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A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO LIBERALISM

Foreword: Liberalism and Philosophy

One of the first problems that occur when approaching the issue of liberalism in relationship to the topic of pluralism, mainly from the perspective of its critics, but not only, has to do with its philosophical foundations. To bring this issue at stake means to question the neutral (merely instrumental, namely devoid and free of any cultural and traditional commitment) meaning of the philosophical concepts liberalism builds on and with, and also to question and rethink the claim to universalism made by liberalism. Thus, liberalism appears to be more problem-laden than it seems to be at first sight, but nevertheless even more promising. Liberalism is built within a certain philosophical tradition and it expresses to a very large extent the Western culture and history. As Rorty says, liberalism is the point the Western world starts from in its approach to other cultures and even types of political experiences. However, this is not enough.

Liberalism is definitely anti-essentialist but it is not necessarily accompanied by relativism. Being able to trace its own limits, liberalism enhances a certain attitude of self-critique and suspicion that is meant to enrich it and also to secure it precisely in its strongest and at the same time its weakest point, pluralism. Being able to become aware of its own limits, to self-limit as such, liberalism is not meant to self-deny but to grow in a way that is both philosophically and humanly enriching. This is the type of philosophical approach to liberalism that the present paper is aiming at with the help of three contemporary philosophers: Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, and Michel Foucault.

The main reason for choosing these contemporary thinkers is roughly speaking given by the fact that all three of them try to forge a different framework for rethinking liberalism and the type of philosophy associated with it. Their inquiries are conducted in a way, which brings at stake the coming into being of liberalism, and the tradition affiliated with it,

definitely against what Berlin would call the *current*. By doing so, they seem to point into the direction of what I would call constructivism, as that type of philosophy which is best fitted to liberalism as a promoter of pluralism. Despite what separates them, all three thinkers seem to pay a considerable amount of attention to what would be rather identified with a “conservative” feature, the past of liberalism, its traditions!

As a consequence, all the three of them situate liberalism within a context that is different from the contract-like theories, from the Kantian or Rawlsian type of argument for the liberal principles. They situate liberalism within a temporal, historical, and cultural context. By doing so, they introduce pluralism within the coming into being of liberalism itself. Liberalism is thus not only a set of legal requirements accompanied by a set of minimal moral values, but it also becomes a certain type of human experience, a way a culture comes to exist within a horizon of open alternatives. Liberalism proves thus to be not only the way Western world comes to meet other cultures, but it becomes a way of rethinking the coming into being of Western culture itself in a plural and alternative-like way, in an open way.

The first chapter of my paper will be an attempt to (re)construct the arguments for pluralism made by the three thinkers, Berlin, Strauss, and Foucault. The second chapter will try to display the main lines of a constructivist approach to liberalism, starting from the meaning of pluralism as defined by the three philosophers. The third and last chapter will try to draw the consequences constructivism entails for liberalism.

Three Philosophical Arguments for Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, and Michel Foucault

The first feature that strikes the reader when considering the ideas of these three very different thinkers is the fact that each of them re-situates liberalism within the coming into being of a certain (dominant) tradition, where (“the true”, namely alternative) liberalism is concocted through going against that tradition. I would call this the “alternative-like” character of liberalism; the capacity liberalism has to invent itself in an alternative way. For Berlin, liberalism is not identified with what is usually considered as the backbone of liberalism, the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the real potential for liberalism lies in the alternative to Enlightenment, in the controversial Counter-Enlightenment or

Romanticism. For Strauss, the real roots of liberalism are not with Locke or Rousseau (I will not mention Machiavelli and Hobbes, where the liberal potential of their conception is controversial). The real roots of liberalism are not one and the same with the roots of modernity. Nevertheless, liberalism can still conceive of itself in an alternative key: both through re-thinking its coming into being (and modernity) and through re-creating, step by step, with the help of its consecrated promoters, the alternatives which were buried, forgotten, left aside. For Michel Foucault, liberalism seems to be the only way to exit what he calls “carceral society”, because liberalism is capable of being suspicious of itself by continuously questioning and going against its institutionalized forms of existence. The ultimate individualism enhanced by liberalism is the potential for building in an alternative way.

The second important problem that these three thinkers deal with has to do with the issue of morality within a liberal context. Constitutive to liberalism is not the weakest possible moral core, not even a hard-core of moral values, but the possibility to generate moral values always starting from a local context, from an individual perspective, from a limited tradition, the potential for constructing what is moral and hence human. This potential comes exactly from the fact that liberalism is not neutral but value-laden, and strongly committed to the goals of life, to the goals of social existence, to what is “good” and “bad”. This idea is constitutive to liberalism to the extent that liberalism identifies itself with individualism. Liberalism guarantees the private sphere (negative liberty) of the individual, and in doing so it secures the choice of the individual and it enhances a plurality of possible options and ways of valuing the “good” and “bad”. This is already a truism. However, this is only half of the picture.

When speaking about political theory, Berlin makes a point out of the fact that political theory is referring to the ends of life, to systems of values, to what is good and bad. For him only sociology or political science is the neutral analysis of the facts of public life, not political theory, or philosophy.¹ If political theory or philosophy cannot be neutral then this means that they present us with a way of interpreting the world. Nevertheless, they make a claim to universality; otherwise, they would cease to be “theory” or “philosophy”. Berlin is widely known as a promoter of negative liberty and of a certain type of radical value pluralism. Then, how can these two statements stay together without contradiction? On one hand, there is the radical character of the individual choice, and the

fact that there could be incommensurable values as the result of so many different individual choices, therefore the agonistic liberalism, as Gray calls it, the ongoing clash and confrontation of “the best” ways of life. On the other hand, there is the possibility of political theory and philosophy as the unifying approach to the public sphere (!), as the attempt to make universal statements about the ultimate, final goals of life...! If so, then there should exist some common horizon, of some human, hence moral, values where the two “contradictory” statements could make sense together. This is the horizon where Berlin’s attempt to build on Counter-Enlightenment points to. It is not a closed horizon, but rather a horizon where values are rather generated and not recognized as such, a horizon where what is at stake is the possibility to change and to transform, to open up to alternatives...! The possibility for such a horizon, where judgments can be made, in a unifying way, about the public sphere, brings at stake the philosophical meaning of the concept of “unity”, which I shall discuss in the second part of this paper.

To the extent then that liberalism has a certain philosophy affiliated with it, it is marked by the same problem. Liberalism makes a claim to universality while not being neutral, but a way of interpreting the world, of making value judgments about the values at stake in the public life. It can, nevertheless, be replied that liberalism tries to limit as much as possible this commitment to values in the judgments it makes, to what Rawls would call “the thin theory of good”. The point the present paper attempts to make is that any “thin theory of good” is already value-laden and even more than that, it is already affiliated to a rather poorly questioned philosophical tradition, to a philosophical tradition that is taken as granted, or as being neutral, “universal”. . . !

Among the three thinkers who are analyzed in this paper, Leo Strauss is the one who makes the strongest and more explicit point in this respect, mainly in *Natural Right and History*. Nevertheless, what is more important to point out in this respect, is that both Berlin and Strauss, when dealing with the issue of the philosophical background of the dominant tradition liberalism was built on, highlight the thought that this is led by the utopian belief in the possibility of entirely capturing the truth and of entirely enclosing it into the real world. This philosophical tradition which liberalism builds on has at its core a certain image of the world and a certain image of the human being, therefore of what morality means. To the extent that this tradition is questioned and analyzed, liberalism proves to be indicating in the direction of a conception of the world and the

human being which could better fit it, and especially the issue of pluralism which seems to be radically entwined with it, namely constructivism. Or, to put it differently, the way liberalism can come to terms with these two contradictory claims – the claim to universality which comes from its unavoidable philosophical affiliation and the claim to pluralism, which comes from its strong commitment to individualism – is first of all by trying to revisit the philosophical tradition which grounds it, secondarily by revisiting the idea itself of universalism and thirdly by making room for constructivism as a desirable philosophical background for a political conception which is more value laden and more committed to some moral values than it comes to actually recognize.

After briefly pointing out these two problems (they are going to be spelled out in a more detailed way in the next chapter) which I think are common for all the three thinkers I am dealing with in this paper, I will dedicate the rest of the present chapter to a reconstruction of the three arguments for plurality made by Berlin, Strauss, and Foucault, always with an eye to the problems their conception of pluralism raises for liberalism and to the way the meaning of pluralism as they understand it points in the direction of what I call constructivism as the best type of philosophy and morality that liberalism should build on.

Isaiah Berlin: The False Pluralism or Can Relativism Be Avoided?

Berlin says that:

Relativism, in its modern form, tends to spring from the view that men's outlooks are unavoidably determined by forces of which they are often unaware – Schopenhauer's irrational cosmic forces; Marx's class-bound morality; Freud's unconscious drives; the social anthropologists' panorama of the irreconcilable variety of customs and beliefs conditioned by circumstances largely uncontrolled by men.²

It seems that relativism, according to Berlin, has to do, at least in its modern form, with the view that man's conceptions and ideas are not his creation, an expression of his unique potential, as an individual. By contrast the core of pluralism is represented by human, individual creativity, and, as I will explain later, not by the rejection of any idea of unity but by a

reconsideration of it. The individual creativity as conceived by Berlin has mainly to do with will and imagination, the fact that individuals have to make radical choices and the fact that they are able to imaginatively enter other cultural territories than their own. As I will try to show in the next chapter this emphasis of individual will and imagination does not exclude the important role reason is nevertheless called to play.

It seems therefore, that for Isaiah Berlin the core of humanity is given by the over-importance of what I would call a creative choice,³ to the extent that by choosing the relevant values and standards for him, the individual is a creator in a two-fold way: as the origin of what is uniquely his/hers and by being able to imaginatively enter other cultural spaces, the creations of other individuals and cultures. Our humanity seems to stretch as far as our imagination does.

We are called upon to exercise our imaginative powers to the utmost; but not to go beyond them; not to accept as authentic values anything that we cannot understand, imaginatively 'enter' into.⁴

It is relevant to point out that when indicating the type of relativism he wants to separate from what he understands by pluralism, Berlin makes a distinction between the type of relativism that denies the mere objective existence of what is different and the relativism that states the impossibility to understand values and standards that are different from my own. Therefore, what is really at stake when making the distinction between relativism and pluralism is the issue of values. To what extent the existence of different values can still presuppose the existence of a common human horizon?

First of all, there is one important point that has to be made in this respect. Berlin criticizes that type of philosophy, which affirms the unity between theory and practice. Therefore, in the attempt to reconstruct the meaning of unity for him, it has to be said that the starting point for the achievement of unity is the broken, incompatible, and even incommensurable field of individual actions. There is no guaranteed unity given in the beginning, no unified pattern as a guide for our choices and for their fulfillment. The question would be then to what extent such a starting point might allow for a never to be reached unity, for a potential unity as an ongoing enlargement and creation of human nature. It is relevant in this respect that when Berlin takes into consideration the role

Burke played in the coming into being of Counter-Enlightenment, he points out Burke's conception of nature, as something not static and unchangeable.⁵ That is why the common human horizon should be something potential, and its limits should be traced by the half potentiality, half actuality of imagination. Imagination seems to be the key word both in connection with the individual will and with the human reason which is not left aside by Berlin, as it might seem at first sight. The question is then what is the meaning of such a common horizon where difference becomes both visible and acceptable not in a passive, but in an active way, as constitutive to the coming into being of one's own choice of the best way of life.

We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline, which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt . . .⁶

The issue at stake seems thus to be the meaning of the "irreparable loss" that the choice might entail. This is due to the fact that, according to the present interpretation, Berlin leaves in fact room for the existence of a common measure, of a common horizon where the different values can even clash, and also to the fact that imagination seems to play such an important role in "entering" other cultures. My hypothesis is that the "irreparable loss" has to do with the fact that every choice, once is made, becomes one with the individual, with what the individual is and can become, with the fact that the choice reflects both the individual and the "universal", the limits of the individual, the interplay between what he is and all the alternative possibilities that he cannot be but he can imaginatively "enter" into.

The "irreparable loss" is the boundary that demarcates the individual, making him what he is, and what is different from him, but not as something detached and absolutely beyond him, something "universal", as a non-committed and free-floating realm, but as something subjective and individual as well.

I cannot even call their values subjective if I cannot conceive what it would be like to pursue such a life,⁷

says Berlin when he points out to the way the individual becomes aware of the fact that a different set of values is precisely the choice made by another culture. The point is that pluralism as understood by Berlin has to do with this interplay of the individual and the universal, where the "universal" is not some realm cut off from the individual creativity (will and imagination), but is precisely the horizon which comes into being whenever an individual choice is made. Every individual choice is both an expression of the creative potential of every individual and recognition of the creative potential of other individuals. In being so, it discloses a new meaning of the philosophical concepts of "universal" and "unity". This new meaning can be really grasped only to the extent that Berlin's way of valuing Romanticism is seriously taken into consideration, as I will try to show in the second chapter.

Pluralism for Berlin is

the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek AND STILL BE FULLY RATIONAL, FULLY MEN, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other... Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because WHAT MAKES MEN HUMAN IS COMMON TO THEM, AND ACTS AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THEM.⁸

There are several key words in this definition. There is first of all the emphasis on the rationality of men, which is related to the existence of "different ends men may seek." This aspect is going to be discussed in the next chapter. Secondly, there is the definition of what means to be "fully" men, where the idea of "deriving light from each other" seems to be the most important. This could be true to the extent that my hypothesis is going to be accepted. Namely, that the clue to Berlin's understanding of pluralism consists precisely in the interplay of the individual and universal. This means that the relative way of defining the "universal", as another possible way of making a "subjective" choice, stresses the fact that difference plays an active role in the coming into being of what is the same. "Deriving light from each other" means to confine myself, due to the other, to the boundaries of my own choice, as something unique and singular, but at the same time as something "universal", to the extent that my choice is absolutely necessary for the other's subjective choice to come to exist as such. Thirdly, there is the fact that what makes men human is what they have in common. The point is that if no

absolute reference point seems to exist, if the individual and the universal change places in the coming into being of each other, than what makes men human, namely what is common to them, is this capacity to keep themselves in the process of making their own humanity, of creating it.

From such a perspective, the only way to keep open the process of making our own humanity is by considering that what really counts is what makes us different. There is nothing given or taken forever. At the same time, there are limits, and these are the limits given by the (in)capacity of imagining ourselves as the originators of that way of life. This thought and imagination experiment, which looks more like the capacity of potentially extending what we could have been or become is the limit of our humanity, of what we have in common. There is a tension in Berlin's thought. On one hand, he seems to emphasize that what really matters is not what all men have in common, but what differentiates them, because this is what makes them what they are and this is what makes communication possible.

There are many things that men do have in common, but that is not what matters most. What individualizes them, makes them what they are, makes communication possible, is what they do not have in common with all the others. Differences, peculiarities, nuances, individual character are all in all.⁹

On the other hand, he very carefully reminds us that there should be some limits, some common human horizon otherwise our humanity comes to be lost.

Incompatible these ends might be; but their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all... **There is a limit beyond which we can no longer understand what a given creature is at; what kinds of rules it follows in its behavior; what its gestures mean . . .** Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon.¹⁰

The tension comes from the fact that pluralism for Berlin makes sense only to the extent that there are limits and a common human horizon. The limits are traced by imagination, the capacity to project one's own creative will as the source of some other different choices and creations.

Due to the fact that what is common to all men is not something given once and for all but something in the making, Berlin values the past in a significant way. That is why for him

to say that the past is completely unknowable robs the concept of the past of all meaning: it is thus a strictly self-annihilating notion.

The point is that if the existence of the human horizon is not given and static but in the process of making, and if it depends on the individual choice, as the act that both demarcates the unique and individual option but also the space of other unique individual choices, then this horizon can be, within the limits of imagination, narrowed down or enlarged. Berlin's idea seems to be that what is worth pursuing is to enlarge this horizon, and to this extent, it would be a loss not to include the past in this project, to elude it, as those conceptions, which are progress-oriented, tend to do.

Strauss: The Search for the Whole through the Human Potential for Alternatives

According to Leo Strauss,

By virtue of his rationality, man has a latitude of alternatives such as no other earthly being has.¹¹

It seems, at first sight, puzzling to read such a sentence coming from a thinker usually identified as a "non-liberal", as a critique of liberalism, as a supporter of the idea of natural right. In what follows, I will try to argue that Leo Strauss is a promoter of pluralism just because he is a defender of the idea of natural right. Like Berlin, Strauss critically reacts to a certain philosophical conception which came to be dominant during the 18th century, historicism. Historicism is the source of both positivism and nihilism. What is interesting from the standpoint of the present paper has less to do with the Straussian terminology, as it has to do with the dominant idea which is characteristic for all these three philosophical conceptions, whatever their name happens to be. All the three of them are characterized by "the attempt to make man absolutely at home in this world".¹² This attempt "ended in man's becoming absolutely

homeless". In doing so, the philosophical conception that is the basis of historicism, positivism and eventually nihilism worked with a distorted meaning of "unity" and "universal". This resulted in the exclusion of pluralism, of the diversity of opinions as the real starting point of politics and morality.

What Strauss rejects is the idea that what makes us human can be fully given to us and be fully in our power, like an algorithm which once known can always and everywhere be applied in the same way and with the same guaranteed success. Strauss traces back the origin of this conception of man to Machiavelli and Hobbes. When analyzing Hobbes' contribution to the coming into being of this idea, Strauss points out that the construction of the political realm,

would not be fully in our power if there were a single step of the construction that is not fully exposed to our supervision. The construction must be conscious construction... the world of our constructs has an absolute beginning or is a creation in the strict sense. The world of our constructs is therefore the desired island that is exempt from the flux of blind and aimless causation.¹³

As a result,

Man as the maker of civil society can solve ONCE AND FOR ALL the problem inherent in man as the matter of civil society. Man can guarantee the actualization of the right social order because he is able to conquer human nature by understanding and manipulating the mechanism of the passions.¹⁴

Despite the different way they interpret Machiavelli's contribution to the coming into being of modern political philosophy, both Strauss and Berlin reach nevertheless almost the same conclusion when it comes about what Berlin calls the backbone of the Western tradition, its dominant idea. The result (reached by the 18th century) has to do with the belief that there is a way to completely master political reality, to fully incarnate any unity, any ideal within the confines of a reality meant thus to become perfect. Berlin, for example, identifies as one of the main ideas of Enlightenment, the belief that a method should exist that will eventually reveal to everyone and everywhere all the correct answers to all the genuine questions, which admit, of course, only one answer, because

anybody who understands the pattern which nature follows... is surely able to elicit from the apparent chaos and confusion of nature those eternal principles, those necessary connections, which bind together the eternal and objective elements out of which the world is composed.¹⁵

It seems then that Strauss and Berlin are both trying to attack the same dominant idea in the Western philosophical tradition, namely that there is a possibility to entirely incarnate the truth within the confines of reality, that there is a method to surely achieve this and that there is only one correct and true way of answering the genuine human, namely moral, questions, the questions about values.

To the extent that they seem to connect on this point, they seem to make a plea for pluralism always within the context of some common human horizon, some common human nature, something that unites men just because they are separated. However, what unites men can never be fully actualized, but this does not mean that the idea of unity can be given up. What needs to be done is to rethink its meaning. It is true that Berlin starts from the idea of difference, and incompatibility. It is true that he praises Machiavelli because he is the initiator of dualism in the Western philosophy. It is true that what Strauss accuses Machiavelli of, is precisely the fact that he destroyed the tension between this world and some transcendental realm. It is true that Strauss finds himself in search of the idea of natural right, which is eventually completely renounced by the Western modern political thought. Nevertheless, both thinkers are engaged in the search for a new meaning of unity, being aware that the consecrated meaning of unity in the Western philosophy takes us to a dead end, and this is meant to affect liberalism itself and its philosophical ground.

It is significant in this context the argument that both thinkers make for the necessity of finding an alternative philosophical ground for liberalism in the coming into being of modern political thought. For Berlin, the argument has roughly speaking two steps. The first step has to do with the fact that the ends a society accepts need to be diversified; otherwise, the loss of moral depth and humanity is unavoidable.

In a society in which the same goals are universally accepted, *problems* can be only of *means*, all soluble by technological means. That is a society in which the inner life of man, the moral and spiritual and aesthetic imagination, no longer speaks at all . . .¹⁶

Such a society would come to be dominated by what is called instrumental rationality, or as Horkheimer put it,¹⁷ reason would become here a mere mercenary, to the extent that it would be willing to engage itself uncritically in the efficient achievement of whatever goals are presented to it. Therefore, in Berlin's view, pluralism is required in order to enrich humanity, but also in order to call attention upon the fact that what really counts are the ends of our life, their proliferation. What it also matters is the possibility to judge them, because we are able by means of our imagination to project the limits of our humanity and thus to take attitude towards these ends and not simply and passively accept them, with indifference and in an uncommitted way. The second step of Berlin's argument for an alternative philosophical framework for liberalism is represented by his fear that the history of thought (which stays, of course, to some extent for the way human experience and thought are built and relate to each other) is a history of dominant models, and these models, which "invariably begin by liberating people from error . . . from some kind of unintelligible world which they seek to explain to themselves...", "end by enslaving those very same people (their creators, *my note*), by failing to explain the whole of experience. They begin as liberators and end in some sort of despotism."¹⁸

In the same manner, Strauss stresses the fact that

man's highest possibilities cannot be exhausted as long as there are still high human tasks – as long as the fundamental riddles which confront man, have not been solved to the extent to which they can be solved,¹⁹

and also that:

If there is no standard higher than the ideal of our society, we are utterly unable to take a critical distance from that ideal.²⁰

For Strauss as well the whole of human experience cannot be exhausted by one single ideal, by one single design of political realm, by one single conception of morality. There should be something which always remains unexpressed, uncaptured which keeps humanity moving, always aware of its imperfection and finitude, always in search for what is ideally true and absolute, because every attempt to express the truth is merely an opinion, a perspective which aims to reach the whole without being ever able to do so. In the absence of this ongoing tension between philosophy

and city, between opinions and truth, between ideal and reality, the critical perspective becomes impossible and any alternative perspectives are banished, forever excluded. What Strauss deplors as the loss of critical spirit, Berlin deplors as scarcity of creativity. The critical spirit and creativity stand both for some fundamental human feature that unites men just because it separates them, makes possible distance from each other and within each of them.

Strauss considers that:

Above all, knowledge of the indefinitely large variety of notions of right and wrong is so far from being incompatible with the idea of natural right that it is the essential condition for the emergence of that idea: realization of the variety of notions of right is *the* incentive for the quest for natural right . . .²¹

This means that far from being incompatible, pluralism and unity presuppose each other. What is even more important is that what unites men due to their differences is the idea of potential consent. The limits are thus not traced once and for all, they are not given, static, absolute. They are potentially traceable, or as Berlin thinks, they are imaginatively drawn.

The variety of notions of justice could be said to refute the contention that there is natural right, if the existence of natural right required actual consent of all men in regard to the principles of right. But we learn from Socrates, or from Plato, that what is required is not more than potential consent. Plato, as it were, says: Take any opinion about right, however fantastic or "primitive", that you please; you can be certain prior to having investigated it that it points beyond itself, that the people who cherish the opinion in question contradict that very opinion somehow and thus are forced to go beyond it in the direction of the one true view of justice, provided that a philosopher arises among them.²²

It is true that for Strauss there is a privileged character in the interplay between plurality of opinions and the potential whole, never to be reached, the philosopher. There is, nevertheless, a privileged character for Berlin as well, the romantic creator and hero. Anyhow, in the Socratic and Platonic tradition, philosophy is for Strauss

knowledge of what one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems, and

therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought.

Philosophy has such an important role to play for Strauss because:

All knowledge, however limited or “scientific”, presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which knowledge is possible. All understanding presupposes a fundamental awareness of the whole: prior to any perception of particular things, the human soul must have had a vision of the ideas, a vision of the articulated whole. However much the comprehensive visions, which animate the various societies, may differ, they are all visions of the same – of the whole. Therefore, they do not merely differ from, but contradict, one another. This very fact forces man to realize that each of those visions, taken by itself, is merely an opinion about the whole or an inadequate articulation of *the fundamental awareness of the whole* and thus points beyond itself toward an adequate articulation. *There is no guaranty that the quest for adequate articulation will ever lead beyond an understanding of the fundamental alternatives or that philosophy will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will ever reach the stage of decision. The unfinishable character of the quest for adequate articulation of the whole does not entitle one, however, to limit philosophy to the understanding of a part, however important. For the meaning of a part depends on the meaning of the whole. In particular, such interpretation of a part as is based on fundamental experiences alone, without recourse to hypothetical assumptions about the whole, is ultimately not superior to other interpretations of that part, which are frankly based on such hypothetical assumptions.*²³

It appears that for both Berlin and Strauss there is an unfinished interplay between the part and the whole, between ideal and reality, between unity and fragment, between individual and universal. This interplay, which is going to be analyzed in a more detailed way in the next section, makes the core of their argument for pluralism. Pluralism is a necessary condition to keep going the search for unity, the approximation of the whole, while at the same time is the very condition for tracing the limits of every unique choice, opinion, perspective on the whole. The projection of the whole is basically the condition of possibility of any individual and hence unique choice, option of a set of values. To the extent that there is an interplay between plurality and unity, mere arbitrariness or the impossibility to make value judgments on the other’s choice is excluded because every individual can make the test of the humanity of

that option. He/she can do so to the extent that he/she exercises either his/her imagination or their critical thinking. Every individual can do that when it comes about the other's choice because doing so is a requirement for himself/herself in order to ground his/her own option for a set of values or opinion about it.

Foucault: The Broken Unity or the Unavoidable Pluralism as a Condition for a New Meaning of Unity

The notion of "broken unity" is rather associated with a thinker like Isaiah Berlin for whom

the notion of the broken unity and its restoration – is a central strand in the whole of western thought.²⁴

Nevertheless, what Foucault analyzes in his book *Les Mots et les choses* is precisely the "broken fragments" of the lost unity between words and things, fragments which are impossible to put together, to glue in a coherent whole, due to the incomplete character of man as described by the analytics of finitude. The tension between transcendental/empirical, between thought/unthought, and the coming/the retreat of the origin makes the unavoidable fragment-like character of our knowledge and existence. "Man", his humanity, can thus never wholly be captured by what he "is". Man appears to be a truth both reduced and promised. Man's thought is always overwhelmed by his own being, which means that any attempt to approach the unthought modifies thought itself. Finally, any attempt man makes to begin connects him to a different time than that particular moment of beginning. The fragment-like character of modern human existence appears thus to be the condition of an unavoidable plurality. I would call it an assumed plurality, even a programmatic plurality, although Foucault claims that what he is doing is only to diagnose and not to come up with a normative model. It is an assumed plurality, one which needs to be accepted and incorporated as such by modern human beings, because this is the only way Foucault sees an (always temporary!) escape not only from the carceral society, but from the fundamental relation between power and knowledge which seems to be constitutive for being human.

Recognizing in Enlightenment a key-turn in the coming into being of modern episteme, which incorporates the very condition of plurality, Foucault defines the philosophical ethos of Enlightenment as *une attitude limite*.²⁵ The philosophical ethos of Enlightenment is more like an experimental attitude, a critical and historical enterprise.

Je veux dire que ce travail fait aux limites de nous-même doit d'une cote ouvrir un domaine d'enquêtes historiques et de l'autre se mettre à l'épreuve de la réalité et de l'actualité, a la fois pour saisir les points où le changement est possible et souhaitable et pour déterminer la forme précise à donner à ce changement. C'est dire que cette ontologie historique de nous-même doit se détourner de tous ces projets qui prétendent être globaux et radicaux.²⁶

As a consequence, goes on Foucault,

Je caractériserai donc l'éthos philosophique propre à l'ontologie critique de nous-même comme une épreuve historico-pratique des limites que nous pouvons franchir, et donc comme travail de nous-même sur nous-même en tant qu'êtres libres.²⁷

Therefore, the main aim to be achieved by Enlightenment is to bring to the light

dans ce qui nous est donné comme universel, nécessaire, obligatoire, quelle est la part de ce qui est singulier, contingent et du à des contraintes arbitraires. Il s'agit en somme de transformer la critique exercée dans la forme de la limitation nécessaire en une critique pratique dans la forme du franchissement possible.²⁸

The same problem seems to be at stake for Foucault as well as for Berlin and Strauss: given the unavoidable plurality which is the starting point of, at least in our modern existence, any act of knowledge, and hence of any attempt to make value judgements, is unity entirely futile, or is still a meaningful category in the human picture? At first sight, what seems to be the most important and urgent enterprise for Foucault is how to escape unity, how to go back to the source of unity as no more than self-creation, to its condition of possibility in a Kantian language. Unity seems to be so "dangerous" due to the fact that it tends to incarnate itself

into reality, and thus to present its self-legitimization as absolute, necessary and universal. It might not be entirely arbitrary that both Foucault and Strauss seem to consider that Hobbes played a fundamental role in the coming into being of modern political thought, in the modern conception of man. If, from Strauss' perspective, Hobbes considered that

only science discloses to man the obligatory aims of his volition and action. Thus with this ideal there is already the anticipation of the systematic overstepping of ordinary values, a morality opposed to pre-scientific morality, a truly paradoxical morality and a form of politics which is Utopian and outstrips all experience,²⁹

according to Michel Foucault

tout se passe comme si Hobbes, loin d'être le théoricien des rapports entre la guerre et le pouvoir politique, avait voulu éliminer la guerre comme réalité historique, comme s'il avait voulu l'éliminer de la genèse de la souveraineté

What originates with Hobbes, according to Strauss, is the false neutrality, which hiding behind the modern ideal of scientificity, masks and even dismisses the real plurality of opinions, which characterizes the natural (pre-scientific) world. As a result:

The true public reason is the new political science which judges in a universally valid, or objective, manner of what is to the interest of each, for it shows to everyone what means he must choose in order to attain his attainable ends, whatever those ends might be.³⁰

What originates with Hobbes, according to Foucault, is the false universality of the dominant (juridical) discourse of power, to the extent that the main concern of the English philosopher was to exclude the idea of war from the realm of politics. While for Foucault

a l'intérieur de cette « paix civile » les luttes politiques, les affrontements a propos du pouvoir, avec le pouvoir, pour le pouvoir, les modifications de rapports de force... tout cela, dans un system politique, ne devrait etre interprete que comme les continuations de la guerre.³¹

Therefore, for both philosophers what Hobbes brought about, a feature which eventually came to dominate the modern conception of man and politics, is a certain narrowing down of the plurality of opinions and perspectives as the real ground for any political philosophy, for any “universal” and thus “unifying” moral and political discourse.

Nevertheless, Foucault, no less than Strauss and Berlin, is trying to (re)state a different meaning of “unity” than what apparently dominated modern (political) philosophy. In attempting to do so, Foucault makes at the same time a strong point in favor of plurality. Plurality is first of all the very condition of man, as shown by the very core of the modern epistemic subject, the analytics of finitude. Plurality is also a “necessary” condition to be met in order to evade the repressive distinction between normal and abnormal, sane and insane, rational and irrational, as Foucault attempts to demonstrate in the case of the coming into being of the modern conception of madness. At last but not at least, plurality situates at the core itself of the way the individual relates to the others in terms of power relations. Having a strong Nietzschean flavor, the Foucauldian concept of power relations – even if presented in *Surveiller et punir* as leading to the picture of the all-comprising carceral society where the subject, the final incarnation of the Hobbesian model of sovereignty, disappears completely in the glance of a power system which anonymously reproduces itself – has to be understood rather as an incentive for the self-creation of the individual, as an ongoing barrier, a challenge, a provocation not to be accepted but contested. To the extent that power relations constitute themselves rather as a network than as something to be possessed and manipulated on a global level, Foucault emphasizes the fact that there is no power and therefore no domination in the absence of a strong will and stubborn liberty to resist it.

La relation de pouvoir et l'insoumission de la liberté ne peuvent donc être séparées. Le problème central du pouvoir n'est pas celui de la « servitude volontaire » (comment pouvons-nous désirer être esclaves ?) : au cœur de la relation de pouvoir, la « provoquant » sans cesse, il y a la relativité du vouloir et l'intransitivité de la liberté. Plutôt que d'un « antagonisme » essentiel, il vaudrait mieux parler d'un « agonisme » – d'un rapport qui est à la fois d'incitation réciproque et de lutte ; moins d'une opposition terme à terme qui les bloque l'un en face de l'autre que d'une provocation permanente.³²

The question is to what extent there is room for the notion of “unity” in a conception, which makes out of plurality the condition itself of the modern notion of man. My point is that Foucault leaves room for a local meaning of unity, a mobile and always challenged notion of unity which is the condition itself for the coming into being of plurality itself. In his book, *L'ordre du discours* Foucault lists those themes of traditional philosophical thought, which are rejected by his own view of the genesis of any discourse. They are: the theme of the grounding subject, the theme of the original experience the ego has of the world which allows the ego to know the world, the theme of the universal mediation, which states the existence of an ultimate rationality of the world.³³ To these fundamental themes of traditional philosophy, Foucault opposes his own “founding” ideas. They are: the principle of reversal which replaces the traditional search for unity with the negative game of splitting and dispersing the discourse, the principle of discontinuity, which traces the origin of any discourse to practices which are not necessarily related to each other, practices which can even ignore or exclude each other, the principle of exteriority, which aims at revealing the external conditions which make possible the coming into being of the discourse.³⁴

Bringing these grounding ideas in the context in which the French philosopher conceives power relations as an intermingling of power/domination and liberty it might become possible to trace the meaning of unity. As a matter of fact, it does not necessarily follow from the rejection of the above-mentioned themes of traditional philosophy that Foucault rejects any meaning of unity. At the same time, the fact that plurality plays such an important role in the analysis he makes to the coming into being of modernity does not necessarily lead to the rejection of any meaning of unity from the way the relationship between knowledge and power works. What Foucault tries to say is that any power relation is characterized, as a constitutive ingredient of it, by the tendency to freeze itself under the heading of some achieved unification and to present this unification as being one and the same with some “universal”, “necessary” features of the way humans and the world are. Any manifestation of power is thus not entirely negative, repressive, but it is constructive, inventive, it proliferates ways of being human, it produces knowledge. The point is that knowledge does not free human beings, to the extent that knowledge is a creation, which tends to impose itself as “the truth”.³⁵ In their attempt to know, human “subjects” create themselves and at the same time limit themselves. The aim of Foucault is to call the attention

upon the horizon, which could be opening beyond all attempts to knowledge/creation/domination/limitation.

The horizon of being human, as for Strauss and Berlin, is an open horizon, something still to be achieved. As a consequence, Foucault introduces the notion of liberty as a correlate of power. Liberty, to the extent that is exercised, has the beneficial capacity not only to resist power but to help power coming into being, because its role is both to demarcate, limit power, and by doing so, to open the space for counter-attempts to know/exert power. From the combination of power and liberty, it results a meaning of unity, which emphasizes first its incomplete character. It is a unity still to come, a unity still to be achieved. Then, it is a unity, which always opens up its own possibility to continue only through each of its actual, concrete, and particular incarnations, forms, where power/knowledge/liberty contribute all. Such a unity is never actually global; therefore, its origin cannot be precisely traced back to some author, to some subject, to some defined initiator. This is due to the fact that its origin it is rather always in "the middle", in the agonistic challenge to or revolt against any of its given forms, a confrontation between what is actual and what is still to come, and re-affirmation of any of its actual forms due to the fact that only through such re-affirmation of what is already there the still to come can really do so.

It might be that this mobile, ever-shifting origin of discourses is what determines Foucault to radically orient in his late period, of problematization and the genealogy of ethics, towards the techniques of the self. What I think is the target of his late period is precisely the attempt to reconstruct the notion of unity starting from the way the individual self constructs himself as a moral subject. What has to be mentioned in this context is the double meaning of the notion of subject (sujet) Foucault operates with: as the origin of knowledge/power and as what constitutes at the same time the object itself on which knowledge/power activities are meant to exert over. In doing so, Foucault tries to come up with a milder core of what means to be a subject, again in its double sense, as origin of knowledge/power and as object of the knowledge/power production. This milder core is meant to reconfigure the meaning of unity, which keeps, nevertheless, all the participants within the confines of the same agonistic game. What the French philosopher tries actually to do is also to come up with a way to defend society, to "free" it from the negative impact of carceral society. The way of living together becomes a way to refigure the meaning of unity.

The starting point is the new notion of “subject”. The target is to what extent the mobile, always contested and challenged, the local, both actual and potential meaning of unity is possible.

The milder core of the notion of “subject” is given in the late Foucault by at least three notions: the new meaning of truth, and the notions of “subjectivation” and “objectivation”. Truth ceases to be *le jeu de vérité* in order to become something more like a life style, where the main point of constructing the self as a moral subject is the effort to construct and express himself from the perspective of self care. This less other-oriented attitude is meant nevertheless to make even more room for the other. The individual who conceives his life as a work of art will not tend to reduce difference to what is the same and thus normal, will not try to normalize and discipline, in its double sense as stating “normality” and thus excluding “abnormality”, and as confining this attempt to one dominant scientific/true discourse. The same type of individual will tend to cultivate asymmetry. This means that he will positively praise difference as constitutive and necessary for the coming into being of his identity, and that he will tend to focus on activity than on its presumed final goal. Such a self will incorporate into his own creation, which becomes the main focus of his existence and activity, plurality itself. In becoming a moral subject the individual self will be aware from the very beginning, as the notions of “subjectivation” and “objectivation”³⁶ show to be the case, that his choice is only one possible way among many others. In being so, his attitude towards otherness will not be to reduce what is different to his own project and choice, but to recognize that otherness preserved in its difference and not reduced to some false unity is constitutive to his own coming into being. Even if in this late period Foucault seems rather to move the space of the agonistic confrontation inside the self as the notion of askesis shows that the case might be, “the other” is still an important presence for the coming into being of the self as a moral subject. The other and the self are both exercises into plurality. In being so, they are each incomplete and to this extent, they cannot be reduced to “the other”. It seems impossible to clearly distinguish between who depends on whom, who is “subject” and in what sense. From this ambiguity every identity can equally come into being, because they are both absolute “authors” of their lives and absolute “results” of the coming into being and creation of the others identity.

A Constructivist Approach to Liberalism

In going against what they identify as the dominant philosophical tradition, Berlin, Strauss, and Foucault are, one way or another, bringing at stake the meaning of some of the fundamental categories of this tradition. Among these, there are first of all the categories of “plurality” and “unity” and their relationship. There are also the categories of reason, (human) nature, as well as the categories of individual and universal. According to the main point of the present paper, all three thinkers are (re)working the meaning of these categories in a constructivist direction, this being the best fitted philosophical framework to conceive liberalism. Before presenting the meaning of plurality and unity from a constructivist perspective, I will first deal with the other categories, of reason, (human) nature and individual and universal.

As I already made the point, Berlin is both a critique of Enlightenment and someone who believes that an alternative philosophical background for liberalism can be built on Romanticism or Counter-Enlightenment. To this extent, he bestows upon will and imagination a very important role in the moral choices the individual has to make, without neglecting or entirely rejecting the role of reason. My hypothesis is that, to the extent that Berlin rejects Enlightenment’s main philosophical ideas he also rejects Enlightenment’s conception of reason, which I will call, following Whitehead, methodical reason. At the same time, to the extent that he attributes to individual will and imagination a very important role in the making of moral choices without entirely banishing reason, then he might accept a different meaning of reason, what I will call, following again Whitehead, speculative reason. According to Whitehead, speculative reason combines the harmony of logical rationality and the harmony of aesthetic achievement. While the characteristic of logical understanding is to start with the details and to pass to the construction achieved, to aim at the unity of construction, the aesthetic attitude singles out the totality where each component part becomes visible. Speculative reason, as defined by Whitehead, is connected to the capacity of “imaginative generalization”, the capacity to go beyond particular observation and thus to encompass the whole in the attempt to bring about novelty and creativity in the way of understanding a universe which is itself self-creating and interconnectedly advancing, through novelty, to the whole of it. Needless to say that novelty plays an important role for

Berlin as well, especially in the context of his interest for Romanticism and of his attempt to make out of creativity the core of the individual.

Another concept that seems to be resignified by Berlin is that of "human nature". The fact that Berlin embraces value pluralism does not exclude his belief in the existence of human nature. However, I do not think it is enough to simply say that human nature consists precisely in value pluralism. The point I am trying to make is that human nature as understood by Berlin is not only characterized by pluralism, but, because it is pluralistic it has to be dynamic, in the making, to have a process-like character, which speaks basically about its capacity to combine the actual and the potential in its unity. One helping hint in forging the meaning of human nature according to Isaiah Berlin comes from the fact that he rejects that conception for which

human nature is a *static, unaltering* (my italics) essence, that its ends are eternal, unaltering and universal for all men, everywhere, at all times, and can be known, and perhaps fulfilled, by those who possess the appropriate kind of knowledge.³⁷

If human nature is more like a process than static and unaltering, then the understanding of its meaning requires a clarification of the role actuality and potentiality, individual and universal play in its construction. Again, Whitehead has some helpful hints to offer. Universe, as the ultimate paradigm for the meaning of unity, is process. To be something in this universe means to have the potentiality for acquiring real unity with other entities, because this keeps the universe moving through creativity. An entity is for Whitehead, at least, a particular form capable of infusing its own particularity into creativity. Thus, the universe intermeshes in a dynamic way, process-like way, unity and multiplicity, finite and infinite, particular and universal, actual and potential, order and disorder, which are all present, and not divorced one from another. In such a universe, there is not only order, but also disorder, which might mean lack of a coherent structure, clash and conflict, perspectives going against each other. The point is that this does not exclude the coming into being of order due to the way every actual entity, which might be every form of existence from elementary particles to human individuals and societies, fundamentally relates to the "whole". An actual entity has a three-fold character. It has the character "given" for it by the past. No actual entity can rise beyond what the actual world, as a datum from its standpoint,

allows it to be. Each such entity arises from a primary phase of the concrescence of objectifications, which are in some respect settled. The basis of its experience is “given”, is order. It has the subjective character aimed at in its process of concrescence. This subjective aim is not primarily intellectual, it is the lure for feeling. This lure (attraction) for feeling is the germ of mind. The breath of feeling, which creates a new individual fact, has an origination not wholly traceable to the mere data. It conforms to the data, in that it feels the data. But the how of feeling, though it is germane to the data, is not fully determined by the data. In this respect each actual entity is *causa sui*. The whole of the world is self-creative. In its self-creation, the actual entity is guided by its ideal of itself as individual satisfaction (the final cause, its attainment which is always partial) and as transcendent creator. Due to this satisfaction, the achievement of the subjective aim is the “superject” rather than the substance or the subject. Superject signifies both the fact that the satisfaction closes up the actual entity and yet its adding its character to the creativity whereby there is a becoming of entities superseding the one in question.³⁸

Going back to Berlin’s conception of pluralism and to the way this is connected to a process-like character of human nature it has to be pointed out that pluralism means for the English philosopher, first and foremost, incompatibility and even incommensurability of values. This means, as he himself suggests, the absence of an unitary and harmonious unity and order of values. It means, more or less, disorder, conflict and clash of values. However, if Berlin’s statement that:

There was a romantic movement; it did have something which was central to it; did create a great revolution in consciousness; and it is important to discover what this is,

then the very special role language comes to play from the romantic perspective has to be considered here. In characterizing Hamman’s and Herder’s contribution to Romanticism, Berlin pays the required attention to the role of language. Language is the storehouse of memories and truths not accessible to human awareness. Language is a network, which is linked together at every point that is why it makes sense to speak of culture, as a whole. This means that on the level of one single culture there is order and unity, and not necessarily clash and conflicts of values. However, if conflicts and clashes of values would be characteristic for a culture there would still be the possibility of some common measure, of

some common horizon, which is created by language. The point I am trying to make is that there seems to be some inconsistency between Berlin's emphasis on the role of the individual who chooses in an absolute way, and the idea of a culture as a whole, as some unitary structure.

Or, to put it differently: how could be explained that on the level of one single culture there is the possibility of unity and of a common structure in spite of the undomitable character of the individual choice? One way to reply to my point would be by saying that what makes the unity possible is the language. There are on the level of human nature several different (natural) languages, therefore there are many possible unities but not a single over-arching unity. The point is that when romantics discuss the issue of language they consider that the way language works stays for the way our human way of being works. It is not a matter of this or that different language, but language as such is the paradigm for understanding the way human "nature" works, how humans come to know the truth, and the world. According to Andrew Bowie's interpretation of Romanticism, for the romantics the diversity of natural languages appears to be linked to a schematising capacity (a Kantian notion which is meant to bring unity in human knowledge, which constructs architectural wholes, structures), which does not function in a uniform manner.³⁹ The essential aspect of language, adds Bowie, refers to the ways language can establish new relations between things.⁴⁰ Therefore, beyond the diversity of natural languages there is this schematising capacity which is inherent to language. This schematising capacity is a "means of fixing things", of locating them in larger wholes.

The point is that in doing so, the schematizing capacity does not re-present an already given order but it dynamically and creatively builds this order. In this construction the only possible starting and ending point is contextual, and individual. In reading the possible meaning of unity and human nature for Berlin in this key, it becomes possible to connect it to Whitehead's conception of the actual entity. The starting point is always represented by what is given, by the language of one's own culture as a storehouse of possibilities to express and choose values. The individual is nevertheless creator, to the extent that the nature itself of language is to establish new relations between things, to generate meaning and values. In doing so, the individual creates himself as something unique adding at the same time to future possibilities, building a richer world for those to come. There is in this process an intermesh of order and disorder, of conflicts, clashes and also incompatibility and even incommensurability,

to the extent that there is permanently a gap between what is given and what is novelty. The common measure of things is always at stake, but from this does not necessarily result that it does not exist. It is continuously in the making. This feature is made possible, among others, by the superjective character of the individual, always caught between what the past handed down to him and the future possibilities opened up by his creation of values and by his choices. This unity, as a combination of actuality and potentiality, is always in the making, never closed, therefore traversed by conflicts, clashes and an ongoing lack of common measure in the sense of a given and static, valid in all times and places.

The main reason that a common, static and unaltering measure, valid in all times and places cannot exist is the fact that action divides humanity, breaks any unity, to the extent that action expresses the individual, something unique and unrepeatably, and not some universal and common pattern which the action is meant to re-present, to re-produce, to re-unite the individual with. That is why Berlin thinks that

utopias have their value – nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities – but as guides to conduct, they can prove literally fatal⁴¹

It would be worth taking note of the comment Berlin makes on the role utopias come to play. However, on one condition, to be recognized as creations, as expressions of human creativity and imagination, as expanders of “the imaginative horizon of human potentialities”. Therefore, the core of human nature is plurality, conflicts of values, clash of ideals and ways of life, to the extent that what makes human nature, what constitutes it, what keeps it in the making is the coming into being of novelty. Creativity and individual expression is the crux of human nature. However, from this does not follow the impossibility of unity, and of some universal values. It follows instead that any attempt to achieve unity and to express universal values takes place always from an individual standpoint, from a contextual perspective. As a matter of fact this is a Kantian idea which is constitutive for modern philosophy, an idea which became constitutive for Romanticism as well, the idea that knowledge itself is a construction, and that every attempt to express the truth, the whole, is individual and presupposes a re-contextualization of the truth, of the idea itself of a whole.

The relationship between unity and plurality as conceived from a constructivist perspective enriches itself when seen from Strauss' perspective. Two of the main critiques formulated by Strauss to the way modern political thought constituted itself refer to the way Machiavelli and Hobbes changed classical political philosophy. According to Strauss, Machiavelli, by substituting the value of humility with the value of humanity, limited man only to what is within his reach.⁴² It annulled the motivating and moving force of the ideal, of something more to be achieved, beyond mere humanity. When it comes about Hobbes, what was radically changed was the meaning of (human) nature. Nature ceased to be the paradigm for the potential order, the model for unity, which is searched for by humans, in order to be assimilated to what is sub-human, irrational, to the disorder of passions and desires. As a consequence for Hobbes,

man as the maker of civil society can solve once and for all the problem inherent in man as the matter of civil society. Man can guarantee the actualization of the right social order because he is able to conquer human nature by understanding and manipulating the mechanism of the passions.⁴³

Thus man was eventually confined to his own humanity, but in happening so, man was in fact confined to the boundaries of his actual world, to the boundaries of his own community, to the boundaries of his own individual grasp and to the illusion that these are one and the same with what is universal. For Strauss as for Berlin, in spite of the fact that their interpretation of Machiavelli differs in a radical way, the notion of unity is a mix of actuality and potentiality. Humanity is a creation, something to be achieved. That is why for both of them it is dangerous to freeze the meaning of humanity to only one view of it. Plurality and unity require each other, because "realization of the variety of notions of right is *the* incentive for the quest for natural right"

Based on this idea, Strauss criticizes the way modern political science reduces the meaning of the "universal" to what is common to different societies. The point is that this manner of proceeding is only a way to mask the fact that "the universal" is only the hidden monopoly of some single perspective or opinion, which becomes *the* science or *the* truth. *The* science comes thus to neglect and dismiss the real diversity of opinions as expressed in pre-scientific knowledge, and therefore one important capacity of human beings is lost out of sight, that man is a being which

posits values, able to choose his ends, and not to blindly achieve what the mandarins of science tell him to pursue. Therefore, in the attempt to find the common good, something that gives the content of a public space, the starting point is given by the diversity of pre-scientific opinions, because what is politically the highest is already there, in society, and it gives society its character,

it constitutes and justifies the regime of the society in question. The “highest” is that through which a society is “a whole”, a distinct whole with a character of its own⁴⁴

It results from here, that what is universal is not what is common to all societies, but what can make room for the differences, what can cast light upon them, showing them and also helping them to point beyond each of them to the whole, to the potential unity which can be reached only starting from what is different, from the variety of local contexts.

Two Straussian concepts are extremely relevant in this context, the concept of potential consent⁴⁵ and the ceaseless quest for unity (“*the unfinishable character of the quest for adequate articulation of the whole*”).⁴⁶ What these two concepts seem to indicate is that, according to Strauss, there is not only the possibility of dialogue between different and even contradictory opinions, but there is also the crucial fact that every dialogue is taking place in such a way that every part expresses itself in the light of this potential consent, of a potential unity which every part is striving to capture. The different steps to be taken in this unfinished inquiry, in the unfinished quest for unity can be reconstructed as such:

a) Every part starts from the premise that its perspective captures the whole.

b) By this very claim, which sets the limits of every perspective, due to the incomplete, limited and finite character of the attempt, every perspective sends beyond itself. Every perspective, to the extent that it demarcates itself from the angle of the whole which aims to encompass but it fails to, points beyond itself, making therefore visible for itself the other perspectives.

c) Thus, the issue of dialogue takes shape as a remote possibility, because, according to Strauss, all perspectives point towards some kind

of unity, which makes the ground of their very existence, a whole of which they are the parts and which is their very condition of possibility.

d) When entering the dialogue, every part still starts from the premise that its perspective is THE way of expressing the whole.

e) Caught into the space of the potential dialogue, which is made possible by the idea itself of unity as the ground of diversity, the different parts involved realize that everyone makes the same claim, to express the whole, the unity.

f) What eventually might make them to potentially consent and thus create the object of their potential consent, which might never come to be entirely captured, is that every part, to the extent that it still clings to being itself, has to recognize itself as being overwhelmed by what is still there to capture, and this still - there - to - capture belongs to no one.

One of the most important constructivist ideas to be found in Foucault's critique of modernity has to do with his conception of the relationship between reason and rationality. Foucault considers that:

il faut refuser tout ce qui se présenterait sous la forme d'une alternative simpliste et autoritaire : ou vous acceptez l'Aufklärung, et vous restez dans la tradition de son rationalisme (ce qui est par certains considère comme positif et par d'autres au contraire comme un reproche) ; ou vous critiquez l'Aufklärung et vous tentez alors d'échapper à ces principes de rationalité (ce qui peut être encore une fois pris en bonne ou en mauvaise part).⁴⁷

In stating this, the French philosopher rejects that idea that there should be some dominant model of rationality, which comes to be identified with the core or the essence itself of human reason. It is better to speak about multiple bifurcations of reason, a sort of self-creation of reason, where what really counts is the possibility to situate ourselves at the limits of what came to be considered as being necessary. The space thus opened at the frontier between what is actual (and dangerously identified with what is necessary) and what is potential makes the autonomy of the individual. The different meanings of rationality generate each other, they oppose to each other, without being possible to identify a moment when reason lost its fundamental project.

What seems to really matter for Foucault is the capacity the individual has to generate new meanings of rationality, in a space where power and liberty intermingle. A space where unity is there rather to be questioned and de-composed, than sought for. Nevertheless, as I mentioned

already, there is in Foucault's conception of the relationship between power/knowledge and liberty a meaning of unity without which the idea of plurality itself would lose its meaning. Only by resisting unities, by pointing out to their contingent character plurality can come to make any sense. As the case seems to be with the idea of right, of legitimating power through some dominant juridical discourse and institutions, which come thus to trace something like a dominant and official historical genesis of that particular form of legitimacy. Beneath the level where right unifies there is a potential field of alternatives, which are denied or repressed, there is a continual conflict, war, which is hidden, having its existence denied. What Foucault tries to bring at stake is the unity brought about by the principles of right. This has to be questioned in order to discover the hidden, covered, alternatives, which were progressively eliminated. In this respect, Foucault enriches the constructivist perspective by adding to the Straussian potential consent (peace) the idea of ceaseless war (violence as the final, ultimate solution). A point where he intersects Berlin, both speaking of agonism as the label for their way of understanding pluralism. Nevertheless, Foucault enlarges more than Strauss the field of facing the other's different and necessarily contradictory opinions, discourses. For him there is not only the field of philosophical dialogue, but the broader field of practices where power/liberty intermesh on a daily basis, where every individual can play the privileged role of the Straussian philosopher. Within the confines of such a realm, every attempt to resist power/unity is both a way of generating a new unity and a way to shape one's own self. In this respect, Foucault seems to meet Berlin, both expressing a similar idea. Every attempt to express truth, to achieve knowledge has a moral dimension attached to it. It is intermingled with the construction itself of the individual as a moral subject. As the Foucauldian notions of *gouvernementalité* and *gouvernement de soi* seem to show, every attempt to unify, to bring under control is correlated to the construction of individuality, to a certain model of individual identity. However, every individual attempt to resist unity, to defy it and assert itself as such ends inevitably in the creation of a new unity. This web of unity and plurality seems thus to be the core of being human in Foucault's view.

In the Guise of a Conclusion: A Few Constructivist Hints for Liberalism

According to Berlin, there is no necessary connection between liberalism and pluralism. This is definitely an attempt to free pluralism from the philosophical background of a certain type of liberalism which would attempt to produce false and thus dangerous unities, to suffocate the proliferation of other "best ways of life". My point is that from a constructivist philosophical background liberalism can easier "free" itself from the attempt to reduce diversity to only one set of (true and universal) values. Liberalism itself becomes a construction, being thus able to diversify itself, to conceive itself in an alternative-like way. Liberalism cannot avoid unifying, but as Michel Foucault considers, liberalism is a critical perspective on the government as coming from society, being thus based on both economy and right but also on the ethical self-care and desire. Liberalism corresponds to the moment when society and the subject come into being. Liberalism is the limit of police. This means that there is a fundamental ambiguity, which characterizes liberalism. In its becoming, "individualization" and "totalization" emerge at the same time. Liberalism is both a way of self-repression and self-control and an element of permanent critique of "governance" (governing).⁴⁸ Liberalism can thus incorporate suspicion of itself, it can be critical with itself, it can de-compose and re-compose itself, learning from what presents as being different from itself. This is because liberalism has as its hard core the possibility to generate individualities, novelty, and (self) critique. To this extent, liberalism can be its most severe enemy, because it is constitutive for its way of being to create its own opposition, its own critique, and the liberty, which resists power.

That is why, between liberalism and pluralism there is, if not an absolutely necessary, at least a very strong connection: individualism. To this extent, and this is the point Strauss makes in a very determinate way, the clue for the relationship between pluralism and liberalism is the individual and his creative potential. This means, that even from the perspective of a strong plea in favor of pluralism and in favor of divorcing pluralism from liberalism, the value of the individual has to be recognized, as well as his capacity to create, to bring about novelty, to make use of what Berlin call his creative will! What Strauss attacks in the name of "severe individualism" is permissive egalitarianism and democratism. To this extent, he brings into discussion a very interesting pair of moral

values from the perspective of the relationship between pluralism, liberalism, and individualism.

What shapes “severe individualism” is the tension between courage and moderation, between the desire to impose ones own perspective as being the whole and the awareness of the radical impossibility to do so. It is also the tension between two major temptations, of competence and of humble veneration, the capacity of the individual to find the middle between the authority of truth and the challenge of any authority.⁴⁹ What is extremely interesting, as shown by the inquiries made by Strauss in the Islamic and Jewish worlds,⁵⁰ but also in the Greek political philosophy, these moral values are indeed values to be found in all these realms, values which enforce liberalism, while revealing at the same time their plural character, the fact that they belong to more than one culture in an unique and nevertheless universal way! According to the constructivist standpoint that would be the philosophical crux of liberalism: to bring together what is at the same time unique and universal, the same and nevertheless different, with the sole purpose of enriching thus the meaning of being human.

NOTES

- 1 Isaiah Berlin, *En toutes libertés. Entretiens avec Ramin Jahanbegloo*, Editions du Felin, Paris, 1990, p. 80.
- 2 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1983, 1988, 1990, p. 78.
- 3 "Will as the Creative Function of Man", *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 41.
- 4 Idem, p. 84.
- 5 *En toutes libertés*, p. 97.
- 6 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, pp. 13-14.
- 7 Idem, p. 12.
- 8 Idem, p. 11.
- 9 Idem, p. 39.
- 10 Idem, p. 11.
- 11 *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1953, 1965, p. 130.
- 12 Idem, p. 18.
- 13 Ibidem, p. 273.
- 14 Idem, p. 194.
- 15 *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 26-27.
- 16 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 15.
- 17 Max Horkheimer, *L'Eclipse de la raison*, Payot, Paris, p. 34, 46, 52.
- 18 *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 2-3.
- 19 *The City and Man*, The University of Chicago Press, 1964, 1978, Introduction, p. 2.
- 20 *Natural Right and History*, Introduction, p. 3.
- 21 Idem, p. 10.
- 22 *Natural Right and History*, p. 125.
- 23 Idem, p. 127.
- 24 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 24.
- 25 *Dits et écrits*, Gallimard, 1994, vol. 4, p. 574.
- 26 Ibidem.
- 27 *Dits et écrits*, p. 575
- 28 Idem, p. 574.
- 29 *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Its Basis and Its Genesis*, The University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1963, p. 138.
- 30 See *Ancient and Modern Liberalism*, New York, Basic Books, 1968, An Epilogue.
- 31 *Il faut défendre la société*, Gallimard, Seuil, 1997, p. 16-17.
- 32 *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, Gallimard, 1994, p. 238.
- 33 *L'Ordre du discours*, Gallimard, 1971, p. 50

- 34 Idem, pp. 14-15.
- 35 See "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire" in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 138-139.
- 36 *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, p. 706.
- 37 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 32.
- 38 See A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, The Macmillan Company, The Free Press, 1929, 1957, *Modes of Thought*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1958, and *Science and the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1933.
- 39 Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, Routledge, London, New York, 1997, p. 60.
- 40 Idem, p. 66.
- 41 *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 15.
- 42 *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Glencoe, Ill, Free Press, 1958, p. 228.
- 43 *Natural Right and History*, p. 194.
- 44 *Ancient and Modern Liberalism*, p. 214.
- 45 See supra-note 8.
- 46 See supra-note 9.
- 47 *Dits et écrits*, p. 572.
- 48 See *Cites*, Michel Foucault: *de la guerre des races au biopouvoir*, 2, 2000, pp. 23-26. The whole paper by Yves Michaud, "Des modes de subjectivation aux techniques de soi: Foucault et les identités de notre temps" is relevant in this respect, the issue of liberalism from a late Foucauldian perspective.
- 49 See Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" in *Ancient and Modern Liberalism*.
- 50 See *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1952, 1988.