

Isaiah Berlin

Sir, – In his review of *Isaiah Berlin: A celebration*, edited by Edna and Avishai Margalit (July 5), John Gray makes, I believe, a serious mistake. Berlin's main idea, Gray claims, is that different values are *incommensurable*. In explaining this idea, Gray says that it makes no sense to try to "rank" Shakespeare and Racine, or the Parthenon and Notre-Dame. "We lack the scales on which these goods might be weighed." Gray would be right to claim that, even in principle, there are no such scales. There could not be precise truths about the relative greatness of two such different writers, or buildings. That is why we can plausibly deny both that one is greater than the other, and that they are exactly equally great.

From this claim of incommensurability, Gray slides to a very different claim. Artists and works in different traditions are, he thinks, *incomparable*. There cannot be *any* truths about their relative merits. As Gray writes, "though there may be improvement or decline within specific artistic traditions, there can be no progress in the arts that spans divergent and incommensurable traditions". On this view, Shakespeare cannot be greater than even the very *worst* writer in a different tradition.

If this claim were confined to the arts, it would be damaging enough. But Gray adds, "On Berlin's view, the same is true in ethics". If there cannot be true comparisons across different cultures or traditions, there cannot be moral decline in the transition, say, from Kant to Hitler. That is not Berlin's view.

Even within one cultural tradition, different items cannot be precisely compared. There is no scale on which we can weigh Rembrandt and his pupils. If *incommensurable* implied *incomparable*, as Gray seems to assume, there could never be true comparisons.

The assumption is incorrect. Shakespeare and Racine *are* comparable. Like the Parthenon and Notre-Dame, they are imprecisely equal, or in the same league. There can be true comparisons even across quite different arts, or cultural traditions. Rembrandt and Bach are in the same league; and both are greater than Jeffrey Archer. Since the same is true in ethics, Berlin's "value-pluralism" need not "undermine the idea of a rational morality".

DEREK PARFIT
All Souls College, Oxford.