, introduced conflict into the values of even hitherto conservative women, and this in turn gave rise to internal deliberation on their part that resulted in many of them revising their views on issues of abortion. The point then is that even if, at a given time, a value-economy seems relatively unreachable by internal reasons because it is relatively coherent and unconflicted, so long as we think of moral-psychological economies as necessarily being in history, conflicts may be injected by historical developments into moral-psychological economies.

The point is essentially Hegelian, though in Hegel himself it is unfortunately ruined because it is embedded in terms that were unnecessarily deterministic. But it is a point of the utmost importance to the way in which post-classical liberals might think of themselves as being able to cope theoretically with the loss of external conceptions of reason that defined its classical period.
This Hegelian idea goes deeper than it might seem. It might seem that all the idea amounts to is that at some later time, we might be able to persuade someone with whom we are disagreed by giving him internal reasons, but for now at least, there is an impasse and so relativism about reasons is true. But this deflationary description misses the real theoretical status of the appeal to the subject-in-History. That appeal is precisely intended to repudiate the idea that we should think of subjects as being in slabs of time, with relativism about their values holding in one slab, and possibly passing away in the next. Despite the talk of different times, that would still be to conceive the subject essentially synchronically at each slab of time. A genuinely diachronically conceived subject (hardly ever the subject that is considered by analytical philosophers writing about morals and politics, or anything else), a subject conceived neither synchronically nor in discreetly periodized times, but rather a subject conceived of as essentially historically open-ended, is exactly intended to replace the subject relativized to a time, when his values may have a 'relative' truth, or his reasons a relative closure. Hence the inclination to say, "Relativism for now, but not perhaps later!" is to not yet quite to be on board with the depth of the point which Hegel's stress on the importance of history for our conception of human subjectivity, is making. To be fully on board is to see that no sort of relativism is sanctioned for subjects conceived essentially diachronically and therefore open to the conflicts that history may provide.

I will admit again, however, that my appeal to Hegel here is highly selective since the fact that history should play this kind of role in our understanding of moral subjectivity (paradoxically) opens things up against the very sort of historical determinism that historicism, in particular Hegel's own historicism, usually suggests. The select element in Hegel which I am applauding is the idea that Reason (what I call 'internal' reason) does its work in a human subject by bringing about changes of value via deliberation on her part to overcome internal conflicts among values (something that popularizing Hegelians—never Hegel himself-- describe overly schematically in dialectical terms of the trio of “thesis, antithesis, and synthesis”); and that one does so very often as a result of conflicts (what in the popular Hegelian representation is called "antitheses") that emerge because of incoming states of information provided by specifically historical encounters. Once viewed this way, there is no reason to think that relativism follows upon the loss of external reasons, and so no reason to be pessimistic about the scope of internal reasons to be a resource for secular liberal political outcomes. Within this selective Hegelian view of the importance of
history and of diachronic subjectivity, the right way to describe what has wrongly been described as this 'pessimism', is simply to say that there is no Whiggish guarantee of a consummation of the historical process in a secular liberal outcome. That is not pessimism, it is just a recoil from a *deterministic* historicism.

That we should see the significance of history for subjectivity along these lines is, however, not a merely metaphysical position; it is in a rarefied sense itself an *evaluative* position. This point is crucial. After all someone else may see history as having a rather depressing record in resolving conflict between groups, and resist my repudiation of relativism, a repudiation which has *the default* lie in the view that it is always at least possible that new conflicts *internal* to an individual or group may --via internal reasoning-- help resolve conflicts *between* individuals or groups. Such a person will simply not find the record in history sanctioning this default position. The default says that when there is an intractable value-disagreement between two parties, history may always inject in one of the parties, the sort of internal conflict necessary for the other to provide internal reasons to it. The interlocutor here will deny this, saying that the record of history, does not justify this to be the default position. I have no purely philosophical or metaphysical argument against such an interlocutor, who does not agree with me about how to view the significance of history for moral subjects in conflict with one another. To find this interlocutor wrong is, in the end, to assert a value. In fact we cannot find him wrong without asserting a value, we cannot find him wrong by a non-evaluative argument. And to say that is to assert the priority of the evaluative over the metaphysical. I will echo and complete this point which is the eventual heart and centre of this paper’s overall argument, at the very end of the paper.

Of course, none of this will seem too principled to the classical liberal. Liberalism, conceived and arrived at along the lines proposed in this paper, is much too dependent on the particular conflicts and the particular internal reasons that a particular subject or group may find itself invoking in a particular historical moment, in order to sign on to liberal principles. Unlike the external reasons of Mill where a *single* principled reason (the elusive nature of truth’) is given for embracing a liberal principle, on this view there may be a *variety* of quite different internal reasons by which different subjects and communities may sign on to liberal principles, overcoming quite different conflicts within their respective psychological economies in order to do so. This criticism should be granted. It is indeed
unprincipled in this sense. However -and I insist on this important point--there is no sense in which this lack of principle is like other sorts of unprincipled outcomes that may be forced on one by circumstance such as, for example, agreeing on something that one is not wholeheartedly behind, a form of compromise which puts aside what one really wants, for the sake of some minimal thing that all parties want. That is simply not the nature of the lack of principle I am admitting to. Rather what is being admitted is that there is no single reason that all have for signing on to the outcome in question. Each may have quite separate reasons for doing so. But despite this fact, it is an outcome that all embrace wholeheartedly, and not merely as a compromise, since they each have internal reasons for embracing it. That it is not the same reason does not meant that it is not a reason that fully (internally) justifies the embrace of the outcome on each person (or party’s) part. It comes off as unprincipled not in any other sense, therefore, than that it appears unprincipled to someone like the classical liberal who wants the reasons for political outcomes adopted to be the same for all rational persons (and parties).\textsuperscript{x}

Even if the view presented in this paper seems unprincipled by the lofty standards of classical liberalism as we find it in Mill and others, what it loses by way of principle it gains by way of pluralism, which is itself a good liberal ideal. That is to say, it allows for a plurality of reasons for political outcomes. But even as I say this, I want to mark a distinction of some importance. This is a pluralism which is quite distinct from the pluralism we had just discussed earlier, the pluralism of philosophers such as Isaiah Berlin and others influenced by him, for whom the doctrine (despite Berlin’s somewhat coy demurrals at times) has essential ties to a relativism about the liberal outcomes, that is to say, about liberal principles themselves. For Berlin, pluralism amounts to a liberal having to acknowledge that liberal principles are only one among other political doctrines and (when they clash) each one may have some sort of right on its side, its right. No such acknowledgement is being made by the pluralism I am congratulating myself on having gained by my stress on a secular liberalism founded on the internal reasons. The whole point of the stress on internal reasons which this paper has tried to bring to the understanding of liberal doctrine is to disallow
any such concession, any such compromise on the exclusive truth or rightness of the liberal viewpoint (as against opposing political viewpoints). Rather pluralism is acknowledged at a quite different level than where Berlin places it. Pluralism should not be the view which has the liberal conceding that opposing principles to liberal ones may have their own sort of right on their side, it should rather be the view that there may be plural reasons (plural internal reasons) emerging in differently conflicted subjects for signing on to secular liberal principles, which alone have the right on their side. In other words, unlike Berlin who explicitly insists that his pluralism is about the values or principles themselves; the pluralism being suggested here is only about reasons for principles.

Just to be scrupulous to some details in Berlin, the real point of importance on this score is this. Berlin sometimes –though not always-- tends to deny that his pluralism requires him to say that conflicting values have their own right on their side because he thinks that the deep source of relativism is not value-conflict but rather that values can be incommensurate. But this is all wrong. Exactly the opposite is true. That is to say, if you have incommensurateness but you don’t have conflict, no hard problem arises. Such superficial ‘apples and oranges’ incommensurateness means only that you sometimes cannot compare highly disparate values. Why should this cause any concern of a relativistic kind. It is impasse-inducing conflict among values which is the deepest source of relativism, not incommensurateness-lite that is unaccompanied by conflict. In fact, if and when values are incommensurate in this superficial sense, they cannot conflict since if you cannot compare two things they cannot be found to conflict. If I say mountains are beautiful and you say books are interesting, there is no deep problem. Both may be true. No one who thought relativism was a deep problem thought this sort of incommensurateness was a problem. Certainly Kuhn did not. Rather relativists insisted that incommensurateness was deep only when there was incompatibility or conflict as well. For now, one could only save the day, one could only avoid the intolerability of inconsistency, by relativizing the correctness of inconsistent value judgements to different conceptual schemes or to different cultural backgrounds, etc. The fact is that we don’t really know what Berlin’s relativism amounts to because he is coy about admitting it in some of his remarks, leaving it unclear whether his pluralism is relativizing the correctness of value judgements or whether it is only pointing to a superficial form of incommensurateness in which there is no problem raised that relativizing the correctness of value judgements helps to solve. So, let
us put aside these difficulties of interpreting his views and simply pose the question to his sort of pluralist position about moral values and principles: What stand *would* his pluralism take when values *do* conflict in some fundamental way? And the point is that in the context of this question, he cannot disavow the deeper relativism about values, without actually taking something like the Hegelian stance I have suggested above. And so, the eventual point is that if you do help yourself to the Hegelian stance —for which there is no evidence whatever in Berlin—then there is no need to assert a pluralism *about values and principles*, rather than merely a pluralism about *reasons* for values and principles.

This last conceptual distinction regarding how to think about pluralism has enormous practical consequences. Which pluralism one embraces can make all the difference to what liberal states will allow. Let us take a well-known example from India. What pluralism amounts to in someone like Berlin, allows for the idea that a liberal state will, in the name of minority cultural rights, grant to minorities (in the Indian case, to Muslims) their own special personal laws on divorce, marriage, alimony, etc., even if some of these laws are illiberal in various respects. Thus it allows an exception to a uniform, secular, civil code in the name of minority rights. Exactly Berlin's sort of pluralist arguments were voiced in Constituent Assembly discussions in India before rights to their own (in some cases illiberal) personal laws were awarded to the Muslim minority there. How exactly that awarded outcome in India is to be interpreted is actually a rather delicate matter. In some explicitly formulated constitutional statements, the thought is that Muslims’ being ready to embrace a secular civil code should be a matter of waiting for them to find *internal reasons* for embracing it, and to the extent that one stresses those formulations, it would be wrong to describe the outcome as expressing a relativistic pluralism of the sort I am opposing in Berlin. But there are other clauses regarding minority rights and personal laws in the constitution (and certainly many claims made in the constituent assembly debates) which suggest that granting them personal laws is not just a matter of waiting till Muslims find reasons from within their own values to sign onto a uniform civil code, but rather that their religious personal laws are an *alternative nomic system* which is a rival system to secular law with its own sort of right on its side, and that the pluralism that the constitution was committed to must acknowledge this fact. That sort of tendency in the constitution is much more akin to the position one finds in Berlin. On that interpretation of the outcome, the pluralism which I am proposing —where the pluralism is only at the level of allowing plural (internal) *reasons* for
signing on to liberal principles and laws without in any way compromising on the principles and laws themselves—would find no legitimacy for the outcome at all.\textsuperscript{x}

(This issue has been excruciatingly complicated at present by the fact that the demand for reform of Muslim personal law usually comes these days—and for some years now—not from anything recognizable as allowing Muslims to reform them as a result of their own internal reasoning, but rather from a kind of harassment of a minority by the Hindu right-wing in the country. That Muslims could be reasonably expected to reform their personal laws by internal reasoning in the face of such harassment would be to utterly fail to understand the psychological preconditions for how internal reasons usually work in a historical context. A group’s capacity to change via internal reasoning requires a great deal of psychological security and self-confidence, precisely what is put into abeyance by the demoralization caused by such harassment.)

Returning from the details of this example to the general point about different types of pluralism, I don't want to deny, and in fact have just admitted above, that even the more austerely conceived 'higher-order' pluralism regarding reasons only, which I am proposing, compromises the purity of the \textit{classical} liberal's conception of reasons and justification for liberal principles. But I do want to repeat that it does not at all compromise, as the relativistic version of pluralism does, a liberal's strength and confidence in the claim to the exclusive correctness of the secular liberal principles themselves.

This confidence itself has its source, or perhaps it is just a reflection of, the Hegelian notion of subjectivity I had invoked earlier. The default position mentioned there was that we must see the significance of history for subjectivity to be as follows: that one always see it as at least \textit{possible} that a dispute in values may be resolved by internal reasoning as a result of the requisite \textit{internal} conflict being introduced into one or other of the disputing parties by the incoming states of information that historical changes provide to their psychological and value economies. It is when the significance of history is viewed along these lines (as allowing such a default position) that we are in turn allowed to turn our back on the claim of relativism that disputes in value might constitute an impasse. That is to say, such a default allows one to make \textit{no} concession to a possible right or truth or correctness on the side of one’s opponent, in cases of interesting and deep moral and
political dispute. So the deepest question, which I raised earlier, remains: what gives us the right to view the significance of history for moral subjectivity along these lines? Why may we not see its significance along quite different lines, see history as providing too much evidence for disallowing what I just claim as at least a necessary and permanent possibility. The nested modalities are complicated here, but my interlocutor’s idea will be that what I am insisting is a possibility, might only be contingently so, there may be no necessity that such a possibility always exists. History is simply not to be viewed in the optimistic way I am viewing it. It is possible that such dispute resolving internal conflicts are introduced into moral subjects by history but it is possible also that they are not. Why, then, am I insisting that history must be viewed in a way that it necessarily leaves it as an open possibility that such a conflict is introduced?

As I admitted earlier there is no answer to this question (and so there is no justification for taking the default position I do on the significance of history) along lines that are non-normative or purely metaphysical. There is nothing in history, nothing in the concept of history and our place in it, when that is conceived in purely descriptive and non-normative terms, which could instruct us to view history as offering us the default position I insist on. To take the default position I do, therefore, is itself to take a higher-order evaluative stance. And it is only by taking such an evaluative stance that a secular liberal can express the confidence that disputes in identitarian contexts with illiberal tendencies need not ever produce the despondency of saying that perhaps both sets of principles (liberal and illiberal) may have their own sort of right on their side.

What do I mean by saying that it is in the end an evaluative stance, which gives a secular liberal the confidence to insist on the exclusive rightness of secular liberalism against illiberal opponents, despite the loss of externalist reasons and the loss of externalist justifications of liberalism? I mean simply that it reflects a value, a value central to what I think is best conceived as a special and unusual version of humanism.

Here is how I have allowed myself to think of it.

When one is in a moral dispute with another, even if it is a bitter and vexed dispute, it is far better to be have an attitude of inclusiveness towards one’s foe that makes one strive to share the truth as one sees it with him, rather than to adopt an excluding attitude and say that he may have his own sort of
truth or right on his side. The latter is what the relativist pluralist says, and it will be said by anyone who does not see the philosophical and methodological force and insight of the Hegelian notion of a subject and its significance for morals and politics, as I am seeing it. For someone who does see that force and that significance, the attitude will be quite the opposite, the value of inclusiveness. This is the value which claims that it is far more attractive to say to even one’s bitterest foe in a moral or political conflict, “You must be my brother” than it is to say, “You can never be my brother”. To insist that he must be your brother, to refuse to allow him his own truth and to strive to convince him of the truth as you see it and judge it, is to show the requisite attitude of inclusiveness towards him. This may seem paradoxical since one is refusing him his own sort of truth for his views in the name of seeing him as one’s brother. But that is just how it is. Perhaps only a subject as perverse and abstract as Philosophy can see in this, no paradox at all.

I will admit that the rhetoric of ‘must’ versus ‘never’ in my last paragraph to express the contrasting values does not present the best options. I did use the flamboyant rhetoric even so and presented the options in their most extreme form, in order to bring out the contrast vividly. To care about the truth, as one sees it and judges it, and to care enough for others who do not see it, to strive to share it with them, need not take on the vocabulary which has it that one thinks that they ‘must’ be one’s brother and embrace the truth we see. But that vocabulary captures something of the caring that I want to stress here against the relativist form of pluralism, which precisely does not care in this way. Opposing such a relativistic form of pluralism, I am saying, involves not merely appealing to the Hegelian notion of subjectivity in the way I do, but also seeing that appeal as an assertion of a value of caring about the truth (as one sees it and judges it), rather than showing an indifference to others who disagree with one, as the relativistic pluralist does when he says that they may have their own sort of moral truth on their side. Such a way of caring for truth therefore itself reflects a caring for others, caring enough to want to convince them of the truth. That is the point of the talk of ‘brotherhood’ as a value, a humanist value, which in this specific sense, is missing in the relativist cast of pluralism.

To many humanists, such talk of brotherhood --flowing as it does from an ideal of caring for something so abstract as truth, and wanting to share that abstract thing with others-- will seem too intellectualized a way of talking compared either to the down-to-earth ways in which we talk of the humanist
values of brotherhood or to the sentimental, literary cast it had taken on ever since the rhetoric of ‘sweetness and light’. It is brotherhood based on an epistemological value rather than on the usual sort of moral values of solidarity and support that are articulated in standard versions of humanism. To such traditional humanists, the paradox of denying one’s moral foe his own sort of rightful moral view in the name of brotherhood, will seem to undermine the doctrine from within. But, as I said there, is no paradox here. It is a sign of great respect for someone, of including him in humanity, that you deeply want him to believe what you believe to be the truth rather than grant him as a truth (his truth), what you take to be deeply false. I admit that this is a very abstract way of configuring the ideal of human inclusiveness. But why should humanism not have highly abstract sources? These sources are precisely what might give the doctrine some further muscle and rigour, and therefore make it less dismissable as a musty and pious doctrine. At any rate, it is this rarefied version of humanism alone which can justify reading the significance of history along lines that arrest the slide from an acknowledged loss of external Reason to a relativism about values, a slide that would deeply limit the aspirations of even the most soberly formulated secular modernity.

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commitments about the censorship of blasphemy. Since free speech is so central to liberalism too, the secularist and the liberal join together on this example. And it is generally true, perhaps, that they join together on many others as well. But, as I said, that joining is contingent and not necessary or conceptual. 2) ‘Secularism’ sometimes marks a doctrine that states should be neutral between religions and deal with them evenhandedly. This is not how I will be using the term. I will be using it to mark the quite different idea that a polity and state should not be constituted by any religious precepts and laws. The distinction between these two uses is quite important since it is perfectly possible for a state to be even handed between Islam and Christianity by allowing for censorship of blasphemy against each, thereby falling under ‘secular’ in the former sense of the term, and not the latter. There is yet another use of the word ‘secular’, which is neither of these, a quite preposterous misuse one would have thought, which has it that a ‘secular’ person is an irreligious person and a ‘secular’ society is one in which all or most people are irreligious. This is how Christopher Hitchens uses the term, and I suspect so do people like Richard Dawkins. It is certainly not how I am using the term in this paper, and I think it is a misuse because for some time now the term has come to define only a political doctrine which religious people can subscribe to, so long as they are prepared to put aside those aspects of their religious beliefs that speak to issues of polity and law. Even if atheists like Hitchens, and Dawkins (and, it should be said, myself) would like to see a society that is increasingly irreligious, there is no reason to confuse this sentiment by making it a sentiment about what is properly called ‘secular’. See my “The Clash Within Civilizations” Daedalus, Summer 2003 for a mild polemic against Hitchens on this point and several other related points that flow from it, regarding current events and the actions of the United States government.

ii To mention just two, “Rushdie and the Reform of Islam”, Grand Street (Spring 1989) and “What is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity” in Critical Inquiry, Summer 1992. In subsequent papers I applied this philosophical point by way of criticism of a very specific political case of secularism, the case of Nehruvian secularism in India, both after Indian independence and for some years before, in the thinking and rhetoric of the Indian National Congress party as it led the movement for independence. These and a number of other papers are to appear in a volume entitled Politics and the Moral Psychology of Identity (Harvard University Press, 2004)

iv It is bizarre that a self-declared pragmatist like Rorty does not come to this conclusion. Though he insists that something that does not make a difference to inquiry, makes no difference to epistemology, he does not see that this pragmatist insight requires us to see truth as something that we can often know that we have attained, when we have attained it. Instead he retains the Cartesian conception of truth that we can never know when we have attained it, and so goes on to say that truth is not a goal of enquiry. To call this pragmatism is just simply wrong. It is caving in to Cartesianism and indeed to a Platonist notion of truth and reality.

v See, for instance among other essays by Berlin, his “The Pursuit of an Ideal” in his *The Proper Study of Mankind*, (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1997)

vi The sorts of values that fall under b), the sorts of values that lend support to free speech may differ for different subjects or groups. This is a view of how to think about achieving secularism that I have been taking since “Rushdie and the Rise of Islam” (see reference in footnote 2). There is more discussion of this point in the text of the paper, and also a comparison of it with Rawls’s notion of an overlapping consensus in a long footnote further below.

vii I discuss this more subtle kind of internal conflict in my forthcoming book, mentioned in footnote 2.

viii I discuss the importance of this Hegelian point to issues of moral reason and moral anti-relativism in the book, mentioned in the footnote 2.

ix There is an exegetical question here raised by Charles Taylor about these non-classical forms of liberalism based on internal reasons that both he and I subscribe to (see his contribution to Secularism and its Critics, edited by Rajeev Bhargava (Oxford University Press, 1996), about which I am not very clear. To what extent is the claim I make about there being a variety of distinct internal reasons as opposed to a single external reason for free speech, of a piece with Rawls's later (non-classical liberal) idea of an ‘overlapping consensus’? When I first wrote of internal reasons in early
articles on the Rushdie affair, I had not read Rawls’s work on overlapping consensus. And now that I have read and studied the work, I remain uncertain of the extent of agreement. To begin with there are minor differences. For example, Rawls had tended to put much emphasis in his discussion on the notion of ‘comprehensive doctrines’ and how they affect liberalism, and how liberalism must respond to them. I don’t think that doctrines are political phenomena. People are. One does not give or provide reasons –internal or external-- to doctrines. There are Muslims who do, but Islam does not, get into the political arena, whether a contractual arena or some other. People may subscribe to doctrines of course, but these are people who subscribe to all sorts of things, other than doctrines, and so bringing in some idea of a ‘comprehensive’ doctrine, does not really amount to anything that is useful or relevant or even real. A more important, difference is that it was important for Rawls that the context in which he developed his idea of overlapping consensus, is one in which the disagreement between liberalism and those groups embracing an ‘identity’ politics is to be seen as a disagreement between agents, who are essentially ‘reasonable’. By contrast, I am inclined to think that reasonableness here is an outcome of the effectiveness of internal reasons in any particular case where such reasons are effective, rather than as a starting point. That is to say, reasonableness is not something that we should plonk down as a starting assumption. We need only plonk down a capacity for internal reasoning, which is a much weaker thing to plonk down. In fact, I have not really ever been clear about how philosophers like Rawls, who seem at crucial points to wheel in the notion of ‘reasonable’ to do serious work, really expect to provide philosophical illumination or argument, in doing so. Much more important --and this may be a closely related point-- throughout his work, even in his most recent publication (Law of Peoples, Harvard University Press, 2001), Rawls had talked of overlapping consensus as something to be achieved within a procedure that begins with his celebrated ‘original position’. This is explicit in Law of Peoples, where he spends a long section elaborating once again on the original position. He therefore never gave up the point and importance of the original position. But, that is not at all how I see the role of internal reasons as providing for a higher-order pluralism. The whole point of what I am suggesting is that the notion of external reasons drops out --whereas the original position is a position that precisely retains the idea of external reasons because it is a position which, ex hypothesi, leaves out substantive values as providing reinforcing justifications. So, from my point of view, Rawls’s use of the original
position in his last work should be seen as utterly redundant once one sees the point of his own notion of overlapping consensus. These are large differences to have registered. But if we put such differences aside, I think that what is being suggested in this paper is proximate to a general theoretical tendency that is captured well in the idea of an overlapping consensus, and to that limited extent, I would be happy to view the efforts of this paper as 1) a grounding of that idea of overlapping consensus in a basis having to do with the nature of internal rationality, as I expound it in Hegelian terms, and 2) allowing this grounding itself to grow out of a prior critique of classical liberals like Mill, (and Rawls himself in his earlier work.).

* This is a subject that I pursue in another chapter entitled, “A Hegelian Moment in the Indian Constitution” in my book mentioned earlier, Politics and the Moral Psychology of Identity.