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# What's wrong with Charles Taylor's moral pluralism

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## Abstract

*In political philosophy one often encounters claims on behalf of pluralism, yet there is anything but a consensus over the meaning of this fundamental concept. It is true that there is no single pluralist tradition; rather, there are different pluralist traditions within different domains of practical reason. No one would object, however, to the notion that Isaiah Berlin's "value pluralism" is a genuine form of meta-ethical pluralism. Charles Taylor is another philosopher who is often called a pluralist, but I shall argue that this is a mistake. One of the central goals of his philosophy is that of reconciling competing aims and ends and this is incompatible with pluralism.*

It goes without saying that moral pluralism is a protean subject. However, it is generally agreed in the history of ideas that the concept of *value pluralism* was introduced by Isaiah Berlin<sup>1</sup>. It is true that the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the idea of unavoidable conflicts between equally valid ends is present in the work of thinkers such as William James, Max Weber or John Dewey, Berlin is probably the first philosopher to explore the meanings and implications of moral pluralism from a meta-ethical point of view. Cf. "The conflict of ideals" in James, W. (1897), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 198-205; for the irreducible opposition between liberty

development of this notion is simultaneous with the ideal of negative liberty<sup>2</sup>, namely that conception of individual freedom that entails a sphere of activity that must be free from the deliberate interference of other human beings. This evidently contrasts with positive liberty and its emphasis on the notion of autonomy; in this sense, agents are free when each acts according to his or her own will. The positive construal of liberty is associated with the ideal of “self-mastery”, according to which human reason can be divided into a superior, higher, dominant self on the one hand, and a lower, dominated and thus heteronomous *self* on the other<sup>3</sup>. For Berlin, this contrast between the rational and irrational aspects of the self lends legitimacy to a potential source of subjection and oppression to those who would not be able to see what is good and right – after all, according to Rousseau<sup>4</sup>, “[o]ne always desires one’s own good, but one does not always see what it is<sup>5</sup>”. Hence, society reserves the right to force every citizen to be free insofar as its social contract contains an “implicit obligation which alone can give force to the others, that if anyone refuses to obey the general will he will be compelled to do so by the whole body<sup>6</sup>”. That is why Berlin works to defend negative liberty,

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and rationality in Weber’s thought, see “Politics as a Vocation” in Weber, M. (1948), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, p. 77-128; and “John Dewey and the Roots of Political Pluralism” in Eisenberg, A. (1995), *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*, p. 27-54. See also “Historical Inevitability” in Berlin, I. (2002), *Liberty*, esp. p. 151: “if we can understand how conflicts between ends equally ultimate and sacred, but irreconcilable within the breast of even a single human being, or between different men or groups, can lead to tragic and unavoidable collisions, we shall not distort the moral facts by artificially ordering them in terms of some one absolute criterion”.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on negative liberty, see Berlin, I. (2002), “Two Concepts of Liberty”, esp. p. 216: “Pluralism, with the measure of ‘negative’ liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Berlin, I. (2002), “Two Concepts of Liberty”, p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that Berlin traces the positive construal of liberty back to Rousseau. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 183, 185, 191 and 194. See also Berlin, I. (2002), *Freedom and its Betrayal*, p. 27-49.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, J.-J. (1994), *The Social Contract*, II, 3, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 7, p. 58.

since he believes that it is better able to ensure moral pluralism — unlike its positive version, which encourages a particular conception of the common good.

Charles Taylor has criticized Berlin's distinction<sup>7</sup> not only for its simplistic and somewhat Manichean character, but also because a stubborn commitment to negative liberty encourages what he calls a "Maginot Line mentality"<sup>8</sup>. To stand on this line, he argues, is to declare all self-realization views to be "metaphysical hogwash" and by implication, to uphold a purely Hobbesian definition of freedom, one according to which liberty is understood exclusively as the absence of external barriers<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, as Taylor has put it, this conception of freedom proves to be untenable from a practical point of view: it ignores an irreducible dimension of human experience from which individuals understand that there exists, regardless of their own will, a "pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all [...]"<sup>10</sup>. Taylor's reformulation of the problem, which separates negative and positive conceptions of freedom is certainly well known; it is nevertheless worthwhile to recall the main point that emerges from his argument: the negative conception fails to establish a fundamental distinction between "opportunity" and "exercise" concepts of freedom<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, Berlin's dichotomy asserts an analytical gap between the conditions for the possibility of freedom and the

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<sup>7</sup> See Taylor, C. (1985), "What's wrong with negative liberty". It is worthwhile noting that many political theorists are opposed to Berlin's distinction. Cf. amongst others, Spitz, J.-F. (1995), *La Liberté Politique : Essai de Généalogie Conceptuelle*, p. 97-121; see also Philip Pettit and his conception of freedom as non-domination in Pettit, P. (1997), *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom And Government*, p. 19: "I believe that these philosophical and historical oppositions are misconceived and misleading and, in particular, that they conceal from view the philosophical validity and historical reality of a third, radically different way of understanding freedom [...]: the republican tradition".

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), "What's wrong with negative liberty", p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, C. (1991), *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), "What's wrong with negative liberty", p. 229; See also Mulhall, S. (2004), "Articulating the Horizons of Liberalism: Taylor's Political Philosophy", p. 108-109.

effective realization of this freedom. In other words, as soon as the problem of freedom is contextualized, Taylor believes that it is possible to understand how we – “strong evaluators<sup>12</sup>” – are led to make moral judgements. The problem of freedom, then, should be seen as a matter of knowing whether and how we can determine the importance of our different ends or purposes.

This contrast between Berlin and Taylor as regards the question of liberty is well known. In the following pages, my aim will be to further develop it by introducing a new theme: one concerned with their respective conceptions of value pluralism. My main goal will be to question the assumption, taken for granted by many scholars of political philosophy – indeed perhaps even by Taylor himself – that Taylor’s approach to morals and politics is pluralist. For, while the recognition of a non-formalized plurality of human goods plays a fundamental role in Taylor’s moral philosophy, there nevertheless is an important difference between his desire to find a way to harmonize the various purposes and ends to which individuals and communities aspire, on the one hand, and the quintessentially value pluralist assertion that these purposes and ends are often irreconcilable with each other, on the other. My investigation begins with an account of the short exchange between Berlin and Taylor<sup>13</sup>, one which highlights two radically divergent approaches to practical reason, especially in the light of what is sometimes called the problem of “dirty hands<sup>14</sup>”. Against the prevailing interpretation, I will argue that Charles Taylor is simply not a pluralist; indeed, to uphold a position that seeks to avoid moral dilemmas from a practical standpoint is to strive to reconcile competing aims and ends. Finally, I will proceed to illustrate the manner in which Taylor’s moral philosophy can even be characterized as “monist”. In the final section, I will devote significant attention to the implications he brings to dismiss the problem of dirty hands.

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<sup>12</sup> See Taylor, C. (1985), “What is human agency?”. The notion of “strong evaluation” is crucial to understanding Taylor’s work – its practical implications will be analysed in the following sections.

<sup>13</sup> See Berlin, I. (1994), “Introduction”, p. 1-3; and Taylor, C. (1994), “Charles Taylor replies”, p. 213-214.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Walzer, M. (1973), “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands”, p. 160-180. See also Blattberg, C. (2013), “Dirty Hands”, p. 1366-1372.

## 1. Incommensurability and conflicts of values: how Berlin read Machiavelli

One of the best ways to understand Berlin's moral pluralism is to focus on the thoughts he expressed regarding Machiavelli<sup>15</sup>. Needless to say, the opposition between paganism and Christianity, brilliantly highlighted by the Florentine, proved to be a real dagger in the heart of the natural law tradition<sup>16</sup>. According to Berlin's interpretation, Machiavelli's rupture with the whole tradition of classical political philosophy brought to light the incompatibility between two concurrent moral universes – the wisdom of the Ancients and the weakness of the Moderns. Now it makes sense to focus on the theme of value conflicts in the work of Machiavelli in so far as we pay attention to the moral problem with which Berlin has been concerned – namely, the gap between an ideal standard of action and reality in practice. Drawing on this, we must respond to the famous objection of Leo Strauss, according to which the substance of Machiavelli's political teaching regards “the essential inherence of immorality in the foundation of society and hence in the structure of society<sup>17</sup>”. Against Strauss' frustratingly bleak tableau, Berlin argues that Machiavelli's line of demarcation does not correspond to a boundary between specifically moral values and specifically political values. Indeed, Berlin tries to show how the differentiation has rather more to do with two distinct ethical systems: “what [Machiavelli] achieves is not the emancipation of politics from ethics or religion [...]; what he institutes is something that cuts deeper still – a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life, and therefore

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<sup>15</sup> See Berlin, I. (1980), “The Originality of Machiavelli”. It is relevant to note that Berlin traces the origin of the idea of value pluralism to the German Romantics and to Machiavelli, in opposition to what he depicts as a mainstream Western rationalist tradition and whose main thinkers are Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. Cf. Berlin, I. (1999), *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 21-34. See also Riley, J. (2013), “Isaiah Berlin's 'Minimum of Common Moral Ground'”, p. 63-67.

<sup>16</sup> Such is, at least, the reading Berlin shares with Leo Strauss. Cf. Strauss, L. (1959), *What is Political Philosophy?* p. 40-50; see also Strauss, L. (1958), *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, L. (1959), *What is Political Philosophy?*, p. 44.

two moralities<sup>18</sup>”. The parallel lays out the inevitably tragic character that accompanies any position in favour of one or another sets of values, because the choice made between these two forms of life will fundamentally be radical<sup>19</sup>.

If Machiavelli attributes the cause of “infinite inconveniences and infinite disorders” to the Church, it is because, in his opinion, “it has not been so powerful nor of such virtue as to be able to seize the tyranny of Italy and make itself prince of it<sup>20</sup>”. The affirmation of a consequentialist common good is made manifest in the myriad examples of Roman society to which the Florentine refers readers, as its aim is to show, *inter alia*, that the Christian moral ideal is ineffective in practice. Berlin argues that what matters most, for Machiavelli, is that the morality of the pagan world was somehow a socially necessary instrument – but not, however, morally superior – as it should be able to foster respect and fear of God among citizens<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, it is in his description of the pagan religion that the notion of *verità effettuale* makes perfect sense, as it is obvious that Machiavelli rejects the Christian ideal from a purely consequentialist perspective. Thus, to the extent that the morality of the Christian world inevitably leads the Republic to powerlessness and to political inefficiency, Machiavelli makes the “radical choice<sup>22</sup>” of embracing an “effective

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<sup>18</sup> Berlin, I. (1980), “The Originality of Machiavelli”, p. 45. The essential values of the morality of the pagan world are “courage, vigour, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice, above all assertion of one’s proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction [...]”. Against this moral universe, the ideals of Christianity are “charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value – higher than, indeed wholly incommensurable with, any social or political or other terrestrial goal, any economic or military or aesthetic consideration”.

<sup>19</sup> Berlin, I. (1980), “The Originality of Machiavelli”, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, N. (2009), *Discourses on Livy*, I, XII, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, XI, p. 34-35: “Whoever considers well the Roman histories sees how much religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked”.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of radical choice is central to my analysis – I will, of course, develop it further in the following pages. For the moment, suffice it to say that what I mean by radical choice is the decision of an individual to give

truth” which, having passed the test of experience is better able to account for the instability of worldly things<sup>23</sup>.

There can be little doubt that the concerns raised by Machiavelli proved to be eminently pragmatic. At first sight, the links with the question of moral dilemmas may seem strange; insofar as the set of values chosen by the Florentine is justified by facts – that is, by what history has taught us –, one might wonder if it is indeed a radical choice. Yet, it is important for us to recognize the gap observed by Berlin between the two aforementioned moral universes: Berlin's interpretation places emphasis on the incompatible values such as described by Machiavelli; it follows from this that it is impossible to reconcile these two ends or purposes, because the use of an absolute and unquestionable fulcrum – such as a transcendent order of justice – that would legitimize a certain standard of morality is simply unworkable in practice. According to Berlin, Machiavelli believes that justice is the result of a painful choice made by individuals living in a sublunary sphere, as Aristotle would say, that is, in a world subject to physical changes. However, in such a world, there is no room for the idea of an intelligible harmony designed with absolute certainty regarding the existence of one supreme human purpose: “Machiavelli's cardinal achievement is [...] his uncovering of an absolute dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity<sup>24</sup>”.

## 2. Berlin's argument

In a *festschrift* published in honour of Charles Taylor, Berlin begins the discussion on a fundamentally critical tone:

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preference to one possibility, and therefore automatically exclude all other possibilities; the fundamental evaluation whereby the agent bases his or her decision cannot be grounded in any form of rationality. In other words, the justification for a radical choice that entails the comparison of incommensurable reasons for action cannot be determined theoretically. See Taylor, C. (1985), “What is human agency?”, p. 29-35.

<sup>23</sup> Berlin, I. (1980), “The Originality of Machiavelli”, p. 46-47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74. It is worth noting that Aristotle, who is a monist, would agree with neither Berlin nor Machiavelli.



Charles Taylor [...] is basically a teleologist – both as a Christian and as a Hegelian. He truly believes, as so many in the history of thought have done and still do, that human beings, and perhaps the entire universe, have a basic purpose [...]. Consequently, everything that he has written is concerned with what people have believed, striven after, developed into, lived in the light of, and, finally, the ultimate goals towards which human beings as such are by their very natures determined to move<sup>25</sup>.

Berlin's argument brings forward two essential points regarding Taylor's thought that, in his opinion, are incompatible with moral pluralism: first, there is his teleological approach, which involves the assignment of a certain direction – be it spiritual or secular – to human affairs. Second, even if Taylor seems to be aware that it is not feasible – nor even desirable – to determine one and only one conceivable course of action for the whole of humankind, he argues that it is however possible to reconcile competing aims and ends. Berlin attributes much of these limits of Taylor's thought to the fact that he remains under the influence of Herder, for whom different cultures and societies are supposedly driven by an inherent organic structure<sup>26</sup>. Berlin, who was strongly influenced by philosophers like Spinoza and Hume, rather than Herder, boldly asserts that purposes are “imposed by human beings upon nature and the world, rather than pursued by them as part of their own central natures or essences<sup>27</sup>”. It is clear that one significant reason for the distance Berlin places between himself and Herder is the atomistic ontology that characterizes the former's approach to morals and politics<sup>28</sup>. However, as we know, Herder was concerned with cultural diversity, while acknowledging and defending the fundamental value of the individual as well<sup>29</sup>. What we must remember, in short, is that Berlin

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<sup>25</sup> Berlin, I., (1994), “Introduction”, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> See Blattberg, C. (2000), *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics: Putting Practice First*, p. 4, 75-76 & 126.

<sup>29</sup> Such is, at least, Louis Dumont's interpretation of Herder. Cf. Dumont, L. (1983), *Essais sur l'Individualisme*, p. 119.

rejects the idea – which he considers to be central to Taylor's thought – of a causal structure that could determine the development of different communities and individuals in an inexorable march towards a single, predestined goal<sup>30</sup>.

Now we are drawn to expound Berlin's main concerns about the practical implications of Taylor's guiding ideas regarding moral pluralism. If we take his objections seriously, it becomes clear that the agent who has to compare incommensurables – that is to say, who must determine his action vis-à-vis a plurality of non-formalized purposes or concerns justified on grounds of membership, attachments or any other reason – will be facing values that prove morally indefensible in terms of a “common good”. In fact, what worries Berlin is that Taylor seems to acknowledge that there is an essential direction, as it were, whose function is to weigh claims and principles against one another with the aim of establishing an order of priority. It is then clear that, for Taylor, in so far as individual evaluations are ultimately expected to converge towards a common goal – this vision of “a human society acting in a harmonious and interactive fashion” – they are therefore not the result of a radical choice<sup>31</sup>. Our modern identities' fate, the claims goes, is to embrace the discovery according to which it is possible to eliminate genuine moral dilemmas, if only our authenticity and our rational conclusions were met in practice.

Unfortunately, Berlin's argument – which, it must be said, is really a mere draft – does not go into further details about the possible criticisms regarding the implications of Taylor's thought on moral pluralism. It is as though Taylor were obviously in no way ready to accept the crucial observation that inspired the entire career of the historian of ideas:

the notion of one world, one humanity moving in one single march of the faithful, *laeti triumphantes*, is unreal. The incompatibility of equally valid ideals in different societies at different periods, and of the various values and ends of individual human beings of whom these societies are composed – these and these alone, not a cosmic plan,

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<sup>30</sup> Berlin, I., (1994), “Introduction”, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

determine what the total outcome of human behaviour must be, even if the individuals cannot themselves tell what the result of these interacting activities will turn out to be<sup>32</sup>.

### 3. Taylor's response

Admittedly, it may be asked whether Berlin's argument sketched above rigorously applies to Taylor's position with respect to moral pluralism. As a matter of fact, Berlin never considered himself a moral philosopher and the lack of analytical precision in his writing does not help matters either. Thus, before examining the issue before us in the previous works of Charles Taylor, I think it would be wise to pay attention to his own response to the criticisms addressed by Berlin.

First, it is interesting to note that Taylor recognizes that he is not sure the gap between them is as wide as it seems in Berlin's description<sup>33</sup>. Of course, against the charge of teleology, Taylor argues that their disagreement is rather due to theological than practical differences<sup>34</sup>. That being said, the question of Catholic influence on his thought has not only been discussed many times elsewhere<sup>35</sup>, but I think it can be conceived in isolation from the problem of dirty hands. In addition, Taylor emphasizes the fact that we are often faced with irreconcilable conflicts between seemingly incompatible ways of life; he goes on, moreover, to challenge what he calls "pseudo-solutions", that is to say, simplistic philosophical positions that tend to derive our obligations and purposes from a single principle<sup>36</sup>. His criticism is aptly addressed to those "radically monistic" ethical currents of thought according to which moral

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<sup>32</sup> Berlin, I., (1994), "Introduction", p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, C., (1994), "Charles Taylor replies", p. 213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> See Fraser, I. (2005), "Charles Taylor's Catholicism"; Abbey, R. (2006), «Turning or Spinning? Charles Taylor's Catholicism: A Reply to Ian Fraser»; and Fraser, I. (2007), *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, C. (1994), "Charles Taylor replies", p. 213. Taylor certainly had in mind utilitarianism – it is important to recall his fierce critique in Taylor, C. (1985), "The Diversity of Goods".

conflicts should be avoided at all costs – hence their use of an axiomatic of rational decision<sup>37</sup>. Taylor is, then, well aware that it is difficult to reconcile divergent values such as freedom, respect for human rights, environmental protection and acceptance of cultural diversity<sup>38</sup>. It is evident that seeking to reach a compromise on one given path goes hand in hand with possible compromises on other ones, because it is not possible to find a total solution to reconcile *a priori* value conflicts. However, a closer look reveals that Taylor sees himself between radical monism and Berlin's moral pluralism:

I am reluctant to take this as the last word. I still believe that we can and should struggle for a 'transvaluation' (to borrow Nietzsche's term *Ummwertung*) which could open the way to a mode of life, individual and social, in which these demands could be reconciled<sup>39</sup>.

This then means that, for Taylor, Berlin's moral pluralism is such a radical approach as utilitarianism, for it is not compatible with conceiving of moral dilemmas as surmountable<sup>40</sup>. But this claim, I want to argue, reveals an incoherence at the very heart of Taylor's ostensive pluralism, because a moral dilemma is insurmountable by definition – indeed, there is a contradiction in Taylor's thinking if the agent facing a moral dilemma has also the means to resolve it. Furthermore, Taylor's insistence on reconciliation of once opposing incommensurable goods fails to take the pluralist's presumption that tragic conflict between ultimate reasons for action is unavoidable seriously enough. In practical terms, to resolve a conflict of values, the agent will inevitably have to face confrontation and compromise, if only to establish a hierarchical opposition between the values at hand, and hence artificially rank them – therefore, we could say that the agent is, so to speak, already willing to get his or her hands dirty.

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<sup>37</sup> We can think of philosophers such as Peter Singer or Philip Pettit who have "discovered" quasi-algebraic formulae to solve all moral problems they encounter – sentience and non-domination, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, C. (1994), "Charles Taylor replies", p. 213-214.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4. The problem of “dirty hands”

Jean-Paul Sartre famously articulated the problem of dirty hands in a play where the idealism of Hugo, a young bourgeois intellectual, is confronted with Høederer’s – one of the communist leaders – pragmatism. When faced with the apparent naivety of Hugo, Høederer objects on a glorious tone:

[h]ow you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently<sup>41</sup>?

Sartre is mostly interested in the issue of political action, namely the procedures and modalities for fair and equitable action, given the circumstances. However, in the absence of a transcendent criterion of justice, the very meaning of dirty hands must refer to a moral dilemma, given the conflict that occurs between, for instance, political goals A and B – because we can only target one at the expense of the other. Just consider values such as freedom and equality – as Berlin has put it, “total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted<sup>42</sup>”. Given what has been said above, it becomes evident that when equality demands a restraint of liberty – and *vice versa* – we fall into a dilemma: there cannot be any effort whatsoever of rationalization that could be capable, for example, of systematizing different premises, that is to say reducing them to a few principles whose priority order would be obvious. We can approach the problem with another passage from Sartre, also quoted in Charles Taylor’s work, to illustrate the concept of responsibility with regard to moral

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<sup>41</sup> Sartre, J.-P. (1989), *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, p. 218.

<sup>42</sup> Berlin, I. (1990), “The pursuit of the ideal”, p. 12.

evaluations<sup>43</sup>. It is, of course, the example of the young man who is torn between two competing interests and the compromising balance that needs to be struck between them: his brother was in fact killed during the German offensive of 1940, so he wanted to join the *Forces Françaises Libres* to avenge him and fight the rise of Nazism. On the other hand, his ailing mother lived with him and the young man was aware that his death in combat would plunge her into terrible sorrow. Sartre's thesis is that there is no basis for a line of reasoning to be applied in order to compare – let alone reconcile or arbitrate – the two competing moral allegiances: the young man “has to settle the question, whichever way he goes, by radical choice<sup>44</sup>”.

Yet, Taylor does not share Sartre's portrayal of the dilemma; according to him, we see a grievous moral dilemma because of Sartre's simplistic and instrumental conception of the young man's “contrastive language” – that is to say, the language in which he is able to express a preference between incommensurables, or, in other words, what leads him to call one alternative higher or more worthy than another one<sup>45</sup>. Taylor's argument, it seems to me, is essentially as follows. There is a way of understanding “human agency” in light of evaluations that involve a qualitative distinction of desires – hence the notion of “strong evaluation<sup>46</sup>”. A strong evaluator is an agent who has the capacity for reflective self-evaluation, and so he or she is able to form second-order desires. Put in other terms, the agent who examines a practical situation relies on a contrastive language that allows him or her to express qualitative distinctions. As Taylor has put it, “we think of (at least higher) animals as having desires, even as having to choose between desires in some cases, or at least as inhibiting some desires for the sake of others. But what is distinctively human is the power to *evaluate* our desires, to regard some as desirable and other as undesirable<sup>47</sup>”. The strong evaluator envisages his alternatives through a “vocabulary of worth”, and, in doing so, he articulates a “qualitative characterization of desires as higher and lower, noble and base, courageous and cowardly,

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), “What is human agency?”, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

integrated and fragmented, and so on<sup>48</sup>". The strong evaluator is thereby able to establish the superiority of one alternative over the others; so within an experience of reflective choice over incommensurables, the agent initiates a process of reflection on his or her own preferences with reference to a background of meaning that stems from traditions and interpretations<sup>49</sup>. For Taylor, this phenomenological account of identity is constitutive of the "transcendental conditions" of the human being; what makes us truly human, according to him, is that we are capable of articulating our preferences in terms of qualitative distinctions, not just applying cost / benefit considerations<sup>50</sup>. Continuing with Sartre's hypothetical case, Taylor believes that the young man portrayed as acting in virtue of radical choice is not a "strong evaluator", but rather a "simple weigher" – for "all his putative strong evaluations issue from simple weighings<sup>51</sup>". Indeed, according to Taylor, if the agent's preference does not depend on the application of a contrastive language, the radical choice appears to be purely arbitrary – which "brings us to the limit where choice fades into non-choice<sup>52</sup>". As far as the practical consequences of the subject's judgement, his or her opinion must necessarily be based on principle to determine the desirability and importance of commitments. Otherwise put, in keeping with Taylor's understanding of choice – whether radical or not – one cannot be satisfied under any circumstances with unintentional criteria. Consequently, even radical choice depends in some way on an assessment that should ultimately determine why the agent is leaning more one way than to the other. And that is why Taylor thinks that the "theory of radical choice" is inconsistent; its advocates are aware that such a choice requires an evaluation based on practical consequences, but they are not willing, however, to recognize their status as moral judgements:

[e]ither we take seriously the kinds of considerations which weigh in our moral decisions, and then we are forced to

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), "What is human agency?", p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> See Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of The Self*, p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), "What is human agency?", p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

recognize that these are for the most part evaluations which do not issue from radical choice; or else we try at all costs to keep our radical choice independent of any such evaluations, but then it ceases to be a choice of strong evaluations, and becomes a simple expression of preference, and if we go farther and try to make it independent even of our *de facto* preferences, then we fall ultimately into a criteria-less leap which can not properly be described as choice at all<sup>53</sup>.

It is important to note that, for Taylor, moral judgements are unified and rendered coherent by our acknowledgement of an architectonic source of ultimate value, namely “hypergoods<sup>54</sup>”. These goods are at the foundation of our moral judgements, that is to say, it is through their pursuit that we become able to articulate qualitative distinctions between different values: “higher-order goods of this kind [...] not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about<sup>55</sup>”. It is, as it were, a line of reasoning that exists independently of each individual will and according to which persons succeed in establishing the importance of their choices. That is not to say that the process of squaring off different competing ends necessarily entails smooth decisions. There is a sense, of course, in which “hypergoods”, as Taylor defines them, can be a potential source of conflict since the highest, architectonic good can call for the supersession of less adequate goods outright<sup>56</sup>. In illustrating this position, Taylor uses the example of the notion of universal justice as part of a moral framework that arose through a historical negation of earlier hierarchical conceptions of society<sup>57</sup>. At this point, one could argue that the very recognition of a “hypergood” cannot but dirty our hands; as Taylor concedes, it is a source of “often grievous dilemmas in moral life<sup>58</sup>”. Yet Taylor fails to appreciate the extent to which

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<sup>53</sup> Taylor, C. (1985), “What is human agency?”, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of The Self*, p. 62-75.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 64-66.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



moral conflicts can result in genuine tragedy, and that irreparable loss is sometimes unavoidable. Indeed, he still believes that, by the interpretive form of practical reason, one which aims to establish “that some position is superior to some other”, it is possible to reconcile hypergood-driven conflicts<sup>59</sup>. In *Sources of the Self*, he writes:

greater lucidity can help us to see our way to a reconciliation. If I may give expression to an even farther-out hunch, I will say that I see this as the potential goal and fruit of articulacy. We have to search for a way in which our strongest aspirations towards hypergoods do not exact a price of self-mutilation. I believe that such a reconciliation is possible<sup>60</sup>.

That is why, according to Taylor, by way of a foray into language and meaning, one can go on and “rationally assess” definitions of worth because “there is, at least in principle”, a way in which such conflicts can be arbitrated<sup>61</sup>. Certainly, returning to the example of Sartre’s young man, it is clear that Taylor does not believe that the agent’s choice is obvious *a priori*. Taylor is aware that the young man must be prepared to make a disconcerting moral judgement on his own action, but “unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence<sup>62</sup>”. Taylor’s conception of strong evaluation as an essential condition of articulacy entails that the justification of value judgements becomes virtually impossible in the absence of “a horizon of issues of importance<sup>63</sup>”. But when it comes to the conflicts between ultimate sources of value, whether those sources are defined narrowly as reasons for action, or more broadly as “hypergoods”, my claim is that the path to articulacy cannot cope with tragic loss. Although Taylor agrees that there are a variety of

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<sup>59</sup> Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of The Self*, p. 72-75. See also Blattberg, C. (2009), *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy*, p. 134.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

<sup>61</sup> *Cf.* Introduction to Taylor, C. (1985), *Human Agency And Language: Philosophical Papers I*, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, C. (1991), *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

valuable ideals, pursuits, and aspirations for which human beings yearn, he appears to miss the practical implications of normative pluralism. In fact, in Sartre's example, Taylor never decides the issue of the student's authentic purpose, but his argument aims to show the lack of criteria available to the reader so as to define the agent's standards of value. In the presence of this horizon of issues of importance that defines "the *respects* in which self-making is significant<sup>64</sup>", the strong evaluator's radical choice is untenable: he is therefore not facing a moral dilemma, and Sartre's student – whatever his choice is – will not get dirty hands.

## 5. Value pluralism and moral dilemmas

Rereading Berlin's criticism in light of the problem of dirty hands, it is difficult not to acknowledge the large gap between the latter's understanding of moral pluralism and Charles Taylor's. Unlike Berlin's assertion, according to which pluralism concerns the duties that lead to moral dilemmas, Taylor's formula suggests that we should rather understand that we are caught in an inescapable network of hierarchical requirements that relegates to a lower status those matters that are likely to face a constant dilemma. There seems little doubt that one of the salient features of this disagreement is an ontological misunderstanding; while an individualistic atomism is manifest in Berlin's thought, Charles Taylor extols a sense of solidarity among the different values that are present in a diverse society. Now, Taylor is probably right to accuse Berlin of retreating into a "Maginot Line" to defend at all costs the ideal of freedom as non-interference, because practical collisions necessarily stem from this atomistic conception of values<sup>65</sup>. That being said, Taylor's holism cannot be exempt from all criticism; indeed, from a practical standpoint, the moral strength of the relationship among the different values that transcend the individuals' mere particularity is, ultimately, the reflection of an implicit aspiration towards unity. Of course, Taylor is not defending a comprehensive version of liberalism that would seek, through politically oriented public policies, to inculcate the values it upholds to citizens who do not share them – we

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor, C. (1991), *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 40.

<sup>65</sup> See Blattberg, C. (2013), "Isaiah Berlin", p. 524.

mentioned earlier his rejection of radical monism. However, while in Berlinian pluralism the problem of dirty hands is insurmountable, the purpose of Taylor's approach, by virtue of the moral horizon that functions as a background of intelligibility, is to reconcile what at first glance appeared to be a moral dilemma. All this amounts to defining a rationality specific to human beings ("strong evaluation") according to which our aims, which are independent of our own desires – inclinations or choices – represent prescriptive standards to which the agent must comply<sup>66</sup>.

One may wonder, however, if Berlin is right to read Machiavelli as a potential source of normative pluralism<sup>67</sup>. Based on Taylor's reasoning, we could argue that as a strong evaluator, Machiavelli is seeking a moral ideal – i.e. the wisdom of the Ancients. Insofar as the Florentine defines his choice in accordance with a minimal horizon of significance, the fact that he radically rejects the Christian doctrine does not pose a moral dilemma *per se*<sup>68</sup>. The bottom line, here, is that Berlin wants us to acknowledge that Machiavelli completely abandons the idea of an ideal order that could guide us through systematically unified theories; in renouncing to this pretention of harmony, he made his readers aware that we sometimes have to make difficult – even agonizing — choices between incompatible purposes<sup>69</sup>:

[a]nyone who believes in Christian morality, and regards the Christian commonwealth as its embodiment, but at the same time largely accepts the validity of Machiavelli's political and psychological analysis and does not reject the

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<sup>66</sup> Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of The Self*, p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> It is pertinent to note that Berlin does not tell us that Machiavelli is a pluralist. However, he is convinced that the Florentine significantly contributed to the development of moral pluralism. Berlin, I. (1980), "The Originality of Machiavelli", p. 75: "I do not mean that Machiavelli explicitly asserts that there is a pluralism or even a dualism of values between which conscious choices must be made"; p. 79: "Yet he is, in spite of himself, one of the makers of pluralism [...]".

<sup>68</sup> We must recognize that Machiavelli abandons Christianity mainly because "the church has kept and keeps this province [Italy] divided". Cf. Machiavelli, N. (2009), *Discourses on Livy*, I, XII, p. 38.

<sup>69</sup> Berlin, I. (1980), "The Originality of Machiavelli", p. 79.

secular heritage of Rome [...] is faced with a dilemma which, if Machiavelli is right, is not merely unsolved but insoluble<sup>70</sup>.

It should be noted, in this regard, that pluralism goes beyond merely pointing out the multiplicity of manifestations of higher-order values and ideals. Pluralism, in Berlin's sense, is based on the radical assumption that there is a plurality of ultimate sources of reasons for action, and that these sources are in constant peril of clashing. Thus, genuine moral dilemmas are intractable and inevitable; in fact, the problem arises in practice when the agent faces several possible descriptions of these horizons of significance, as Taylor would say, because the agent ultimately has to determine the relevance of his or her purposes and ends against a background of contingent criteria<sup>71</sup>. That is why, in a pluralist perspective, when the agent faces moral or political conflicts between different but equally valid arguments about what to do, which thus present the agent with tragic choices, there will always be a "moral remainder"<sup>72</sup>. Otherwise put, we will necessarily end up with dirty hands.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Let us conclude by saying that the constitutive paradox of moral pluralism – that is, that the problem of dirty hands is inescapable – entails rejecting Taylor's approach to value conflicts and moral dilemmas. It is as if Taylor wanted to follow Berlin's conception of conflict as the very basis of moral pluralism, but he is nevertheless not ready to assume all the consequences: Taylor argues that this horizon of significance – i.e., the background

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<sup>70</sup> Berlin, I. (1980), "The Originality of Machiavelli", p. 77.

<sup>71</sup> The charge of relativism is a point that space does not permit me to elaborate on here, but it is evident that critics may claim that pluralism lowers the standards of social action. This might be true. It could be argued, however, and as Víctor Muñoz-Fraticelli puts it, that "pluralism, as opposed to relativism, does not deny the objectivity of value across communities and cultures". Cf. Muñoz-Fraticelli, V. (2014), *The Structure of Pluralism*, note 19, p. 15. See also Jahanbegloo, R. (2013), *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, B. (1978), "Politics and Moral Character", p. 63.

against which our desires, preference and reasons for action make sense – somehow enables individuals to overcome the inevitability of tragic conflict. Consequently, Taylor’s perspective rules out the possibility of irreparable loss, and as long as the agent is faithful to that transcending moral ideal, any compromise (or concession) that must be struck in response to a given conflict should be considered clean.

It is important to acknowledge that this horizon of significance of which Taylor discusses does not constitute a discursively deduced reasoning from an indubitable first principle. On the contrary, the moral aspiration in question – the *ideal of authenticity*<sup>73</sup> – takes issue with the anthropocentric nature of social atomism<sup>74</sup>, due to the fact that it neglects the particular and contingent relationship between our moral criteria and the social and historical conditions of their development. I agree with Taylor on his pertinent criticism of the absolute defense of negative liberty – and its resulting radical individualism –, as it is undoubtedly one of the ultimate sources of the imminent fragmentation of democratic societies. However, if I am right, we must recognize the incoherence of the hypothesis according to which Taylor’s approach to morals and politics is pluralist. To sum up, we should remember that pluralism not only posits the existence of a plurality of incommensurable moral sources that will inevitably conflict, but also claims that there is, at least sometimes, no way of resolving those conflicts because the goods involved are irreconcilable. Pluralism, then, opens the door to genuinely insoluble conflicts and hence to tragedy, since we cannot prioritize different human goods without getting dirty hands. Indeed, without access to a transcendent criterion allowing us to weigh values and purposes against each other, and as long as the agent must

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, C. (1991), *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 25-30.

<sup>74</sup> In a well known article, Taylor argues that the term ‘atomism’ is used to characterize the “doctrines of social contract theory which arose in the seventeenth century and also successor doctrines which may not have made use of the notion of social contract but which inherited a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfilment of ends which were primarily individual”. Otherwise put, atomism is a view about human nature which asserts the “primacy of rights”. Cf. Taylor, C. (1985), “Atomism”, p. 187.

establish an abstract order of priority with the aim of distinguishing important — that is, what he or she cannot afford to neglect — from secondary, or trivial things, the agent will be facing radical choices between wholly incompatible interpretations. This does not mean that this choice will be arbitrary, in contrast to Taylor's opinion, but *radical* in the sense that even if it is guided by a powerful and conventionally accepted moral ideal, the agent will still be weighing incompatible goods: thus, the agent will be *de facto* facing a genuine moral dilemma.

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