

A black and white portrait of a middle-aged man with short, slightly graying hair, wearing thin-rimmed glasses. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a light-colored collared shirt under a dark jacket. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient.

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A Touch of Gray

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Every silver lining's got a touch of gray—Robert Hunter

INTRODUCTION

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to comment upon the work of John Gray. His output has been so extensive and his thought has seen so much development that one could easily write a book tracing his intellectual odyssey, and so a mere paper on the topic must, of necessity, be no more than an incomplete sketch.¹

Gray began his intellectual life on the left (Colls 2003, p. 59), but moved towards libertarianism in the late 1970s, influenced by his study of the work of Nobel Prize-winning free-market economist F. A. Hayek (1982).² Gray's libertarianism was tempered, however, by studying the work of Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott. Over time, he was led to increasing skepticism towards the entire Enlightenment project. (Graeme Garrard's paper in this issue criticizes aspects of Gray's understanding of the Enlightenment).

In the last decade or so, Gray has increasingly written works that interleave recounting of historical episodes with philosophical reflections on their meaning. He also has developed his metaphysical views in a direction that I would refer to as "mystical atheism." (Many writers use "mystical" as a pejorative: be assured I am not doing so here).

So let us take a too brief journey through Gray's oeuvre, beginning with his gradually distancing himself from Hayekian liberalism.

LEAVING LIBERALISM

A key text for understanding this shift in Gray's attitude towards liberalism is his 1988 work, *Liberalisms*. It is a collection of essays written over a period of a dozen years. As Gray describes the essays, "They embody a single project, pursued continuously over the period in which they were written—the project of defining liberalism and giving it a foundation." But, for liberalism, the conclusion of the project was not a happy one: "The enterprise ended in failure" (Gray 1988, p. vii). Gray notes that, prior to the breakdown of the Western consensus the most salient event of which was the Reformation, "the liberal problem of establishing fair principles of social cooperation among persons having incompatible and incommensurable conceptions of the good—does not exist" (1988, p. 169).

In an essay on the contractarian method of political justification, Gray argues against John Rawls's contention that justice is silent about the choice of economic system. Gray's analysis of the unstable and

inefficient nature of market socialism displays a deep understanding of the calculation argument forwarded by Mises and Hayek, far surpassing that of today's average economist. Gray argues that, contra Rawls, "the appropriate conception of the person for our historical circumstance is closer to that which Hobbes presented at a time of profound religious conflict" (1988, p. 181). We will see that Gray returns to address Hobbes several times, including his most recent book.

Having decided that there is no philosophical basis for preferring liberalism to all other forms of governance, Gray turns his attention to what follows from this conclusion in a series of essays collected in *Post-Liberalism*. In the essay "Hayek as a conservative" Gray notes that "Hayek's position is distinctive, to be sure" (1996, p. 32), and that "Hayek's attempt to synthesize the deepest insights of conservatism with the best elements of classical liberalism merits our closest scrutiny" (1996, p. 33). That is because "The dominant superstition of the Age of Reason is the belief that vital social institutions—law, language, and morality, as well as the market—must be or can become products of conscious contrivance and control, if they are effectively to serve human purposes" (1996, p. 36) Hayek's "chief importance... is that he has freed classical liberalism from the burden of [this] hubristic rationalism" (1996, p. 37).

However, Gray warns that "At times [Hayek] seems to subscribe to a doctrine of historical progress which... cannot be endorsed by any twentieth century conservative." (1996, p. 38) Gray concludes that, "since much of contemporary culture is possessed by a death-wish brought on by pathological developments in some of our oldest traditions, a modern conservative must also be a moral and intellectual radical" (1996, p. 39).

In the next chapter, "Oakeshott as a liberal," Gray writes:

[Oakeshott's] first lesson is that the hubristic project of doctrinal or fundamental liberalism—the project attempted by all the liberal thinkers... of fixing the boundaries of government action by some principle or doctrine, be it *laissez-faire*, a specification of allegedly natural (but patently conventional) rights, or a list of basic liberties derived (as in Rawls and Dworkin) from a conception of justice rooted only in the fleeting local knowledge of the American academic *nomenklatura*—embodies a mistaken conception of philosophy itself" (1996, p. 41).

Commenting on Oakeshott's distinction between civil association and enterprise association, Gray remarks: "the debacles of Thatcherism and Reaganism suggest that, for us, the enterprise-association state is an historical fate, which we may indeed strive to temper, but which we cannot hope to overcome" (1996, p. 44). One can gather from that passage that Gray was not pleased by the outcome of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Indeed, during the 1990s, Gray was associated with New Labour—the center-left movement that brought Tony Blair to power in Westminster—and he became a prominent critic of global capitalism with his book *False Dawn* (1998).

In "Buchanan on liberty," Gray argues that James Buchanan, contra Hayek, recognizes that spontaneous social orders will not reliably be beneficial without the aid of deliberately constructed institutions designed to make them so. For instance, Gray argues that, after the collapse of communist states in eastern Europe, "we cannot intrust ourselves to the providential designs of Burkean or Hayekian institutional evolution. Rather, armed with the best theory we can find, we must wager on a new social contract" (1996, p. 53). Gray closes his Buchanan essay on a more optimistic note than he will sound in much of his later work, writing, "we must wager on liberty by seeking, amid all the vicissitudes and contingencies of practice, a new constitutional settlement on limited government, in which free men and women may live in voluntary association—in liberty under the rule of law" (1996, p. 63).

In Gray's essay on Isaiah Berlin we see the roots of another phase of Gray's thought, as he embraces Berlin's value pluralism:

Berlin's work, both in intellectual history and political theory, is one which, if true, as I take it to be, strikes a death-blow to the central, classical Western tradition—and, it must be added, to the project of the Enlightenment. Berlin's master idea is that ultimate values are objective and knowable, but they are many, they often come into conflict with one another and are uncombinable in a single human being or a single society, and that in many of such conflicts there is no overarching standard whereby the competing claims of such ultimate values are rationally arbitratable... There is, then, no *summum bonum* or *logos*, no Aristotelian mean or Platonic form of the good, no perfect form of human life, which we may never achieve, but towards which we may struggle, no measuring rod on which different forms of human life encompassing different and uncombinable goods can be ranked (1996, p. 65).

This is a puzzling passage. At least as Gray presents Berlin, we have here a *petitio principii*: what is supposedly the conclusion of the argument is, in fact, one of its premises, because it is only if there is, indeed, no "*summum bonum* or *logos*" that such conflicts are not "rationally arbitratable." After all, Plato and Aristotle and Aquinas, among many others, acknowledged that there are people who resist the pull of the *logos* and therefore are immune to rational argumentation as to what is truly good. Whether Berlin manages to avoid this question begging in his work is beyond the scope of this introduction, but at least we can say that Gray does not offer us any reason to think that he has in this essay. In any case, it is clear that Gray *does* accept this conclusion of Berlin's, and, we suggest, that is extremely important in understanding his subsequent work. He goes on to say, in a passage notable for illustrating Gray's decreasing enthusiasm for Hayek:

Berlin at the same time, cuts the ground from under those doctrinal or fundamentalist liberalism—the liberalism of Nozick or Hayek no less than of Rawls or Ackerman—which suppose that the incommensurabilities of moral and political life, and of liberty itself, can be smoothed away by the application of some theory, or tamed by some talismanic formula... if there is any liberalism that is now defensible, it is Berlin's (1996, p. 67).

In "The politics of cultural diversity," an essay as relevant today as when it was written, Gray argues that the progressive enthusiasm for what is called "multiculturalism" is "animated by moral hatred of the dominant traditions, and a voyeuristic fascination with submerged, overwhelmed, or oppositional cultures." Therefore, it seeks to "entrench minority traditions in protected institutions and confer on them arbitrary privileges" (1996, p. 266).

In the preface of his 1995 book *Enlightenment's Wake* (a second edition appeared in 2007), Gray writes: "In this book, a train of thought developed in my earlier books, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, *Post-liberalism: Studies and Political Thought*, and *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government, and the Common Environment*, is brought to a conclusion" (2007, p. vii). He corrects the conclusion of *Post-liberalism*, arguing "the historicist argument for liberal institutions... neglects the variety of institutions within which a *modus vivendi* can be achieved in our time, and unduly privileges variations on Western models" (2007, p. viii). While "commentators and politicians are invoking 'Enlightenment values' as an antidote for contemporary ills," Gray notes that "Enlightenment values have often been illiberal, racist, or totalitarian" (2007, p. xvi). In fact, while "Neo-conservatism... may be the last of the Enlightenment ideologies... it too is ready to use terror to realize its utopian goals" (2007, p. xvii).

The first two essays in the volume critique contemporary political philosophy. In the first, "Against the New Liberalism," he contends that "the tradition of liberal theorizing [that *A Theory of Justice*] inaugurated has done a little more than articulate the prejudices of an Anglo-American academic class that lacks any the understanding of political life in our age" (2007, p. 2). The second essay, the "Definition of the Political Thought of Tlön," Gray satirizes the contents of Goodin and Petit's *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* by comparing it to Borges' fictional *The First Encyclopedia of Tlön*. Just as the residents of Tlön

believe that the only things real are what they perceive, so, Gray contends, for most academic political philosophers, “only that has reality which is at any particular time perceptible in academic discourse” (2007, p. 21). Why else, Gray wonders, do the editors consider powerful factors in modern politics like theism and nationalism beyond the pale of discussion, while a topic like anarchism is included in their selections?

The final essay in *Enlightenment’s Wake* summarizes Gray’s conclusions on the “Enlightenment project,” and his review is not positive. As he puts it:

within Western cultures, the Enlightenment project of promoting autonomous human reason and of according to science a privileged status in relation to all other forms of understanding has successfully eroded and destroyed local and traditional forms of moral and social knowledge; it has not issued in anything resembling a new civilization, however, but instead in nihilism (2007, p. 217).

Gray dismisses attempts like that of the Romantic movement to re-enchant the world, writing “The disenchantment that trails in Enlightenment’s wake is a fate that can perhaps be tempered, but not overcome” (2007, p. 231). It is true that, if the disenchantment that came with the Enlightenment was like the removal of rose colored glasses, so that we at last see the world in its true, dreary colors, we probably can’t unsee that revelation. But Gray does not seem to consider a different possibility: perhaps the Enlightenment actually consisted of putting *on* a pair of spectacles that *filtered out* the vibrant colors of an enchanted world. Then “re-enchanting” the world would merely consist in taking off that filter. As Robert Hunter once put it, “maybe the dark is from your eyes.” In the end, Gray does not place much hope for a recovery from nihilism in Western cultures. He writes, “Any prospect of cultural recovery from the nihilism that the Enlightenment has spawned may lie with non-Occidental peoples, whose task will then be in part that of protecting themselves from the debris cast up by Western shipwreck” (2007, p. 276).

The 1997 work *Endgames* begins by asserting that “our inherited stock of political ideas no longer tracks the world in which we live and strive to flourish” (1997, p. vi). Having concluded that the Enlightenment project has been a failure, Gray worries that “the faith of the Enlightenment will be deployed... as a drug to stupefy the intellect and an antidote to despair” (1997, p. xi). In an effort to address these circumstances, Gray notes that “The gap between late modern thought and emerging postmodern realities is the space in which the questions that are the subject of this book are put” (1997, p. xi). The essay “The Strange Death of Tory England” deals with the British Conservative party undermining its own base by embracing neoliberalism. While much of the essay deals with particulars of British politics, it does further illustrate Gray’s move away from Thatcherism, as well as the fact that unfettered markets are not friends of social cohesion. The next essay, “After Social Democracy,” argues that, whether one approves or disapproves of Thatcherism, its “consequences for political life in Britain” are “irreversible” (1997, p. 11). Gray sees no possibility of Britain reverting to a pre-Thatcher form of social democracy or traditional conservatism; instead, the correct focus of practical political thought is “What is Thatcherism’s successor?” (1997, p. 11).

Gray contends that while social democracy was once a workable alternative to Soviet communism and American individualism, “the billions of skilled workers released onto the global market by the communist collapse and the disappearance of any effective barriers to global mobility of capital” have rendered it “a bankrupt project” (1997, p. 13). Gray also rejects the project of right-wingers (such as John Redwood) who seek to revive traditional cultural forms that have mostly vanished. As an alternative, he recommends “a communitarian liberal perspective” which “enriches standard liberal philosophy with the distinctive insights of communitarian thought” (1997, p. 15). He hopes this will balance the human need for security and forms of common life with people’s “demand... to make their own choices and to be at least part-authors of their own lives” (1997, p. 16). This latter requirement is, of course, incompatible with the denial of free will that Gray will adopt later: if free will is an illusion, we no more make choices than does a rock tumbling down a hill.

A central component of “the communitarian liberal view... is that market freedoms have instrumental value only, as a means to individual well-being” (1997, p. 17). And “in contrast with social democracy, which has extended to social welfare rights the supposedly unconditional claims of negative liberal rights, the communitarian view affirms the dependency of individual autonomy on a strong network of reciprocal obligations” (1997, p. 18). The goal is “reconciling the human need for security with the permanent revolution of the market” (1997, p. 19). Gray comments that “It is a comment on the parochialism of British political life that social democrats have accepted the Thatcherite claim that opposition to European federalism is the prerogative of the Right” (1997, pp. 34-35). This was a prescient remark, given how a decade later, Brexit was cast as a purely right-wing initiative.

In his essay “Rawl’s Anti-Political Liberalism,” Gray knocks Rawls off of his pedestal in a few pithy sentences. He succinctly describes the difference between Hobbes and Rawls:

For Hobbes, the goal of political philosophy is not to come up with an apology for any particular political regime. It is instead to understand the universal and permanent human needs that political institutions of all sorts exist to meet... The contrast with Rawls’s political liberalism could hardly be starker... Rawls takes as his point of departure... the intuitions common among American East Coast liberal academics (1997, p. 53).

In the end, Gray notes, “The most striking feature of Rawls’s political liberalism is its utter political emptiness” (1997, p. 54).

In “Berlin, Oakeshott, and Enlightenment,” Gray undertakes an interesting comparison of these two prominent critics of rationalism. But he misunderstands Oakeshott in a fundamental way when he writes, “If, for Oakeshott, all forms of knowledge are at bottom practical...” (1997, p. 86). Oakeshott quite explicitly rejects that view, writing “The world of practice... will be found to be abstract and defective from the standpoint of the totality of experience... [and] that (consequently) it is without any direct relationship with other abstract worlds of experience, such as those of science and history...” (Oakeshott 1933, p. 249). One might respond, “Well, that is just the early Oakeshott,” were it not the case that he again, forty-two years later, rejects the idea that theory can be reduced to practice (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 29-30).

In “Beginnings,” the last essay in *Endgames*, Gray treats the theory of evolution, a biological model of how lifeforms change over time, as something with vast implications for metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and philosophical anthropology. For example, he writes:

It is difficult to reconcile [science as truth seeking] with the results of scientific inquiry, such as Darwinism. In a consistently Darwinian perspective, science will seek truth only in so far as truth serves human interests (1997, p. 168).

The problem Gray’s case faces here is that given what he says about science, he has no reason to acquit Darwinism of the charge he levels at all other scientific theories. And that would mean we have no particular reason to think that Darwinism is true; rather, it has been devised to help evolutionary biologists find mates, gain social prestige, and so on. And that makes his argument self-undermining. (I will note here that I think Darwinism is a pretty good theory, albeit one likely to be eventually superseded by an even better theory, but that is because I do believe that science is generally truth seeking).

Gray opens *Two Faces of Liberalism* by noting that “The liberal state originated in a search for *modus vivendi*” (2000, p. 1). And he acknowledges that “Liberal toleration has contributed immeasurably to human well-being” (2000, p. 1). But then he makes the quite important distinction between two liberal approaches to tolerance: “Viewed from one side, liberal toleration is the ideal of a rational consensus on the best way of life. From the other, it is the belief that human beings can flourish in many ways of life... If liberalism has a future, it is in giving up the search for a rational consensus on the best way of life” (2000,

p. 1). He goes on to note that “The liberal ideal of toleration which looks to a rational consensus on the best way of life was born in societies divided on the claims of a single way of life. It cannot show us how to live together in societies that harbour many ways of life” (2000, pp. 1-2). Gray then offers examples of prominent thinkers exhibiting these different forms of liberal tolerance:

The philosophies of John Locke and Immanuel Kant exemplify the liberal project of a universal regime, while those of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume express the liberalism of peaceful coexistence. And more recent times, John Rawls and F.A. Hayek have defended the first liberal philosophy, while Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott are exemplars of the second... In this Hobbesian view [of the second sort of thinkers], the end of tolerance is not consensus. It is coexistence (2000, pp. 2-3).

Gray then claims, “*Modus vivendi* expresses the belief that there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive... Where such ways of life are rivals, there is no one of them that is best” (2000, p. 5). This may be true, but here it is not argued for but merely assumed. And on its face, the assumption seems false: for instance, are we really wrong to regard the new ways of life that arose during what has been called “the Axial Age” (Jaspers 2014), when religions arose that regarded all humans, and not merely some particular tribe or nation, as of equal moral worth, as ethically superior to their predecessors? (And we can recognize that, while Jaspers placing this transformation in a narrow band of a few centuries is too limiting, there was a broader change that took place in the space of a millennium or so). After all, humans “thrived” in the pre-Axial societies, at least in the sense that the human population increased and humans came to inhabit more and more of the earth’s lands. And, in fact, Gray’s search for a *modus vivendi* which will allow humans pursuing different ways of life to co-exist is an implicit acceptance of the Axial Age advance in human ethical consciousness, and assumes that the ways of life it created *are* better than the more tribalistic ways of life they replaced.

Gray, of course, perceives this problem, and hopes to solve it by noting that “Not all ways of life allow humans to live well. There are universal human goods and evils. Some virtues are needed for any kind of human flourishing” (2000, p. 8). So, presumably, Gray would argue that, say, the Mafia’s way of life fails to recognize these universal human goods and evils, and therefore need not be tolerated. But this has simply raised the problem of liberal universal agreement to a higher level: this regime requires near-unanimity on just what virtues are required for any kind of human flourishing, and, furthermore, just what constitutes human flourishing. Some people might declare that humans are flourishing if they are healthy. Others will further require that they are materially prosperous, or that they be intellectually stimulated, or have open to them the path to enlightenment, or the opportunity to end the ceaseless cycle of death and rebirth, or to achieve salvation through God’s grace.

Gray’s treatment of abortion is symptomatic of this problem. In discussing “fundamentalists,” he treats one mark of fundamentalism as talking about “the right to life” (2000, p. 14). (And Gray actually puts the phrase in scare quotes.) But it is not obvious why this is not itself the very sort of universal good Gray already acknowledged. For instance, the great liberal philosopher T. H. Green declared such a right a modern advance, writing of how, in the ancient world, “the exposure of children was everywhere practiced... a practice in strong contrast with the principal of modern law that even a child in the womb has a right to live” (Green 1986, p. 119). For the “fundamentalists” who wish to see abortion banned, their aim, as they understand it, is certainly pro-autonomy: the right to autonomy of the fetus is most definitely wiped out by killing it. Gray might argue that the fetus is not a person, and thus has no such rights. But that just illustrates that there is no consensus on vital points that Gray assumes we can agree upon to establish his *modus vivendi*. He goes on to state that “Liberals and pluralists walk side-by-side in resisting totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes... It is a mark of an illiberal regime that conflicts of value are viewed as signs of error” (2000, p. 20).

But of course Gray is viewing what he calls “fundamentalism” as a sign of error. And for him, the category “fundamentalist” apparently includes all the adherents of universal religions (such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), as he says that “universal religions are incompatible with the truth of value-pluralism” (2000, p. 21). But this means that well over one half of the world’s population hold views that are incompatible with value-pluralism. And therefore Gray’s preferred regime tolerates all of their ways of life just so long as they don’t take their own religion’s claim to universality all that seriously. (See Finnis 2011 for the case that there is no such incompatibility between value pluralism and universal religions.)

That problem could be sidestepped, however: One could heartily agree with Gray that a *modus vivendi* political regime is the best course in our current circumstances, while rejecting his case for value pluralism. For instance, one might hold that a Christian polity would be superior to our current regimes, *if* such a thing were achievable. But given that ideal is unrealistic, the Christian virtue of prudence recommends we accept a *modus vivendi* regime. Gray, I contend, has conflated two separate claims:

- 1) There is no rational way to choose between different ways of life; and
- 2) Our best political option at present is a *modus vivendi* regime.

The case for the second claim does not depend on the first claim being true; in fact, I suggest it is actually weakened by being lashed to the first one, since tying them together weakens the appeal of the second claim for those who reject the first.

Heresies is a collection of essays that Gray first published in *New Statesman*, between 1999 and 2003. The book opens sounding a familiar theme from its immediate predecessors: “Both communism and neoliberalism were messianic movements, using the language of reason and science, but actually driven by faith” (2004, p. 1). The belief in progress, he claims, “has now become harmful... Anyone who dares question the idea of progress is at once accused of wishing to return to the Dark Ages. Yet it is a fact that the largest mass murders in history were perpetrated by progressive regimes” (2004, p. 5). In an interesting essay on the first two *Matrix* films, Gray notes how they illustrate the power of technology to “blank out the environment in which we live” (2004, p. 51). The example he cites is amusing in retrospect: “Plugged into our Walkman, we can forget the squalor by which we are actually surrounded” (2004, p. 51). Even someone as far-seeing as Gray probably could not have imagined how plugged into our smart phones we would be two decades later. He concludes: “In a curious, oblique way, these are political films, but the questions they suggest are not hackneyed ones about capitalist exploitation or media tyranny. They are about the affluent majority colluding with the media in sustaining an unreal view of the world” (2004, p. 55).

In another essay, Gray, displaying his knack for finding fascinating but obscure examples upon which to meditate, takes up Franz Kafka’s short story “A Report to the Academy,” in which an ape called Red Peter addresses a learned society. Along the way, Gray remarks “Secular thinkers find it extremely difficult to come up with reasons for thinking that the human species has some kind of unique standing in the world” (2004, p. 76). He claims that “humans have had a huge, and almost entirely harmful, impact on other animal species” (2004, p. 77). And clearly he intends that we should change our misguided notion that we are unique among animal species, and should reduce the harm we are causing other species. While the latter sentiment is clearly laudable, the mere fact that Gray addresses these concerns to his fellow humans demonstrates that he, too, recognizes that humans really are different than all other species. No wolf philosopher has ever risen who addressed his fellow wolves and asked them to be kinder to deer. No fire ant philosopher has appeared who has asked fire ants to please reconsider their invasive species routine in continents upon which they do not belong. Human beings are the sorts of creature who can respond to a moral argument by changing their behavior. And there is no other species on earth of which that is true.

STARING INTO THE VOID

Straw Dogs is one of Gray's most popular books. In it, a "gloomy Gray" comes to the forefront. A lot of this gloom turns on Gray's interpretation of Darwinism and his reading of its implications. The book opens with several curious assertions. First, he writes "Darwin teaches that species are only assemblies of genes, interacting at random with each other and their shifting environments" (2007, p. 3). But Darwin had no concept of genes at all. Mendel's work on genes was unknown to him, and was not incorporated into the mainstream of evolutionary theory until well after Darwin's death. And even if Gray is using "Darwin" as a synecdoche for "modern Darwinian theory," there is still a problem: in modern evolutionary theory, it is not true that evolution is purely random. As Richard Dawkins put it, "Darwinism is a theory of random mutation plus *nonrandom* cumulative natural selection" (Dawkins, 1996, p. 75).

Gray next assigns Christianity a unique status among world religions in believing that there is a significant difference between humans and other animals, and holds it thus responsible for Darwin's theory being at all controversial. However, quite clearly Judaism and Islam, sharing the Old Testament with Christianity, also differentiate humans from other animals. But then, so did Aristotle, giving humans a unique character due to their possessing reason (Aristotle, p. 9). It is true that in religions incorporating the idea of reincarnation, it is often thought that souls may move between human and non-human lives in successive reincarnations. But Buddhism, for instance, regards human reincarnations as special in their openness to the possibility of enlightenment, since humans, possessing reason, have the ability to grasp the dharma (Norbu et al. 2020, pp. 19-26). Gray specifically cites Hinduism as a religion in which humans are not special, but hinduamerican.org says "Mankind, because it is believed to be the most spiritually evolved, thus carries a special responsibility..." (Hindu American Foundation).

In fact, as G. K. Chesterton noted, "the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one" (1925, p. 7). He recounts the incident of a boy finding paleolithic cave paintings of animals, and says that unless the boy was "one of the professors who simplified the relation of men and beasts to mere evolutionary variation..." he would realize that "he had dug very deep and found the place where a man had drawn the picture of a reindeer. But he would dig a good deal deeper before he found a place where a reindeer had drawn a picture of a man" (1925, p. 15). In other words, the vast gulf separating humans from all other animal species is empirically quite obvious, and only can be ignored through a process of extensive education. Recognizing this empirical fact does not immediately yield any metaphysical implications. Recognizing that volcanoes are different from all other mountains would not mean that we have to grant them some superior ontological status. But nevertheless, it would be a very poor geologist who did not recognize this significant difference.

Gray's remarks on technology should be read by every techno-optimist:

Once a technology enters human life—whether it be fire, the wheel, the automobile, radio, television or the Internet—it changes it in ways we can never fully understand... Technical progress leaves only one problem unsolved: the frailty of human nature. Unfortunately, that problem is insoluble (2007, pp. 14-15).

But he notes that Green thought partakes of the same illusion: "Green thinkers understand that humans can never be masters of the Earth. Yet in their Luddite struggle against technology they renew the illusion that the world can be made the instrument of human purposes" (2007, p. 15).

Gray's 2011 work, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, describes two historical episodes, which he relates with his usual panache. The first tale is about the British parapsychologists active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group included many prominent figures, such as the great ethical theorist Henry Sidgwick, the classical scholar Frederic Meyers, the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, and British foreign secretary and prime minister Arthur Balfour. These men

looked to science to replace religion as the guarantor of man's immortality by seeking empirical evidence of life after death. Often they attempted to receive messages from the dead that could demonstrate the continued existence of the deceased. An intriguing example of this effort involved automatic writing, a practice in which a medium would write down what were supposed to be messages from the afterlife, without conscious awareness of what he or she was writing. Over a number of years this practice yielded "many thousands" (2011, Kindle Location 173) of pages of automatic writing, which were thought to display "cross-correspondences," so that something written down by one medium only formed a complete message when assembled with the transcriptions of others. The experiment was inclusive, as the interpretation of the "messages" was not a determinate matter; to some people they were clear evidence of an afterlife, while for Gray, "The connections were encrypted in a way of life, which has since disappeared" (2011, Location 1013).

The next story related in *The Immortalization Commission* describes the important role occultism played in the Soviet Union before World War II. It is from this section that the book's title is drawn: the Soviet Union actually had such a commission, as well as a Soviet Committee for Psychical Research. The embalming of Lenin's dead body was performed largely with this goal of achieving immortality through science. Commenting on religion, Gray writes:

The heart of all religions is practice—ritual and meditation. Practice comes with myths, but myths are not theories in need of rational development. The story of Icarus has not been rendered redundant by progress in psychology. The Genesis story is not obsolete because there have been advances in palaeontology. Myths like these will endure for as long as humans remain human. Myths are narratives that deal with unchanging features of human experience...

Ever since the rise of Positivism a legend has been repeated in which myth-making belongs in the infancy of the species. *The Golden Bough* (1890), a collection assembled by the anthropologist J. G. Frazer, propagated this Positivist legend: mythic thinking is typical of children and primitives; adulthood lies with science. In fact, as Wittgenstein remarked, 'Frazer is much more savage than most of these savages.' Modern myths are further from reality than any that can be found among traditional peoples... (2011, Location 2477).

So, we see that, while Gray may not be (conventionally) religious himself, he has no sympathy for rationalists' strawman version of religion, a theme he will return to in *Seven Types of Atheism*.

Gray's 2015 book, *The Soul of the Marionette*, continues the development of his stoicism in the face of a meaningless universe. A meditation on the theme of human freedom, the work examines the perspectives of a number of thinkers on the topic, a melange that includes the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, the poets Giacomo Leopardi and Edgar Allan Poe, and the science-fiction writers Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick.

Gray cites Aztec ritual killings as evidence of the ineradicability of human violence. Playing whack-a-mole, we surpress if in one place only to see it pop back up in another. He is skeptical of studies that purport to demonstrate a secular decline in violence, citing violence-caused famines and epidemics, deaths in labor camps, the gigantic U.S. prison population, the revival of torture in the most "civilized" societies, and other contemporary brutality to call these studies into doubt. He connects the failure to accept this reality to the failed neo-conservative project of bringing peaceful "enlightenment" to non-Western societies by bombing and invading them, along the way wrecking whatever social order they had.

Despite its many virtues, there is a paradox at the heart of this book: if free will is an illusion, as Gray suggests, then what is the point of his recommending we adopt a stoical attitude towards this fact? If we have no free will, then we are not able to freely choose the attitude we adopt about that (or any other) set of circumstances we face.

In his 2018 book *Seven Types of Atheism*, Gray makes the important point that atheism is not a single doctrine, but rather encompasses a wide variety (at the very least, seven) of world views. In his first chapter, Gray addresses the “New Atheists”: few “believers” could write as scathing a takedown of this movement. As he puts it:

The new atheists have directed their campaign against a narrow segment of religion while failing to understand even that small part. Seeing religion as a system of beliefs, they have attacked it as if it was no more than an obsolete scientific theory... But the idea that religion consists of a bunch of discredited theories is itself a discredited theory—a relic of the 19th century philosophy of Positivism” (2018, p. 9). For example, “The Genesis story is not an early theory of the origin of species (2018, p. 11).

As Gray demonstrates, the new atheists, far from being irreligious, are followers of Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity,” a cult the French thinker created in the 19th century that contained its own positivist rites and sacraments.

The next variety of atheism that Gray addresses is secular humanism. He convincingly argues that the belief in continued human progress, divorced from its Biblical roots, is merely the echoing death rattles of a dying Christian civilization. Gray, however, mistakenly forwards the common idea that all cultures without the Bible as their sacred scripture have a cyclical understanding of history. As Eric Voegelin wrote:

When I devised the program [of *Order and History*] I was still laboring under the conventional belief that the conception of history as a meaningful course of events on a straight line of time was the great achievement of Israelites and Christians... while the pagans... could never rise above the conception of a cyclical time. This conventional believe had to be abandoned when I discovered the unilinear construction of history... developed by the end of the third millennium B.C. in the empires of the Ancient Near East” (Voegelin 2000, p. 51).

Gray closes his chapter on secular humanism with a critique of Ayn Rand, in which he demonstrates the roots of her “cod-philosophy” (2018, p. 51) in the work of Nietzsche, while noting how ridiculous her cults’ embrace of such habits as smoking cigarettes with a filter and esteeming tap dancing above all other dances were.

Gray next chapter, “A Strange Faith in Science,” takes on those who make a religion out of science. The first part of the chapter discusses the roots of modern racism in the Enlightenment, noting that Hume, Kant and Voltaire all were quite explicitly racist, and that this racism continued in several “scientific” forms well into the twentieth century.

The last part of the chapter deals with transhumanism, which Gray refers to as “techno-monotheism” (2018, p. 66), and “religion recycled as science” (2018, p. 67). He argues that even if the transhumanist touted technologies come to fruition, the result will be not one “Supreme Being... [but] many different gods, each of them a parody of human beings that once existed” (2018, p. 70).

In a chapter on “God-Haters,” Gray again demonstrates his ability to unearth obscure but curious anecdotes from the byways of history that help illustrate a theme he is exploring. In this case, Gray turns to the life and work of English literary critic and poet William Empson. Empson was, indeed, a “God hater,” writing “The Christian God the Father... is the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man” (quoted in Gray 2018, p. 117). Yet Empson had an affinity for Buddhism, despite regarding it as “more life-negating and in this regard even worse than Christianity” (quoted in Gray 2018, p. 122). Gray sagely remarks that Empson saw “The irreducible plurality of meaning and value in language and art... In the contradictory expressions of the Buddha. He was too close to Christianity to see it there to” (2018, p. 123). And the rest of that paragraph significantly softens earlier criticisms he has made of Christianity.

In the final two chapters Gray addresses thinkers who might be grouped together as “mystical atheists,” including George Santaya, Joseph Conrad, Arthur Schopenhauer, Benedict Spinoza, and Lev Shestov. (The last of these again illustrates Gray’s talent for finding lesser-known examples that add depth to a theme.) Gray here claims that “the most basic presupposition of monotheism [is] the dualism of mind and matter” (2018, p. 149). But that is inaccurate: a better statement of the basic presupposition of Abrahamic monotheism is that it assumes a clear distinction between a Creator and His creation. But if one considers someone like Bishop Berkeley (1999), an orthodox Christian clergyman, who was also a monistic idealist, it should be clear that the mind/matter dualism is not essential here. Gray concludes with a passage that should be read by every participant in an online “atheism versus religion” debate... but of course won’t be:

If you want to understand atheism and religion, you must forget the popular notion that they are opposites. If you can see what a millenarian theocracy in early sixteenth-century Münster has in common with both Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany, you will have a clearer view of the modern scene. If you can see how theologies that affirm the ineffability of God and some types of atheism or not so far apart, you will learn something about the limits of human understanding (2018, p. 158).

In the 2020 work *Feline Philosophy*, Gray compares the attitude of cats towards the world with that of humans, and finds that, as a whole, that of cats is better. For one thing, cats have no concept of morality; humans believe they do, but they are mistaken. Gray claims that when people talk of morality, “what they are doing is expressing their emotions” (2020, p. 46). This metaethical theory is known as emotivism, and was popularized by A. J. Ayer (1946). It is a significant departure from Gray’s earlier realistic moral pluralism. A laudatory feature of Gray’s work is his continual willingness to rethink and revise earlier positions he has taken. But appreciating that does not mean that every change has been for the better. And this is a case where it has not, because emotivism is mistaken, regardless of whether there are objective moral facts or not. Consider someone who says “Adultery is wrong”: they are *not* just expressing a negative emotion they feel towards adultery. For instance, it is quite possible for someone to say, “I know adultery is wrong, but boy do I love it!” No, when someone utters a sentence like that, they are claiming that there is *a fact of the matter* about adultery being wrong. Now, they might be mistaken in their claim, just as I might claim, “There is a man hiding behind that tree” when there is no such man there. But my sentence was not a description of some emotion I was experiencing; it was a fact claim, but one that happened to be incorrect. (See Brandt 1959 and Geach 1960 for further arguments against emotivism).

Attempting to back his advocacy of emotivism, Gray notes while it was once thought to be moral to use imperial power to spread civilization, that is now considered immoral. But simply pointing out the people have had different opinions on some topic at different times in no way shows that no opinion is more truthful than any other. Some people think that all living creatures popped into existence in a single act of creation that took place 6000 years ago. Others believe that all living forms evolved from simple creatures that appeared on earth over 3 billion years ago. Would Gray argue that this difference of opinion means that no view on the matter is better than any other? Gray might respond that morality is not like science in this regard. But that answer is question begging: whether it is or isn’t is the point of contention, and Gray certainly cannot show that there are no better or worse answers to moral questions simply by showing that there are various answers to them.

Gray contrasts the idea of morality found, for instance, in Christianity, with that of the Chinese ideal of “living according to *tao*” (2020, p. 47). But this ignores the deep similarities between Taoism and Christianity, as demonstrated by, e.g., Damascene 2002 or Lewis 1974.

In the last chapter of *Feline Philosophy*, Gray offers ten “feline hints” (2020, pp. 108-111). All of them are interesting, and many of them strike me as fairly sound. But the entire list rests uneasily with feline commandment number nine, which advises “Beware anyone who offers to make you happy”: Isn’t that what Gray (or his cat?) is doing with this list?

After these ten hints, he writes, “Eternity is not another order of things, but the world seen without anxiety” (2020, p. 111). This is a profound insight; and indeed, one can find this idea also expressed by Buddha and Christ.

Gray’s most recent book is *The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism*. As with many of his latter works, this one takes the form of an extended meditation on a topic, similar to Milan Kundera’s ideal type of the novel (Kundera 1988).

Throughout his meditations, Gray brings up Hobbes repeatedly. In fact, the central theme of the book is that the circumstances that led Hobbes to write *Leviathan* have again become salient in our time, as the liberal world order that prevailed for some years after the fall of the Soviet Union is disappearing.

Gray argues that “Hobbes was a liberal—the only one, perhaps, still worth reading” (2023, p. 4). He defends the claim that Hobbes was a liberal by first citing the four defining characteristics he described in *Liberalism*, namely, that liberalism is:

- individualist
- egalitarian
- universalist
- meliorist

Gray argues that these central liberal ideas are also central to Hobbes, since for him:

- “Society is made up of individuals...”
- “[each] equal in being exposed to death at each other’s hands...”
- “Human nature is universal in its needs...”
- “With the application of reason, government can be improved...” (2023, p. 5).

Thus Hobbes is “the” proto-liberal. However, as Gray explains, “Each of these [liberal] ideas is a half-truth”:

- Individuals are the basis of society, but “self-preservation is only one of their needs: bare life is not enough.”
- Human beings “regularly give up peace and security in order to defend a form of life...”
- “The most basic human goods may be universal but they are often sacrificed...”
- “Society and government can be improved, but what is gained can always be lost... There is no complete or final exit from the state of nature” (2023, p. 5).

Gray’s claim that Hobbes was a liberal may disconcert some who have interpreted him as a totalitarian. But here Gray makes a crucial, often overlooked, point about Hobbes, “Hobbes’s was a state whose powers were unchecked, but its goals were strictly limited. Beyond securing its subjects against one another and external enemies, it had no remit” (2023, p. 2). In other words, Hobbes’s justification for the sovereign was its ability to keep citizens from going to war with each other, and it had whatever power it needed to achieve that goal. But its remit did not extend to stopping them from drinking too much, or prompting them to exercise, or urging them to approve of polyamory, or encouraging them to go to the opera.

Gray understands that the whole liberal project is based upon a metaphysics that modern liberals either ignore or completely reject:

Liberalism was a creation of Western monotheism and liberal freedoms are part of the civilization that monotheism engendered. Twenty-first-century liberals reject this civilization, while continuing to assert the universal authority of a hollowed-out version of its values. In this hyper-liberal vision all societies are destined to undergo the deconstruction that is underway in the West (2023, p. 109).

Gray is not enamoured of “what has come to be called the woke movement,” declaring that its “origins... are in the decay of liberalism” (2023, p. 110). He notes that “If Western capitalism creates an expanding underclass without any productive function, it also produces a lumpen intelligentsia that is economically superfluous” (2023, p. 111). So what can these “superfluous” individuals do to make a living? Well, they compete for jobs based on who is “most woke.” Wokeness is a “vehicle through with surplus elites struggle to secure a position of power in society” (2023, p. 110). Or, as Gray also puts it, “In their economic aspects, woke movements are a revolt of the professional bourgeoisie” (2023, p. 111).

CONCLUSION

One of the results of reading (or re-reading) much of Gray’s oeuvre in writing this paper is wonder at the scope of material he has digested: he appears to not only have read everything you have, but also everything three or four of your colleagues have as well. That, combined with the vast amount of work he has published, makes one wonder about the nihilism that he seemingly adopts in some of his output. After all, if “it” is all meaningless, why has Gray spent so much time and effort gifting us with such an extensive, insightful, and provocative body of work?

In addition, I have left my (woefully incomplete) survey of his work with three other major questions:

- 1) Does value pluralism really contradict the idea of a *summum bonum*?
- 2) What caused Gray to abandon his objective value pluralism for a form of ethical emotivism?
- 3) What led Gray from recognizing humans as unique among animals species to denying that uniqueness?

I offered them here as potential avenues for further research.

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NOTES

- 1 I have previously reviewed three of Gray's books, and some of the material below is drawn from those reviews, which one can find cited in the bibliography.
- 2 I will cite works of Gray's without any name, e.g., (1982). Works by other authors will include their name in the citation.

Pluralism, but Not for Pluralists: Gray's Peculiar Value Pluralism

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Moral or value pluralism is a set of ideas associated closely with Isaiah Berlin and subsequently explored by a variety of 20th and 21st-century moral philosophers.¹ There is nothing like a unified doctrinal statement, but there are certain commonalities amongst the various thinkers. First, value pluralists reject any monistic account of value and/or the moral life, including both deontology and utilitarianism, the two most prominent contemporary moral theories. This means that they doubt the possibility of creating or discovering a single decision procedure or single value ranking system in ethical life. Their primary conclusions are that values are both incompatible (i.e. there are multiple things that humans value and that are valuable, and these things do not form a coherent whole but conflict with each other) and incommensurable (i.e. that values are not completely comparable according to or reducible to a single metric). In this essay, I examine the conception of pluralism presented in some of the essays of John Gray. Gray and others have called this version of value pluralism *modus vivendi* pluralism, and it is notable in Gray's conception because he claims that his conception of pluralism does not entail any commitment to liberalism capaciously understood. I focus specifically on Gray's treatment of negative liberty because I will also argue that self-conscious value pluralists will reasonably conclude that the protection and promotion of negative liberty ought to be considered as the rebuttable first priority of an authentically pluralist political community. That is, the public morality of a political/legal community composed of self-conscious value pluralists would consider the protection of negative liberty as the first responsibility and the *differentia* of a pluralist government. As a complement to negative liberty as the unique responsibility of a self-consciously pluralist government, the first virtue and the *differentia* of the public morality of a pluralist community would be toleration of others, especially toleration of what others choose to do with their liberty.

In Gray's version, *modus vivendi* pluralism rejects the notion that the acceptance of pluralism suggests that negative liberty would be the primary priority of a pluralist community, and, indeed, he is skeptical of the notion that the acceptance of pluralism necessarily ought to be connected to any specific political regime or set of institutions. I will argue that Gray's pluralism suffers from specific weaknesses connected with his interpretation of the character and importance of pluralism itself which render his sort of pluralism's attention to the commitments of self-conscious pluralists insufficient.

I. MODUS VIVENDI PLURALISM

The term '*modus vivendi*' was originally a term of abuse that John Rawls used to characterize an unacceptable conception of the agreement that supports a just liberal regime. For Rawls, a merely strategic or instrumental agreement to 'get along' was both an unjust and unstable way to found a society of cooperation for mutual benefit.² However, *modus vivendi* pluralists reject Rawls' claim that a political society

is most adequately understood as a society of fair cooperation. Instead, they insist that the most that could garner widespread support among people with radically different moral commitments would be to consider political society as a regime of peaceful coexistence. Because of this conclusion, *modus vivendi* pluralists claim that pluralism has little to nothing to contribute to political theory. As John Gray writes, “as a matter of logic, value-pluralism cannot entail any political project. All that value-pluralism implies is that strongly universalist moralities—religious or political—are illusions.”³ Instead, whatever beliefs, values, commitments, or institutions lead to (relatively) peaceful coexistence constitute the *modus vivendi* of any particular political community. Liberal values and institutions (e.g. negative liberty manifested in freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of conscience, private property rights, etc.) are not a necessary part of every version of a good human life, and, thus, are not a necessary part of any political *modus vivendi*.⁴

Modus vivendi pluralists have made it their primary point of departure to address the radical alteration of political culture that has arisen as non- or anti-liberal individuals and groups have immigrated to Western liberal states. As Patrick Neal (1997, p. 185) observes, *modus vivendi* pluralism is a response to the “shift from liberals arguing with each other about rights versus utility to liberals exploring alternative ways of rationally defending the faith in the face of challenges from ‘outside’.” They are much less concerned with conflicts within liberal value systems than with the kind of conflicts that exist between cultures, especially Western liberal cultures and non-liberal non-Western cultures, because, with mass immigration from the latter to the former, these conflicts have become internal to liberal states. Like egalitarian pluralists, *modus vivendi* pluralists view negative liberty as merely one value among many others. However, the *modus vivendi* pluralists recognize that, for many individuals and groups, negative liberty, especially understood in terms of individual choice, is not central to the pursuit of their version of the good life. This is especially the case for orthodox religious adherents, who despite the secularization of the West, appear to be growing in numbers throughout the rest of the world. Indeed, according to *modus vivendi* pluralists, the emphasis on negative liberty and freedom of choice neglects or even crowds out other possible good things. David McCabe (2010, p. 103) suggests that “in championing goods like self-expression, individuality, and choice, liberal regimes do less well in fostering others—cultural continuity within normative frameworks, aesthetic coherence across the community, fraternity with fellow citizens, moral integrity, and so on.” The recognition of the truth of a radical form of value pluralism has led the person most closely identified with *modus vivendi* pluralism, John Gray, to reject the notion that pluralism leads to liberalism at all. Indeed, as suggested above, this more radical pluralism has led Gray to claim that the political community in a pluralist world is best understood in terms of peaceful coexistence or ‘just getting along.’ The political regime of the modern state, for Gray, can be best understood as a *modus vivendi* which allows individuals and groups to pursue their own versions of the good life without the overall direction of a central power.⁵

Gray’s account of *modus vivendi* pluralism is most accurately considered as, on the one hand, a practical response to the influx of non-liberal and anti-liberal individuals and groups into the Western world and, on the other, a theoretical response to the appearance and academic influence of philosophically monistic theories of liberalism.⁶ He claims that “as a consequence of mass migration, new technologies of communication and continued cultural experimentation, nearly all societies today contain several ways of life, with many people belonging to more than one” (2002, p. 1). He couples this relatively non-controversial historical claim with a much more contentious historical and theoretical argument. Gray suggests that the ideological and monistic version of liberalism found in the work of thinkers like Rawls and Dworkin does not adequately reflect the empirical fact of pluralism as found in modern states or the theoretical truth of value pluralism as an account of human life. Further, Gray asserts that contemporary monistic liberalism is the last gasp of the Enlightenment project, which consisted of the attempt to construct or discover a single, universal, impersonal, and impartial morality and consequent political regime that would then be applied and administered throughout the world. He writes that:

The failures of the Enlightenment project that are my point of departure are intellectual as well as world-historical, though these intellectual failures are inevitably repressed in conventional liberal thought: I mean the inability of liberal theorists to deliver on the foundationalist promises of the Enlightenment project, by giving the principles of liberal society a universal claim on reason (1993, p. 69).

For Gray, the failures of both the Enlightenment project and of contemporary monistic liberalism result from the refusal of both to take seriously the nature of value pluralism. Since contemporary liberalism as manifested in the work of Rawls, Dworkin, Gauthier, Hayek, et al. fails to offer an adequate account of value pluralism, it neglects the authentic character of human life, offering instead a highly artificial and highly rationalized conception of morality and politics. According to Gray, taking proper account of the nature of value pluralism will lead, not to a liberal political theory, but to conceiving of political life as a *modus vivendi* between individuals and groups who hold a variety of conflicting ideas about what counts as a good human life. This *modus vivendi* will not be a one-time settlement or resolution of conflict, but a constant negotiation of the terms of peaceful coexistence between conflicting groups within any particular society.

Gray's account of value pluralism focuses primarily on conflicts between values and the incommensurability of values that are the common subject of most value pluralists. He writes that "the goods of human life are many and cannot be derived from or reduced to any one value," that there is a "non-harmony among values," and that "there is no one kind of life that is the best for all humankind or for any single person" (2003, p. 87). These are characteristic claims made by most value pluralists. However, there are important differences between Gray's account and other delineations of conflict and incommensurability. He writes that, since:

conflicts between communities whose ways of life are incompatible are a major threat to human well-being in the late modern world...[t]he variety of pluralism that should shape the agenda of political philosophy today is not the pluralism of personal plans and ideals that preoccupies recent liberal theory. It is the strong pluralism of incommensurable goods and bads whose conflicts implicate whole ways of life (2003, p. 85).

Gray's 'strong pluralism' is characterized by an extreme incommensurability of values, and Gray argues that this means that there is no rational way to make judgments among such values or among commitments, plans, projects, or among ways of life. He writes that incommensurable goods "cannot be ranked," and that incommensurability "means that no...comparative judgments are possible." (2002; 2003, p. 84). For Gray, the difficulties associated with making judgments between different cultural systems is the single most important political problem of the contemporary Western world. However, the incommensurability of values does not necessarily lead to a radical subjectivism of the type that Gray often seems to suggest it does. Incommensurability only suggests that all values cannot be reduced to a single metric without emptying the variety of values of their actual meaningfulness in human lives. For example, one can buy sex, but one cannot buy love or friendship, so one might conclude that sex and friendship are not completely commensurable. That does not make decisions concerning whether one should sleep with one's friends or with one's friends' spouses beyond the scope of reasonable choice. Nor does it even mean that the value of sex itself can be made completely manifest in terms of monetary exchange.⁷ Further, the problems associated with incommensurability are more often than not overcome by the set of circumstances in which decisions are made, including considerations of both impersonal/impartial and personal duties, the consequences to others of one's actions, and one's personal commitments and projects. And comparisons can be made according to some specific quality in which the comparison is made. Gray suggests that the works of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Beckett are non-comparable (a term that he uses synonymously with incommensurable). However, Richard Halpern has just published a book which compares the three playwrights

(among others) in terms of the connection between tragedy and political economy (Halpern 2017). So, Gray has exaggerated the irrationality which any account of incommensurability must admit. Further, he does not offer an account of the character of practical reason, and, without such an account, value pluralism tends to slide into subjectivism and relativism. Gray's emphasis on radical incommensurability and conflict are the direct result of his focus on the problem of plural monisms instead of on the implications of the acceptance of value pluralism.⁸

From this account of 'strong' value pluralism, Gray derives his recommendations for contemporary political life, which he calls *modus vivendi* pluralism. Gray's version of *modus vivendi* is rather sketchy, but, given his claim that radical incommensurability makes rational judgments about value difficult if not impossible, the sketchiness is not necessarily its primary weakness. First, Gray claims that, since values are plural, conflict with each other, and are incommensurable, there is no single argument about the structure of the political community that could possibly be acceptable to all members of the community, and, thus, the fact of value pluralism itself destroys the credibility of monistic versions of liberalism. According to Gray, liberalism offers a version of *the* good life, but, since it is only one version, it cannot be understood to have universal validity. Second, since there are many forms of human flourishing, there will be many forms of government which are acceptable insofar as they promote a variety of good lives and maintain order, security, and enforce a minimum content of morality. Gray writes that "the test that value-pluralists apply is how regimes promote and protect valuable ways of life and ensure a *modus vivendi* among them... [and] the terms of such *modus vivendi* will be constrained by a universal minimum morality that specifies a range of generically human goods and bads."⁹ Third, negative liberty, for Gray, is merely one value among many, and, in fact, the concept of liberty is subject to the same sort of conflicts which characterize value conflict and incommensurability. He writes that "just as there are conflicts among ultimate values that are incommensurable—between liberty and equality, equality and general welfare, say—so there are conflicts no less radical within liberty itself—conflicts among distinct liberties having incommensurable value" (Gray 1993). Thus, he rejects not only the notion that negative liberty would be a priority for any self-conscious value pluralist, but also rejects the idea that negative liberty (i.e. freedom from external interference or coercion by other human beings) would be more valued by the pluralist than positive liberty (i.e. the capacity for self-mastery or self-realization).

Gray sometimes suggests that toleration is a primary priority of *modus vivendi* pluralism.¹⁰ He is also correct in rejecting the Rawlsian characterization of political community as a fair system of cooperation.¹¹ As Gray rightly observes, the empirically pluralistic nature of modern states means that they cannot be accurately considered systems of cooperation. Instead, modern states ought to be understood as means by which individuals and groups of individuals with very different commitments, plans, and conceptions of a good human life coexist in relatively peaceful and orderly way.¹² It is also the case that self-conscious value pluralists would view the state in a similar way, since there is no reason for pluralists to expect the state to assist them in the pursuit of their particular projects by forcing others to cooperate with them. However, they can reasonably expect the state to secure the conditions under which they engage in the pursuit of their projects (e.g. order, security, and negative liberty). Gray is right in observing that negative liberty is not the only political value, and that order and security are also important. So, it makes perfect sense for a person, whether a pluralist or not, to prefer the order and security of Singapore and, until recently, of Hong Kong to the negative liberty of inner-city Detroit, the south side of Chicago, or the ninth ward of New Orleans. However, since order and security are goods in any political regime and would be considered goods by monists as well as pluralists, this fact does not tell us anything about the importance of value pluralism or its implications for political theory.

Indeed, the most obvious weakness of Gray's work, and that of other pluralists who reject the connection between pluralism and a preference for negative liberty as a political value, is that Gray does not take the commitments of self-conscious value pluralists seriously enough. Instead, his primary concern seems to be making the West safe for plural monisms. Value pluralism as an account of the character of practical life does not involve the mere assertion that there are various valid beliefs about what constitutes

a good life for human beings. Instead, it involves a claim about the real nature and plurality of possible good human lives, and, thus, the more interesting question is, what are the implications for accepting it?, not how do we deal with those who do not accept it? Nonetheless, Gray's claims that political life in plural communities involve, at best, getting along with others, and that "the test of legitimacy for any regime is its success in mediating conflict of values" raise questions about what counts as getting along and what counts as successful mediation (2002, p. 133). As noted above, Gray often suggests that any *modus vivendi* can be judged on the basis of whether it preserves, supports, and/or encourages a variety of versions of good human lives. It is "a political project, not a moral ideal...[I]t is a commitment to common institutions in which the claims of rival values can be reconciled" (2002, p. 25). At the same time he claims that *modus vivendi* does not "aim to convert the world to value-pluralism...[Indeed,] illusion may be a condition of some forms of life that are worth living," according to Gray (2002, p. 136).¹³ It is with this confession that Gray's lack of commitment to the actual political implications of accepting the truth of value pluralism becomes clear, and we are presented with, to borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams, what might be called Government House pluralism.¹⁴ *Modus vivendi* here is a kind of value pluralism where the ignorant monists are protected in their monism to preserve their happiness, contentedness, the values of their monisms, etc. Indeed, the purpose of Gray's *modus vivendi* regime could be understood as the fostering of a menagerie of monisms so that pluralists are able to observe the kinds of goods that acceptance of pluralism makes impossible or, at least, difficult (e.g. monotheistic doctrinal religions, political ideologies, cultural institutions like slavery and suttee and cannibalism).¹⁵

Generally, we would prefer that our scientists, engineers, mechanics, and carpenters have 'true' opinions about their various practices. It is less important that human beings have correct meta-ethical opinions, but it is still odd that Gray is indifferent to the persistence of error in thinking about moral and practical judgments.¹⁶ Indeed, Gray is more concerned with criticizing liberal monists like Kant, Bentham, and Rawls than with correcting illiberal monists, like Muslims, Marxists, and Fundamentalist Christians.¹⁷ It is true that one does not have to have a proper understanding of moral philosophy either to be moral or to live a decent life, just as one does not have to have a proper philosophy of comedy to be funny. However, it is usually considered to be the case that it is better to know the truth than to operate under an illusion. As Bernard Williams writes, "the consciousness of the plurality of competing values is itself a good, as constituting knowledge of an absolute and fundamental truth" (1978, p. xix).

It should also be obvious that accepting the adequacy of value pluralism as an account of human practical life will have an actual effect on one's own practical valuations, the nature of one's commitments, plans, and projects, and what one takes to be a good human life. Gray claims that "strong pluralism is a subversive truth. It cannot coexist with the articles of faith of any universalist creed," which is an odd claim for him to make given that his primary concern seems to be extending liberal tolerance to a variety of illiberal monisms, each claiming to be true and, thus, rejecting value pluralism (2003, p. 101). Of course, self-conscious value pluralists will not necessarily be morally upstanding human beings, and the acceptance of value pluralism will not bring about the New Jerusalem and it is unlikely that the lion will be lying down with the lamb. There is no reason to believe that people who accept the validity of value pluralism will not continue to cheat on their spouses or on their taxes, steal from their employers, neighbors, or big box retailers, mistreat or ignore their children and/or parents, refuse to stand up for what is right, flee from danger, abuse drugs or alcohol, or do almost anything that has traditionally been considered immoral. However, if they take their acceptance of value pluralism seriously, they will be far less likely to be fanatical followers of religion or political ideology, and they will quite obviously want to reserve for themselves the freedom to change their minds about their beliefs, commitments, plans, and projects.¹⁸ For a person who has changed his so many times about so many things, Gray seemingly ignores that there might be others who might at some point change their minds as well, and, thus, place a high priority on negative liberty.

Gray's strong or extreme version of pluralism suffers from serious weaknesses directly related to his characterization of the problem that he is attempting to address. His project concerns, on the one hand, addressing the increasing empirical pluralism which characterizes modern Western states, while also

criticizing the theoretical claims of monistic or ideological liberals because of their rejection of value pluralism. However, Gray's practical purposes and his theoretical ones do not necessarily cohere very well. The historical fact that Western states now contain significant and diverse population groups who not only reject liberalism as an account of the good life for humans but offer distinctively non- or anti-liberal accounts of the good life for human beings is of significant practical importance. However, this development has nothing to do with the theoretical validity of value pluralism as an adequate account of practical life. Indeed, instead of addressing the implications for political life of value pluralism for self-conscious value pluralists, Gray focuses almost solely on the problem of the proliferation of plural monisms. Because of this direction, Gray's account of value pluralism concerns itself primarily with conflicts between groups and cultures, and ignores conflicts within groups and cultures and within the individuals composing them. And, when he does glance in that direction, his examples point in the direction of the priority of negative liberty, especially regarding choices about an individual's own commitments to groups or cultures.¹⁹

Modus vivendi pluralism is best understood, not as a form of liberalism, but as an appeal to liberals, both monists and pluralists, to extend the range of toleration in the liberal state to non- and anti-liberals who are willing to accept a minimal public moral standard which doesn't prioritize negative liberty or choice itself. The ambivalent and, sometimes hostile, disposition of Gray as the most prominent defender of *modus vivendi* toward negative liberty makes *modus vivendi* pluralism much more susceptible to appropriation from ideologies that are both monistic and anti-liberal, and, in that way, undermines any real commitment to the truth claims of value pluralism. It also involves ignoring the radical character of accepting value pluralism, i.e. that there are all sorts of orthodoxies and ideologies that would be obviously unappealing to a value pluralist because of their monistic character. Gray wants to preserve the diversity of good lives, especially those dependent on monistic morality, but in doing so, he neglects the importance of negative liberty to his fellow value pluralists.

CONCLUSION

The weakness of Gray's conception of *modus vivendi* pluralism lies in its lack of interest in what self-conscious value pluralists would require governments to do. I suggest that value pluralists would reasonably choose negative liberty as the primary political value that distinguishes regimes that respect pluralism from those that do not. The government's protection of negative liberty is the primary value of a pluralist state because of the various possibilities that negative liberty preserves and supports. It preserves a space within which each person can pursue his own projects and act on his own commitments; it allows for the possibility that he might change his mind about his commitments, projects, and the entire direction of his life; it preserves and supports the idea that good human projects and commitments are plural and that there is no single hierarchy that could be composed which would be acceptable to all; and it preserves and supports the notion that projects and commitments which do not violate the minimum content of morality should be allowed to flourish without fear or favor from government or from our fellow citizens.

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NOTES

- 1 See, among others, Raz (1986); Stocker (1990); Norton (1976); Baier (1985); Pincoffs (1986); Hampshire (1989); Berlin (2002, pp. 166-217; Kekes (1993); and Williams (1985).
- 2 Rawls (2005, pp. 144-154). Rawls' acceptance of value pluralism is questionable, and he severely limits this acknowledgement by restricting acceptable pluralisms to those he calls reasonable pluralism. Nonetheless, critics have suggested that Rawls is wrong about the apparent instability of a *modus vivendi* understanding of political agreement. For example, Claudia Mills argues that such an instrumentalist or strategic commitment to a liberal regime might be just as effective as the overlapping consensus that Rawls recommends, and, of course, instrumental/strategic commitments can develop over time into stronger more durable commitments (e.g. the transactional relationship that a person has with his barber or bartender or haberdasher often turns into a personal commitment to said barber, bartender, haberdasher). See Mills (2000, pp. 190-203; and Hershovitz (2000, pp. 221-230).
- 3 Gray (2000, p. 135). For other writers who have argued that value pluralism has few implications for political theory, see Crowder (1994, pp. 293-305); Newey (1998, pp. 493-522); and Kekes (1993, pp. 199-217). Both Crowder and Kekes have subsequently altered their positions, with Crowder now arguing that an acceptance of value pluralism leads to an acceptance of welfare-state liberalism, and Kekes suggesting that it would lead to an Oakeshottian-style conservatism. See Crowder (2002, pp. 217-257 and Kekes (1998, pp. 190-219).
- 4 John Gray is the most prominent proponent of *modus vivendi* pluralism. See Gray (2000, pp. 85-102); and Gray (2002). However, there are other writers who use the language of *modus vivendi* and/or peaceful coexistence, but use it to defend negative liberty as a primary political value. See Kukathis (2003) and McCabe (2010). Others defend a version of *modus vivendi* pluralism while calling it something else. For example, Patrick Neal calls it vulgar liberalism, and Gray himself sometimes refers to it as agonistic liberalism. See Neal (1997, pp. 185-205; Gray (1993, pp. 64-69; 1995, pp. 64-86).
- 5 Neal (1997, p. 191) writes that *modus vivendi* pluralism involves "a 'Hobbesian enterprise of pragmatically looking for ways to ensure civil peace and order among those who disagree.'"
- 6 John Gray is well-known for the chameleon-like character of his thought, so I will focus primarily on his work on *modus vivendi* pluralism, which can be found in (Gray 2003, 2002). For a brief account of Gray's intellectual transformations, see Colls (1998, pp. 59-71).
- 7 The Beatles, a popular singing group from the 1960s, recognized the difficulties arising in this area, noting that love cannot be reduced to a purely monetary valuation, when stating that 'I don't care too much for money, [because] money can't me love.' At the same time, however, they realized that, in certain circumstances (e.g. extreme poverty), money might be considered more valuable than love. So, while admitting that 'your lovin' gives me a thrill,' they also note that 'your lovin' don't pay my bills,' so the solution is to 'give me money, that's what I want.'
- 8 For a similar critique of Gray's conception of incommensurability, see Rasmussen and Den Uyl (2005, pp. 173-183). Rasmussen and Den Uyl focus on Gray's generalized rejection of perfectionist morality, which ignores the possibility that value pluralism can encompass a notion of individual moral perfectionism, which can also resolve the problems of general incommensurability of values by particularizing such problems within the beliefs, commitments, and projects of an individual.
- 9 Gray (2003, pp. 86, 87) offers no systematic account of the minimum content of morality, arguing that "there can be no definitive list of the conditions that endanger a worthwhile human life. Even so, to be tortured, or forced to witness the torture of loved ones or compatriots; to be separated from one's friends, family or country; to be subjected to humiliation or persecution, or threatened with genocide; to be locked in poverty or avoidable ill-health—these are great evils for all who suffer them." He also notes that "The good life for humans demands a clean and healthy environment, a stable and cohesive society, and a distribution of benefits and burdens that is accepted as fair. It requires many other goods as well. There can be no complete or definitive list" (Gray 2002, p. 66; 2003, p. 98).
- 10 He writes that "toleration is a precondition of any stable *modus vivendi* among incorrigibly imperfect human beings" See Gray 1995, p. 18.
- 11 In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls writes that "society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage," while, in *Justice as Fairness*, he claims that "political society... is a fair system of cooperation" (Rawls 1999, p. 4; 2001, p. 4).
- 12 Neal (1997, p. 200) suggests that "Hobbesians take the measure of civil polity by the yardstick of the *summum malum*, and on that instrument the mark labelled 'civil peace' is not preceded by the adjective 'mere.'"
- 13 As an example of the perversity of Gray's argument, he suggests that the suffering and anguish of Kafka and van Gogh might have been a necessary condition of their creative genius, so that curing

- their problems might have prevented them from producing their masterpieces. However, it's a very different proposition to suggest that, had Kafka or van Gogh not experienced their own personal torments, they would not have produced the profound beauty that they did, and saying that we shouldn't want to prevent human beings from experiencing personal torments because, on occasion, we get good art out of it. In a similar way, it is one thing to accept Shostakovich's compromises with Soviet totalitarianism as reasonable under the circumstances, but it's quite another to justify Soviet totalitarianism because Shostakovich produced his music under its cloud (Gray 2002, p. 59).
- 14 Williams (1995, p. 166) uses the term 'Government House Utilitarianism' to describe the anxiety of rule utilitarians about what the possible deleterious effects on common sense morality might be if the common people actually understood the true character of utilitarian arguments, especially the notion that act utility is the real or authentic justification for obeying moral rules. He writes that "Utilitarianism emerges as the morality of an elite, and the distinction between theory and practice determines a class of theorists in whose hands the truth of the Utilitarian justification of non-Utilitarian dispositions will be responsibly deployed... This version may be called 'Government House Utilitarianism'".
 - 15 Gray (2002, pp. 109-10) mentions that slavery would be contrary to the minimum content of morality, but gives no support for this argument. A benign slavery which insured that the slaves were well-fed, well-housed, well-clothed, had adequate leisure time, somewhat meaningful work, etc. would seemingly satisfy Gray's standards. In fact, he even mentions the Communist regime in Cuba under Castro as a legitimate form of government, suggesting that government enslavement of the people is acceptable as long they have a socialized medical service.
 - 16 Daniel Weinstock (1997, p. 492) offers the following characterization of Gray's indifference toward persistent monists (I have substituted the term 'pluralist' and 'monist' for Weinstock's original terms 'liberal' and 'traditional' to clarify the relevance of his summary to my argument): "[The pluralist] knows something that [the monist] does not. [The pluralist] is right in his beliefs about value, whereas [the monist] is wrong. His epistemic superiority has to do, moreover, not with some marginal fact or relatively trivial aspect of human existence. Rather, it has to do with moral and prudential values that give meaning to life and allow for cooperation and solidarity within communities. Given his objective value pluralism, Gray can deny this superiority only by trivializing pluralism in a way that runs against the whole thrust of his argument."
 - 17 In this he is very different than Stuart Hampshire, another thinker who could be classified as a *modus vivendi* pluralist. Indeed, Hampshire titled the second chapter of *Justice is Conflict* "Against Monotheism" (Hampshire 2000, pp. 51-75).
 - 18 For Chandran Kukathas (2007, pp. 74-118), who is as concerned with extending liberal toleration to non- or anti-liberal individuals and groups as Gray, the right of exit and the freedom of association connected with it are the central liberties that value pluralists would want their governments to protect.
 - 19 Gray (2002, p. 56) writes "say I am a second-generation Asian woman who must decide between an arranged marriage and a relationship based on personal choice. In that case an appeal to common practices will not suffice. I must decide which practice I accept." Gray's example offers obvious evidence as to why a self-conscious pluralist would strongly desire a government that placed a rebuttable primary priority on the preservation of negative liberty for its citizens. Otherwise, and in a *modus vivendi* pluralist community, this paradigmatic woman might not be given a choice at all.

The Futility of the Recognition Paradigm

ATTILA K. MOLNAR

Abstract: The recognition paradigm has emerged to understand the core of human conflicts in terms of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. However, the Hegel's dialectic has been turned into an egalitarian-antipolitical project: many writers of this paradigm have suggested that 1, mutual recognition can be achieved, 2, and it may result the end of conflicts. This paper shows that theoretically as well as empirically these are vain hopes, because recognition is a positional good. And the movements claiming recognition search for upper-hand position instead of mutuality.

Keywords: recognition, human nature, ambition, conflict, antipolitics

In political modernity several versions of egalitarianism are so dominant that it is not unreasonable to assert that in contemporary "political discourse, the claim that 'all humans are equal' is often assumed to be obviously true" (Carter 2011, p. 540). The claim itself is seen unproblematic. The 19th century was dominated by legal and political egalitarianism—although not entirely, but rather under the flag of nationalism—while the 20th century was obviously dominated mainly by the economic brand of egalitarianism—known either as socialism or welfarism. However, by the mid-1970s, long before the collapse of the state socialism in 1989-1991, it had already become apparent that socialism cannot provide either a satisfying egalitarian redistribution of material goods, nor the economic prosperity that could produce an abundance of these goods. The reaction was the rise of free-marketism, promoted by the likes of Thatcher and Reagan, which promised economic prosperity at the expense of economic equality. Egalitarians looked for a new avenue of expression, turning toward non-material goods, such as psychological well-being and moral authority, which seemed to be in inexhaustible abundance. The recognition paradigm emerged in the previous decades seems to be one version of the contemporary moral egalitarianism and antipolitics (Gray 1997, 2000, 2003).

Egalitarians have found a type of goods—respect or recognition (and the resulting psychological satisfaction and emotional well-being and self-confidence they bring)—which are seemingly in abundant supply and which are unaffected by the human conflicts arising from scarcity. This kind of egalitarianism has brought forth multiculturalism and the notion of deliberative democracy. This shift away from economic egalitarianism has fitted well with the so-called cultural turn of the Left, initiated by Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* and furthered by the Frankfurtians, which focuses on criticism of bourgeois thinking and culture instead of critiquing property relations.

Since the decline of economic egalitarianism, moral egalitarianism has dominated the contemporary landscape of academia, and its influence has spread without any serious obstacle. "Liberal modernity becomes distinctively ethical" (Anderson 2009, p. 11). Moral egalitarianism is, in logical terms, non-

egalitarian in some respects, however. It involves drawing moral distinctions and passing judgements on its opponents, labelling them racist, sexist, and the like, to morally devalue them. Moral egalitarianism cannot accept any other moral position than its own. It cannot accept or tolerate moral disagreement, and that is why many see this way of thinking as totalitarian in nature or at least oppressive. Recently, the wide scale protests against moral egalitarianism and resistance to its more extreme forms, which depreciate the morality of common people, has been labelled populism.

RECOGNITION

The latest dominant version of egalitarianism is closely connected to the notions of respect and recognition, and their horizon of meaning. One thread in modern political thinking has concerned how to eliminate politics. In the past, the positivist and Marxist versions of scientism, and later the moralised politics of Kantian liberalism were seen as an escape route from politics, but recently the dominant utopian idea has been labelled deliberative democracy and regarded as intersubjective communication. Beside the hopes to escape from politics, the literature of modern politics has focused on the construction of an ordered life of free and equal people. The first approach to addressing the problems of plurality was to set borderlines (public/private; Protestant/Catholic; etc.) to delimit fields of tolerance (Milton, Bayle, Locke, Mill). The second such strategy adopted was the short-lived idea of neutrality (John Rawls) while the most recent form is the respect/recognition paradigm connected to the ideas of multiculturalism and deliberative democracy.

Today the criticism of recognition has become a taboo, and it is taken for granted and cannot be criticized, just like equality and human rights cannot be criticized. "To be 'against recognition' seems, on the face of it, to be an unsustainable position... To be against recognition in this sense would be untenable since it would entail opposition to the crucial insights into the dialogical and non-rational nature of subjectivity that have informed many significant, frequently radical, traditions of thought. The idea of recognition has also acquired renewed significance, in the past decade or so, as a way of denoting the increasingly central role played by identity claims in social and political conflict" (McNay 2008, p. 1).

Recognition (or respect) means valuing somebody or something, regarding them as worthy and appreciating them as they are. Recognition has an evaluative sense: it carries connotations of evaluating something which is not common, but which is outstanding or extraordinary. It "differs from the others insofar as it is a comparative appraisal of a person's merits or an evaluation of her relative quality in light of some standards of excellence" (Dillon 1992, p. 111). It is important as a moral attitude referring to others, not as a recognition of facts, laws or physical environment. However, I would suppose, it is rather characteristic for this paradigm that the efforts aimed at the egalitarian reinterpretation of recognition use the terms "recognition" and "respect" interchangeably, and cannot separate them from "esteem", "honour", "prestige" and other synonyms.

Typical contemporary moral and political papers concerning recognition suppose that people demand or deserve equal respect, that is, they demand a form of recognition that "must not be due to some people more than others" (Bird 2004, p. 209). Recognition as an egalitarian normative claim refers to mutual and symmetrical interpersonal relations. In general, mutuality has become one of the key ideas of the contemporary form of egalitarianism. Mutual recognition is seen today as the only just and democratic relationship between individuals and groups, and "the value of mutual recognition... is at the core of deliberative democracy" (Gutman and Thompson 1996, p. 7).

The idea of mutual dependence, as opposed to either hierarchy and dependence or independence and autonomy is an old concept, connected to the Scottish moral thinkers' notion of *sympathy*. It became dominant mainly in the descriptive notion of the division of labour, which was devoid of any hint of criticism, as represented for children in Richard Scarry's *Busytown*. Accompanying the current dominance of free market economic rhetoric, the previous ideal of mutual interpersonal (moral) dependence has come into

fashion again, but with a strongly prescriptive tone. “Reciprocity is an explicitly moral principle” (Gutman and Thompson 1996, p. 18).

The normative force of the recognition paradigm comes from its redemptive potential residing in the ideal of mutual recognition, but this time the redemption—both from inequalities and from the concomitant discomforts and conflicts—would not only be earthly, but interpersonal and moral.

Contemporary egalitarianism is less economic in its focus, that is, it is less concerned with redistribution of wealth, but is instead preoccupied with moral and intersubjective themes. Thus, while egalitarians throughout most of the 20th Century sought to change institutions and the human mind in order to create economic equality, today their successors’ efforts are aimed at achieving intersubjective moral equality experienced in and by means of mutual recognition. The demand for recognition refers both to interpersonal relations and to relations between individuals and institutions, so contemporary egalitarians would change both. It is worth noting, however, that the recent demands for recognition are much less focused on institutions than they are on interpersonal relations.

After 1945, and particularly after the political takeover of the ‘68-ers in most institutions, it became clear that neither enlightened legislation nor the welfare state were capable of achieving the desired equal and free society. After decades of leftist governments in various countries, without clear oppressors like kings, aristocrats, etc., and where everything was controlled by the benevolent representatives of the people, a strong sense of frustration still remains. Therefore, the contemporary utopia of justice has been focused on moral epistemology and equality: how people can achieve consensus and justice, measured by their subjective psychological satisfaction. Instead of the earlier goal of legal or economic equality, today moral or intersubjective equality (recognition) is the Holy Grail sought by intellectuals and implemented by bureaucratic and legal enforcement. John Rawls clearly established that self-esteem is the most important good and it depends on the esteem of the Others’. “our self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others” (1971, p. 178). Therefore the satisfaction of one’s Ego depends on one’s social environment, as Rousseau put it critically in his *First Discourse*: Rawls hoped that self-esteem could be connected to equality, and supposed that democrats would not wish to be the masters of others in order to raise their self-esteem. A “desirable feature of a conception of justice is that it should publicly express men’s respect for one another. In this way they insure a sense of their own value” (Ibid., p.179). Democratic self-esteem and pride is somehow not equal with vanity and ambition.

This moral and political effort was closely connected to the discipline of sociology which has provided a wealth of analysis showing that in spite of legal and economic equality, a great deal of inequality persists in everyday life within intersubjective relationships. The present demands for recognition are related less to the work of institutions, than they are to intersubjective attitudes.

Face-to-face inequality, due to a lack of recognition or due to any kind of unfriendly attitudes, is evident in the communication of moral requirements, the so-called pressure for conformity expressed by the Others. These requirements are traditionally labelled as intolerant or oppressive, but in this discourse they are instead deemed to be misrecognition. They cause mental and moral suffering, a key criterion of what constitutes unjust and violent behaviour. The demand for recognition is justified basically by moral psychology, by the equal right to self-respect and a positive self-image, an unmolested mind and the concomitant psychological satisfaction. The refusal of this demand is termed misrecognition, the root of injustice and conflict in the world, and the unjust character of any human relation evidenced by the psychological well-being of specified groups of people, labelled “minorities”. Thus, justice is realized in the recognition that is claimed measured in terms of psychological well-being.

Refusing to grant the desired recognition, seen as an ‘insult’ or ‘humiliation’, is called injustice, because it damages one’s positive self-image (Honneth 1995, p. 131). This misrecognition is observable in a state of mind, as an infallible sign of unjust relations. “The conflict – coming from disapproval – is based not on a violation of an individual assertion of rights, but rather on a violation of the integrity of the person as a whole... ‘Honour’, then, is the stance I take towards myself when I identify positively with all my traits and peculiarities”. It would appear to follow that just or democratic honour or dignity is antithetical

to any normative criticism or self-criticism or self-contempt, because these would hurt the Ego's integrity. "Our ethical life rests upon a positive relation to ourselves" (Deranty and Renault 2007, p. 101). Because everyone has a right to a positive self-image that stems from recognition, and everyone has an equal right to recognition, irrespective of any merit or qualification. Hence, after the demolition of any idea of normality, there is only one politically correct, that is, egalitarian moral requirement: the refusal of any non-egalitarian requirements. Any other moral or functional requirements may cause bad feelings, psychic discomfort or critical self-reflection, and these are therefore forbidden as oppressive.

If an individual experiences an "insult", it is justified for him/her to rebel and resist. The emphasis is on such justified rebellion. Misrecognition may undermine self-righteousness and generate reflection, but a democratic self has a right to be saved from self-reflection or self-criticism. The aim is the elimination of the dialogical self—the consciousness or I/Me difference—by eliminating any disapproval as unjust (Honneth 1996, p. 83).

In the rhetoric of recognition one can see a new argument for an old utopia. The present rhetoric emphasizes psychological well-being and a sense of self-righteousness, because it has become clear that material well-being or a properly organized welfare state cannot grant the happiness wished for by many. Beside legal and economic equality, political hedonism demands intersubjective or moral equality, called mutual recognition. The problem here is that legal or economic equality and success would not satisfy ambitious people, because "in the theaters gold cannot procure a seat for the servile race beside their former masters" (Tocqueville 1994, I. p. 359). It turned out after the emancipation in the 19th century that political and legal recognition is not satisfying without social recognition, because the "judgement of others is the last judgement; and social exclusion is the concrete form of hell and damnation. It is also because man is a God unto man that man is a wolf unto man" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 196). It turned out that social misrecognition can generate the same resentment as political and legal misrecognition. After achieving mass suffrage contemporary democrats have sought equal recognition for the resentful people. The fundamental insight of the followers of the recognition paradigm is that people may be oppressed not only due to them lacking or being denied resources but also or alternatively through a denial of recognition.

COMMUNICATIVE UTOPIA, COMMUNICATION AS UTOPIA

The notion of mutual recognition is connected to the age-old hope for consensus: if only all men could see the world from every others' point of view, that is, if they are sympathetic toward one another, then mutual understanding and an inclusive political community would emerge, instead of the existing one, which is fraught with conflict between an irreconcilable plurality of views, misrecognition and frustration. The idealised dialogue of G. H. Mead is symmetrical, honest, serious, and free from violence, enforcement or any kind of asymmetry. This equal and free communicative situation involves continuous bargaining over meanings, creating wall-to-wall consensus. From this point of view any kind of inconvenience, limitation of freedom or sanction is fair only if it is based on the consent of the affected persons.

The utopia of communication—which will achieve truth and justice sooner or later—has been a constant in our culture since Milton's *Aeropagitica*, but it was given a new twist by G. H. Mead's pragmatism (Benhabib 1985). According to Mead's account, intersubjective communication is inherently symmetrical, even without power and enforcement. Recently Habermas has continued this utopia through the notion of the "ideal speech situation" and "communicative action". Mead's pragmatic theory of interpersonal communication has become important for contemporary egalitarians, because he connected the utopia of (symmetrical) communication to the formation of the self.

Recent notions of democracy include the right to a peaceful soul and an unmolested mind, undisturbed by the knowledge of failures. Mead's idealized symmetrical communication would thus eliminate the mental discomforts and self-assessment disorders which derive from misrecognition. Therefore, instead of tolerance, positive reinforcement—in the guise of recognition, respect, etc.—has emerged as the highest virtue of egalitarianism, because "the flaunting of [people's] vice in public hurts more than

the vice itself” (Montaigne 1991, p. 296). Tolerance in the past meant legal tolerance, but today it means, above all, suspending moral or even functional requirements. The recognition paradigm alludes to equal moral worth, but it opposes not only moral requirements, because it translates all kinds of lack of achievement into moral categories and turns the tensions arising from these shortages into moral questions. The theoreticians of this paradigm do not confront the question of how a society based on mutual recognition, compassion, and a moral and “cultural” interest in avoiding any misrecognition can at the same time run a contemporary complex and performance-oriented economy.

Previous notions of tolerance or neutrality presupposed that differences should not be relevant, while a paradigm which demands recognition means that particularities are important, and a decent democrat should positively support the demands for recognition of certain people. Not “colour-blindness”, but active moral support of minorities is the proper egalitarian behaviour in face-to-face relations, in this model. Hence, this mindset aims to prohibit the expression and vindication of moral requirements in interpersonal relations. This is called the enforcement of recognition. Equality may tolerate difference, but certainly not recognise merit or superiority.

The language of recognition has reinterpreted oppression or exploitation as including psychological trauma, pain, anxiety and self-assessment disorders. These negative emotions are regarded as the signs of and a convincing argument against pathological, unjust and unequal social conditions. “Psychological oppression typically results from pressures to conform to the standards and ways of life of majority cultures, who assert their values and modes of expression as the ‘norm,’ or as ‘universal,’ and correspondingly designate the values and practices of minority cultures as ‘different,’ merely particular, and inferior” (Anderson 2009, p. 33). Justice and democracy can in this way be perceived as subjective satisfaction or psychological well-being, originating from being loved (Honneth 1996, p. 135).

In the recognition paradigm, equality means everyone enjoying an equal right to an unmolested mind, which includes self-confidence and a sense of moral rightness and intersubjective reinforcement. Democracy and justice are, above all, pleasant. This pleasant state of mind is termed the integrated self, that is, one with a clear conscience, which is not burdened by external expectations or sanctions from others. The demand for recognition is a demand for the positive reinforcement of the individual’s self-confidence and positive self-image.

The argument for this claim is based on a socialized interpretation of the self. In Hegelian and Meadian thinking the self emerges through interaction and is created by the attitudes of Others, and this idea underpins the main argument for transforming interpersonal relations and enforcing recognition. In this constructivist interpretation, the self is formed in and by its interactions with others, and power and oppression exist also in these relations as misrecognition, a form of oppression involving refusing to recognize someone else’s demand. Misrecognition—meaning the refusal of recognition—is oppressive and hurts one’s dignity. As a form of symbolic violence¹ it provokes the morally legitimate and rightful retaliatory violence of the misrecognized (Honneth 1996, p. 5).

The signs of misrecognition are a troubled mind, anxiety, perplexity and self-doubt. Self-scrutiny, an ancient and Christian ideal, akin to a bad conscience, has been reinterpreted as the consequence of the unjust and unequal treatment of individuals. An integrated, harmonious self is the result of its social environment, just like a frustrated and oppressed self is. Happiness and satisfaction, and a peaceful mind can only exist if there is respectful interaction. Therefore, democracy—or as it is interpreted in this paradigm, the equal right to psychological well-being—requires the proper types of interaction, involving love, care, respect and encouragement. According to this argument, proactive democratic states should make every effort to enforce these kinds of relationships and prohibit every other kind. Social reconstruction is necessary to satisfy everyone’s need for self-respect and an unmolested mind.

In the past, the integrated self or a peaceful, undisturbed soul was seen as a result of grace, achieved by the Christians’ pilgrimage in the Valley of Sorrow. Today it is the birth right of every democrat, and only oppressive and intolerant institutions and people are the source of subjective moral calamities through their oppressive expectations and through misrecognition. Thus, equality should be created in face-to-face

relationships by securing the wished for recognition for everyone or at least for those considered underprivileged. In this psychologized politics “man has a right to live in the world he wills himself” (Henrie 1999, p. 371).

THE IMPLICIT IDEA OF THE NON-CONSTRUCTED SELF OR COVERT ESSENTIALISM?

Charles Taylor (Taylor 1994) has connected recognition to identity. In his view, misrecognition is not problematic because its means submission, but rather because it forces the Ego into a distorted version of itself.

How can this be? If the self is constructed in and by interpersonal relations, it consists of what can emerge in these circumstances. In contrast, recognition is claimed to be the actualization of authentic identity. In their argument for recognition and against misrecognition, Taylor and Honneth supposed that there is a “real self”—an “I”—that should be recognized by Others and that is not the result of intersubjective relations. It is not clear in their argument what the origin of this “real self” is, that should be recognized by others, and if this “real self” is not socially constructed, how misrecognition can distort it. Those who argue for recognition in defence of the self do not assert that the denial of recognition can hurt someone. Instead, they emphasize that it demolishes or heavily distorts the self.

If the self is constructed in and by social interactions then, theoretically, idealized mutual recognition would entail an open social process resulting in random and unanticipated selves. However, in practice the policy of recognition requires the support and reinforcement of every participant’s ready self-image and unmolested mind. What is the source of self-image or authentic identity, if it is not socially created in dialogue with others, but something that should be respected? Does the self have direct access to something that is independent from interaction and which should be recognised? The normative requirement of recognition implies that the self is not socially constructed in interaction and thus does not emerge from the reactions of others, but has instead an independent core, having dignity and the right to be respected. Without the presupposition of this “real” (or authentic) self, the normative demand for recognition and the condemnation of misrecognition would be meaningless. On the other hand, without the theory of a self which is constructed in and by social interactions, the significance of recognition could not be stressed. Without this theory of self, misrecognition would simply be unpleasant but not something deeply and fundamentally disastrous for the misrecognized individual.

AMBITION AND RECOGNITION

The vocabulary of recognition refers partly to Mead’s interpersonal communicative utopia and partly to Hegel’s recognition model of struggle and the master-slave relationship. According to Kojève, human beings would even risk their own lives “in order to be ‘recognized’ by the other, to impose itself on the other as the supreme value; accordingly, their meeting can only be a fight to the death. And it is only in and by such a fight that the human reality is begotten, formed, realized, and revealed to itself and to others. Therefore, it is realized and revealed only as ‘recognized’ reality” (Kojève 1969, pp. 7-8). The “human reality is created, is constituted only in the fight for recognition and by the risk of life that it implies” (Ibid., p. 12). The aim of the fight is not to annihilate the Other, but to enforce his recognition, because recognition is the most valued good possible, and one can only receive recognition from the subdued. The subdued has to give up his claim for recognition, but he is obliged to recognise the winner. In the Hegelian perspective the relation between two consciousness is always asymmetrical, because the claim for recognition is asymmetrical: the Ego demands that the Other recognize him. The demand for recognition is a demand for an asymmetrical relationship. The question is simply who will be subdued and who will obtain recognition from the Other. The subdued seeks to transform the world from a non-recognizing into a recognizing one in which he can be the master. Therefore, in Hegel’s account, the claim for recognition cannot be said to foster agreement or mutuality. It results in continuous fights and challenges, and obtaining recogni-

tion means that the other will be subdued and unsatisfied. The wish for recognition is a wish for a certain behaviour on the part of the Other, whose wishes are thus not satisfied.

In Hegel's description it is not difficult to recognise the old theme of ambition, running from Plato's Callicles and St. Augustine to Hobbes and Rousseau's spoiled child. According to this tradition, man seeks recognition at another's expense.

The demand for recognition was thus imbued with negative connotations in western culture in the past. It was connected to the tyrannical man, as often described by many realist political thinkers. Hobbes started from St. Augustine's sinful man and from Plato's description of Callicles, figures who can survive in a hostile world only if they take care of themselves alone, striving to be the strongest and to arrange the social world around themselves. The recognition they demand would be the continuous affirmation of the Ego's sense of strength. In many descriptions, man is tyrannical by nature. In Christian realism, as Niebuhr called it, man searches for recognition or respect from the Other, and because of the *libido domini* man seeks to keep or reverse the master-slave relationship.

To the old question of whether order can exist without hierarchy in a world of equals, Hobbes' answer is well known. As he wrote, life in the world of equals is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1965, p. 92). The equals can be kept in a state of peaceful cooperation only by force. However, *Leviathan* is not only about equality. It is also about pride and ambition, the old subject of the *vanitas* topos. *Leviathan* is the king of the children of pride (*ambitionis Elenchus*) (Job 41:34). The ambitious men want the Others' appreciation that they can only acquire from the losing competitors. Even then, only some of them can occupy a position of appreciation, so the appreciated position cannot be shared. That is why respect is a positional good, that is, status can be taken in a zero-sum game. Prestige, status and respect can be enhanced only at the expense of others.

In this regard, it is worth referring here to the founding father of the modern democratic thinking, Rousseau. In addition to the widespread interpretation of Rousseau's thought that human is good by nature and prefers justice and order, he offers another perspective on human nature in *Emil*, according to which Man aims to dominate his environment and dominate his partners by nature:

Man naturally considers all that he can get as his own. In this sense Hobbes' theory is true to a certain extent: Multiply both our wishes and the means of satisfying them, and each will be master of all. Thus, the child, who has only to ask and have, thinks himself the master of the universe; he considers all men as his slaves; and when you are at last compelled to refuse, he takes your refusal as an act of rebellion, for he thinks he has only to command. All the reasons you give him, while he is still too young to reason, are so many pretences in his eyes; they seem to him only unkindness; the sense of injustice embitters his disposition; he hates every one. Though he has never felt grateful for kindness, he resents all opposition... In vain everybody strove to please them; as their desires were stimulated by the ease with which they got their own way, they set their hearts on impossibilities, and found themselves face to face with opposition and difficulty, pain and grief. Scolding, sulking, or in a rage, they wept and cried all day. Were they really so greatly favoured? Weakness, combined with love of power, produces nothing but folly and suffering" (Rousseau 1921, p. 51).

In Rousseau's *Second Discourse* he argues that competition for prestige is not natural in origin but the result of social life, and this competition leads to slavery as a concomitant of social life.

Men no sooner began to set a value upon each other, and know what esteem was, than each laid claim to it, and it was no longer safe for any man to refuse it to another... Hence, the first duties of civility and politeness, even among savages; and hence every voluntary injury became an affront, as besides the mischief, which resulted from it as an injury, the party offended was sure to find in it a contempt for his person more intolerable than the mischief itself" (Rousseau 2002, pp. 118-9).

Social life produces vanity and ambition, as Man desires recognition and high esteem because he is a social animal. Rousseau criticized culture and society because man as a social being “lives outside himself”, he knows himself only from the Others’ judgements and opinions. (See his *First Discourse* and Moliere’s *The Misanthrope*.) It is not power, but the wish for affirmation and self-love which perverts human beings (Grant 1987).

The origin of vanity, the root of corruption of man other than private property, is man’s nature or his social life. Therefore, the solution can only be a return to the pre-social state, or the education of man—as in *Emil*—or the utopian construction of democracy—as set out in *The Social Contract*. Mead, Habermas and the radical democrats usually quote Rousseau, but they overlook his remark that democracy is for gods.

One may find a similar observation on the nature of man in connection with the world’s oldest democracy. John Adams wrote that the demand for equality is simply disobedience, as everyone hates superiority, but nobody really wishes to be equal, but instead they want to be superior. The preference for equality means the refusal of anyone being superior but not the annihilation of the ambition for superiority and esteem. Similarly, according to Tocqueville, everyone in a democracy searches for a higher position. This means that democratic people are always unsatisfied and restless. There is always competition and clashes are inevitable. He wrote: “All are constantly seeking to acquire property, power and reputation” (Tocqueville 1994, II p. 243). Nobody wants to stay in his position because there are only transitory positions among equals (Ibid., p. 244). The ostensible equality begets “restless ambition”. (Ibid., p. 39). People under a democracy are characterized by “envy, hatred, uncharitableness, pride and exaggerated self-confidence”, (Ibid., p. 7) and their lives are in a state of permanent combat. The question is not whether assigning equal value is possible or not. The real question is whether the people desire such equal valuation, whether it satisfies their wishes or not.

Even Rawls remarked bitterly:

The account of self-respect as perhaps the main primary good has stressed the great significance of how we think others value us... (N)ot everyone can have the highest status, and to improve one person’s position is to lower that of someone else. Social cooperation to increase the conditions of self-respect is impossible. The means of status, so to speak, are fixed, and each man’s gain is another’s loss. Clearly this situation is a great misfortune. Persons are set at odds with one another in the pursuit of their self-esteem (1971, pp. 544-46).

Before the emergence of the recent recognition paradigm and the related reading of Hegel by G. H. Mead, the ideal of mutual recognition resulting in peace and harmony when all demands for recognition have been reconciled was rather rare. It can be found in a rather abstract form in Kant (1991, § 24. p. 244) and Fichte (2000, p. 43), who hoped that this desire could be mutually satisfied and that this would not necessarily result in a master-slave relationship, and suggested that mutual recognition might create a new community containing symmetrical relationships.

In contemporary neo-Hegelian egalitarianism, the demand for recognition is regarded as having been the motivating force for emancipation throughout history. (Lawrenz 2007) In this egalitarian interpretation, conflict is the result of misrecognition. “The struggle is the necessary consequence of their faulty self-understanding” (Anderson 2009, p. 11). Thus, logically, mutual recognition would result in the end of conflicts and “the end of history”.

However, beside this egalitarian hope, there is still the old tradition of the moral and political refusal of ambition. The demand for recognition, the foundational notion of contemporary moral egalitarian project, had to be reinterpreted in order to separate it from the traditional meaning of ambition in the Christian tradition.

Rawls and the followers of the contemporary recognition paradigm turned the tradition upside down, defining self-respect as the highest moral and honourable good. Traditionally, the demand for recognition

results in conflict, instead of peace, because its aim is the submission of the Other, that is, the enforcement of the Other to recognize the Ego. However, this traditional interpretation of the demand for recognition and the contemporary egalitarian one are common at one point: both can see state as an established form of recognition. Because of the conflicted consequences of ambition, the Christian tradition interpreted it as sin, something that should be dominated or at least limited. But, as we can see, the recognition paradigm broke with this tradition, and instead of moderating ambition, it tends to celebrate it proudly.

In the recent discourse on recognition, mutual recognition is partly the natural character of interactions as Mead described it, and partly something that should be enforced by the democratic state. Egalitarians would use state power for satisfying demands for recognition by bureaucratically fabricating and enforcing the wished recognition of certain differences. The contemporary democratic state aims to revolutionize interpersonal relations in order to satisfy the demands for recognition of certain groups of people. The usual paradox is that the egalitarian and free relations of mutual recognition should be created by democratic state power, based on equal dignity and the representation of each person, which would then force some people to change their behaviour and even attitudes towards certain individuals. The representatives of the recognition paradigm, who are usually radicals, are rather confident of reconstructing Others' minds by means of the state. They usually do not ask whether this "moral duty could be enforceable or should be enforced" (Green 2010, p. 219).

The Hobbesian—traditional—sense of ambition, pride and honour seems to be involved in a Hegelian master-servant model (Ibid., p. 213). The question is whether people demand mutual or positional respect, and whether people are motivated by the offer of respect and satisfied by that mutual respect or not. The practice of emancipatory movements shows that rebels do not aim for mutuality at all.

INCREASING TENSIONS

In this paper I do not intend to scrutinize the presupposition of the respect paradigm. I am not interested in whether everyone aims for recognition, or even if people aim for it to an equal degree, or even if they deserve recognition equally in every situation. Neither am I interested in whether they demand equality more than recognition.

Until recently the demand for recognition—or pride, ambition, vanity, etc.—was seen as a problem because of its potential for conflict, and several institutions and social processes were maintained more or less with the purpose of taming or ameliorating this demand and reconciling frustrated people. It is a rather unusual development that some people have recently placed their political and moral hopes on a wish for recognition.

The history of democratic movements and of social life does not support the optimism of the followers of the recognition paradigm. Even leftist thinkers such as Rawls and Žižek have observed that this moral-political paradigm has not solved anything. Instead of generating peace and cooperation it has ignited conflicts, disturbing the spirit instead of pacifying it (Žižek 1999). In ancient Greek thought it was a common idea that the wish for respect and avoidance of shame had socially positive effects. It results in individuals making efforts to adapt themselves to their social requirements. In the recognition paradigm the morally justified emotional grounds for action is suffering, or bad feelings arising from disrespect. In this view, adopting Others' requirements is not a virtue of civility, but it is a form of self-deprecation, self-abasement or submission: "In the context of the emotional responses associated with shame, the experience of being disrespected can become the motivational impetus for a struggle for recognition" (Honneth 1995, p. 138). In this paradigm the dominant issue is not whether misrecognition and shame are well founded or not, but that it is unjust as such. This paradigm separates ambition and pride from its potential harmful social consequences, as it relieves shame of its supposedly positive social effects.

Why does the respect paradigm incite conflicts instead of bringing peace and cooperation?

There are several reasons for this:

1. The promise is satisfaction for all, but the psychological well-being of an ambitious man is a *positional good*, which originates from the respect of Others, therefore it cannot be distributed equally.

Recognition, in spite of the efforts of academia and benevolent moral thinkers to reinterpret our understanding of recognition and respect, is still a form of positional good, one which is connected to the agonistic human condition, to competition and scarcity. The increase in morally and politically legitimised demands for recognition thus creates more conflict instead of bringing the promised political and psychological harmony.

Rawls hoped that democracy would be the preference of equality. After the failures of the socialist utopia, many people thought that shortages or productivity difficulties occur only when there is an equality of material goods, but they supposed that when it came to moral goods—like self-esteem, an unmolested mind and the like—no such problems could exist. However, self-esteem originating from recognition seems to be a positional good, that is, it presupposes somebody occupying underdog positions. Finally, recognition turns out to be scarce, just like material goods. Scarcity seems to be a perennial feature of the human world and the “symptom of the world’s fall-*eness*” (Kirsch 2008, p. 144).

The demand for recognition presupposes that someone else’s desire has to remain unsatisfied.

The demand for recognition—referring to the equal right to subjective satisfaction, self-respect, identity, an unmolested mind, etc., but at the same time involving an upward revaluation—requires a certain change in the behaviour of Others, and of their mode of thinking and feeling. Thus, the Others can no longer be fully autonomous beings.

On the one hand, the Ego wants to be free and to control his social environment, even to the extent of controlling the thoughts and feelings of people around him. The problem with mutual recognition is that everyone would like to be free from the expectations of Others, and from the pressure to conform deriving from their social environment. That is why the demand for recognition can be satisfied only in asymmetrical relations. It therefore results in eternal conflicts instead of a state of peaceful and harmonious cooperation. It is closely connected to the demand for transparency: many people demand the transparency of the world—institutions, other people’s minds, etc.—but all of them indignantly refuse any demand for their own transparency and insist on privacy and secrecy. The widespread wish for a more transparent world is combined with a horrified refusal of our own transparency through surveillance.

The idea of interpersonal and mutual recognition obviously contradicts the liberal ideal of autonomy and self-domination (Gray 1993, 2003, 2023), because in a situation of mutual recognition an individual should behave and even think and feel according to the requirements of his environment. The demand for recognition aims to change the Others’ thinking about the Ego. “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, §175, p. 110). This means that the demand for recognition is for a demand to change the minds of Others, which is incompatible with the older liberal ideal of an autonomous man, which has been idealized until recently. Therefore, demands for recognition generate persistent conflicts between individuals who are taught to demand individual freedom, in the sense of autonomy—not being formed and controlled by others from without—and to be authentic—in the sense of not being conformist—as well as to demand recognition from others, i.e. to seek to control the behaviour of Others and even their attitudes and feelings (Nagel 1986). “The individual is perpetually riven by the conflict between her desire for the freely given recognition from the other, on the one side, and her longing to extort this recognition through domination, even annihilation, on the other” (McNay 2008, p. 44).

2. Social reconstruction rarely occurs without there being some losers, and thus rarely happens without some resistance. The contemporary egalitarian, therefore, would use force to transform certain institutions and interpersonal relations in order to provide recognition to some, while this would involve others losing their present recognition (called “privileges” by reconstructivist actors).

The political issue concerns whether these ambitious people, who demand recognition, can live an ordered and peaceful life without political order. Two possible solutions can be identified: one would eliminate this ambitious character of man by education or religious or ideological conversion, while the other would limit the satisfaction of their ambitions by means of enforcement or education, and offer some form of compensation. The promise of contemporary democracy is the psychological well-being and satisfaction of each individual. In practice, however, it is clear that this psychological well-being can only be enjoyed by some people. I will call this groups the privileged democrats.

3. The demand for recognition is a demand for status. Therefore, the real question is whether people demand equal respect, and whether they are satisfied by that or not. The theoreticians of the recognition paradigm use an allegedly moral argument—the notion of mutual recognition—to support the ambitions of a realist type of man, and finally these moral egalitarians find themselves in the trap of agonistic democracy. In the minds of the academic representatives of the recognition paradigm there is the notion of an idealized, mutual kind of recognition, which leads humankind towards egalitarian peace and harmony—but in the minds of their fellow activists there is a competitive form of recognition connected to occupying the position of master.

The recent fashion for egalitarian recognition is based on the re-evaluation of the notions of ambition and pride, in opposition to the Christian tradition in order to revolutionize face-to-face, intersubjective relations and to change the nature of master-slave relations. Followers of this trend would realize their goals through a radical reinterpretation of ambition and pride, the characteristic name of the annual march of the constituency of the politics of recognition. As Coin Bird wrote:

In rejecting those sorts of respect that are owed to some more than others, Kantians hope to split their concept of respect off from the hierarchical bedrock in which the language of respect has historically often found a home. Instead of construing respect in terms of a vertical sensitivity to superiority and inferiority, contemporary Kantians think of it in horizontal terms, defining an “egalitarian plateau” below which none must fall. In this way, the modern ethos of equal dignity for all can be insulated from the ancien regime discourse of honour and merit along with all of its hierarchical and inegalitarian connotations (Bird 2004, p. 209).

Even for Kant, moral respect has a hierarchical meaning, including reference to authority and submission. (Bird 2004, pp. 213–4) People outside academia, however, use recognition in a non-egalitarian sense that motivates and mobilizes them, and not in its egalitarian and mutual meaning.

The question is whether the meaning of recognition has shifted in this egalitarian direction among people in general and not only among a small leftist circle, and whether people in democracy have actually changed. That is, whether activists are publicly demanding the kind of egalitarian and universalistic recognition constructed by leftist intellectuals or whether they continue to understand recognition in its traditional sense, which entails one person prevailing over another and subduing them. Obviously, there is a difference between giving reasons for equal treatment and giving the reasons that motivate people to provide equal treatment.

4. Moral criticism of non-recognition amounts to the moral criticism of domination of one over another, or of any kind of asymmetry. Domination and servitude are translated as non-recognition by Hegel. Hence, a Hegelian may argue that achieving mutual recognition would mean the end of domination. Moral progress is usually interpreted as a way toward the end of domination, and toward antinomian freedom and equality. A society based on people mutually respecting each other would be non-coercive, but the way there may contain endless disrespect or misrecognition. It also involves enforcement, so the respect-based argument cannot be used to vindicate a respectful, morally egalitarian society. Meliorism or the perfectionism of the recognition paradigm cannot be reconciled with its own demand for recognition. Someone needs to be silenced or forced into conformity, or to be re-educated, but not recognized in order to achieve the recognition—or the emancipation—of other people.

If people are predisposed to mutual recognition and equality, why does it represent such a daunting political and moral problem, requiring huge intellectual and political efforts for it to be realised? If most of us are victims of misrecognition by some, why do some people want to oppress this egalitarian and non-violent majority? And how can the continued existence of this kind of oppressive and violent minority be explained? Perhaps only re-educated people have this kind of predisposition to mutual recognition.

Perfectionism is inherently disrespectful (Chan 2000, p. 109)—any effort to create mutually respecting people is disrespectful towards the currently existing people—like any reconstructionist efforts. Re-education requires the deconstruction of the existing culture, language, habits and institutions and of the characters of the individuals composing it. Obviously, any form of deconstruction is against recognition of the existing status quo. The activists of recognition politics thus do not accept the moral obligation when it comes to recognizing their opponents. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. They do just the opposite, they claim that their duty is to misrecognize certain groups or individuals in order to demolish them. Not only the misrecognition, but even the dehumanization of their opponents is a part of their practice. As they say, “Self-defence is no offence”.

If the interaction where the self is constructed were an open process, it could change both sides, which may result in the submission or the withdrawal of the demand for recognition on either side. However, this could never be the result in the literature on the recognition paradigm. For its followers, the only just resolution of any interaction is the recognition of certain people whose demand for recognition is valued, without considering the unpleasant changes that would need to be made to the Others’ mind.

Any kind of misrecognition, even if it is justified by emancipatory arguments, increases the conflict between people, instead of bringing us closer to mutual recognition and peaceful harmony. Thus, according to the recognition paradigm, the intensification of the demand for recognition will result in the outbreak of justified conflicts—that is, misrecognition of their opponents is justified—for the sake of emancipation, which will eventually lead to the peace of moral equality and mutual recognition. This logic of emancipation is not actually anything new. It can be found in millenarian and revolutionary texts such as Lenin’s *State and Revolution*: communism and the end of state will be achieved by a dictatorship, a state with immensely increased power. As Appiah concluded, “between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line” (1994, p. 163).

Finally, it is apparent that not every demand for recognition is justified, that is, not everybody “merits some recognition” (Frazer and Honneth 2003, p. 38). It seems that there are just forms of misrecognition. In certain cases, as with racists, sexist and other kinds of unjust people, their psychological well-being can be overlooked due to their unjust nature, and misrecognition can be excused.

The contentious character of the demand for respect was well described by Hegel: the Ego, who demands recognition from the Other, implies the Other's submission and change. If any frustration derives from misrecognition and the misrecognized (the oppressed party) demands recognition, he can obtain the desired recognition only if the Other surrenders and abandons some elements of his own thinking, that is, the Other can recognise the Ego only if the Other is changed and discards his standards—however deeply embedded they are in his personality and identity—and accept the Ego's standards. A Catholic should reject his views on abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, Christ, repentance, absolution, original sin, etc. if he cannot provide the recognition demanded for gays, atheists or Muslims. The notions of right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, success and failure, etc. have to be reinterpreted to be democratic and respectful. Only after changing his standards in this way can the Other provide recognition of the not less beautiful, less successful or wrong people.

This change is not only asymmetrical in nature, whereby only a change on the part of the Other may result in the desired recognition of the Ego, but it also means that the Other gives up his own original demands for recognition. That is, he yields in front of the Ego. The Other has to be submissive and give priority to the Ego's demands. If the Other has property or a well-paid job, but the Ego, referring to luck egalitarian arguments, demands recognition involving demands for a better life, the Other is morally and politically obliged—if he wants to avoid committing the crime of misrecognition and oppression—to give up his initial claim of having rights to his property or to his decently earned income. Or, if the Other initially demanded the recognition of his requirements, as being deeply embedded in his identity, he can avoid moral and political accusations, blackmailing and lynching—that is, pressure and enforcement—only if he renounces his identity and accepts that the Ego can dominate their relations and decide what are the valid standards of recognition and what is a proper identity for the Other.

People think or happily believe, if they are told, that they should receive recognition because of some achievements or characteristics that make them worthy of special attention and treatment (Dillon 1992, p. 109). It feels insulting to be treated with less respect than one *thinks is one's due* (this paraphrase is based on Wolff 1998, p. 107). The egalitarian idea of the demand for recognition in universal terms exists in moral and political philosophy but, in practice, social actors and movements demands first and foremost recognition on the basis of particular characteristics they possess (Darwall 1977).

Which kind of people win in the competition or fight for recognition may change over the course of history or as the political circumstances evolve, and the recognition paradigm is the contemporary vocabulary used in service of the will to win. Recently, what is considered to be the Other—those who should yield and whose submission will allegedly lead to a just and peaceful world—includes those who are (or perceived as) “male, cis, able-bodied, thin, white, middle to upper class or heterosexual”.

5. Being recognized is regarded as lying at the core of one's psychological well-being, so the demand for recognition is not only a demand for a just order of things, but it may also serve to mobilize its supporters. At the same time, one might wonder, how can one measure respect in order to judge mutuality—i.e. non-domination and justice—if subjective satisfaction is the ultimate measure of recognition?

Recognition is not a binary category like virginity, in the sense that it either is or is not. Instead, recognition and misrecognition are two ends of an endless continuum of attitudes. Therefore, someone can always demand or claim more respect. Especially in our current narcissistic age, there can be unlimited demands for respect in any sense, and thus there can always be a legitimate hate and resentment because of the lack of satisfying recognition offered to someone. What

is more, “people are sensitive not only to the way they are treated but also to the spirit in which that treatment is afforded” (Green 2010, p. 219).

Because of the ambiguities of language and the complex nature of moral psychology, the epistemological conflicts surrounding recognition—that is, justice in social relations—cannot be definitively decided one way or another. Language cannot be divested of ambiguity, not to mention irony and religious and artistic use of language:

To respect something is to treat it in a certain manner or to act in particular ways in connection with it... And there are many ways to respect things: by showing consideration for them or taking them into account; by keeping our distance from them and giving them room; by praising, honouring, or worshiping them; by obeying or abiding by them; by avoiding them; by protecting and being careful with them” (Dillon 1992, p. 108).

Hobbes, who based his contentious anthropology on pride, described the unavoidably ambiguous nature of recognition as originating from the problems of language and the human condition: “a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name” (1965, p. 96). Without an arbitrator, the universal demand for recognition—based on subjective and contingent, or even whimsical interpretations of individual moral psychology—results in endless resentfulness and anger.

It is clear that the scope of politics has widened into everyday intersubjective relations, and its activists have proudly rendered what were earlier private issues into public ones in order to draw them into political debates and subject them to political control. Instead of reconciliation and an unmolested mind coming from mutual recognition, the futile politics of recognition results in a more agonistic world, created in the name of justice and equality, in which there are no civilizational or moral limits for radicals who act on behalf of the emancipation of someone.

While the concept of recognition is helpful for understanding the origin of conflicts, the ideal of mutual recognition seems to be futile, causing more conflicts than it resolves. In one way or another, this paradigm falls short of producing the peaceful, harmonious and mutually satisfying human world it promises. The widespread effort to morally legitimize the demand and fight for recognition in political theory seems to lead to an increase in the number of conflicts by morally justifying them. In many cases the followers of this paradigm confess that their paradigm leads to more conflicts but believe that these will miraculously result in a just and peaceful world of mutual recognition. The warlike condition of equals competing for prestige eventually resulted in peace and hierarchy, according to Hobbes, while the recognition paradigm hopes in vain that the quarrels and fights of unequal people will somehow and someday bring equality, self-realization and peaceful harmony. Ironically, the recognition paradigm implies antipolitical hope based on the Hobbesian tragic or pessimist view of *conditio humana*.

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NOTES

- 1 "Symbolic violence is exercised only through an act of knowledge and practical recognition which takes place below the level of the consciousness and will and which gives all its manifestations—injunctions, suggestions, seduction, threats, reproaches, orders or calls to order—their "hypnotic power"" (Bourdieu quoted by McNay 2008, p. 34).

The Dark Enlightenment of John Gray

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It's very much easier to know what John Gray is against than what he is for. This is partly because he's against so much and partly because, when he's against something, he tends to be *very* against it. But he is often frustratingly obscure about what he is for, which often changes. A path out of the very grave dangers that Gray believes we now face never quite comes into focus in his writings, probably because he thinks that the modern West's sickness is incurable.

Among the things that Gray has most strongly and consistently been against is the Enlightenment. He argues that, from the eighteenth-century seed of the Enlightenment have grown a wide range of moral and political pathologies, including totalitarianism, fascism, Communism, environmental degradation, nihilism, Jacobinism, liberal imperialism, Bolshevism, a highly destructive form of capitalist fundamentalism, radical Islam, and even the Counter-Enlightenment. He links the Enlightenment directly to modernity, Christianity, and pre-Socratic antiquity and bundles the whole package together in a giant collection of monstrosities that have led the world to its present state of ruination, with no apparent prospect of escape.

While my primary purpose in what follows is to explicate Gray's dark portrait of the Enlightenment, its purportedly destructive role in Western history, and what he thinks can be done about it, I will also offer some critical reflections on a number of contentious claims, assumptions, and conclusions he makes that raise doubts about the plausibility and coherence of his views on the subject. My account is based primarily on six of his many books covering a twenty-eight year period, in which his presentation of the Enlightenment has remained very consistent: *Isaiah Berlin* (1995), *Enlightenment's Wake* (1997), *Voltaire* (1999), *Black Mass* (2007) and *Seven Types of Atheism* (2018), and *The New Leviathans* (2023).

GRAY'S PORTRAIT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Despite its opposition to organized religion, the Enlightenment for Gray was an intolerant and fundamentalist religious creed based on a set of dogmatic and mistaken beliefs that have caused unprecedented social and political damage that is still being felt today. He contrasts the movement's benevolent self-image with its reality and consequences, as he sees them, in the starkest possible terms.

While Gray cursorily acknowledges that the Enlightenment was not a monolithic movement, he nonetheless believes that it was united by a common core of beliefs that constitute a 'single project,' which he describes as the conviction that 'the basic values of civilized human beings are essentially identical' (Gray 1999, p. 17). These universal values form a 'new morality' based on reason and they define 'the universal civilization for which all Enlightenment thinkers work' (Ibid., p. 17). Gray concludes that 'the ideal of such a universal civilization remains the Enlightenment project to this day' (Ibid., p. 19).

Directly connected to this Enlightenment faith in a single moral truth is its dogmatic belief in a philosophy of history according to which there will and should be a 'universal convergence on a cosmopolitan

and rationalist civilization' based on that truth (Gray 1997, p. 121). According to the philosophical anthropology of the Enlightenment that Gray sketches, societies occupy positions on a developmental continuum, with technologically advanced, science-based, secular nations like Britain and France, which regard themselves as the most 'civilized,' at one end, and primitive, religiously saturated nations and peoples, who are supposedly 'barbaric' by the standards of enlightened modernity, at the other end. Gray sees all this as deeply sinister since it is the justification for the Enlightenment's zealous mission to move all societies along the spectrum to civilization, by force if necessary, an attitude inherited by many of the later political ideologies that he claims grew out of it, above all liberalism. He refers to 'the Enlightenment project of re-founding morality and social life on universal and rationally compelling principles' (Ibid., p. 158), a project that he considers both doomed to failure and highly destructive of the human and natural worlds.

Like Friedrich Nietzsche, on whom Gray relies very heavily in his diagnosis of the sickness at the heart of Western civilization, he believes in what might be called the 'continuity thesis' of Western history—that it constitutes a single, continuous stream of rationalist humanism aiming at its ultimate realization in a universal civilization with a common morality discoverable by reason. This is the thematic core of the West whose 'march to a better world' is but a series of variations on it, of which the Enlightenment is one. Gray links the Enlightenment to the 'logocentrism' of pre-Socratic antiquity and the philosophical rationalism of Plato. With Nietzsche, he sees Christianity as continuous with this outlook that subordinates all particular forms of life and customary local practices and beliefs to a single, universal standard of truth.

The Enlightenment is not the final chapter in this monistic intellectual tradition of Western culture, since it gave birth to liberalism, the dominant form of that culture in our time. In fact, Gray believes that all modern political ideologies that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are offspring of the Enlightenment, despite the intense antipathies between them. For example, during the Cold War, Western liberalism was 'a relic of Enlightenment rationalism' (Ibid., p. 156) no less than Soviet Communism, which was 'one of the Enlightenment's stupendous constructions' (Ibid., p. 33). And Gray even claims that the Nazis 'were also in some ways children of the Enlightenment' (Gray 2007, p. 52), just as racism 'is a product of the Enlightenment' (Ibid., p. 86). There is very little that is bad about our world that is *not* linked to the Enlightenment for him.

What distinguishes the Enlightenment variation on this Western rationalist theme is its identification of knowledge with the practice of science. 'It is this step,' Gray writes, which marks the difference of modern from ancient or medieval rationalism' (Gray 1997, p. 161). It was in eighteenth century Europe that science came to be seen as the one true path to knowledge of reality, including morality. From this faith arose the technology society that we now inhabit, which is for Gray an iron cage rather than the liberation it was meant to be.

Gray rejects every aspect of the Enlightenment outlook, as he sees it, for being dangerously wrong. Its utopian and naïve assumptions about human nature, value, and historical progress have caused death and destruction without precedent in the history of our species. Although the dominant epistemology of the Enlightenment was empiricism and its proponents viewed science as the sure path to knowledge, Gray claims that its core assumptions were ultimately based on blind faith. That's one reason he always calls the Enlightenment a 'creed' or a 'religion' no different from any other religion in its basic dogmatism, except that its mistaken beliefs are more dangerous than those of most religions.

ENLIGHTENMENT'S WAKE

The Enlightenment was 'self-destroying,' 'self-undermining' and therefore 'bound to fail' (Ibid., pp. 144, viii, 163), according to Gray, because its grounding beliefs are wrong. Humans are not fundamentally rational beings, history is not progressive, and there is no single form of civilization that is based on universal moral principles towards which all societies can and should converge. Any belief system that proceeds from these Enlightenment assumptions will eventually run aground on the rocks of reality, causing great havoc in the process. That is why the Enlightenment's wake is littered with the victims of well-intentioned

attempts to ‘unbend the crooked timber of humanity’ to compel it to fit the abstract formulas and idealistic theories of elites who have dominated the mainstream of Western intellectual life since at least the age of Pericles.

Gray claims that our age is ‘distinguished by the collapse of the Enlightenment project’ (Ibid., p. 1). The West has lost faith in its cherished rationalist beliefs, which has also led to a crisis of liberalism, the civil religion of the West today, since ‘liberal cultures depend on the Enlightenment project’ (Ibid., p. 168). We are now in a transition period to a new post-Enlightenment, post-liberal era, which Gray describes as ‘a form of revolutionary nihilism’ (Ibid., p. 178). The final collapse of faith in the Enlightenment project in our time has left the West bereft of any substantive beliefs or values, just as Nietzsche had argued that the ‘death of God’ was succeeded by a nihilistic void of meaninglessness. For both, moral collapse follows from the failure of the belief system that supported it.

The form that this nihilism takes for Gray is thoroughly catastrophic. Culturally, it has meant the merciless destruction of diverse forms of life and traditional practices that gave variety and meaning to the human world. These have been eradicated in the name of justice in order to realize the universal civilization which is ‘the *telos* of the species’ (Ibid., p. 121). Politically, it has justified countless failed attempts since the French Revolution to force humans into various procrustean designs that are contrary to our nature, usually at great cost in human life. Environmentally, it has devastated the natural world in the name of technological progress to the very limits of the planet’s resources. Gray writes that ‘the legacy of the Enlightenment project—which is also the legacy of Westernization—is a world ruled by calculation and wilfulness which is humanly unintelligible and destructively purposeless’ (Ibid., p. 146).

All this is really warmed-up Friedrich Nietzsche, who also saw nihilism, when all values lose their meaning, as the necessary culmination of Western rationalism that began in antiquity. Hence Gray’s assertion that it is in Nietzsche ‘that the definitive critique of the Enlightenment project is to be found’ (Ibid., p. 164). But, whereas the German prophet of the *Übermensch* welcomed the advent of a world ‘beyond good and evil’ as a liberation for those who matter (in his view), Gray sees very little grounds for hope in the future. Uniquely insightful though Nietzsche’s diagnosis of our civilizational malaise is, his prescription for it would only compound the problem. His cure would be worse than the illness.¹

NO WAY BACK

Any attempt to return to the past by reviving pre-modern modes of thought and the practices they sustained is doomed to failure, according to Gray. There can be ‘no rolling back the central project of modernity’ (Ibid. 1997, p. 152). He emphatically denies that his negative account of the Enlightenment has any reactionary political implications. For example, he is critical of the Catholic critic of modernity Alasdair MacIntyre for offering Aristotelian ethical naturalism as a possible alternative to the moral impasse that both believe the West now finds itself in. Since Gray agrees with Nietzsche that the very roots of Western universalism reach back to antiquity, returning to pre-modern modes of thought, assuming that was even possible, would be no escape from the basic problem that has led to modern nihilism. Ancient and medieval societies in the West were also ‘projects of cultural fundamentalism’ no less than the Enlightenment and liberalism are (Ibid., 1997, p. 126). For Gray, everything about the West is tainted by a fundamental hostility to what he calls the ‘truth of value pluralism,’ which is the correct belief that there is no single, rationally compelling arrangement of values applicable to all humans everywhere. That is why he rejects the ‘Right project of cultural fundamentalism’ as much as universalist projects of the political left (Ibid., p. 126). Since the entire history of the West, including the Enlightenment, is based on monist foundations, going backwards would be pointless. Gray is more thoroughly anti-Western than the most radical Jihadists, whom he claims are also expressions of Western universalist beliefs, as are the neoconservatives who have waged wars against them in a supposed ‘clash of civilizations.’

One of Gray’s intellectual heroes is Isaiah Berlin, whose case for value pluralism is among his most important contributions to moral and political philosophy. On this skeptical view, reason is powerless to

lead us to a single value that trumps all other values. Instead, there is a diversity of objective values (such as justice, mercy, freedom, equality) none of which can be ranked as rationally prior to the others. Gray, who strongly endorses this view, argues that value pluralism ‘affirms the ultimate validity of a diversity of politics, moralities, forms of government and economy and of familial and social life—of a diversity of cultural forms’ (Ibid., p. 126). By contrast, value monism asserts the validity of one universal ranking of values and value relativism claims that there are no objective moral values at all. That is why monism in all its forms is prone to tyranny and intolerance whereas relativism leads to nihilism and anarchy. For Berlin and Gray, pluralism is the correct view of the nature of value and is therefore the only enduring and humane basis on which political and cultural life can be built.

Berlin was also a liberal, unlike Gray. While Berlin affirmed the truth that values are plural and can therefore legitimately be arranged in different ways (including non-liberal ways), he believed that a liberal framework of mutual restraint, tolerance, and freedom is the most likely in practice to lead to general peace and prosperity, even if the liberal preference for freedom over other values is no more rational than any other arrangement of values.

Gray accepts the legitimacy of what can be called ‘local liberalism’ (not a term he uses), arguing that value pluralism is ‘wholly consistent with practical support for liberal institutions in particular historical circumstances’ even though it has no logical basis (Ibid., p. 126). It just so happens that liberal practices and beliefs have developed at specific times and places that make them appropriate in those circumstances, although they cannot reasonably be generalized and applied universally, as monist liberals do.²

Gray parts company with Berlin on liberalism, which he views as an intolerant and hegemonic ideology hostile to all other forms of life. Conceptually, Gray is an anti-liberal pluralist or ‘agonistic pluralist,’ as he often calls it. He rejects any one-size-fits-all prescriptions for human societies as both contrary to the truth of value pluralism and as highly destructive in practice as a consequence. He welcomes the collapse of the Enlightenment Project of instituting a universal civilization based on liberal beliefs about morality, truth and the human good as a historic moment when there may be ‘a renaissance of particularisms, ethnic and religious’ (Ibid., p. 145). He wants to open a path to deep diversity so that we can ‘share the earth with radically different cultures’ (Ibid., p. 180). Gray advises that, where traditional cultural forms survive, we should not just tolerate them but ‘seek to nurture them, to shelter them from modern technologies which would rend them, and to develop new technologies which serve human needs while preserving traditional communities and cultural forms’ (Ibid., p. 146). By contrast, liberal practices ‘do not best facilitate the satisfaction of human needs’ and do not respect the integrity of non-liberal cultures, in which most people still live today (Ibid., p. 156).

For Gray, the best that can be hoped for in a world based on the truth of value pluralism in which many values and human goods are neither practically nor conceptually reconcilable, is a purely pragmatic *modus vivendi*. This means an acceptance that a ‘live and let live’ policy is simply the best practical way to co-exist in peace and harmony in a pluralistic world, if that is what people desire. The abstract claims of universalist ideologies should be consigned to the dustbin of history as a major source of violence, terror and misery.

GRAY’S NEW AGE AFTER THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Just as Gray relies substantially on Nietzsche for his diagnosis of the crisis of Western civilization, he leans very much on the anti-humanism of the controversial German philosopher (and Nazi) Martin Heidegger, particularly his later writings, for his prescription for the illness that he claims is killing us. In works such as his ‘Letter on Humanism’ (1946) and ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (1954), Heidegger questions the Western humanist tradition that puts our species at the center of value and frames our relationship to the natural world in purely instrumental, objectified terms subject to human will.

Gray is very sympathetic to this Heideggerian critique of Western humanism, which he agrees can be found close to the origins of ancient Greek philosophy and runs through the whole history of Western

civilization. The culmination of this outlook is the modern, liberal, technological civilization that is now collapsing around us, according to Gray, leading to nihilism.

If something is falling, Nietzsche once proclaimed, then give it a push. Gray thinks this is good advice for the contemporary West. First, he says, we should ‘relinquish the liberalisms and the humanisms by which the Enlightenment cultures were, and continue to be, animated’ (Gray 1997, p. 152). The humanist conception of our species that is shared by ancient Greek philosophy, Christian revelation, the Enlightenment, and contemporary liberalism, according to which we can only be emancipated through the growth of scientific knowledge, ‘must be given up’ (Ibid., p. 155). Gray also asserts that Western conceptions of morality and science ‘that are central elements in Enlightenment cultures’ must also be ‘given up’ (Ibid., p. 155). And the ‘pretensions of science to contain a rationally privileged world-view should be, and can be humbled’ (Ibid.).

In place of the discarded humanism of the West, Gray proposes that we follow Heidegger’s advice and adopt a ‘mode of releasement’ (Ibid., p. 182) towards the world and towards other people, a posture of passively ‘letting things be’ (Ibid.) that is ‘free of humanism’ (Ibid., p. 183). This is the antithesis of the aggressive and invasive mode of the Enlightenment and liberalism that has led us to disaster. Inspiration for this new outlook, he tells us, can be found in poetry and mysticism, particularly from ‘non-Occidental peoples’ (Ibid., p. 184).

Beyond a vague New Age reorientation towards the East and the invocation of the obscure Heideggerian notion of ‘releasement,’ Gray says nothing significant about where we should go from here. His prescriptions are so airy and insubstantial as to imply that resistance is futile. He is clear that the disenchantments the Enlightenment has brought to the Western outlook are irreversible; they ‘can perhaps be tempered, but not overcome’ (Ibid., p. 154). It seems that we should not rage against the dying of the light but rather go gentle into that good night.

FROM BLACK TO GRAY

Gray’s depiction of the Enlightenment is not a thing of subtlety or complexity. He tends to paint in black-and-white rather than in shades of grey on the subject. It isn’t clear (to me) just how extensive his knowledge of the Enlightenment really is. He quotes liberally from Voltaire in his small book on the great French *philosophe*, but his writings are not generally rooted in primary texts.³ Most are deliberately broad and sketchy, aimed at an audience of general readers, rather than fine portraits composed for academic specialists, which helps to explain their wide appeal.

By contrast, in the last half-century scholarship on the Enlightenment has become increasingly specialized and complex. It is now viewed by most experts as a very broad and diverse social, cultural, and intellectual movement that extended far beyond an elite circle of Parisian writers that typically includes Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, d’Alembert, Diderot, Condorcet, and d’Holbach. Distinctions are now made between a ‘high Enlightenment’ of such intellectuals and a ‘low Enlightenment’ of Grub Street journalists and pamphleteers who are now mostly forgotten.⁴ And we know of the existence of Enlightenment in many different national contexts, including Bohemia, Italy, Sweden, Scotland, Russia, and the Netherlands, each with important variations in outlook and emphasis that reflect local circumstances and cultural and historical particularities.⁵ This increasingly complicated picture has even led some scholars to reject the concept of a single Enlightenment movement (‘the Enlightenment,’ with a definite article and capital ‘E’), let alone a unified Enlightenment ‘project.’⁶

One example of the Enlightenment’s internal complexity will have to suffice here in the absence of space for more, and it is necessarily sketchy. The common perception of the eighteenth century as the ‘Age of Reason’ when Enlightenment thinkers exalted reason above the passions is shared by Gray. It is one of the typically naïve assumptions of its proponents that he often criticizes. Like Michael Oakeshott, he sees all forms of rationalism in politics as dangerous delusions that often lead to coercion and terror, particularly the Enlightenment form.

In fact, the views of the philosophers of the Enlightenment on this covered a broad range. At one extreme, thinkers such as David Hume, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarded the passions as greater than reason and could not fairly be accused of having a naïve faith in the latter. It is with some justification that the historian Peter Gay referred to ‘the Enlightenment’s rehabilitation of the passions’ (Gay 1969, p. 192). At the opposite extreme were those such as the mathematician the Marquis de Condorcet whose great confidence in the power of human reason was the basis of his faith in progress and unshakeable optimism about the future, particularly as expressed in his posthumously published *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). Most stood somewhere between these two poles, so it is hard to speak about a single Enlightenment view on this. Gray’s Enlightenment is a simplification that looks more like the unrepresentative Condorcet than it does the typical, mainstream eighteenth-century thinkers, most of whom viewed humans as a complex and volatile mix of reason and passions.

The same is true of many other aspects of eighteenth-century thought, such as religion and historical progress, which were just as varied. Often it is the enemies of the Enlightenment who set it up with a spurious internal coherence in order to make it an easier target to knock down.⁷ To some extent, ‘the Enlightenment’ is a construction of its enemies, and Gray is a good example of this. It is first constructed before it is de-constructed.

It is not entirely clear what the outer limits of Gray’s pluralism are that would keep him from straying into relativism. Here, the stark black-and-white of his portrait of the Enlightenment is replaced by a grey, misty vagueness and boldness gives way to reticence. His anti-liberal ‘agonistic pluralism’ is meant to encompass a broad range of illiberal and even anti-liberal societies. It would appear to preclude all forms of monism, including liberal monism, although ‘local liberalism,’ as I call it, is consistent with the ‘truth of value pluralism.’ But just how expansive and tolerant is his agonistic pluralism?

Pluralism differs from relativism in accepting the existence of objective human goods and values. It differs from monism in accepting that such goods and values are not all consistent with each other and there is no way to arrange them that is more rational than other ways. A liberal monist, for example, will affirm that freedom trumps all other cards in the values deck, so they must be subordinated to it when they clash, something pluralists deny. A relativist will not affirm anything morally, also something pluralists reject.

We have already seen that Gray calls for the development of new technologies that ‘serve human needs’ and he criticizes liberal practices for not facilitating ‘the satisfaction of human needs’ (Gray 1997, p. 156). And, contrary to the views of some post-modernists, he asserts that there are ‘some values that reflect universal human needs’ and thinks a commitment to ‘civilized restraint’ on the use of force is necessary. But he immediately qualifies this by claiming that not all human needs are consistent with each other and there is no rational way to arbitrate them. And the fact that such needs exist cannot, in itself, tell us whether they have any moral status without committing the naturalistic fallacy, something Gray appears to do here. Also, he tells us that universal values can be ‘embodied in different ways,’ none of which is more rational or legitimate than the rest (Ibid., p. 279).

So, while Gray is clearly a pluralist rather than a relativist, it remains frustratingly obscure what the outer moral limits of his pluralism are. He does not specify what universal human needs are and does not really explore their implications for his position. His language implies that they not only exist but should (in the normative sense) be satisfied, something he says liberalism cannot do. If this applies to all humans, then how can he avoid a version of ethical naturalism of the kind that he otherwise rejects as universalist, something that will eventually lead to nihilism via some form of political pathology?

In addition to the satisfaction of human needs as a requirement of his agonistic pluralism, setting it apart from relativism, Gray appears to expect societies to accept ‘the truth of value pluralism,’ which he regards as the only realistic foundation for political life. He welcomes a ‘renaissance of particularisms, ethnic and religious,’ wants to ‘share the earth with radically different cultures,’ and preserve ‘traditional communities and cultural forms,’ all of which are antithetical to the universal civilization that Gray argues

is the final goal of the Enlightenment Project. But does he really believe that most of these traditional, non-liberal cultures would endorse value pluralism?

Gray accuses liberalism of a dangerously utopian idealism, but there is a clear lack of realism here in his apparent expectation that non-Western cultures might embrace value pluralism any more than Western cultures have. He has already ruled out as unacceptable ‘projects of cultural fundamentalism’ found in some reactionary anti-modernists. So Gray presumably wants all cultures to reject such fundamentalism in favour of value pluralism while still retaining their ‘traditional communities and cultural forms.’ If this really is his hope, then it seems like little more than a fantasy. But his very vague and seemingly unserious comments on all this strongly hint that’s just how he sees it—as a fantasy. But if he is serious and if it did somehow come about, then the world would be a plurality of pluralists and not a plurality of monists. In that case it’s hardly likely to contain ‘radically different cultures.’ Such a world would probably look quite similar to the liberal hegemony he claims we have now, albeit with a Rortian rather than a Rawlsian hue.

There is also a dearth of realism in Gray’s requirement that the West just ‘give up’ its most fundamental assumptions about itself and the world that he claims have underpinned and legitimized its outlook for millennia. It is not clear what it even means to do so. Nor is it apparent if he intends the West to ‘give up’ all of science, or just selected parts of it. If the latter, how would that be possible without retaining the universalist assumptions and methods on which those parts are based? If the former, then would Gray really want to throw out all of the technological benefits we currently enjoy, such as those of medical science? It would help if he was much more specific about what he actually intends and explained more clearly just how far beyond liberalism and Western science he thinks we should go in the wake of the Enlightenment. That he has avoided doing so raises the possibility that none of his rather under-developed prescriptions are really meant to be taken too seriously.

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NOTES

- 1 Nietzsche was actually surprisingly ambivalent about the Enlightenment, as I have shown in Garrard 2008.
- 2 See Garrard 2007 for an account of Berlin's views on liberalism and the Enlightenment.
- 3 Gray 2023 is an exception. It relies directly on the writings of Thomas Hobbes.
- 4 For a very good general overview of these changes in Enlightenment historiography, see Outram 2019.
- 5 The various national forms of Enlightenment are chronicled in Porter and Teich 1981.
- 6 See Schmidt 2000.
- 7 This is the theme of Garrard 2006

Reconsidering Post-Modern Liberal Conservatism

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to evaluate whether John Gray's short-lived "post-modern liberal conservatism" is a more defensible position compared to the radical pluralism later adopted by the author. It first reconstructs Gray's post-modern liberal conservatism, analyzes his shift toward radical pluralism, and evaluates whether this abandonment was justified. Since Gray rarely argues against his previous position, it is tested against the arguments directed at Rorty's post-modern liberalism, a position which Gray associated with his own. Subsequently, the viability of Gray's radical pluralism is examined in its own right. The essay concludes that post-modern liberal conservatism constitutes the more viable alternative, since it withstands the arguments leveled against Rorty while avoiding the antinomies of Gray's later stance.

Keywords: John Gray; post-modern liberal conservatism; post-liberalism; value-pluralism; modus vivendi; Richard Rorty; liberalism; post-modernity

In the context of post-modernity, characterized by fragmented knowledge, the question of how to justify our political arrangements is a troubling one. There appears to be no natural law to appeal to, and the projects that still harbor the intellectual *hybris* of Enlightenment rationalism prove misguided at best. While some might instinctively deny this outlook, John Gray takes it seriously to its ultimate consequences. One of his attempts at responding to the challenges of post-modernity was formulated in the early 1990s under the label of "post-modern liberal conservatism", a radically historicist defense of the liberal order in its most fundamental form, the institutional legacy of civil society. However, this view was quickly displaced by Gray himself as he turned to embrace a more radical form of pluralism, one which does not necessitate liberalism and sees it as merely another tool for achieving peace.

Given its brief life, post-modern liberal conservatism has received little scholarly attention. This essay seeks to redress that gap, and to assess whether Gray's abandonment of post-modern liberal conservatism in favor of radical pluralism was warranted, or whether the former remains the more defensible stance. It first reconstructs Gray's post-modern liberal conservatism, while later analyzing his shift toward radical pluralism. The arguments against his previous position are then evaluated. Since Gray scarcely argues against post-modern liberal conservatism, this study instead tests whether his arguments against Rorty's post-modern liberalism—associated by Gray with his own view—hold up. After this, his radical pluralism is put to the test, with main emphasis on Michael Bacon's critique. The argument advanced here is that Gray's post-modern liberal conservatism is the more viable position, since it withstands the arguments leveled against Rorty and avoids the antinomies of Gray's later stance.

POST-LIBERALISM AND POST-MODERN LIBERAL CONSERVATISM

What Gray calls “post-modern liberal conservatism” is a stance that was developed during his “post-liberal” phase, one which was most clearly exhibited in the essays that comprise *Post-liberalism*. Post-liberalism arises in response to what Gray identifies as a “fundamentalist or doctrinal liberalism, according to which liberal institutions framed the only fully legitimate regime for the whole of humankind” (1996/1993, p. vii). In post-liberal theory, “liberal practice is defended not as the application of a universal political morality but as an historical inheritance which meets human needs in the context of late modernity” (Ibid.). And thus, from this perspective: “the failures of foundationalist liberal political philosophy are accepted as final and not to be lamented, since we have all we need in the core institutions of liberal civil society” (Ibid.).

Gray’s post-liberalism follows a historicist approach, though not unequivocally so. This is because during Gray’s post-liberal phase there is an ambivalence between a historicist defense of liberal institutions and the idea of objective value-pluralism.¹ This is clearest in his “What is dead and what is living in liberalism?” essay (Ibid.), in which he attempts to reconcile both positions, invoking Michael Oakeshott—for his historicist defense of civil association—and Isaiah Berlin—for his liberalism founded on radical value-pluralism. The argument developed here is that liberalism as a political philosophy is dead, given that “none of the four constitutive elements of doctrinal liberalism—universalism, individualism, egalitarianism and meliorism—survives the ordeal by value-pluralism” (Ibid., p. 284). The argument then takes a historicist turn, as Gray concludes that “what is living in liberalism is the historic inheritance (...) of a civil society whose institutions protect liberty and permit civil peace” (Ibid.). And this kind of political order is the most apt for “all or virtually all contemporary cultures, which harbour a diversity of incommensurable conceptions of the good” (Ibid.).

The two arguments are distinct, and although they may reinforce each other, no relation of necessity binds them. This ambivalence is key to explaining his later abandonment of the post-liberal view. Gray similarly develops two different arguments in favor of post-liberalism in his postscript to *Liberalisms*, in which he argues that foundational liberal philosophy must be abandoned both because of the indeterminacy of its own principles and its lack of historical grounding:

A central disability of liberal ideology, then, in addition to the indeterminacies infecting its constitutive principles, is its blindness to the historical singularity of its distinctive forms of self-identity and self-understanding. If we abandon the delusive perspective of universality, however, then we can see liberal society as a historical achievement, an inheritance of institutions and traditions which informs our thought and practice in profound ways, but which we are bound to acknowledge has no universally apodictic character (Gray 1989, p. 240).

He develops this purely historicist line—against doctrinal or foundational liberalism and in favor of post-liberalism—in his essay “The politics of cultural diversity” (1996/1993) under the label of “post-modern liberal conservatism”, which Gray chose to associate his position with that of Richard Rorty.² Most specifically, it resembles Rorty’s “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” (1991), a label which he applies to himself—and also to Michael Oakeshott and John Dewey—to describe a defense of liberal institutions that disposes of any ahistorical philosophical foundation. In this essay, the argument is historicist through and through, as it defends a particular political order transmitted through tradition and presents it as most apt for the historical condition of liberal individuals living in a post-modern world.

The single most important premise on which Gray relies is the idea that modern life is defined by living in “societies which are not unified by any single cultural tradition, but which contain a variety of traditions and ways of life” (1996/1993, p. 253). Gray describes our societies as encompassing a “kaleidoscopic diversity of attitudes to sexuality and gender, death and the human condition, even as they harbour a prodigious diversity of ethnic inheritances and styles of life” (Ibid.).

However, this plurality of traditions and ways of life can be observed not only at the societal level but also within the individual.³ The experience of marginality is integral to the identity of the modern individual: “because we belong to many different and often discrepant networks and communities, we belong wholly to none of them” (Ibid., p. 263). Because of this, the role of government is best understood as confining itself to maintaining peaceful coexistence:

In the subtle mosaic of traditions which is modern society, government is ill-fitted to act as guardian or protector of any of the traditions it shelters. It cannot claim to express any deep, undergirding moral community in the society, since no such community exists (Ibid., pp. 264-265).

What Gray is explicitly combating is a feature of modern thought that he calls a “modern heresy”, the idea that “political orders ought to embody or express the cultural identity of homogeneous moral communities” (Ibid., p. 254). Gray then goes on to describe why socialism, liberalism, and also conservatism commit this heresy. The most obvious case is, of course, socialism, as it is central to Marxism that contingent human identities—the only ones that actually exist—are the product of a mode of production that falsifies true human essence, whose expression would be made possible in a Communist society.

In the case of liberalism, Gray first describes the liberal individual as “a cultural achievement perhaps more precious than any other bequeathed to us by European civilization” (Ibid., p. 259). However, the mistake of liberalism—as exemplified by authors such as Mill—is treating it as more than a historical contingency: “to deny the historical reality of liberal individuality is then absurd, but to turn it into a universal theory—or, after the fashion of the Enlightenment, to appoint it to the *telos* of history—is to traffic in illusions” (Ibid.).

Besides the charge against both Marxism and liberalism of harboring this modern heresy, it is Gray’s charge against conservative criticism of liberalism that is most interesting, since here the modern element is far less obvious:

The conservative theorist, like the communitarian critic of liberalism from the Left, moves unreflectively from the truth that we are none of us unencumbered or disembodied selves to the very different, and indeed manifestly false proposition that we are, or ought to be radically situated selves—that is to say (...) selves whose identity is contoured by membership in a single moral community and mirrored in the institutions of a single political order (Ibid., p. 261).

Here, communitarian conservatism commits the modern heresy by proposing a seamless community, and it is myopic in not taking into account the fact that the modern individual does not belong to any single community exclusively. Gray’s post-modern liberal conservatism precisely avoids the modern heresy and, in Hobbesian spirit, proposes a much more modest role of government, which is “to keep in good repair what Oakeshott calls civil association—that structure of law in which, having no purpose in common, practitioners may coexist in peace” (Ibid., p. 265). According to Gray, this is not only better suited to modern societies, but also a better reading of European history. Following Oakeshott, he states: “the condition of moral complexity to which I have alluded is not a novelty of modern decadence, but instead a phenomenon that manifests itself in European life at least since the late-medieval period” (Ibid., p. 263). But what is post-modern in post-modern liberal conservatism is that:

In coming to understand liberal individuality as an appropriate rendition of our experience as moderns, however, we abandon the distinctively modern (or Enlightenment) project of grounding liberalism on the universal maxims of autonomous reason. [In] recognizing the time-bound modernity of the liberal individual we do not (...) deconstruct the individual, but rather initiate

a form of post-modern individualism that is fully conscious of its own historical particularity (Ibid., p. 259).

In this, the post-modern individual resembles Rorty's liberal ironist⁴, a figure who is fully aware of the contingency of his or her community's practices. Since we no longer need to rely on the secular myths that upheld the liberal order, "we acquire the paradoxical character of post-moderns, heirs to all the achievements of modernity, but not to its seminal myths" (Ibid., p. 269). The challenge, then, is to defend a political order that we know both not to be rooted in human nature and to be historically particular. Gray himself acknowledges the fragility of this arrangement, yet he concludes on a hopeful note, envisioning "a form of political solidarity that does not depend on shared moral community, but only on the mutual recognition of civilized men and women" (Ibid., p. 271).

THE SHIFT TO RADICAL PLURALISM

This hope for a foundationless liberal political order does not last, as Gray explicitly shifts away from the stance just described. Not only from post-modern liberal conservatism but also from post-liberalism itself. He does this explicitly in *Enlightenment's Wake*, and he summarizes this shift in the preface to the second edition of *Post-liberalism*:

In *Enlightenment's Wake* (...) I take the argument of *Post-liberalism* one step further. I contend that there is no reason why the liberal project of devising a *modus vivendi* for people who hold to incommensurably different conceptions and values should everywhere be best achieved by the adoption of liberal institutions. The true successor to the liberal project is *pluralism*, the position which affirms that the diversity of forms of ethical life is legitimately mirrored and reflected in a variety of institutions and regimes, both liberal and nonliberal. Pluralism is a response to the diversity of incommensurable values and perspectives that is a peculiarly prominent feature of early post-modernity. It relinquishes the universalist ambitions of the Enlightenment project and of liberal theory, and maintains that the terms of peaceful coexistence must be worked out locally and in practice, vary considerably along with cultural and historical contexts, and will only sometimes encompass the construction of liberal institutions (Ibid., p. ix).

If taken at face value, his shift seems rather minor, and it just entails a move from a supposedly universalist to a more particularist view. What Gray is referencing is the idea he developed in the "What is dead and what is living in liberalism" essay in which he postulates civil society as "a condition of prosperity and peace for any modern civilization" (Ibid., p. 320). To fully understand the implications of this shift, it is necessary to consider how his diagnosis evolved. While, in *Post-liberalism*, his post-modern liberal conservatism is seen as an adequate response to the condition of post-modernity, in *Enlightenment's Wake* (2007a/1995), it appears as something of a half-measure. In avoiding the modern heresy, this proposal ends up giving—according to Gray—unwarranted privilege to a particular political order:

In the context of emerging post-modernity, liberal practice can have no special authority even for those cultures in which it is an historic inheritance. For this reason, neither Rorty's post-modern bourgeois liberalism, nor the post-modern liberal conservatism I have myself argued for in the past, takes the full measure of the cultural metamorphosis that the passing of the Enlightenment project comprehends—a transformation comparable in scale and depth with the passing of Christianity as a unifying world-view (Ibid., p. 234)

Gray's diagnosis in *Enlightenment's Wake* (Ibid.) is that with the passing of the Enlightenment, there is no possibility of re-enchantment, nor salvaging the project itself: "for us, the post-modern condition of fractured perspectives and groundless practices is a historical fate, which we are wise to make the best of" (Ibid., p. 219). Yet he also rejects the post-modernist view, one which he describes as "typically one which

rejects Enlightenment reason while retaining its commitment to a humanist emancipatory project” (Ibid.). Thus, Gray rejects two alternatives which he recognizes that appear with the waning of the Enlightenment project, one anti-modern (represented by MacIntyre) and the other being the post-modern alternative (represented by Rorty).

Gray (Ibid.) wholly rejects MacIntyre’s prescription, arguing against the idea of recovering an Aristotelian and Thomistic view of morality in response to the fragmented world of post-modernity.⁵ However, what mainly concerns us here is his rejection of the post-modern alternative. Gray characterizes Rorty’s view: “Rorty believes giving up foundationalist projects and accepting the contingency of their practices and the fragility of liberal hopes would strengthen liberal ironists in their commitment to their life” (Ibid., p. 254). The post-modernist move of decoupling liberalism and its philosophical foundations, which echoes Gray’s previous stance, is now seen as untenable. Gray’s arguments against Rorty’s post-modern liberalism can be summarized in three main points: first, it tacitly assumes a philosophy of history in which a Western model is taken as a universal condition. Second, it underestimates the importance of the Enlightenment philosophical foundations for the liberal order itself, as they have taken a crucial role in liberal cultures. Third—and closely linked to the second claim—it incoherently retains a commitment to human emancipation while jettisoning Enlightenment rationalism.

After rejecting both alternatives—pre-modern and post-modern—Gray describes his shift as going from a view “in which liberal institutions and practices are commended for their hospitality to forms of moral diversity marked in value-pluralism, to a pluralist view, in which liberal forms of life enjoy no special privileges of any kind” (Ibid., p. 214). Gray frames this as a consequence of the passing of the Enlightenment, after which:

*Pluralist forms will emerge, animated by the goal of facilitating a *modus vivendi*, not only or primarily among different personal life-plans or conceptions of the good, but first and foremost among different communities and their associated cultural traditions. Such pluralist institutions may reasonably adopt elements of liberal practice where that is a living historical inheritance which meets contemporary human needs; but the pretensions of liberal societies to be germs of a universal civilization must be forgone* (Ibid., p. 233).

According to Gray, this sort of arrangement not only relinquishes the universalist pretensions of Rortyan liberalism, but also abandons any priority given to the liberal order for the achievement of *modus vivendi*:

we may reasonably anticipate that liberal practice will be reformed, or abandoned, when it becomes manifest that they do not best facilitate the satisfaction of human needs in the late modern context of deep cultural diversity (Ibid., p. 234).

The support for this *modus vivendi* pluralism is coupled with a disposition—or mode of thinking—of “releasement” that Gray suggests we can find in Heidegger, “most particularly in the mode he calls *Gelassenheit*, which is the mode of ‘releasement’ in which we let things be rather than aiming willfully to transform them or subject them to our purposes” (Ibid., p. 229).

ON THE PLAUSIBILITY OF FOUNDATIONLESS LIBERALISM

Gray says little about why he rejects his earlier stance, but since he has admittedly linked his view to Rorty’s he likely believes that at least some claims he levels against Rorty’s post-modern liberalism also apply to his own post-modern liberal conservatism. Because of this, it is convenient to take Rorty’s liberalism as a foil, and to examine the three main points that are leveled against it, while also evaluating whether each of them applies to Gray’s previous stance.

The first one is the charge of universalism. This point most clearly applies to his own former view, since he takes it as a point of departure, and also believes his view resembles Rorty's "in attempting a radically historicist reformulation of liberal theory, in which the near-universal authority of liberal institutions is preserved" (Gray 1996/1993, p. viii). Gray believes there is no basis for the universalist pretensions of Rorty's liberal utopia.⁶ As Gray notes: "why should practitioners of non-liberal forms of life give up the project of renewing them, merely because it collides with the local practices of liberal societies, as Rorty conceives of them?" (1995/1986, p. 93). However, Gray (2007a/1995) also argues that Rorty's view tacitly relies on a philosophy of history, a claim that seems exaggerated. As Michael Bacon points out, in Rorty's utopia there is a difference between universal validity and universal reach: "he is firm in the view that achieving that utopia cannot be presupposed but can only stem from free discussion" (2007, p. 94). Rather than a conviction of universality—which a philosophy of history would imply—it is an open-ended hope.

Much the same holds for Gray's own universalism in *Post-liberalism*, in which he maintains that civil society might not be "universal in fact. Its universality is that of a necessary condition, in virtually all contemporary historical contexts (...) of a common life for those with divergent values and conceptions of the world" (Gray 1996/1993, p. 320). Here, Gray's position is very similar to Rorty's in its assumption of a universality of reach. Whether it rests on a philosophy of history is secondary; Gray's larger point—that any hope for universalism is completely unwarranted—remains compelling.

The second charge concerns whether liberal cultures require Enlightenment foundations to survive. This argument applies to both proposals, given that both of them represent radically historicist defenses of the liberal order. Gray (although emphasizing the case of the US) argues that liberal cultures require their Enlightenment foundations, "precisely because the universalist claims of liberal philosophy have become embedded in the public culture of liberal societies" (2007a/1995, p. 262). Against this premise that the liberal order requires firmly held philosophical convictions, one can respond in Oakeshottian fashion that the relationship is inverted, as Michael Bacon (2004, p. 64) does following Brian Barry, when he argues that the "philosophical articulation of liberalism was not an *a priori* justification but an *a posteriori* rationalization, and thus liberalism has no need of the sort of philosophical grounding of which writers like MacIntyre and Gray believe it is now being deprived".

Yet this does not fully respond to the claim that this relationship has transformed into a symbiotic one, given how embedded the Enlightenment premises are in liberal cultures. Against this empirical claim, one can respond, as Rorty (1997, p. 50) himself did, maintaining that Gray's prediction is simply overly pessimistic, and that "maybe he is right that political hope cannot survive in a post-modernist intellectual climate. But maybe it can". It follows that both proposals must be taken as wagers. Here Gray's third point becomes relevant, since the stakes in Rorty's wager seem unreasonably high. As Gray (1995/1986, 2007a/1995) correctly points out, there is a strong element of human emancipation and self-creation in his post-modern liberalism that owes much to the Romantic movement and to the Enlightenment itself. Nonetheless, this is not the case in his own post-modern liberal conservatism, which is a much more modest, Hobbesian stance. What is being defended is the legacy of civil society, not individual self-creation but mere peaceful coexistence. Therefore, the plausibility of not needing to rely on any philosophical foundations at all is much higher than in Rorty's case.

As becomes clear, while the charges against Rorty can be taken as enough to reject his post-modern liberalism, this is not the case with Gray's post-modern liberal conservatism. This stance can withstand these three charges if it relinquishes its universalist pretensions—which do not play a central role in it—while maintaining the historicist justification of liberal practice. It does require a wager against Gray's empirical predictions but it is one that seems quite plausible. Up to this point, the arguments have followed an historical logic, in the sense that Gray justifies his shift by claiming that this view is no longer apt for current conditions. However, Gray's later pluralist project pulls the thread of value-pluralism further, making value-pluralism itself the core of its justification, thus leaving the historicist reasons for the shift in the background.

THE FATE OF PLURALISM WITHOUT LIBERALISM

After abandoning post-liberalism, Gray comes to rely heavily on the argument of value-pluralism, radicalizing his project toward its furthest conclusions. Thus, Gray arrives at a position that, while philosophically coherent at first glance, turns out to be highly problematic for reasons discussed in the following section. The seeds of this are already evident in earlier works, in which Gray describes his view of the role of philosophy: “philosophy may be critical or subversive of practice without thereby founding one set of practices or grounding any single form of life”⁷ (1989, p. 163). And although this stance predates the shift in *Enlightenment’s Wake*, it is quite explanatory of the later progressive thinning of his political proposal. The reliance on value-pluralism can already be seen in *Enlightenment’s Wake*, where he argues that “the implications of strong value-pluralism inexorably entail relinquishing the liberal project. Even non-standard or agonistic liberalism is not immune to the subversive force of value-pluralism” (Gray 2007a/1995, p. 212). Hence Gray’s shift is grounded not only in empirical predictions about the self-defeating fate of the Enlightenment project, but also in his belief that the truth of value-pluralism has political consequences.

This relation of causality has not been made clear and has led to impasses within Gray’s own thought. As Bacon (2010) suggests, despite rejecting rationalism and the Enlightenment project, Gray seems to be committed to elements of Enlightenment liberalism in the defense of his *modus vivendi*. This is perfectly exemplified by Gray’s claim that believers in universal religions suffer from illusions⁸, but also by the requirement of abandoning those beliefs in favor of value-pluralism:

Conflicts arising from the clashing universalist claims of religious fundamentalists are founded on errors. Internalising the truth of value-pluralism within a human subject or a culture has the effect of dissolving such rivalries. In this way accepting the truth of value pluralism can reduce conflicts among values and promote *modus vivendi* (Gray 2000b, p. 91).

If philosophy plays a subversive role in political practice, it must then be because individuals must internalize the truth that has been arrived at. This explains why Gray remains insistent on his belief that “*modus vivendi* rests on the belief that value-conflict is a natural feature of human life, and for that reason *modus vivendi* cannot be decoupled from value pluralism” (Gray 2007b, p. 224). If Gray’s *modus vivendi* pluralism requires us to relinquish our illusions in favor of accepting the truth of value-pluralism, then it can be argued that Gray’s project “replicates the Enlightenment concern to replace unfounded belief with rationally justified knowledge” (Bacon 2010, p. 377). Paradoxically, then, in aiming for a radical pluralism that is more coherent with value-pluralism, and at the same time, is more apt than his previous positions in the face of the self-defeat of the Enlightenment project, Gray returns to its rationalist pretensions.

Another issue is that in defending a form of *modus vivendi* that goes beyond the liberal political order—or does not require it—Gray is formulating a very abstract arrangement that risks being one in which “anything goes”. To solve this, Gray (2000a) formulates the idea of universal values that ground a universal minimum moral standard. Gray insists that such an idea does not ground a universal morality,⁹ but as Bacon suggests:

He proposes a standpoint that is said to be universal. He thinks that the universal minimum means that he can criticize worldviews and moralities from the outside without committing himself to the Enlightenment project that prescribes a single way of life. The problem, however, is that this response comes at a cost, namely, it conflicts with value pluralism (2010, p. 382).

In the need for the acceptance of the truth of value-pluralism, and the proposal of this universal minimum moral standard, Gray falls back into the transformative and universalist elements of the Enlightenment project (Ibid.). This signifies a betrayal of his own politics of releasement, as the fact that

this disposition alone cannot sustain a defense of *modus vivendi*, and that Gray must therefore rely on remnants of Enlightenment rationalism, illustrates the difficulty *Gelassenheit* faces in avoiding nihilism and political quietism. As Peter Lassman suggests: “if western civilization, whether the product of the Enlightenment or not, is so doomed then why bother to defend any form of liberalism, *modus vivendi* or otherwise, at all?” (2007, p. 101).

Consequently, Gray’s later pluralism faces a “two-horned problem”: either a retreat into political quietism/nihilism, or a relapse into the Enlightenment project through the universal minimum moral standard and the demand to internalize the truth of value-pluralism. Both cannot be coherently held at once. By process of elimination—following Gray’s own diagnosis—the only feasible alternative to this undesirable scenario is the wager of post-modern liberal conservatism. This avoids the nihilist consequence of *Gelassenheit* because it defends a specific historically grounded political order, one that expresses the modern European notion of individuality (Gray 1989). It also avoids a collapse back into Enlightenment rationalism because of its radically historicist nature: a defense of particular institutions transmitted through tradition, one that does not require anyone to accept any philosophical conclusions.

The paradox of this scenario is that in searching for a more coherent value-pluralism that takes itself seriously and has political implications, Gray has arrived at a dead end: either accept one of two equally undesirable conclusions, or cling to a proposal that is untenable in its entirety. And although the alternative might seem uncertain in that it is indeed a wager, one might still borrow from Rorty’s notion of political hope, one that does not require much philosophical weaponry, given that “philosophy is a good servant of political hope, but a bad master” (Rorty 1997, p. 50).

This essay has reconstructed post-modern liberal conservatism and shown why it constitutes a preferable alternative to Gray’s radical pluralism. While it is reasonable to concede the point to Gray and relinquish its universal pretensions, this is not central to this proposal. What matters most is the “method” itself; the radically historicist justification is precisely what steers it clear of the antinomies of Gray’s later view. The challenge to post-modern liberal conservatism is that it remains a wager, and thus it requires the confidence of post-modern individualists, who, while aware of the historical contingency of their practices, are able to defend them because they are the best available means of maintaining peaceful coexistence. Its chief strength lies in offering an allegiance without philosophical foundations, yet firmly anchored in historical experience. Moreover, because of its non-ideological character, it allows for flexibility in its defense when engaging in politics. It can be said that this proposal shares Rorty’s belief that liberalism can survive without Enlightenment foundations, while avoiding his emancipatory pretensions. And while Gray may argue that it belongs to the past, it appears to be a necessary wager in an era where no stronger form of solidarity remains available.¹⁰

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NOTES

- 1 Gray (1996/1993, p. 297) describes his value-pluralism as a plural realism, which is "the view that, whereas there are definite limits on the varieties of human flourishing, there are many forms of life, often exhibiting divergent and uncombinable goods, in which human beings may flourish, and none of them is the one right way of life for man".
- 2 "The 'post-modern liberal conservatism' argued for in this book resembles the position of Richard Rorty, by which it was avowedly inspired, in attempting a radically historicist reformulation of liberal theory, in which the near-universal authority of liberal institutions is preserved" (Gray 1996/1993, p. viii).
- 3 Besides this historical argument, Gray also thinks there is something to say about the human condition as a whole: "To a very considerable extent, human beings are self-defining animals: they differ from other animal species precisely in their ability partly to constitute for themselves their own identities. This is to say that, for humans, personal identity is not a natural fact but a cultural artifact. We are what we are, not because nature has made us this way, but because we (...) have made us what we are (...) If the identities of persons are artificial and not natural, if they vary within broad constraints imposed by our biological endowment and exhibit a rich variety of kinds and forms, then any essentialist or naturalistic conception of the human species is to be rejected as false if not incoherent. We are left with human beings in all the miscellaneous diversity with which they present themselves to each other" (1996/1993, p. 258).
- 4 "The citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists —people who met Schumpeter's criterion of civilization, people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment" (Rorty 1989, p. 61).
- 5 "The self-defeatingness of the Enlightenment project, which is the self-undermining effect of modernity in inexorably disclosing its own groundlessness, is for MacIntyre reason to step back from the greatest moral theorist of modernity, Nietzsche, in order to vindicate in terms adequate to contemporary philosophical inquiry the pre-modern intellectual tradition of Aristotelianism, particularly in its central Thomistic version. For me, by contrast, the self-defeat of the Enlightenment project, particularly as that is expressed in the thought of Nietzsche, is the end-point of that larger and longer Western intellectual tradition of which Thomism was one of the most powerful syntheses. There can, in my view, be no rolling back the central project of modernity, which is the Enlightenment project, with all its consequences in terms of disenchantment and

ultimate groundlessness. The modernist project of Enlightenment, though it broke with pre-modern, classical and medieval, thought at many points, was also continuous with it in its universalism and its foundationalist and representationalist rationalism” (Gray 2007a/1995, pp. 226-227).

- 6 Rorty describes his global liberal utopia as “the image of a planetwide democracy, a society in which torture, or the closing down of a university or a newspaper, on the other side of the world is as much of a cause for outrage as it is when it happens at home. This cosmopolis may be, in non-political matters, as multicultural and heterogenous as ever. But in this utopian future cultural traditions will have ceased to have an influence on political decisions. In politics there will be only one tradition: that of constant vigilance against the predictable attempts by the rich and the strong to take advantage of the poor and weak” (1995, pp. 203-204).
- 7 Gray contrasts his view with one that he attributes to Wittgenstein, Oakeshott and Rorty, one which posits that “philosophy may illuminate but cannot otherwise change practice” (1989, p. 163).
- 8 “From the standpoint of value-pluralism, all conflicts between rival claims about the best life for humankind are collisions of illusions” (Gray 2000a, p. 21).
- 9 “To affirm the reality of universal human goods and evils is not to endorse a universal morality, such as many liberal thinkers have attempted to defend. Universal values are compatible with many moralities, including liberalism (...) There is no one regime that can reasonably be imposed on all. Even minimal moral standards can be met in different ways” (Gray 2000a, p. 67).
- 10 Special thanks to the *Nueva Cultura* project (Universidad de los Andes, Chile) and to the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame.

Liberty and the Kinds of Order in Society

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In 1984, John Gray published a pioneering study of Hayek's social and political thought, titled *Hayek on Liberty* (Gray 1984). Gray rightly sees Hayek as an eclectic liberal who draws on thinkers ranging from Adam Smith and Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, among many others.

In the heyday of Keynesianism, Hayek was indeed seen as an eccentric champion of Austrian economics, but as confidence in mainstream Keynesian economics has eroded, Hayek's stock has steadily risen. Gray's book set a high bar for future Hayek scholarship with its comprehensive, annotated bibliography of Hayek's published works. Gray focused his exposition and critique on Hayek's theory of social and cultural evolution, asking whether liberty is likely to be the outcome. By contrast, in this essay, I shall be much more narrowly focused on the question of whether Hayek's libertarian politics rests on his notion of a spontaneous social order.

1. TRANSCENDING THE NATURE-CONVENTION DICHOTOMY

Throughout his life, Hayek insisted social order could not be understood through the common antithesis of nature and convention. This familiar contrast has ancient roots and contemporary defenders. G. A. Cohen, for example, asserts: "The Sophists' distinction between nature and convention is the foundation of all social criticism" (1978, p. 107).

Still, whatever its defects, the Sophists' bold antithesis was certainly a provocation to the thought of Hayek: "Unfortunately, the Greeks' distinction between natural and artificial has become the greatest obstacle to further advance..." (Hayek 1978, pp. 4-5).¹ As we shall see, the division of social institutions into what is natural and what is conventional is certainly widespread, but far from universal.

Why does Hayek so strongly object to this commonplace? Hayek argues that the nature-convention dichotomy embodies the assumption that all social order is either natural or deliberately instituted, thereby ignoring the crucial role of the customary or spontaneous order such as we find in language, law, and the market.² "Yet much of what we call culture is just such a spontaneously grown order [e.g. custom], which arose neither altogether independently of human action [nature] nor by design [stipulation], but by a process that stands between these two possibilities, which were long considered as exclusive alternatives" (Hayek 1979, p. 509).

Hayek sees this same unfortunate dichotomy in debates about sociobiology: one side explains human behavior in terms of "instinct" while the other side appeals to human "reason." But Hayek insists that human conduct is more fundamentally rooted in habit and custom than in either instinct or reason: "Just as instinct is older than custom and tradition, so then are the latter older than reason: custom and tradition stand *between* instinct and reason—logically, psychologically, temporally" (Hayek 1988, p. 24). Thus, Hayek in several places insists that we replace the nature-convention dichotomy with a nature, custom,

and reason trichotomy, so that we acknowledge the fundamental importance of the organically-evolving order of habit and custom in human social life.³

Hayek attributes this unfortunate dichotomy to the Sophists of the fifth century and to the influence of Aristotle.⁴ He also argues that it was not until the eighteenth century that thinkers such as Mandeville and Hume acknowledged the existence of phenomena that arose neither by nature nor by deliberate design, namely, the whole realm of customary social institutions (Hayek 1973, p. 20). Hayek traces his notion of spontaneous order to Adam Ferguson: “Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design” (Ferguson 1767, p. 187).

Yet, as we shall see, several ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, had already transcended the Sophists’ dichotomy and recognized the importance of habit and custom. More importantly, Hayek’s own theory of social order would have benefited significantly from better knowledge of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. For Aristotle offers us not just the *tertium non datur* sought by Hayek, but also a theory of the relations of nature, custom, and reason in human life far more sophisticated than anything in Hayek.

Instead of just turning the older dichotomy into a new trichotomy, Aristotle shows us that these kinds of order form a nested hierarchy. In short, Aristotle shows that the kinds of social order are mutually inclusive, while Hayek tends to treat spontaneous and designed order as mutually exclusive.

Hayek is certainly right that many important Greek Sophists had set nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) into stark opposition.⁵ And Hayek is also right that many Greek writers disambiguated the notion of convention into either custom (*nomō*) or deliberate institution (*thesei*).⁶

Yet the greatest of the Sophists had already begun to transcend this stark dichotomy. Protagoras said: “Learning from teaching (*didaskalia*) requires both nature (*physis*) and practice (*askēsis*).”⁷ Plato also developed a version of this triad when he observed that “if one has the natural capacity (*physei*) for rhetoric, one can become a famous rhetorician, provided that one also acquires knowledge (*epistēmē*) and practice (*meletē*)” (Plato 1997, *Phaedrus* 269D). And Aristotle agrees on the need for all three qualities: “Now some think that we become good by nature (*physei*), others by habit (*ethei*), still others by teaching (*didakē*)” (Aristotle 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b20).

So all of these Greek philosophers had already transcended the crude dichotomy between what is natural and what is deliberately stipulated. Many Greeks, like many moderns, debated whether learning arose by nature or by nurture, but Protagoras, Plato, and Aristotle reject that false dilemma. They all insist that learning requires nature, habit, and reason. Like Hayek, they see the need for positing a reality between instinct and reason. That this fundamental insight into the complex order of individual and social human life should arise from a reflection upon education is characteristic of the Greek mind. For, as John Dewey was fond of saying, there is an important sense in which all of Greek philosophy is the philosophy of education.

2. TRICHOTOMY OR NESTED HIERARCHY?

In Book VII of Aristotle’s *Politics* we find this cryptic passage: “In order to become good and wise (*agathos kai spoudaios*) requires three things; these are nature, habit, and reason (*physis, ethos, logos*)” (1984, 1332a38). Few sentences in the Aristotelian corpus, I think, are as richly suggestive as is this one or as much in need of both interpretation and imaginative reconstruction.

From the immediate context we can see that Aristotle is speaking about the components of moral and intellectual self-realization: we must begin with the right natural powers and dispositions, we must cultivate them into the right habits of character, and we must use reason to reflectively adjust our habits in light of our stipulated moral ideals. In this model of human self-realization, our habits presuppose human nature but cannot be reduced to it, just as our stipulated rational ideals presuppose our habits but cannot be reduced to them.⁸

Aristotle extended his triad beyond individual self-realization to the actualization of the political community. Thus, he says in many places that when the legislator makes deliberate stipulations of law (*nomos*), he must take into account the natural capacities of his citizens as well as their social customs (*ethē* or *agraphoi nomoi*).

In the subsequent Aristotelian tradition, we find this triad employed in the analysis of several other social institutions. In jurisprudence we find many variants of expressions for natural, customary, and stipulated or positive law.⁹ In logic we find John Poinsoot (John of St. Thomas) asking “whether the division of signs into natural (*naturale*), stipulated (*ad placitum*), and customary (*ex consuetudine*) is a sound division” (Poinsoot 1985, p. 269). By natural signs he means those signs that relate to their objects independent of human activity: smoke is a sign of fire. By customary signs he means those signs that arise from the collective and non-reflective practices of human communities: napkins on a table are signs that dinner is imminent. By stipulated signs he means those signs whose meaning is deliberately appointed by an individual, as when a new word is introduced. Although Poinsoot does not refer to Aristotle in his discussion of the threefold division of signs, I argue that he is offering an interpretation and extension of Aristotle’s nature, custom, and reason.¹⁰

Following the lead of the theorists of order from Aquinas to Hayek, I will now reconstruct Aristotle’s triad in terms of three fundamental concepts of order: the natural order of physical, chemical, and biological processes; the customary order of habitual social practices; the stipulated order of deliberate design.

In Aristotelian political science, the unit of analysis is an institution or practice (some stable pattern of human action or interaction) and the level of analysis is natural order, customary order, or stipulated order. Our three kinds of order form the three dimensions of every human practice or institution, meaning that explanation must involve analysis at the levels of the sciences of nature, the sciences of custom, and the sciences of rational stipulation. For example, the study of language involves the natural sciences of psychology and physiology, the customary sciences of linguistic drift and analogy-formation, and the rational sciences of rhetoric and logic. Each of these levels of analysis is necessary to explain the complex order we find in language.

In accordance with Aristotle’s explicit logic of classification, I have thus far treated nature, custom, and rational stipulation as three species of the genus “order.” But this genus-species logic does not indicate the serial and hierarchical relations among our three concepts: nature is prior to custom and custom is prior to stipulation. Aristotle, however, offers an alternative logic of classification, which is most clearly illustrated by his analysis of the kinds of souls. Here, instead of defining the genus “soul” and the species of plant, animal, and human souls, Aristotle says that the plant soul is living (that is, nutritive and reproductive), the animal soul is living plus sensitive, and the human soul is living and sensitive plus rational (1984, *On the Soul* 414a29-415a13).

Aristotle implicitly treats nature, custom, and stipulation as such a hierarchy: “In every case the lower faculty can exist apart from the higher, but the higher presupposes those below it” (Hicks 1907, p. 335). Nature represents the physical, chemical, and biological processes of the cosmos; nature can and did exist apart from human custom and stipulation. Human custom is rooted in the physiology of habit but transcends habit by becoming a social system of norms. Custom presupposes nature, but custom can exist without being the object of rational reflection and stipulation: language existed before grammarians. Stipulation is the synoptic order deliberately imposed upon the pre-reflective materials of custom; reflective stipulation always presupposes custom.

By examining our triad in a variety of contexts, we will see that this progressive hierarchy is pervasive in Aristotle’s thought. First, for Aristotle, nature, custom, and stipulation articulate the hierarchy of the *scala naturae*: “The other animals for the most part live by nature (*physis*), though in some respects by habit (*ethos*) as well, while man lives also by reason (*logos*), for he alone has reason” (1984, *Politics* 1332b2). Just as Hayek said that custom is “between” instinct and reason, Aristotle says that habit is the bridge between nature and reason.

Second, nature, custom, and stipulation form the same progressive hierarchy in individual development as they do in the scale of nature: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Aristotle says that there are three kinds of human faculties (*dynamēis*): those that are innate (*suggenēs*), those that come by practice (*ethos*), and those that come from teaching (*mathēsis*) (1984, *Metaphysics* 1047b31). These three faculties form a hierarchy: “The contribution of nature clearly does not depend on us . . . while argument (*logos*) and teaching (*didakē*) surely do not influence everyone, but the soul of the student must have been prepared by habit (*ethos*)” (1984, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b21). Our nature, he says, is given at birth while our natural potentials are trained by habit; teaching invites us to reflect on our habits and perhaps stipulate new ones.

Third, this hierarchy plays the same role in the political development of a community as it does in the moral development of an individual. The first task of a legislator, says Aristotle, is to regulate the biological nature of the citizens through eugenics (*eugeneia* or *aretē genous*); his second task is to instill the proper habits in each citizen through an educational regime aimed at developing the right political disposition (*euhexia politikē*); his final task is to reflect on his first two tasks by studying political science (1984, *Politics* 1334b30ff; 1336a4). Aristotle not only pioneered Hayek’s triad of types of order, but he also developed that triad into a nested hierarchy rather than as a trichotomy.

This hierarchical structure was certainly understood by the student of Thomas Aquinas who completed his commentary on the *Politics*: “There ought to be harmony among them, namely, nature, custom, and reason: for always the latter presupposes the former.”¹¹ Aquinas himself analyzes the mutually complementary roles of nature, habit, and doctrine in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aquinas 1949, l. 14 [2143 ff]).

3. ARE THE KINDS OF ORDER MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

Hayek is well known for his emphasis on the importance of order in both understanding the world and in understanding the human mind. Indeed, Hayek argues that the mind and the world can only be defined in terms of a relational order.¹² Hayek attempts to replace the computational model of mind, based on algorithms, with a pattern-recognition model of mind. Instead of calculating in a linear sequence, human beings intuit patterns and draw rough inferences. Studies of chess expertise bear out Hayek’s insights here: grandmasters do not calculate long strings of possible moves; instead, they sense strengths and weaknesses in the patterns of the arrayed pieces.

Hayek never attempts formally to define order, and he merely adopts a definition from L. S. Stebbing: order is the basis for inference.¹³ Order cannot be properly defined because it is a logically primitive concept that is presupposed in any act of mind. In his identification of mind with the recognition of order, Hayek follows Thomas Aquinas, who says in the prologue to his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “to be wise is to establish order. The reason for this is that wisdom is the most powerful perfection of reason, whose characteristic is to know order” (Aquinas 1980, Prologue, n. 1).

Aristotle has no generic concept of order and Hayek is right when he notes that we get the first philosophical treatment of order in Augustine’s treatise *De Ordine* (Hayek 1973, p. 155n). But Hayek’s specific concepts of order are clearly found in Aristotle, who explicitly articulates natural, customary, and stipulated order in his discussion of good social order: *eukosmia*, *eunomia*, and *eutaxia*. Here *kosmos* connotes natural social order, *nomos* connotes customary or legal order, and *taxis* connotes deliberately stipulated order, as in the order of battle (1984, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b14; *Politics* 1299b16, 1326a30). Yet, whereas Hayek strongly contrasts *kosmos* as spontaneous order with *taxis* as stipulated order, Aristotle stresses that every social institution has all three kinds of social order. For example, Hayek strongly contrasts the stipulated order of legislation with the spontaneous order of custom and common law.¹⁴ But Aristotle notes that legal custom is often created by deliberate stipulation in legislation (1984, *Movement of Animals* 703a29).

In addition to his trichotomy of natural, customary, and stipulated order (or instinct, custom, and reason), Hayek also develops a dichotomy of spontaneous and designed order. Although Hayek is widely credited in the secondary literature for pioneering the expression “spontaneous order,” Struan Jacobs

argues that Michael Polanyi actually deserves credit for introducing this concept and expression into twentieth-century social theory (Jacobs 1999, pp. 111-127). Hayek uses a variety of terms to mark this contrast: organism or organization, grown or made, *kosmos* or *taxis*. They are always very sharply contrasting kinds of order: “a self-generating or spontaneous order and an organization are distinct and . . . their distinctiveness is related to the two different kinds of rules or laws which prevail in them” (Hayek 1973, p. 2).

To begin with, each kind of order has a fundamentally different kind of purpose. The designed order of an organization, he says, promotes the purposes of those who designed it, while a spontaneous order promotes the purposes of those myriad individuals who participate in it (Ibid., p. 38). The rules governing an organization often take the form of commands, which apply to particular persons, while the rules governing spontaneous order generally take the form of general laws that apply equally to all participants. He calls the law of organizations “*thesis*” or legislation and the law of spontaneous order he calls “*nomos*” or common law.¹⁵ Commands serve the interests of the commander while laws serve the interests of the agents; with commands, the choice of a particular action falls with the commander while with law, the choice of a particular action falls on the agent.¹⁶ In short, organizations empower leaders while spontaneous orders empowers everyone who makes use of them.

Hayek’s strong conceptual contrasts create the impression that any particular practice or institution must belong either to a made or to a grown order but not both. According to John Gray, for example, Hayek sees social order as inevitably spontaneous, not designed.¹⁷ How could an institution embody both the purposes of its designer and the purposes of all who use it? How could a single organization be governed both by commands and by general laws? And if such mixtures were possible, then how could we distinguish a made from a grown order?

Hayek never theorizes such mixtures or the relations between kinds of order. And by dividing up institutions into examples of each kind of order, Hayek further reinforces the impression that the kinds of order are mutually exclusive: he tells us that spontaneous order includes “morals, religion and law, language and writing, money and the market” (Hayek 1973, p. 10),¹⁸ while organizations include “the family, the farm, the plant, the firm, the corporation and the various associations, and all the public institutions, including government...” (Hayek 1973, p. 46). If all these institutions can be sorted into one order or another, then the kinds of order seem to be mutually exclusive. Yet, in other places, Hayek clearly acknowledges the mix of these two orders in particular institutions: “A spontaneous order may rest in part on regularities which are not spontaneous but imposed” (Hayek 1978, p. 74).

The best guide we have to Hayek’s thought about how to mix the kinds of social order comes from some of Hayek’s specific examples of spontaneous order: growing a crystal and creating a magnetic field with iron filings. We cannot make a crystal in the sense of putting every molecule in place, but “we can create the conditions under which such a crystal will form itself” (Hayek 1979, p. 508). To grow a crystal or a living culture in a laboratory, a researcher first designs a matrix in which to structure the growth. The design of the matrix does not determine where each new molecule or cell will be located, but it provides a pattern for that spontaneous growth. We can design the shape of a magnet and the iron filings and thereby predict the overall shape of the resulting spontaneous order of filings.¹⁹

In his brilliant demonstration of how spontaneous order is also the product of deliberate design, John Tomasi develops the example of crystallization in the formation of rock candy. Although we cannot literally construct a sugar crystal, we can construct the matrix for the spontaneous growth of sugar crystals: thus, candymakers create an aseptic container, mix the sugar solution, design the string, and even affix seed crystals to the string, as ways of regulating the production of rock candy.²⁰ In short, rock candy is at once grown and made, spontaneous and designed. The two basic kinds of order in society are not mutually exclusive.

Although Hayek sharply contrasts designed order with spontaneous order, at a deeper level he clearly sees that spontaneous order in civilized society grows at the interstices of designed orders. For example, Hayek often sharply contrasts the order of legislation to the order of common law and custom; but at a deeper level, Hayek sees that common law and custom grows at the interstices of statute. The spontaneous

order of Roman and English private law grew up around the matrix of constitutional law, simple codes, and many particular statutes. True, the effect of that spontaneous common law was often to overshadow or even undermine the original legislative matrix.

Similarly, the spontaneous order of markets grows up around legislative, political, and administrative decisions that create or open new domains for commerce. In a dramatic example of how legislation creates new markets, the free exercise provisions of early U.S. state constitutions created the conditions for a new market in religious life, leading to the emergence of tens of thousands of new churches in America. And the explicit suppression of primogeniture and entail in our Constitution obviously created new markets in land. Even nations with formal legal codes that forbid recourse to judicial decisions nonetheless find that a common law grows up in the interstices of the code. Over time, these original matrices are themselves redesigned, leading to new forms of spontaneous order, as we are now witnessing in the case of opening marriage to gay couples. So how are we to describe these markets and these bodies of law? Are they examples of designed or spontaneous order? The matrix is designed, but the order around it grows up spontaneously, sometimes as predicted and sometimes contrary to prediction.²¹

We must not confuse the unit of analysis with the level of analysis. Our unit of analysis is a particular institution (the family, a market, or a body of law); the level of analysis is the kind of order seen in that institution: natural, customary, or stipulated. Hayek often simply lumps some kinds of institutions into particular kinds of order, as when he frequently describes the market as spontaneous or the government as an organization.²² But, we can now see that these descriptions confuse the unit of analysis with the level of analysis.

Aristotle, with his nested hierarchy of kinds of order, will say that any institution admits of analysis on three levels. Markets rest upon the natural order of the human propensity to truck, barter, and exchange. But that natural propensity is decisively shaped by customs of fairness and good faith, as well as by deliberate legal stipulations defining what can and cannot be bought and sold.

Although Hayek often points to the social division of labor as an example of spontaneous order, I argue that there is a natural, customary, and stipulated dimension to the division of labor in society (Murphy 1993, chaps. 2, 6). So Hayek, at least in his language if not in his thought, confuses the unit of analysis with the level of analysis.

How ironic that Hayek should blame Aristotle for the Sophists' crude dichotomy of nature and convention when Aristotle actually pioneered the triadic analysis of nature, custom, and stipulation favored by Hayek. How unfortunate that Hayek never learned from Aristotle that institutions cannot be parceled into kinds of order but that every institution embodies all three kinds of order. Karl Polanyi liked to joke that whereas labor markets were designed by nineteenth-century legislators, the welfare-state emerged spontaneously!²³

The assumption that spontaneous orders are numerically distinct from designed orders has been a source of deep confusion in the whole vast secondary literature on Hayek. Although Hayek, as we have seen, sometimes describes spontaneous and designed order as if they were mutually exclusive, he makes it clear in a variety of contexts that spontaneous order usually emerges at the interstices of designed order. Unfortunately, his commentators almost always treat spontaneous and made order as mutually exclusive. In perhaps the most important book-length study of Hayek's theory of spontaneous order we read: "According to this binary vision of the world, order exists either as *cosmos* or as *taxis*" (Petsoulas 2001, p. 13).²⁴

One verbal contrast between Hayek and his commentators is deeply revealing. Hayek almost always speaks of "spontaneous order" while his commentators often speak of "spontaneous orders."²⁵ Once we speak of orders, then the temptation to treat the kinds of order as mutually exclusive becomes irresistible. There are countless book chapters and articles listing various examples of "spontaneous orders": law, money, markets, mores, etiquette, constitutions, bicycles, language, crafts, medicine, units and measures, etc.

These lists are non-denumerable because every social institution or practice has a spontaneous dimension, for the familiar reason captured by Robert Burns: *The best laid schemes o' mice an' men/ Gang aft agley*. No matter how carefully a plan, organization, or code of law is designed, over time it becomes spontaneously revised, often beyond recognition. Justinian attempted to freeze his codification of Roman law by forbidding all interpretation of his code. The result has been a body of interpretation encompassing thousands of books and even more articles.

True, deliberate design plays a greater or lesser role in various kinds of institutions, but every social practice or institution is both spontaneous and designed. The real challenge posed by Hayek's distinction is the one central to theories of constitutional design: how do we design institutions with the flexibility to evolve spontaneously?

What does Hayek's theory of social order have to do with his neo-liberal policy preferences? If the kinds of social order were truly mutually exclusive, then it would be a disaster to attempt to subject a spontaneous order to deliberate planning. Hayek's rhetorical opposition of grown and made order underwrites a very strong presumption against efforts to impose legal and political regulations on the spontaneous order of culture or markets.

But, as we have seen, Hayek's deeper theory of social order acknowledges that spontaneous order is always partly made. So, any particular institution might well embody both kinds of order, meaning that Hayek's theory of social order provides no basis in itself for rejecting the legal, political, or administrative regulation of any institution or social practice. He may have additional economic, legal, and political arguments against welfare-state regulations, but his theory of social order does not, in itself, support his neo-liberal policy preferences.

True, Hayek tells us that we must be careful how we mix these two kinds of order: "the two principles of order cannot be mixed in any manner we may wish" (Hayek 1967, p. 163).²⁶ We must be careful, he says, not to attempt to eliminate all spontaneous aspects of order from social life. He warns against "the process of transformation of a free, spontaneous order of society into an organization or *taxis*" (Hayek 1978, pp. 74, 80).

Hayek's theory of social order is clearly incompatible with totalitarian policies that seek to turn cultural or economic institutions into centrally-planned projects of mobilization. Respect for the invaluable potential of spontaneous order rules out an exclusive reliance on command and control. Hayek is persuasive that we must design matrices for social and economic institutions that are open-ended enough to permit spontaneous growth at the interstices. What this means is that a very wide range of public policies, from neo-liberal to social democratic, are fully compatible with Hayek's theory of social order.

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NOTES

- 1 Hayek repeats this accusation in several places: "The discussion of the problems with which we are concerned was long hampered by the universal acceptance of a misleading distinction which was introduced by the ancient Greeks and from whose confusing effect we have not yet wholly freed ourselves" (Hayek 1973, p. 20). John Gray notes "Hayek's repudiation of the Sophistic nature-convention dichotomy" (Gray 1984, p. 29).
- 2 "These dichotomies define this area, and these processes, out of existence" (Hayek 1988, p. 144).
- 3 "It therefore never became clear that what was really required was a three-fold division which inserted between the phenomena which were natural in the sense that they were wholly independent of human action, and those which were artificial or conventional in the sense that they were the product of human design, a distinct middle category comprising all those unintended patterns and regularities which we find to exist in human society" (Hayek 1967, p. 97; 1988, p. 143).
- 4 "Through Aristotle's adoption of this division [nature or convention] it has become an integral part of European thought" (Hayek, 1967, p. 96). Hayek repeats his critique of Aristotle elsewhere: "Current scientific and philosophical usage is so deeply influenced by the Aristotelian tradition, which knows nothing of evolution" (Hayek, 1988, p. 143).
- 5 "The original Greek terms... seem to have been introduced by the Sophists of the fifth century..." (Hayek 1973, p. 20). According to Guthrie, throughout the fifth century, *nomos* and *physis* were treated as antithetical. Some Sophists championed *physis* (Antiphon, Callicles) while others championed *nomos* (Glaukon, Protagoras): Guthrie 1969, chap. 4.
- 6 (Hayek 1973, p. 20). For a study of *thesei* in the origins of the notion of positive law, see Murphy 2005, chap. 1.
- 7 (Shorey 1909, Protagoras frag. 3). Usually *didaskalia* is rendered as "teaching" but Paul Shorey is right to argue that "learning" fits the context better, since the focus is on the conditions that promote successful learning in the student, of which teaching is only one. Shorey traces the history of Protagoras's triadic conception of education through Plato and all the way to Cicero's *ingenii, exercitatio dicendi, ratio aliqua* (*Pro Archias*).
- 8 "According to Hayek, knowledge is dispersed throughout society and, further, it is embodied in habits and dispositions of countless men and women" (Gray 1984, p. 38).
- 9 Thus the author of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (II, 19) lists the departments of *ius* as: "*natura, lege, consuetudine, indicato, aequo et bono, pacto*". Ulpian (*Digest* I, 1.1) distinguishes *ius naturale, ius gentium, ius civile*. And Cicero (*De Inventione* II, 53.160) deploys the Aristotelian scheme in his famous passage on the evolution of law from principles of nature to deliberate statutes: "Law (*ius*) initially proceeds from nature, then certain rules of conduct become customary by reason of their advantage; later still both the principles that proceeded from nature and those that had been approved by custom received the support of religion and the fear of the law (*lex*)".
- 10 For a critique and reconstruction of Poinsett's doctrine of signs, see Murphy 1991, pp. 33-68.
- 11 The commentary on *Politics* 1332 a38 reads: "*Quare hoc oportet consonare inter se, scilicet naturam, consuetudinem, et rationem: semper enim posterius praesupponit prius*" (Aquinas 1951, p. 386).

- 12 “The conclusion to which we have been led means that the order of sensory qualities no less than the order of physical events is a relational order” (Hayek, 1952, p. 19). Later, he refers to his “definition of mind as a peculiar order” (p. 46).
- 13 Order, says Hayek, is “a state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form correct expectations concerning the rest, or at least expectations which have a good chance of proving correct” (Hayek 1973, p. 36). Hayek here draws on Stebbing: “When we know how a set of elements is ordered we have a basis for inference” (Stebbing 1950, p. 228).
- 14 Hayek terms “*nomos*” as the law of spontaneous “*kosmos*” (private law) and he terms “*thesis*” as the law of stipulated order (*taxis*): as in constitutional and administrative law (Hayek 1979, p. 78).
- 15 “A general rule that everybody obeys, unlike a command proper, does not necessarily presuppose a person who has issued it. It also differs from a command by its generality and abstractness” (Hayek 1960, p. 149).
- 16 “The action performed according to such commands serves exclusively the purposes of him who has issued it. The ideal type of law, on the other hand, provides merely additional information to be taken into account in the decision of the actor” (Hayek 1960, p. 150).
- 17 “The order we find in social life cannot, for these reasons, be the product of any rational design, and it can never become so. Social order is and must always be a spontaneous formation” (Gray 1984, p. 26).
- 18 “We find the spontaneous formation of self-regulating structures in the growth of language, the development of law and in the emergence of moral norms” (Gray 1984, p. 31).
- 19 “We could never produce a crystal or a complex organic compound if we had to place each individual molecule or atom in the appropriate place in relation to the others. We must rely on the fact that in certain conditions, they will arrange themselves in a structure possessing certain characteristics” (Hayek 1960, p. 160).
- 20 “The crystals grow according to their own internal principles; no one controls or intends the precise outcome of that process of growth. And yet at a more general level, human intentionality and conscious design pervade the entire process” (Tomasi 2012, p. 153).
- 21 Hayek says that although we cannot predict where particular elements of a spontaneous order will be located, we can make “pattern predictions” about the overall shape of a spontaneous order (Caldwell 2004, p. 310).
- 22 “Such spontaneous orders we find not only in the working of institutions like language and law...but also in the relations of the market” (Hayek 1979, p. 509).
- 23 “Throughout the world, and certainly in Britain, the emergence of the modern welfare and administrative state occurred via a long series of piecemeal and unplanned responses to specific problems” (Gray 1984, p. 120).
- 24 Petsoulas goes on to quote Hayek’s mutually exclusive enumeration of spontaneous institutions and designed institutions, which I have quoted above. True, Petsoulas also notes that “For Hayek, law exists as both a ‘grown’ order and a ‘made’ order, as *nomos* and *thesis* respectively.”
- 25 For many examples of “spontaneous orders,” see Petsoulas 2001, pp. 12-33.
- 26 Hayek says elsewhere: “though spontaneous order and organization will always coexist, it is still not possible to mix these two principles of order in any manner we like” (1973, p. 48).

John Gray—and Critical Rationalism

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1. INTRODUCTION

I have known John Gray for many years. I have long been an admirer of his work, impressed by both the range of his knowledge and the quality and quantity of his output. I was also struck by the way in which, from early on, he combined an appreciation of Hayek with a concern about the way in which Hayek's ideas about the kind of progress one might expect in market-based societies was in tension with traditionalism. On this issue, John seemed to me to highlight an issue which was not properly appreciated by the entire tradition of free-market conservatism.

Over time, John moved from careful, broadly analytical concerns—as were found in his early work on Mill and his essay on Popper's liberalism—to a concern with the late Twentieth Century revival of 'classical liberalism'. From this, he moved to an interest in various foundationalist attempts to provide a justification for classical liberalism and related approaches. This led to a succession of enthusiasms, followed swiftly by disillusionments. I wrote a long critical review of these developments in 'Gray's Progress: From *Liberalisms* to *Enlightenment's Wake*' (Shearmur 2007).

One striking feature of these moves on Gray's part, was that he typically wrote retrospectively about different views concerning which he had previously been enthusiastic. He had acute things to say about them. But he also tended to write about them as if only a fool or a knave could have embraced the ideas in question. What was odd about this, is that they were often views which he had embraced until recently, himself. This pattern continued—with his shifting from liberalism, to Oakeshottian conservatism, to a favouring of Tony Blair's 'New Labour' and ideas from the New Liberal tradition of T. H. Green and his successors, and then on to a distinctive form of environmental concern.

Gray also shifted from writing largely about political philosophy, to an engagement also with political journalism. This was often acute. But there was a tendency to offer unargued ex cathedra judgements about all kinds of substantive philosophical issues, while his concern with contemporary events sometimes took a turn towards prognostications of the future. The intellectual model for this read as if he shifted between acute situational analysis, to gazing into the crystal balls of Mystic Meg.

Gray ended up—if that is the right word to use about someone whose substantive ideas seem so frequently on the move—in a form of pessimistic scepticism. He is critical of all ideas about progress (while admitting the usefulness of certain technical innovations), and about humanism (in the sense of views which view humans as being radically distinct from animals). Even when Gray was a liberal, his liberalism was combined with a form of pessimism which did not fit well with the liberal tradition. One might say that it would seem as if, in the end, it is his pessimism which has won out.

There is much in Gray's work which merits detailed discussion, not least his changing views about Hayek, which I hope to address on a future occasion.¹ My engagement here will fall into two parts.

In the first, I will suggest that what might be called some of his later political ideas merit elaboration. They are inviting and interesting, but seem to me to call for greater and more systematic explication and the facing of some problems. That this is a worthwhile enterprise, I will argue for further in the final part of my second section.

In the second section, I will address his pessimism. In part this may simply be a matter of temperament. John is no more likely to be arguable out of that, than would his soul-mate Eeyore be temptable out of his dreary paddock.² But I shall address this, by discussing the degree to which certain of the motifs of John's later work—his critique of progress, and his stress on the continuity between humans and animals—are also to be found in the work of Karl Popper. Popper, it seems to me, showed how these themes could be explored in interesting ways. But his work also suggested that they could be combined with optimism,³ and a concern with what might be done to advance our knowledge, and make piecemeal improvements to our current situation.

A further contribution from Popper, however, could in my view be an epistemological one. For John, it seems to me, while he has very reasonably turned his back on foundationalism, seems unclear about what, then, we might make of our knowledge, and of the role of pluralism within it. I will conclude by saying a little about what I take Popper to be offering us here, in the hope that this is something that John might find attractive.

2. GRAY'S LIBERALISM

I have already indicated that it is risky to try to offer an account of John's political views and to engage with them, just because he is regularly on the move. In addition, lots of his ideas have been developed in essays within which many different themes are pursued in quick succession.

But it seems to me worthwhile to sketch briefly something that has at least been present in his later work, and to engage with it. For it seems to me interesting and important in itself, but also to pose some problems which anyone attracted to it needs to grapple with.

What I have in mind, here, is John's interesting combination of a deep pluralism of traditions and moralities, minimalist broadly shared ideas about morality, and a *modus vivendi* conception of liberalism. His pluralism relates not just to his developments of Berlin's ideas about values, ways of life and moral traditions, but also to the idea that there are different forms of capitalism.

I would like to raise two different issues about all this. The first, is that, on the face of it, a *modus vivendi* conception of liberalism could do with tentative explication in institutional terms. At one level, if different ways of life are to co-exist, we could do with the explication of tentative rules about how they might usefully inter-relate. It would I think be naïve to proceed as if we could lay down such things in a timeless manner. But at least on the face of it, pragmatic guidelines for their inter-relationships would be useful, and the (ongoing) codification of ideas about this, might offer guidance as to how we might inadvertently avoid damaging our, and others, ways of doing things.

There are two levels to this. On the one side, if people are living in different ways, pursuing different role models and cultivating different virtues, then they are likely to need to find ways of socializing their members into these distinctive ways of doing things, and may need to find ways of protecting how they do this from influences from elsewhere. (It is striking that, in her writings about her intellectual and moral development, Ayaan Hirsi Ali tells us of how the academic study of Nineteenth Century English literature featuring chaste romantic love, had a striking impact on her life in a Somali culture of arranged marriage⁴ (Ali 2006/ 2007; 2015). Further, if there are different forms of capitalism, there is the question of whether trade takes place between them. Rules will be needed for this. But if trade is taking place, there is likely to be impact from this—and in ways that may be difficult to anticipate—from one form of capitalism on another.

There is also the question of whether interaction—and learning—takes place. There is a sense in which one might see the 'Utopia' section of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) as having offered a

model (which does not depend on his ideas about rights) for J. S. Mill-style ‘experiments in living’. On the face of it, if one wishes to recognise the legitimacy of pluralism, not only does one need an institutional framework within which such pluralism can take place. But one also needs to ask: can we not hope to learn from other experiments in living, and from what people in other traditions might make of us? Different traditions may face similar problems. But equally, they may hit difficulties particular to themselves, which people from outside may be able to diagnose and make suggestions about. Not only may dialogue be productive, even when there is no expectation of reaching consensus. But such exchanges may also stimulate people within different traditions to engage, within them, in the creative *Invention of Tradition*.⁵

Such interaction, learning and innovation, however, may require that there is a measure of hierarchy involved (lest the taken-for-granted moral ideas and traditional practises of ordinary members unravel). It is striking that, from Stolzenberg and Myers’ study of the in many ways successful activities of the Satmar Hasidism in modern America, innovation from the leaders of the group plays an important role.⁶

The second kind of issue relates to what happens at the individual level. I have already suggested that a tradition may need to find ways of protecting its members from certain kinds of contacts with other traditions. At the level of the individual, this would seem to be needed for socialization into the specifics of a tradition to take place. While, as I have just suggested, while learning and innovation may be essential, traditions may only function if this activity is initially limited to, or monitored by, its leading members.⁷

However, this leads us to a twofold problem. On the one side, there are issues concerned with the kinds of freedoms and choices that are available to the individual. My concern, here, is not with issues of rights of the kind that John I think correctly repudiates. Rather, it relates to what can be offered to the individual within a particular tradition, if the tradition is to keep its integrity. On the other side, the development of the internet, and social media, has led to a kind of fragmentation of knowledge, and the undermining of the social vehicles for fallible expert authority which we had in the past.⁸

The other issue concerns a theme the significance of which I have already highlighted in Gray’s work. It relates to Hayek’s arguments about knowledge and the use of socially scattered tacit knowledge and information. As far as I know, Gray has not repudiated this,⁹ instead stressing that there can be different forms of market-based society, within different traditions.

But to the degree to which this point is right, it would suggest—to put things provocatively—that a pluralistic capitalist version of Fukuyama’s end of history thesis might be correct, at least for those who are operating in competitive, market-based societies. But if this is the case, then we need, I think, to pay attention to a theme of which John has made much in his discussion of ‘neoliberalism’.¹⁰ It is that economic activity within such societies may have the effect of undermining what could be called the economic basis of traditions and established forms of life.

John, when he was in what one might call his ‘New Labour’ phase, wrote as if there could be the adjustment of the economy on the basis of local understandings of fairness. Such a thing is possible. But how stable are such local understandings, and how effective can such adjustments be, if we are in capitalist economies with the features that Hayek has highlighted? In addition, in his writings on different foundational approaches to classical liberalism, John exhibited a good knowledge of the kinds of issues which had been raised by writers in the public choice tradition about the problems of democracy. One does not have to be uncritical of such literature to recognise the degree to which it—and the important literature on the problems of American ‘pluralism’—pose difficult issues concerning what one will actually get as the product of political interventions into the economy of this kind, made in the name of ‘social justice’.¹¹

In raising these issues, I should stress once again, I am not aiming to offer a criticism of John’s work. Rather, it seems to me that he has raised interesting ideas, which it would be nice to have explicated in more detail, and also explored in the light of the kinds of issues that I have raised here. The idea that such exercises are important, will be defended in the final section of this paper.

3. POPPER, HISTORICISM AND PROGRESS

Popper is well-known for his criticisms of what he referred to as ‘historicism’. At one level, this was the idea that there was a teleology to history, a view which was inherited from Christian ideas, and which was embraced, in one form or another, by both the political right and the political left in the inter-war period. Popper had, in his teens, been an enthusiastic Marxist, working as a volunteer in the office of the small Austrian Communist Party. But—in a story which he told many times—he was shaken by the way in which a Communist-led demonstration led to the death of unarmed workers. And this, in turn, led him to reflect on the substantive ideas which he had uncritically espoused, and on the claims which were being made about their epistemological status.

The result was his now well-known critique of teleological ideas about the course of history. It is also striking, however, that Popper came to identify, and to criticise, what he called historicist ideas in many other areas, too. As a young man, he was immersed in musical developments in Vienna, and worked with some of those associated with Schönberg.¹² While he got to know their music well, he was critical of them, not least because of their acceptance of Wagnerian ideas about ‘the music of the future’. In reaction against this, Popper developed his knowledge about, and undertook work in the tradition of, Bach. Popper was also critical of ideas about ‘moral futurism’.

Popper was guarded in what he thought that we might expect of progress in any form. As Popper wrote (Popper 1963, p. ?):

...in science, we often learn from our mistakes, and ... we can speak clearly and sensibly about making progress there. In most other fields of human endeavour there is change, but rarely progress (unless we adopt a very narrow view of our possible aims in life); for almost every gain is balanced, or more than balanced, by some loss. And in most fields we do not even know how to evaluate change.

In addition, there is another important theme to Popper’s work: his anti-utopianism.¹³ As Gerald Gaus argued in *The Tyranny of the Ideal* (Gaus 2016), one could take Popper’s criticism of Plato’s utopianism as a more general critique of Ideal-based approaches to politics, including in the work of Rawls. But Popper considers it important to do what we can to alleviate suffering and injustice, he takes this to be a fallible, continuing activity. And he is also critical of the idea that we can sensibly assume that we are in possession of an unchanging ideal, for the sake of which other people and their interests should be sacrificed.

Popper does, indeed, uphold the ideal of ‘Emancipation Through Knowledge’ (Popper 1995, 1945). However, he does so in such a way that it does not seem to me open to the kinds of criticisms that John has advanced.

4. POPPER, HUMANS AND ANIMALS

Popper also offers a distinctive view about the relationship between mankind and animals. At one level, it is striking that he shares John’s concerns about the problematic impact of a growing human population, and also the view that we should look positively at science and technology to assist us.

However, he also holds that there are key continuities between us and other animals; in particular he takes animals to be conscious, and also to work with hypotheses about the world. For Popper, all knowledge is a matter of trial and error, and this includes animal knowledge. In his view, both animals and humans have fallible inbuilt expectations about the world. Popper emphasised this in some of his earliest work on psychology (see Popper 1963b). He stresses the continuity of themes across animals and people from an evolutionary perspective, notably in his ‘The Rationality of Scientific Revolutions’ (Popper 1994, chapter 1). That being said, it is also striking that Popper takes seriously the issue of human freedom, and

the role of behaviour and consciousness in biology. He does so, however, in a manner which is not grounded in issues to do with religious faith.¹⁴

There are, obviously, on Popper's account, significant differences between people and animals. But they are a matter of degree. Popper has stressed the significance, for us, of what he calls 'world 3': the world of the products of the human mind, and the way in which we have the potential to grow and develop ourselves in interaction with such products, and other people. But at the same time, he also emphasised not just the role of animal consciousness, but also the role of traditions and extra-somatic products in the life of some animals.

Further, while Popper takes a strongly evolutionary view—a Darwinian view—of ourselves and of our knowledge, he does not see this as being incompatible with ideas about emergence, or with our aspiring for truth (rather than just knowledge of a practical character). After all, we have been able to create music, and works of art and literature, to say nothing of what we have accomplished in science, mathematics and logic. All this has been accomplished with cognitive tools which it appears showed themselves to be effective, and led to our survival, in the pursuit of practical, survival-related tasks. But this does not suggest that what we can accomplish is limited by the basis on which these capacities originated.

What is going on—in terms of our selves, our knowledge, and the world—looks to me a matter for exploration together, and thus for creative interplay between speculation, criticism and testing. It is this which leads me to the final section of this piece, in which I describe and commend to John aspects of Popper's epistemology. I do this in part because I think that it is important—but typically not understood in the way in which I think that it should be. But also because after his abandonment of foundationalism, John has seemed to me unclear as to what his own ideas here are, and possibly as a result, to have been unduly negative in his critical appraisals of the approaches of other people.

5. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF CRITICAL RATIONALISM

What does human knowledge look like from a broadly Popperian perspective?¹⁵

The key starting-point is our offering fallible interpretations of the world in which we find ourselves. We are biologically predisposed to see the world in certain ways. But there is no reason why these should be correct, or why the subjective convictions that we might have about them are any guide to their correctness.

We may, with the help of other people, be able to discover that something is wrong with our ideas. They may be open to empirical testing, and fail in tests. This tells us that something needs to be modified, but not what. How we proceed is up to us. But if we are interested in the growth of our knowledge, we will need to endeavour to produce ideas which explain what, so far, seemed to be correct in our knowledge, and at the same time, to try to correct the difficulties that we have found, and which ways that themselves say interesting things which are themselves independently testable.¹⁶

We may well have ideas about the kinds of views that we should develop to cope with our problems. These may constitute a research tradition, or what Popper called a 'metaphysical research programme'. (Metaphysical because not open to empirical testing). Such views may themselves be open to critical appraisal, in terms of their ability to resolve the problems towards which they are addressed, or others which may arise with the passing of time. We may also—as Lakatos stressed—discuss the degree to which those working within a research programme have been able so far to generate useful scientific theories in line with their programmatic ideas.

All this leaves us with a situation in which there is a pluralism of competing research traditions or metaphysical research programmes.¹⁷ In principle it is open to anyone to appraise how they are doing so far—in terms both of how they are faring with regard to theoretical (or if you like, 'conceptual') problems, and what their track record has been in terms of the production of successful empirical theories. These are matters concerning which we might well be able to get agreement across people attracted to different programmatic views. Clearly, there is no reason to expect that their reaction to an agreed problem-situation

will be the same. People will take different views about how attractive the pursuit of different programmes will be. Or they might wish to argue that aspects of hitherto commonly shared standards should be revised. But a crucial point about this, would be that their conviction about such matters would be just that, and what they would need to do is to aim for arguments for the revision of our existing standards which would be found inter-subjectively telling.

Much more could obviously be said.¹⁸ But I will conclude with two comments.

The first is that while I have illustrated these ideas with an eye to scientific knowledge, they would seem to me equally applicable to political and, indeed, religious ideas.

The second, and this is why I am commending it to John, is that it would suggest that while the kind of critical eye that he has for different views is very much to be welcomed, openness to criticism—and thus the existence of open problems—is to be expected everywhere. One cannot expect the discovery of problems to be fatal to an approach. But, at the same time, the keeping track of what an approach amounts to, of its strengths and weaknesses, and of how those who favour it have responded, over time, becomes of paramount importance. Accordingly, we might hope that John the trenchant critic might be prodded into a transformation into John the tracker of the performance of views with which he is critically engaged.

One might add, to this, a further twist. It is certainly the case that, on the basis of the approach that I have sketched, criticism might usefully come from anywhere. But it is also important, if we are to have to make choices with regard to research programmes or, indeed, to policy measures, to be able to take a comparative perspective. This means that it is typically useful for someone to give an indication of the perspective that they take, and of what they understand its current problematic to be. In John's case this would be particularly welcome, just in the sense that—as I indicated at the beginning of this piece—John has, over the years, offered a variety of most interesting reflections on politics and political philosophy. But it is difficult to judge just where he currently stands, and what he understands its problematic to be. Also it would be useful to know why he thinks that the balance of the argument should incline one towards the pursuit of this, rather than one or other of the approaches which he has favoured in the past.

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NOTES

- 1 I am currently revising a volume which brings together some historical studies of classical liberal institutions in the Twentieth Century. After this, my next engagement will be with critics of Hayek, from Foucault, through Plant to Gray.
- 2 Eeyore is the donkey with a Gray-like temperament, in A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh stories.
- 3 Popper, indeed, thought that optimism was a moral duty.
- 4 For what it is worth the books seem to me to be more illuminating if taken as studies of a collapsed Somali culture and problems of social change, than they are of Islam.
- 5 See Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.) (1983). While the thrust of the book was a debunking of various traditions, one might also see it as suggesting how traditions might be invented as creative responses to issues that arise in particular forms of life.
- 6 Stolzenberg and Myers (2021), refer to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) on their p. 17. But it is also clear that, in what has proved to be a successful arrangement, innovation has a top-down character. Lengthy battles have been fought against dissident groups, and life for ordinary members is highly traditionalistic.
- 7 This is not to say that others may not, in fact, be able to have good ideas. The problem, rather, is that there is a danger of fragmentation, and also the introduction of ideas and practises which have unintended consequences for the tradition, if its organization is too flat.
- 8 I have discussed this in Shearmur (2025), and in more detail (and in English) in Shearmur (under submission).
- 9 There are, in my view, important qualifications to be made to this argument, relating to Ronald Coase's work on the firm (Coase 1988). It is just that if transaction costs limit the degree to which it makes sense to organise even market-based commercial activity on the basis of market transactions, then Hayek's argument is limited in its scope. See also Shearmur 2000.
- 10 At times he has treated this as an issue about 'Thatcherism' or 'neoliberal ideology', but he has also, I think more correctly, also acknowledged that it is a feature of large, market-based societies as such.
- 11 It is also worth recalling Hayek's discussion in (1944).
- 12 Popper discusses this, and its inter-relationship with his work in other areas, in his (1974/1976). Brian Boyd, in the biography of Popper on which he is currently at work, discusses this in much more detail.
- 13 See, for a fuller discussion, Shearmur 2022.
- 14 O'Hear (2025), while giving welcome attention to Popper's contributions to Popper and Eccles (1977), seems to me in this respect to misread him badly, in suggesting that Popper's ideas about World 3 are of religious significance.
- 15 In what I write here, I will draw on the full range of Popper's work, but also on aspects of what Lakatos wrote about research programmes. However, my emphasis will be Popperian rather than Lakatosian.
- 16 These claims—as both Popper and Lakatos emphasised—also need to receive occasional corroborations of the speculative ideas that they advance.
- 17 These can also, perfectly respectably, include speculative ideas of a realist character.
- 18 I am in the course of writing a paper for a conference in which I try to spell out the distinctive character of a critical rationalist approach in a much more systematic way.

Reply to Critics

JOHN GRAY

They (the liberals) were no doubt right in the nineteenth century to be confident that the world was moving towards the destruction of traditional institutions, privileges and beliefs; but the first part of the twentieth century has already made evident that their own wealth, taste and intellectual liberty will dissolve also in some strange barbarism that will think them a good riddance

— George Santayana¹

It is a privilege to respond to my critics, who have given my writings on politics and ethics such careful consideration. It is also a slightly curious experience. I left academic life in 2007, when I took voluntary early retirement to write full-time in a different key. The position I gave up--a School Professorship in European Thought at the London School of Economics--was an all-research post without teaching or administrative obligations. I did opt to teach a graduate course on liberal critics of liberalism--Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper and Michael Oakeshott--during my time there, but after ten productive years I was no longer interested in writing for an academic audience. I was out of sympathy with the dominant way of doing political philosophy, exemplified in the liberal legalism of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, which I viewed as being not much more than an unwarranted extension of the local conventions of recent American jurisprudence. When I responded to my critics in a pre-retirement festschrift, *The Political Theory of John Gray*,² published in 2006, I felt that the academic relevance of my writings must surely be exhausted.

It is an unexpected pleasure, therefore, to find that aspects of my work retain some interest for a younger generation of scholars two decades later. As Eugene Callahan notes in his generous introduction, there are strands of continuity running throughout my writings--not least my admiration for Thomas Hobbes, who I continue to believe plumbed more deeply into the nature of political order than any other thinker. Re-reading some of what I have published over forty years and more, I find a surprising consistency of intent, in which I am striving to adapt Hobbes's insights to changing circumstances.

These four decades have encompassed some major transformations: the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the increasing ascendancy of post-Mao China, the collapse of the American-led international order, the emergence of populist movements and an alliance between anti-western Islamism and hyper-progressivism in western democracies. These developments shaped my writings as much as my reading--often of authors forgotten or unknown by many of my contemporaries--across a wide range of disciplines. I harvested what I learnt in short essays, vignettes and satirical spoofs, including one in which I invented a Marxian theorist who all but one of my colleagues believed to be real.³ It is a style of writing far removed from that of standard philosophical texts. Yet these seeming fragments frame a coherent line of thinking, which I am inclined to defend.

Callahan concludes his conspectus of my work with three questions: Is value pluralism incompatible with a *summum bonum*, as I maintain? Why did I abandon objective value-pluralism for moral subjectivism? What led me from recognizing humans as unique among animals to denying that uniqueness? These questions are not unconnected, and answering the second will make clearer my responses to the other two.

My move from objective pluralism reflected the long-delayed influence of George Santayana. I first published on this sadly neglected writer in 1989,⁴ but failed to digest the full significance for political philosophy of his critique of the early value-realism of his friend Bertrand Russell, in which he demolished the quasi-Platonistic view—derived from Russell’s colleague G. E. Moore’s treatise *Principia Ethica* (1903)—that there are mind-independent objective values. Russell and Moore committed the error of hypostatization—turning a human concept into a metaphysical entity. As a naturalist, Santayana held that all values are rooted in animal needs and desires, not any cosmic or transcendental realm:

Food and poison are such only relatively, and in view of particular bodies, and the same material thing may be food and poison at once...For the human system whisky is truly more intoxicating than coffee, and the contrary opinion would be an error; but what a strange way of vindicating this real, though relative, distinction to insist that whisky is more intoxicating than itself, without reference to any animal; that it is pervaded, as it were by an inherent intoxication and stands dead drunk in its bottle!⁵

Moore’s intuitionism is, of course, not the only version of ethical objectivism, and not the most plausible. Its weakness was revealed in an entertaining exchange between Moore and J. M. Keynes, in which the champagne-drinking economist asked Moore whether pleasure might be an intrinsic value, only to be told “No”. Moore’s value-realism articulated the mores—or “religion”, as some of them called it—of a late Victorian Cambridge culture-circle. It contained no way of settling disputes as to the nature of the good. Today value-realism is commonly promoted in Aristotelean terms, with the good defined in terms of natural flourishing. But Aristotle’s conception of nature was thoroughly teleological, relying on ideas of final causes and a Prime Mover directing the cosmos towards perfection. I do not need Darwin to find this metaphysic gratuitous. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius promoted a non-teleological naturalism two millennia ago. The appeal of a latter-day Aristotelian like Alastair MacIntyre to shared practices supports the intersubjectivity of ethics, not the objectivity of values. Whether Platonistic, Aristotelian or theistic, value-realism rests on an act of faith.

At this point it may be clearer why value-pluralism and a *summum bonum* are at odds. The good life may consist in flourishing according to one’s nature, but human flourishing has been expressed in many disparate ways of living. If the species is unique among animals, one reason is the relative plasticity of its nature. Human beings do not cherish the same ideals, and the lives of a Homeric warrior and a Epicurean sage, a disciple of the Buddha and a Millian individualist pursuing self-realization call on virtues that cannot be melded into a single mode of flourishing. Some goods may be generically human; but they too are not fully combinable, and no one mix is necessarily best. In tragic choices between great evils, however you choose incurs some irreparable wrong or loss. A universal minimum morality cannot resolve these dilemmas, and there may no truth of the matter about what you should do. As Isaiah Berlin—members of whose family had been compelled to make such choices in Nazi-occupied Europe—used to say: “In the end, you must plump.” Value-conflict is part of what it means to be human, and spills inevitably into politics, undermining the assertion that a form of government could be best for all.

I observed this myself, when for some years I travelled to countries undergoing regime changes. The impulses driving change were not those prominent in the prevailing liberal philosophies. Communism did not fall because centrally planned economies were inefficient and corrupt (they always had been) or because of intellectual dissent. Soviet totalitarianism collapsed because, beginning in Poland, it could not contain nationalism and religion. I was not surprised when, following an interval of near anarchy, an authoritarian regime emerged under the aegis of Vladimir Putin. There was never any reason to think lib-

eral democracy could be established in Russia. A minority of Russians has for centuries yearned to adopt European ways, but most have never accepted liberal values. In the post-communist period, a pluralistic authoritarianism—of the kind Putin originally seemed to promise—was what they wanted.

My thoughts during these years were fertilized by a slight acquaintance with some practicing politicians, including Margaret Thatcher. Observing the contingencies of political events and the tangled forces that impelled them, my inability to take seriously liberal theorizing increased. When Rawls and Dworkin, Hayek and Nozick talked of limiting the political sphere by means of some legal apparatus of rights or procedures, I found it hard to suppress a smile. Eventually, hiving off political conflicts to judges always ends with the political capture of the judicial system or regime collapse. Donald Trump's rampage through American institutions has confirmed my skepticism. Constitutions come and go.

I have argued that it follows from value-pluralism that no single type of political regime can claim unique or universal legitimacy. Following in the steps of scholars who contested my critical interpretation of Isaiah Berlin's thought, it is this claim that Professor McIntyre contests. His counter argument involves some peculiar assertions.

He begins with the assertion that a polity composed of self-conscious value-pluralists would consider the protection of negative liberty the first responsibility of a pluralist government. Presumably he intends this as a thought experiment. Universal acceptance of the truth of value-pluralism might make *modus vivendi* between different ways of life easier; but a polity composed of conscious value-pluralists is so far removed from any historical reality that I have explicitly excluded it from serious consideration. For McIntyre, the alternative is a species of "Government House pluralism" akin to the indirect utilitarianism criticized by Bernard Williams. He seems to regard this as a damning objection. The problem with value-pluralism as a philosophy for a ruling class, however, is not that it leaves the rest of the population to their monistic illusions. The point of value-pluralism in politics, as I have argued for it, is to enforce peace among rival monisms. The difficulty is that, in a time when much of the western political elite is possessed by the illusions of liberal universalism, no ruling class exists that can discharge this task.

McIntyre acknowledges that negative liberty is not the only political value and may be subject to internal conflicts like those between it and other values. But he seems not to grasp the force of these points. It is not that a value-pluralist has no reason to rank negative liberty more than other goods. Rather, conflicting liberties—negative and positive—may be incommensurably valuable, and "more liberty" may have no determinate meaning. His choice of examples suggests he has no clear idea of what negative liberty means. He tells us that "it makes perfect sense for a person to prefer the order of Singapore and, until recently, of Hong Kong, to the negative liberty of inner-city Detroit". But if negative freedom is as McIntyre defines it, "freedom from external interference and coercion by other human beings", it is precisely what the denizen of inner-city Detroit, living in chronic fear of being mugged or killed on its streets, palpably lack. Equally, what was lost with the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong was not public order. It was the negative liberty of speaking and writing without fearing coercion and imprisonment.

In fairness, McIntyre's confusion reveals an important truth. The boundaries between conflicting values are not self-evident, or eternally fixed. Unlike Russell's hypostatic fictions, they shift with history. The order that prevails in Singapore shows itself as freedom in daily life. Few would swap this blend for life in an urban state of nature. Arguably the city-state has achieved a better mix of political goods than any western polity. That does not make it a model by which all other regimes must be judged. (In any case, it is doubtful whether any western political class has the skills needed to emulate it.)

As I have more than once noted, value pluralism does not entail any political project. To say that values are incommensurable is to say that no one resolution of their conflicts can command the support of reason. Different regimes and ways of life come not only from divergent cultural ideals, but also from settling conflicts between values that are generically human. There is no *a priori* reason for choosing liberty over equality, justice over peace. Political reasoning is circumstantial, not apodictic. It is the historicity of the key concepts of political philosophy that allows a value-pluralist to make judgements about better and worse regimes without believing that any regime could be universally legitimate. A value-pluralist

can support different regimes in different countries, and the same country if conditions within it change sufficiently.

In Britain, post-war social democracy and market liberalism were each defensible in value-pluralist terms in their time. So, too, was *modus vivendi* liberalism. What value-pluralism precludes is any project that aims to eradicate conflicts of values from political life. It is a larger category than sometimes realized, excluding not only the utopian visions of communism and “organic” societies based on racism and ethno-nationalism, but the centrist technocratic project of managing society efficiently and the liberal legalist protect of resolving political conflicts by the arbitration of rights. Value-pluralism is subversive.

Professor Molnar’s paper is an instructive exploration of the failures of the modern cult of recognition. Tracing the development of the idea in Hegel, Lukacs and Kojève among others, he demonstrates that the belief that (as Hegel wrote) “self-consciousness achieves satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” is a demand for equality that can only result in conflict and inequality. What is, in theory, a condition of mutual respect is in practice a positional good. This is not incidental. The demand for recognition is imposed on others; compulsion is inherent in it. If equality of respect requires acceptance by society of each person’s conception of themselves, the consequence is bound to be a struggle for power.

Astutely, Molnar notes that the cult of recognition “contradicts the liberal ideal of autonomy and self-domination because in a situation of mutual recognition an individual should behave an even think and feel according to the requirements of his environment”. He concludes:

The futile politics of recognition results in a more agonistic world, created in the name of justice and equality, in which there are no civilizational or moral limits for radicals...The warlike condition of equals competing for prestige eventually resulted in peace and hierarchy, according to Hobbes, while the quarrels and fights of unequal people will somehow and someday bring equality, self-realization and peaceful harmony. Ironically, the recognition paradigm implies anti-political hope based on the Hobbesian tragic or pessimist view of *conditio humana*.

In harking back to Hobbes, Molnar’s argument runs parallel with one I presented in an essay I published in 1989.⁶ There I identified what I described as “the new Hobbesian dilemma”:

In its weakness the modern state has created in a political form the very state of nature from which it is the task of the state to deliver us. In this political state of nature, modern democratic states are riven by a legal and political war of all against all...in modern democratic states, we see the need for collective identification finding overtly political expression in the form of contending projects of for the political protection of cultural identity...The new Hobbesian dilemma of the modern state is that, in becoming the prey of liberal dogma and the focus of a political war of redistribution, it has become weak even as it has grown larger, and has neglected its true tasks as it has become the servant of impossible dreams. It remains to be seen whether a reversion to Hobbesian humility, in which the state is at once small and strong, is itself only a nostalgic vision, a dream that haunts an age that, like Hobbes’s, is deafened by the clamor of barbarous religions and possessed by a passion for peace.

I reprised and updated this argument in an essay in the *New Statesman* in October 2025. Noting that “liberal societies are now in a condition of advanced and possibly terminal decay”, I suggested that the anomic individualism castigated by Alasdair Macintyre and other post-liberals has not come to pass:

Instead, society is being segmented into exclusionary communities. Multicultural diversity is proving to be a process of what we might call quasi-milletisation.

The ultra-individualists celebrated by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* and the masses who have embraced his philosophy of self-realization have an irrepressible need for collective belonging. Identifying themselves as members of self-defined groups, they demand recognition, status and resources. An artificial state of nature is the unavoidable result.

There is no going back to some imaginary communalist idyll. Projects of cultural restoration of the kind that have arisen on the right mirror the neo-medievalism of post-liberals. A communitarian critique of individualism may have been pertinent towards the end of the Eighties, when market liberalism was at its peak and inflicting evident damage on social cohesion. It makes less sense today, when mass migration has altered society irreversibly. The more multicultural a society becomes, the more a Hobbesian state is needed to protect individuals from the incursions of contending communities. Whether such a state can be installed in divided western democracies is at best an open question.

Professor Garrard rehearses the most familiar criticism of my work. My account of the Enlightenment represents it as a monolith, when it was so diverse that it scarcely existed at all as an identifiable intellectual movement, still less a coherent project. My critique of the world the Enlightenment has engendered is not accompanied by any proposals for how it can be reformed or improved. It is, in the end, not much more than warmed-up version of Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern nihilism, without the German prophet's insistence that this condition can be overcome by an act of will.

Like many very similar critiques that have appeared over the years, Garrard's addresses some genuine features of my work. It is true that I do not offer any gospel that could save the modern west from continuing decline. In contemporary debate, the idea of decline has been replaced by a therapeutic discourse in which the ills of our civilization are admitted only on the condition that they can be remedied. I prefer to use the term in the manner it was employed by Edward Gibbon, in which it signified an irreversible process. In this sense, the Enlightenment can itself be described as encompassing a decline. Xenophobia and racial prejudice are immemorial, but the Enlightenment gave them the imprimatur of reason. Racism as an ersatz-scientific theory was largely the invention of Francis Galton, an Enlightenment thinker. The anti-Semitism of Voltaire is a demonstrable fact. Modern racism and anti-Semitism were born within the Enlightenment, not as a Counter-Enlightenment reaction against it.⁷

It is also true that I take something from the critique of modern rationalism developed by Nietzsche. The implication of this critique, however, is not political salvation through an act of will, but the renunciation of any idea of salvation in politics. Michael Oakeshott presented a poetic image of such a post-Enlightenment politics in a well-known passage:

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy, and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.⁸

One may wonder if the tradition Oakeshott invokes survives intact. In any case, there is very little to be hoped from another bout of political rationalism.

Professor Pozo's penetrating analysis of post-modern liberal conservatism addresses a complex juncture in my thinking. In a well-informed critique, he argues that my endorsement of a Rortyesque liberalism with conservative characteristics was a more defensible position than the radical pluralism I later adopted. For the purposes of his argument, he accepts that fundamentalist or doctrinal liberalism, according to which liberal democracy comprises the only fully legitimate regime for all of humankind, is not a defensible view. He goes on to criticize the combination of value-pluralist and historicist arguments I deploy in support of my claim that liberal regimes have no special priority as instruments for the pursuit of peace. My later pluralism faces a "two-horned" dilemma: either a retreat into political quietism, or a relapse into Enlightenment rationalism via a demand for the internalization of the truth of value-plural-

ism. He concludes: "...the only feasible alternative to this undesirable scenario is the wager of post-modern liberal conservatism."

Pozo's critique is subtle and probing. At the same time, it misinterprets some of my arguments and fails to take the measure of the fragilities of Rortyish liberalism, which led me to a more radical pluralism. Some of the difficulties come from a simplistic reading of the relations between philosophy and practice.

The American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were fiascos for numerous reasons, including a lack of knowledge of the societies that were ostensibly being liberated—very few among the American forces spoke any of the native languages, for example. (The fiasco unfolding in Iran has singular causes, not least the clownish strategic incompetence of Donald Trump.) Beneath this there was secular religion masquerading as social science: all modern societies were converging on "democratic capitalism", a catchword denoting the regime that then existed in the US. The purpose of the invasions (aside from any geopolitical objectives they may have had) was to accelerate this evolution. Instead, twenty-odd years later, Afghanistan and Iraq are ruled by Islamist regimes, while "democratic capitalism" has all but disappeared in America, which was supposedly exporting it to the last corners of the globe.

Value-pluralism helps explain and may even predict these debacles.⁹ That does not mean everyone is required to internalize its truth. A popular belief in the universal appeal of liberal democracy may have assisted the west during the cold war. But victory was owed to leaders and advisers such as the diplomat George F. Kennan in his policy of containment of the Soviet Union, who relegated that prospect to a remote future, or privately dismissed it. Paradoxically, the effect of the west's triumph was to promote a universalism that the post-cold-war world has confounded. Food in some conditions may be poison in others.

Value-pluralism may be most useful in politics when it is an esoteric philosophy, like the indirect utilitarianism criticized by Bernard Williams. As Williams' chief target Henry Sidwick put it:

... the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this: the opinion that secrecy may render an action right that would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret; and it seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept expedient.¹⁰

As noted, however, western elites seem incapable of renouncing their illusions. In these circumstances, a public argument for value-pluralism has some merit. Even if it fails to prevent similar disasters in future, it is worth knowing why they will occur.

The capture of western elites by liberal universalism illustrates a larger problem. Post-modern conservatism presupposes institutions to which liberals of a conservative disposition can safely return. This may have been true in the 1980s, when political conflict in western countries was mainly around economic issues and the state still functioned as a guarantor of order. It is plainly false when conflict is over ethical issues (transgenderism, abortion and the like), mass immigration and the place of religion in society, and the state has become an instrument of progressive ideology. The liberal *ancien regime* has melted away. If it was once a not reasonable wager, Rortyesque liberalism is now a decidedly bad bet.

Rorty suffered from a debility common among western academics. He conversed with few non-liberals, if any. That may be why he believed the liberal "story" would likely catch on. When I engaged in a public dialogue with him in London sometime in the early Eighties, he seemed confident that he would carry his audience with him. He was visibly shaken when a speaker from the back of the room, after identifying himself and others accompanying him as believers in an Islamic polity, told him coolly that he had listened to the story and didn't buy it.

Professor Murphy contributes an illuminating paper on the differences and interactions of spontaneous and designed social orders in the work of Hayek. Rightly, he argues that framing this distinction as one between mutually exclusive types of order is mistaken and confusing. I have learnt much from his scrupulous parsing of these ideas and share his conclusion that spontaneous can be used to explain a range

of political regimes. I will confine my response to a question he does not explore: the antagonism between market capitalism and the traditions on which free markets depend, which is a stumbling block for libertarian conservatives who take their inspiration from Hayek.

The undoing of market liberalism has several mutually reinforcing sources. As market forces penetrate every aspect of life, goods that were not tradeable become commodities. Families and communities are dissolved as established ways of life treated as obstacles to consumer choice. Habits of trust that facilitated market exchange in the past lose their hold and are replaced by technical fixes—video-surveillance, blockchains and the like. Mobility and innovation are highly prized and those who cling to familiar places and relationships are punished. Over time, large sections of society may be left behind and abandoned. The losers from free markets are not passive victims. What liberals denounce as populism is blowback against the social disruption produced by their own policies. As a political regime, market liberalism is self-undermining.¹¹

In a witty aside, Murphy writes: “Karl Polanyi liked to joke that whereas labour markets were designed by nineteenth century legislators, the welfare state emerged spontaneously.”¹² The market order began as a deliberate construction, imposed in early 19th century Britain by a state aiming to protect and extend the power of property owners. In contrast, the twentieth century administrative and welfare state “emerged via a long series of piecemeal and unplanned responses to specific problems.”¹³ Also a spontaneous phenomenon, 21st century populism has overturned market liberalism as an international order. Trump’s tariffs halted neoliberal globalization, the putative endpoint of which was a worldwide free market.

In conversation with me, Michael Oakeshott described Hayek’s idea of spontaneous order as “rubbish”. It was a somewhat harsh verdict, but I understood what Oakeshott was getting at. Hayek was a sharp critic of scientism—the belief, systematically dissected in his book *The Counter-Revolution of Science: studies on the abuse of reason* (1952), that society can be fully understood using the methods of natural science. In much of his work, however, he deployed theories in which the emergence of order in society was continuous with evolution in the natural world. As I noted in the first edition of my book on his thought, spontaneous order understood in this way “has no normative content, and in particular, no liberal content.”¹⁴ For all we know, social evolution—if there is such a thing—may be taking us to a new order based on tyranny and slavery.

Jeremy Shearmur belongs in a different category from the other contributors. He was born in the same year I was, and decades ago we exchanged ideas in conversations I recall with fond amusement. The most striking feature of his contribution is that it reads almost exactly as it would have if it had been written all those years ago. It is as if the transformative developments of the past thirty years never happened. Reading him on the virtues of critical rationalism, you would hardly know that “open” societies have descended into repressive wokery and populist insurgencies, or why this metamorphosis has occurred. You would find only the faintest echoes of the fall of communism and what came after it, or of the rise of Islamism in formerly secular Muslim-majority states and fracturing western democracies. None of these developments are examined for what they might suggest about the limitations of critical rationalism in its application to politics.

Shearmur is, as he always has been, a disciple of Karl Popper. Popper’s ideas reflect a time when the principal danger to liberal freedoms came from the overthrow or conquest of democratic states by totalitarian dictatorships. They are of dubious utility when these freedoms are invaded by liberal societies themselves. The censorious orthodoxies that prevail in universities, museums, professional associations and many publishing houses are not enforced by government, though governments have extended censorship into the media. Fearful of betrayal by colleagues and friends, academics and public figures watch their words with as much care and anxiety as they did in eastern Europe in Soviet times. The penalties for dissent are far less severe than those in totalitarian regimes, chiefly consisting in loss of employment. The departure from a culture of tolerance is nonetheless profound.

If this culture-shift is admitted by Popper's disciple, it will doubtless evoke a plea for a more comprehensive critical rationalism. But liberal societies cannot be open in the sense Popper imagined. Emerging from a confluence of historical accidents rather than as stages in the progress of the species, they can be sustained only for as long as most of their members share a body of tacit knowledge and common practices. The freedom of speech championed by Milton originated in a religious demand for freedom of conscience, not Enlightenment rationalism. Injecting another dose of critical reason will not halt the ongoing decomposition of intellectual freedoms. The belief that it could is another confession of faith—one that is not merely gratuitous but irrational.

Human societies are not seminars or debating clubs. Nor are they laboratories for experiments in "piecemeal social engineering". Popper never explained where the values that guided social engineering came from, or how his rationalist engineers would resolve conflicts between them. Most probably, like Jurgen Habermas, he assumed these were problems to be solved by public dialogue. But what counts as a problem in society depends on ideas about the good, which are various and sometimes irreconcilable. For liberal feminists, divorce is a solution of the problems that come with patriarchy. Policies of harm-reduction may seem uncontroversially reasonable. But who determines what is harmful and how to weigh competing harms? Reducing deaths from illegal drugs by decriminalizing their consumption may seem unarguably good; but if the result is to normalize drug-taking, the quality of life in society may suffer. There are no ideal solutions, only a succession or more or less tolerable makeshifts.

The "pessimism" that Shearmur and others among my critics have detected in my work is rarely understood. It is not that I fail to share their hope of new worlds but that I have no wish to live in them. Marx's utopia—a society without religion, family or variety in ways of life—would be worse than the tyrannies that tried and failed to achieve it, for as the "final" phase of history it would presumably be permanent. John Stuart Mill's society of self-invented individuals cut loose from custom and tradition would embody a more oppressive conformity than any Mill found and decried in Victorian England. Happily, these ideal visions are only nightmares. The world as it is, with all its conflicts, is a better place in which to live.

Here we may return to the question posed by Eugene Callahan in his conspectus of my work. What is special about human beings? Hobbes provides one answer, in which there is assuredly much truth. Humans alone exercise "the privilege of absurdity: to which no living creature is subject, but man only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it, that profess philosophy."¹⁵ As to the nature of this absurdity, it consists, perhaps primarily, in hypostatization—the attribution of substantial reality to human concepts. Here Santayana's critique of Platonism in ethics echoes Hobbes, when in Chapter 4 of *Leviathan* he wrote that words are "the money of fools, that value them by the authority of an Aristotle, a Cicero or a Thomas, or any other doctor whatsoever, if he be a man."

The value-pluralism I have defended, an anthropological thesis about the conflicting needs of the human animal, is not an eternal truth. A "higher" form of humankind might be designed by transhumanist engineers, and the rackety old animal become extinct. History would then be a branch of paleontology, of no practical use. Political philosophy, however, is an intrinsically historical discipline, since the concepts with which it deals are mutable human constructions. What is left, it will be asked, when the pursuit of an ideal regime is renounced? Retreat into political quietism is a legitimate option, and need not be nihilistic. Whatever the human good may be, politics is a small part of it. Or you may join in political life as a participant observer, supporting different projects as they come and go, without believing any of them can be more than a temporary palliative for recurring evils. A sceptic of this kind is not necessarily disillusioned. They may never have harbored the illusions that have been attached to political action. Lacking the hopes of the visionary, they may find beauty and satisfaction in the spectacle.

"Existence is contingent essentially. As things might just as well have been different, so they may just as well prove to be inconstant; and since they cannot manifest their groundlessness by now being other than they happen to be, they may manifest it by being other at other times and places..." Philosophers who seek to underpin their accidental way of living with a metaphysical foundation will be disconcerted. Their

search for an ideal beyond the floating world is absurd; but it adds to the gaiety of life. "The flood itself is a nobler companion, and the spirit moves at ease upon the waters."¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society and Government*, Augustus M. Kelly, Clifton, 1972, p. 438.
- 2 *The Political Theory of John Gray*, eds. John Horton and Gleny Newey. Routledge, London and New York, 2006.
- 3 "Western Marxism: a fictionalist deconstruction". In: *Gray's Anatomy: selected writings*, new edition, Penguin Books, London, 2016, 20-9-216. The one colleague who spotted the spoof was Isaiah Berlin. There are two other spoofs in the collection, which I leave it to readers to identify.
- 4 First published in *The World and I*, Washington DC, February 1989, my essay is reprinted as "Santayana's alternative". In: *Gray's Anatomy: selected writings*, new edition. Penguin Books, London and New York, 2016, Chapter 3, pp. 62-67.
- 5 George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine*. J. M. Dent and Sons Limited, London and Toronto, 1913, p. 146.
- 6 "Hobbes and the modern state", *The World and I*, Washington DC, March 1989. Reprinted in *Post-liberalism: studies in political thought*. Routledge, London and New York, 1993, Chaps. 1, 3-17.
- 7 See Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: the Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1968.
- 8 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. Methuen, London, 1962, p. 61.
- 9 I predicted an unfolding fiasco in Iraq in a *New Statesman* essay published on March 11, 2003, nine days before the American invasion was launched: "As events in the Balkans have shown, when an authoritarian multinational state collapses, the result is not federalism. It is war and ethnic cleansing...To think that democracy can be established under such conditions is not just far-fetched, it is imbecilic." See *Gray's Anatomy*, p. 277.
- 10 Henry Sigwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Book IV, Chapter V, section 3, conclusion.
- 11 I have presented this critique of market liberalism in various places, including the postscript to the 3rd edition of *Hayek on Liberty*, "Hayek and the dissolution of classical liberalism". Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 148-161. A sketch of my critique can be found in *A conservative disposition*, Centre for Policy Studies, London, 1991, reprinted as Chapter 9 of *Gray's Anatomy*, new edition, pp.132-160. An earlier critique of the market liberal "minimum state" can be found in my pamphlet *Limited Government: a positive agenda*, Hobart Paper 113, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1989.
- 12 I cite Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1944, in *False Dawn, the delusions of global capitalism*, London, Granta, 1998, pp. 12-14.
- 13 *Hayek on Liberty*, 1st edition, London, Routledge, 1984, p. 120.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.120.
- 15 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, Chapter 5, p. 30.
- 16 George Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, New York, Scribner's and Sons, 1927, pp. 35, 94.

Hayek's Inspirations: Spontaneous Order

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Abstract: Friedrich August von Hayek, a brilliant thinker in his own right, received inspiration from many scholars and, in turn, provided inspiration to numerous scholars. He contributed mightily to the scientific advancement in the economics discipline from the Austrian School of Economics perspective. Hayek analyzed previous theoretical contributions, synthesized established scholarship, and formulated a new and better understanding of the forces that contribute to national economic systems. This paper presents the scholars and their scholarship who formed the foundations for Hayek's development of his notable contributions with respect to spontaneous order.

Keywords: Hayek, spontaneous order, Mandeville, Hume, Smith, Menger, Mises

Friedrich August von Hayek's career choice and ultimate profession was influenced by his family. Ebenstein (2001) chronicled the academic careers of his family. August von Hayek, his father, was a medical doctor and part-time university professor. Franz von Juraschek, Hayek's maternal grandfather, was a prominent economist and statistician who considered Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk a close friend. Böhm-Bawerk was an influential founding member of the Austrian School of Economics. Janik (2019) wrote that Gustav Edler von Hayek, Hayek's paternal grandfather, taught natural sciences. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein, an Austro-British philosopher, was a maternal second cousin. Unsurprisingly, Hayek pursued an academic career which led him, ultimately, to a leading role within the Austrian School of Economic thought and a co-recipient of the 1974 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel.

Hayek is recognized for his scholarly efforts and contributions in the study and understanding of spontaneous order. He was a voracious reader perusing an untold number of sources to develop his deep and penetrating understanding of the subject. It is impossible to identify, definitively, each scholar who inspired Hayek as he advanced the understanding of spontaneous order. However, Hayek cited certain scholars in his writing, and those individuals will be featured in this paper. Hayek's writing addressing spontaneous order benefited greatly from the work of Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Adam Smith, Carl Menger, and Ludwig von Mises.

The following section, *Hayek's Inspirations: Spontaneous Order*, will offer a detailed presentation of the scholars and their scholarship that inspired Hayek to develop his views and present them not only to the academic world but also to such government leaders as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan. The last narrative section, *Concluding Remarks*, will offer a statement regarding Hayek's intellectual work. The *Reference List* will be offered for those individuals who wish to read further concerning the material presented in this paper which interests them.

HAYEK'S INSPIRATIONS: SPONTANEOUS ORDER

Spontaneous order, as a subject, possesses an ancient origin story. The existence of the concept was recognized approximately 23 centuries ago, well before the subject possessed its current name. Rothbard (1995), an esteemed adherent of the Austrian School of Economics, credited Zhuangzi (alternative spelling: Chuang-tzu) (369-286 BC), a Chinese Taoist philosopher critical of the prevailing authoritarian Confucian philosophy, as the first individual to present the subject of the yet to be named spontaneous order. Zhuangzi asserted that the successful governing of society had never occurred. Adam Ferguson (1767), a scholar considered to be a member of the Scottish Enlightenment, described society as the “result of human action, but not the execution of any human design” (p. 205). Societal good order occurred spontaneously without government intervention. Jacobs (1997, 1999, 2000) credited Michael Polanyi for introducing the term spontaneous order for the phenomenon. Polanyi (M.D. University of Budapest, 1913 and Ph.D., Chemistry, Royal University of Pest, 1919) served as a medical officer in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I and later as a research chemist before becoming a highly regarded philosopher. Polanyi first wrote about spontaneous order in 1941, refined his presentation in 1948, and wrote an essay for his book published in 1951. Hayek acknowledged Polanyi’s contribution and popularized the term.

Hayek’s inspirations regarding spontaneous order may be attributed, in large part, to five scholars: Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Adam Smith, Carl Menger, and Ludwig Mises, as he developed an advanced understanding of the subject. These individuals offered important, published writings regarding spontaneous order in the context of individual freedom and liberty. An individual, today, can only speculate concerning Hayek’s undocumented thinking. However, his previous writing presented a common and dominant goal: that of achieving and maintaining individual freedom and liberty. Spontaneous order facilitates the goal, as central planning and hierarchal dictates do not. It may be speculative, but it is reasonable to offer that Hayek’s intense interest in spontaneous order was because it is the means to the end of freeing society from tyranny. That is why it may be asserted that his review of previous scholars’ writing regarding spontaneous order led him to expand his writing about the topic to include its effect on freedom and liberty.

Hayek (1973) developed further the concept of spontaneous order and described it as “orderly structures which are the product of the action of many men but not of human design” (p. 370). The subject’s existence was recognized during the time of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment. Smith’s invisible hand was the recognition that outcomes are neither the direct result of consciously developed decisions nor intentions. Adam Ferguson (1767/1782), a Scottish philosopher during the Scottish Enlightenment, declared that the price system was “the result of human action but not of human design”. Hayek extended understanding of the subject of spontaneous order. His position was that the price system, absent government intervention, developed spontaneously because market forces manifested by the self-interest, but cooperative interaction of many individuals exists.

Lombardo (2025) reported that the subject of spontaneous order may be defined as a self-ordering system whereby the components are arranged in an ethically neutral process that when participants observe behavioral rules, outcomes may arise regardless of any one actor’s intentions. An intelligent administrator in a spontaneously ordered system makes decisions restricted to process issues and does not address outcome issues. The firm is modeled as a design order, not as a spontaneous or emergent order. Firms must operate in, and should be designed to operate in, spontaneously evolving orders, particularly the economy and the legal-institutional environments. For example, bank regulation differs from one country to the next. This reality has obvious implications for the locus of control and functions allowed or designated for various employees and administrators within the bank’s hierarchy. The bank will be designed to operate in its environment. Perhaps less obviously, these differences in function should tend to influence or affect how the bank is organized.

Spontaneous order is found in complex systems whereby constituent members have freedom of action provided they observe the general rules related to process. A review of the writings of Mises, Hayek, and

their adherents indicates that general rules are developed because of coincidence and members' interactions responding to endogenous and exogenous influences while pursuing their individual objectives. This situation represents a dynamic milieu in that complex systems operate in an imperfect world (where agents are imperfectly informed and lack omniscience and prescience), thus resulting in an organic and gradual evolutionary change. Given the reality of human design fallibility, an administrator's effort to design or intensively manage a complex system in terms of effectiveness and efficiency is delusional.

diZerega (2008) claimed that the terms emergent order and spontaneous order are offered interchangeably; but fail to have the same exact meaning. He considered emergent order as the overall outcome resulting from the interactions of related components. The outcome may occur based either on a random informal process or a hierarchal planned process. A spontaneous order is not the result of a hierarchal planned process but rather the result of the cooperation of individuals lacking formal authority. According to diZerega, hierarchal fiat neither directs the process nor determines the outcome. He offers pricing in markets, votes in a democracy, and peer review in science as examples. In other words, human actions and not human design determine the outcomes.

The following subsections: The Pre Scottish Enlightenment Period (Mandeville), The Scottish Enlightenment Period (Hume and Smith) and The Austrian School of Economics (Menger and Mises) are provided below. These subsections offer the five scholars' writings as well as the inspirations that Hayek received from reviewing their work.

THE PRE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

Bernard de Mandeville

Hayek credited Mandeville (Philosophy and Medical degrees from the University of Leiden, 1691) as being the first to present the relationship between uncoordinated individual decision making and community results. Hayek's interpretation of Mandeville's writing was that an outcome results from self-interested, individual human action rather than human design; and such an outcome provides societal benefits. In other words, unintentional individual actions may create beneficial societal outcomes that are unintended consequences of the individuals' self-interested actions.

Mandeville (1714) wrote *The Fable of the Bees*, subtitled *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, which consisted of a preface, the text of *The Grumbling Hive*, an "Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue", and "Remarks". He used the metaphor of bees in the hive to present his thinking regarding individual human self-interest and its impact on human society.

Hayek (1973-1979) lauded Mandeville's ideas and his view that tradition and not deliberate reason influences rules of conduct. Hayek (1989) admired Mandeville's thinking, crediting him as providing the genealogical origins of *laissez-faire* economic theory. Mandeville asserted individuals, without external coordination, interact in their self-interest providing a community benefit as the outcome; thus, social order results. Hayek presented Mandeville as one of the first to put forward the concept of "spontaneous order". Hayek recognized that Mandeville provided a framework for subsequent scholarly inquiry.

Hayek's (1966), "Dr. Bernard Mandeville", the annual Master-Mind lecture, was subsequently published (1967a) and appeared in Hayek's essay collection, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (1978). The substance of the lecture included Mandeville's perspective that hierarchical design does not result in complex market structures; rather, the structures result from the unintended consequences of individual decision making. The lecture and subsequent publications of the lecture were influential, bringing Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* to a wider audience. Mandeville was supportive of the concept of anti-rationalism, a perspective shared by David Hume.

THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

The Scottish Enlightenment was a period of tremendous intellectual activity from approximately the mid-1720s to 1820. This notable period of scholarly enquiry was characterized by an attempt to apply empirical analysis to study social sciences. Francis Hutcheson, an Irishman, was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. He wrote, notably, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725 [2004]) and *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728) ushering in the Scottish Enlightenment. Hutcheson was known for teaching that people had a “moral sense” and creating the phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest number”. He (1694-1746) influenced David Hume (1711–1776), Adam Smith (1723–1790), and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826).

David Hume, a philosopher, bought recognition to the Scottish Enlightenment with his writing even though his book (1739/1740), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, was not widely acclaimed when first published. Adam Smith (1776), an economist, wrote, *The Wealth of Nations*, a hugely influential book that offered the “invisible hand” as a symbol of free market trade without government intervention. Francis Hutcheson (philosopher), Thomas Reid (1710–1796, philosopher), Adam Ferguson (1723-1816, sociologist), and James Hutton (1726–1797, geologist) were other well-known Scottish Enlightenment scholars.

Hayek (1946/1948) drew from Mandeville and the Scottish Enlightenment, especially Hume and Smith, to present his thinking regarding the subject, “True Individualism”. He credited the subject of spontaneous order as emphasizing limits to human knowledge and, in contrast, noted the lack of efficacy of a hierarchal rationalist design process which relies on the assumption of perfect knowledge.

David Hume

Hayek used Hume’s writings as a foundation for developing the concept of spontaneous order. Hayek believed that although human action, or decision making, occurred to achieve a particular outcome, the actual outcome was not the result of human design. Hume’s writings encompassed three distinct areas: history, philosophy, and economics.

Hume questioned the concept of causality, doubting the relationship between cause and effect. Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* consisted of Book 1: Of the Understanding, Book 2: Of the Passions, and Book 3: Of Morals. The first volume (1739) presented his considered views concerning how people think, form ideas and understand causality. The second volume (1739) examined human emotions and desires. The third volume (1740) addressed ideas of virtue, vice, and right or wrong.

Hume’s skepticism caught Hayek’s attention; his perspective conformed with the anti-rationalism tradition. Hume’s partiality to the concept of “anti-rationalism” led him to the view that human decision-making experienced limitations; individuals could not design a perfect society. Hayek considered Hume’s perspective when presenting his own critique of central planning. Hayek was faithful to the fundamental tenet of the spontaneous order of economic markets. That is, outcomes are the result of human action, but not human design.

Hume’s thinking was that human reasoning cannot fathom, *a priori*, the requirements for optimizing societal benefits. Another way to consider the market economy is to recognize that it is a dynamic phenomenon and guidance from humans must be continuous based upon information collected every second, analyzed steadily, and decided upon instantaneously to achieve perfect outcomes. This situation is unrealistic. Hayek (1989), while considering Hume’s thinking, presented his opposition to central planning when considering the spontaneous order precepts.

Hayek embraced Hume’s writing along three dimensions: an anti-rationalist tradition, cultural evolution, and knowledge limitations. Hume favored an anti-rationalist tradition, using epistemological arguments to critique the “constructivist rationalism” concept. The concept fostered the thinking that a perfect society can be designed by the application of human reasoning; Hayek (1989) supported Hume’s critique.

Hume thought that human reason was limited in terms of understanding complex moral or legal norms. Cultural evolution was a function of experience and habit, rather than hierarchal direction. Such experience and habit were the impetus for the emerging rules of justice and property. Societal rules evolve to maintain their relevance. Hume opined that one individual alone experienced limits to his or her knowledge base lacking the ability to know what is needed to plan a society. However, many individuals, each possessing limited knowledge, resulted in dispersed knowledge. The dispersed knowledge is combined by many individuals who take self-interested actions or decisions resulting in a coordination that achieves an outcome spontaneously. The collective action of many self-interested buyers and sellers is an example of how goods are priced by spontaneous order without a hierarchal, central planning process.

Hayek (1944) presented Hume's statement that "*It is seldom that liberty of any kind is lost all at once*" and emphasized Hume's position that centralized planning inexorably results in the loss of individual freedoms. Hayek (1948) praised Hume's philosophical thinking in *Individualism and Economic Order*. He gave a lecture (1963) about Hume and his contribution to the understanding of spontaneous order to the Mont Pèlerin Society. The lecture (1964a) was published eventually in English. Chappell (1966), also, eventually published the lecture. Hayek attributed the view to Hume that the law derives from the spontaneous evolution of legal systems in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1973-1979).

Adam Smith

Adam Smith attended the University of Glasgow and Balliol College, Oxford. He was an integral figure in the Scottish Enlightenment. Smith, famously, coined the term, invisible hand, to describe the self-interested actions of many individuals resulting in beneficial societal outcomes. Smith addressed the concept in his highly regarded, impressive book, *The Wealth of Nations*, originally published in 1776. His writing laid the cornerstone for a market economy structure that is familiarly called capitalism.

Adam Smith, influenced by Hume's conceptual thinking, applied his understanding to the economics dimension, considering specifically the invisible hand. He wrote about the invisible hand in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/2002) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776/2008). The former publication addressed issues related to human morality and sympathy; the later profoundly influential publication provided a presentation of a market economy and the division of labor. The two publications are essential reference books, presenting the theoretical core for a classical free-market economy. The invisible hand presents the understanding that individual benefits derived by the decisions of so many people exercising their self-interest resulted in the collective benefits derived by society. The societal benefits were not considered as part of the design by the individuals when making their decisions.

Smith's writings influenced Hayek in multiple areas: the societal effects of individual self-interest, voluntary collaboration among individuals, and the spontaneous order of economic markets. Although some individuals may conflate "invisible hand" and "spontaneous order", a distinction exists. Smith considered the invisible hand as the efficient allocation of resources applied through the buyers' and sellers' bargaining power to establish prices for finished goods. Their self-interested actions ultimately produce the right amount of goods sold at fair prices. Hayek considered, beyond the economic marketplace, that society is incomprehensible to any one person or government entity. Thus, to issue decrees that understand and manage societal activities is misguided if an expected desired outcome is to unfold. Order occurs when self-interested people confront evolving societal rules and institutions. Despite the distinction, the two subjects are similar in that they both provide explanations regarding how complex social and economic systems benefit from the actions of many self-interested individuals. Individuals who argue in favor of the invisible hand and spontaneous order do not believe that social benefits are derived from hierarchal central planning or a tyrant's dictates.

The terminology "invisible hand" should be considered a specific example of "spontaneous order" in that it applies to the regulation of the marketplace; whereas spontaneous order applies to all human endeavors to regulate itself. Adam Ferguson (1767/1995) coined the phrase "the result of human action, but

not the execution of any human design” when considering the term “invisible hand”. Hayek, approximately two centuries later, used the same phrase to describe “spontaneous order”.

Hayek’s (1960) book, *The Constitution of Liberty*, presented the economic, legal, and political dimensions of spontaneous order and the resultant impact on individual freedom and the constitutional limits constraining government. He cited Smith’s intellectual assertions embracing and expanding the concepts in his own works. Smith’s writing about individual liberty and the division of labor were cited. Hayek used Smith’s contribution when he developed his classical liberalism perspective. Hayek’s (1973) *Rules and Order* acknowledged Smith as the first scholar to promote the occurrence of efficient free markets absent central planning. Hayek’s essay (1948) and lecture (1968) presented the “invisible hand” when discussing competition as a discovery procedure. He argued that competition as well as all evolutionary events were acts of discovery whereby individuals react to novel situations gradually and increase efficiency incrementally. His view was that market competition was spontaneous in nature.

Hayek (1964b) presented his thinking opposing central planning, arguing that it is impossible to predict the future. National economic systems are so large and complicated that individuals and computer systems cannot fully comprehend the present intricacies and nuances of these systems let alone forecast their future states. Hayek’s understanding of Smith’s “invisible hand” led his thinking beyond spontaneous order when writing *The Fatal Conceit* (1989). Hayek relied heavily on Smith and the thinking of the Scottish Enlightenment scholars to declare that socialism and central planning were the antitheses of individual freedom and liberty. Hayek considered Hume’s and Smith’s views, built upon the current thinking, and developed and presented his own views that central planning had severe limitations. Hayek specified that decentralized free markets would be a welcome alternative in terms of economic effectiveness.

THE AUSTRIAN SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

As the previous passages showed, Hayek found inspiration from Mandeville and the Scottish Enlightenment scholars’ thinking, notably Hume and Smith. Their scholarship intrigued Hayek, who not only advanced understanding of spontaneous order but also addressed and presented his concerns for individual freedom and liberty.

The Austrian School of Economics traces its lineage to Carl Menger. He disagreed with the classical economists who proposed the cost-of-production theories of value. Friedrich von Weiser (1889/1893, 1914/1927) and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk (1884, 1889, 1909-1912) were sympathetic to Menger’s views becoming adherents of the Austrian economics viewpoint. Both scholars were major contributors to the Austrian School of economic thought. Second generation scholars who joined the Austrian School of Economics included Ludwig von Mises (1912/1981) who continued Böhm-Bawerk’s work and Hans Mayer who continued Weiser’s work. Böhm-Bawerk and Mises were strong influences on Hayek, with Mises being considered Hayek’s mentor. Hayek was part of the third generation of scholars who joined the Austrian School of Economics.

Mises and Hayek continued the Austrian School traditions of scholarship inquiry that includes an emphasis on (Lombardo, 2025):

- neoclassical marginalist economics;
- alternative cost pricing influenced by consumer desires;
- a time-theoretic approach to capital and interest;
- monetary overinvestment theory;
- opposition to the monetarist’s perspective;
- information uncertainty; and
- competitive, free markets with government *laissez-faire* economic policy.

The Austrian School considers spontaneous order as a fundamental tenet defending and advocating for free markets, completely absent of any government involvement. Carl Menger and, in the following section, Ludwig von Mises were scholars whose writings inspired Hayek.

Carl Menger Edler von Wolfensgrün

Carl Menger (1840-1921), Dr. jur., Jagiellonian University in Kraków, was the founding member of the Austrian School of Economics. He was joined by Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and Friedrich von Wieser, former students and subsequently colleagues. Menger disagreed with the classical economists who proposed the cost-of-production theories of value. Menger was an early adherent to the Marginalist Revolution that included William Stanley Jevons (1835-1882) and Léon Walras (1834-1910).

The three scholars (Menger, Jevons, and Walras) developed the marginal theory of value independently. Walras, a French economist identified with the Lausanne School of economic thought consistent with the neoclassical economics perspective. He went on to offer the general theory of equilibrium. The marginal theory of value is the recognition that consumers' decision behaviors are based on the concept that the purchase of an extra unit of either a good or service should bring the buyer additional utility. This orientation separates classical economics, that is the work of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, from modern economics.

Menger is credited as the originator of the "subjective theory of value" concept. His view is that pricing for a good or service is based on the consumer's desire for the object and not on its scarcity or production cost. Thus, while one consumer is willing to pay a particular price for a good, collectively consumers are willing to pay a varying array of sale prices for the good. Friedrich von Wieser expanded Menger's theory of imputation in production.

Menger (1871) declared that money was the result of spontaneous order and not a government invention. A barter economy existed using highly desirable commodities such as salt or cattle which became the exchange medium before the use of money. Menger (1883) explained his philosophy of social institutions, as well as money and language, as "organic" emerging from the unintended consequences of individuals attempting to redress their own problems. Menger (1892) provided a detailed explanation regarding the spontaneous order process in the case of self-interested individuals, without the benefit of any central planning, developing, over time, indirect exchange protocols. Indirect exchange occurs in a non-monetary trading process whereby a good is exchanged for a nondesired good which, in turn, is then exchanged for a desired good.

Hayek was inspired greatly by Menger (1883) who wrote *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences*. Menger's book advanced Smith's thinking by introducing a theoretical construct regarding the nature of organically emerging social institutions, i.e., money, law, and language, absent central planning. Hayek's writing concerning spontaneous order referenced Menger's previous work. He even went so far as to write an introduction and edit Menger's published works (1933-1936). His introduction emphasized Menger's writing regarding the spontaneous origin of money and social institutions. Hayek (1967b) also credits Menger for explaining that indispensable social institutions, e.g., markets, language, and law, develop by organic emergence rather than formal planning. An institution's profile results from the unintended consequence of the self-interested decisions of innumerable individuals.

Hayek (1973) relied on Menger's investigations when building his theory of decentralized "grown" orders, a term he coined, commonly known as spontaneous order. Hayek considered that the concept of spontaneous order was the evolving composite entity that includes:

- dispersed knowledge (local resource shortages, shifting consumer preferences, and individual skills) not possessed by a centralized command structure;
- interplay between *Cosmos* ("grown orders") and *Taxis* ("made" orders);
- the price mechanism as a decentralized communication system; and

- emergent markets, legal systems, and languages institutions.

Hayek (1988) agreed with Menger's cultural evolution theories advocating that individuals adapted to spontaneous social norms rather than hierarchical fiats.

Ludwig Heinrich Edler von Mises

Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) (Dr. jur., University of Vienna, 1906), was a doctoral student advised by Böhm-Bawerk. He was a monetary theorist affiliated with the Austrian School of Economics. Mises (1922/1936) wrote a critique of socialism. He mentored Hayek who attended Mises's private seminars in Vienna, known as *Privatseminar*, which were offered to a select group of economists. Mises, after emigrating to the United States, continued the seminars in New York City.

Mises's highly regarded publication, *Human Action* (1949), presented his views on the topic of praxeology, which is the study of human decision making, allocation of resources, and the action taken to achieve the goal. This subject matter is the basis for understanding the spontaneous order concept as it applies to social institutions or structures, such as markets, language, and law. These social institutions typically emerge naturally from either the interplay of self-interested decisions by many individuals or by centrally planned fiat. Mises also wrote another highly regarded book, *Socialism* (1922/1936/1951), that inspired Hayek passionately. Hayek repeatedly acknowledged Mises's contribution to his professional development.

Unsurprisingly, Hayek readily cites Mises, his mentor, as he develops his theoretical arguments. However, Hayek's brilliance went far beyond merely citing his mentor; he considered Mises's scholarly work along with the work of other researchers to advance theories that became accepted by so many scholars.

Hayek considered Mises's scholarly arguments in *Human Action* as he formulated a comprehensive theory of evolutionary spontaneous order consistent with Mises's thinking that society evolves from its members' self-interested decision making rather than by executive directives. Mises introduced the "socialist calculation debate" examining if a centrally planned economy could allocate resources appropriately without a market price process. Both Mises and Hayek opined that it could not. As in most cases, Hayek expanded the understanding of the subject matter.

Hayek (1933) first addressed, consistent with Mises's approach, spontaneous order. Subsequently, Hayek, while writing *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) and citing Mises's previous writing (1922/1936/1951), explored how freedom empowers spontaneous social and economic processes. Hayek (1973) presented his developed spontaneous order theory citing Mises's considerable contributions from various sources including *Human Action* (1949). Hayek, in *The Fatal Conceit* (1988), cited Mises on multiple occasions explaining that "socialist calculation" is inaccurate and cannot be relied upon when compared to spontaneous market processes. The book emphasized his view that societal prosperity may be attributable to individual cooperation and private property.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Three points are worth noting regarding the sources of Hayek's inspirations identified in this paper. One, some inspirations undeniably exist; Hayek supplied the evidence when he cites the work of other individuals in his published writings. An inexhaustible search for citations was not done. Thus, in all likelihood, Hayek experienced additional inspiration. Inspirations may be transmitted in other ways, but the process may not necessarily be documented. Two, Hayek had innumerable informal conversations with countless people. A person may have said something which was not documented subsequently that inspired Hayek. Three, Hayek may have experienced what many people experience. A person is told something by another individual; time elapses, memory fades, and the conveyed information resurfaces as one's own. The first

type of inspiration is the only one reported in this writing. Thus, it is possible and may be likely that Hayek was inspired by sources beyond what has been offered in this article.

Hayek (1960) considered that individual liberty, i.e., importance of individual rights and the limitations of government power, is precious and must be safeguarded. He viewed spontaneous order as the foundational process to protect individual liberty. Hayek was fully committed to the spontaneous order process as a safeguard from tyranny. The process of self-interested individuals making decisions that affect their lives rather than a government fiat process was of paramount importance. Hayek's (1960) book referenced not only the work of the Scottish Enlightenment scholars but also that of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Hayek's thinking aligned very well with Tocqueville's (1835-1840/2004) observations and resultant commentary during his May 1831 to February 1832 tour of the United States. Both Tocqueville and Hayek thought that the spontaneous order process was diametrically opposed to central planning tyranny. Spontaneous order provided an opposing force to resist government fiats, thus maintaining democracy and limiting government control. Hayek included Tocqueville with Hume and Smith in his "true individualism" category.

Tocqueville's commentary that the American society forms voluntary associations to achieve an objective, e.g., aid the poor members of society, without government involvement resonated with Hayek's thought that civil society develops without government directives. Hayek heeded Tocqueville's comments that "soft despotism" develops when government repeatedly interferes with the spontaneous order process.

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REVIEW

The Conversation Continues: Liberalism and the Conservatism

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The Conservative Critique of Liberalism. Eds. Beckstein, Martin and David McGrogan, 2026. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Political conservatives have much to thank political liberals for. For a conservative reader, this statement may appear perplexing, given that political conservatism and political liberalism have spent more than two centuries criticising one another. From the conservative perspective, political liberalism has been the source of numerous misguided projects of salvation that have inflicted considerable damage on Western societies. Meanwhile, political liberals have often criticised conservatives for resisting the tide of progress that, in their view, would lead towards a better and more perfect society. In politics, liberalism relies on hope: the belief that progress and a better future remain within humanity's reach. Political conservatism, by contrast, confronted with the wreckage left by liberal projects, relies on the familiar to pick up the pieces.

Nevertheless, political conservatives do have much to thank political liberals for, since without the project of the French Revolution, political conservatism would not have emerged as a self-conscious political doctrine. It was through Edmund Burke's response to the Revolution that political conservatism developed as a distinct doctrine, drawing upon the broader tradition of Western thought to articulate a critique of what he understood as its wrongs and excesses. Hence, since that event, political conservatives and liberals have been friends, rivals, and enemies within the great conversation of politics.

The relationship of friendship, rivalry, and enmity between conservatism and liberalism has often attracted scholarly attention. However, in our current age, in which liberal hegemony is being questioned intellectually and politically by more radical and reactionary forces, this relationship has become a catalyst for an expanding body of scholarship on conservatism, liberalism, and their interaction. One of the latest additions is *The Conservative Critique of Liberalism*, a collection of chapters by various scholars edited by David McGrogan and Martin Beckstein. The volume has much to offer historians of political thought, legal theorists, political theorists, and scholars of public policy. Yet its contributions are, at times, overshadowed by the breadth of subjects covered, whose connections are not always apparent without returning to the introduction; by moments when this reviewer found himself wanting more; and by occasional misunderstandings.

McGrogan and Beckstein begin the book by noting, correctly, that 'conservatism itself is a concept that receives surprisingly little academic attention' (p. 2). The reasons they highlight are the often-blurred connection between liberalism and conservatism, as well as conservatism's reluctance to construct a systematic philosophy of its own. Yet scholarly attention to conservatism is growing, and this book itself provides evidence of that development. The reasons for this growth are explored in Claudia Franziska

Brühwiler's chapter, in which she examines the collapse of the conservative movement consensus in the American context due to the emergence and growth of post-liberalism and national conservatism.

It is easy for a political movement composed of distinct factions to maintain consensus when there is a unifying threat that brings them together. In the case of the American conservative movement, it was the threat of Soviet communism and the growth of collectivism that fostered such consensus. Yet, once these threats had receded, the broad coalition that constituted the American conservative movement began to collapse. This collapse, made visible by Trump's electoral victory in 2016, leads Brühwiler to argue that '[t]wo sub-movements have emerged as contenders to lead a renewed conservative movement, if not a new consensus: postliberals and national conservatives are among the loudest critics of the 'old' consensus and the past trajectory of US conservatism' (p. 61).

These two sub-movements are united by their virulent anti-liberalism and deep critique of the post-war American conservative movement. However, as Brühwiler (p. 66) notes, they 'are united in what they are against—but not yet following the same path'. This highlights the distinct trajectories pursued by post-liberals and national conservatives in relation to their agendas and policy preferences. More importantly, a point that I hoped Brühwiler would have explored in greater detail is that, even within post-liberalism and national conservatism in the United States, there are profound disagreements for example over religion, economics, and the extent to which state power should be employed.

While an exploration of these internal disagreements may have fallen outside the scope of the chapter, it would have added further force to Brühwiler's conclusion: namely, that these sub-movements and 'their ideas preclude them from being part of or lead conservatives towards a new consensus', and hence that these movements 'do not offer anything that would draw in the scattered members of the conservative family' (pp. 68-69). Brühwiler supports this conclusion by noting that the political actor most referenced by post-liberals and national conservatives is not Donald Trump, but rather Viktor Orbán's leadership and political agenda. Ironically, the figure most frequently referenced by these sub-movements is a leader far removed from the realities of American politics and one who was recently removed from office by the electorate. In the end, Brühwiler raises an important question: if these movements cannot provide a new consensus, can other conservative movements accommodate them within a renewed consensus? In this reviewer's estimation, this is certainly a long shot, and perhaps even impossible; nevertheless, it is an endeavour that conservatives cannot avoid.

Perhaps the ideas for a new consensus can find inspiration abroad. Readers can discover such ideas, and learn much about this tradition if unfamiliar with it, in two excellent chapters that explore German conservatism. The first, by Laura Achtelstetter and Alexander Kruska, examines the attempts of Prussian Old Conservatives to 'develop a set of ideas that allowed them to reconcile the demands for political freedom with their anti-revolutionary stance'—in other words, how to live with liberalism (p. 23). These Prussian conservatives therefore sought to construct a "true liberalism" anchored in a natural, God-given order that made "true liberty" possible while allowing for gradual reform. This stood in opposition to a "false liberalism" based on erroneous presuppositions that promoted a "false liberty" and would lead to the upheaval and horrors of the French Revolution. In short, we find in these Prussian conservatives 'a meaningful counternarrative to the liberal focus on individual autonomy and human-centred governance', but one that could not escape confronting, and even accepting, some of the realities brought about by liberalism (p. 34).

The second chapter examines Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner and is written by Tobias Aler-Bartels, who explores Kaltenbrunner's attempts to construct a new conservatism in 1970s Germany. The chapter provides an excellent intellectual overview of the state of conservatism in both pre- and post-1945 Germany. The radical forms of German conservatism discredited themselves through their proximity to National Socialism; hence, post-war German conservatism experienced a "Westernization of German Conservatives" [as] a direct response to the radicalisation of the ideology. However, the recourse to the "Western" tradition of conservative thought...continued to be a striking manifestation of an identity crisis

of German conservatism after 1945' (p. 44). Despite this movement towards a more liberal conservatism, 'conservatism was [still] divided into largely irreconcilable factions' (p. 45).

In Kaltenbrunner's case, a new conservatism was needed for the post-liberal age: one that 'had to gain a certain distance from his own tradition and opt for many a "radical intervention in the status quo"' (p. 52). For Kaltenbrunner, this radical intervention would not be found within the Western traditions of conservative thought, but rather in a return to the traditions of German radical conservatism. In short, like contemporary post-liberals and other radical elements on the Right, Kaltenbrunner sought to overcome the perceived evils of liberal rationalism by adopting a rationalism with a more acceptable face. Aler-Bartels reaches much the same conclusion as Brühwiler: this turn towards the radical represents a dead end. As Aler-Bartels writes of Kaltenbrunner's radical conservatism, 'as liberal and moderate conservatives became increasingly self-confident...radical conservative metapolitics failed to find a lasting resonance in the targeted circles' (p. 56).

Conceivably, insights for a new consensus can be found in the Anglo-American tradition. This theme is explored in Kieron O'Hara's chapter, which seeks to construct a conservative approach to privacy 'that eschews liberal arguments and, instead, rest[s] on (Burkean) conservative foundations' (p. 89). While liberals have approached privacy, often in highly contested ways, through the ideals of autonomy, individuality, and freedom, O'Hara argues that, in an age of digital modernity that threatens privacy and individuality, the conservative approach 'would focus on the existence and durability of modernity, whose very longevity is evidence of its social value', thereby providing a more secure foundation (p. 119). O'Hara finds the Burkean conservative thinker who provides the conceptual tools and framework for this defence in the work of Michael Oakeshott.

O'Hara makes an interesting and necessary argument for a conservative approach. However, by recruiting Michael Oakeshott for this task, the argument begins to encounter difficulties. First, O'Hara presents Oakeshott as a Burkean conservative. This is problematic because Oakeshott himself rejected this label. This is not to suggest that Oakeshott and Burke did not share conservative sympathies; rather, Oakeshott belongs to a secular and sceptical tradition, whereas Burke does not. As Oakeshott (1962, p. 195) tells us, 'in my opinion, there is more to be learnt about this [conservative] disposition from Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and Hume than from Burke or Bentham'.

The second problem is that O'Hara does not appear to fully understand Oakeshott's position, which is surprising given his longstanding interest in Oakeshott's thought. For example, we are told that 'individuality is not valuable on its own terms, but rather because it is part of the tradition into which we have been socialised' (p. 118). The implication is that O'Hara interprets Oakeshott as valuing individuality in instrumental terms. This, however, represents a misunderstanding of Oakeshott's thought. When Oakeshott writes about the individual, he does so in intrinsic rather than instrumental terms, emphasising the uniqueness of each person rather than valuing individuality merely because it forms part of an enduring tradition. Indeed, Oakeshott (1962, p. 244), referring to friendship and human love, writes:

Its object is individual and not concretion of qualities: it was for Adonis that Venus quit heaven. What is communicated and enjoyed is not an array of emotions—affection, tenderness, concern, fear, relation, etc.—but the uniqueness of a self.

These are not the words of an instrumentalist, as O'Hara's interpretation implies, but of someone who attributed a much deeper intrinsic value to individuality. O'Hara's instrumentalist reading of Oakeshott is not confined to the question of individuality; it also extends to his understanding of tradition. Here again, we encounter what I believe to be a misreading. Oakeshott did not regard traditions as goal-oriented or instrumentally valuable. Rather, he understood them as practices in which individuals participate and from which they derive meaningful satisfaction. As Oakeshott (2001, pp. 64–65) writes:

Being human is recognizing oneself to be related to others, not as parts of an organism are related, nor as members of a single, all-inclusive “society,” but in virtue of participation in multiple understood relationships and in the enjoyment of understood, historic languages of feelings, sentiments, imaginings, fancies, desires, recognitions, moral and religious beliefs, intellectual and practical enterprises, customs, conventions, procedures and practices, canons, maxims and principles of conduct, rules which denote obligations and offices which specify duties... a human being is the inhabitant of a world composed, not of “things,” but of meanings; that is, of occurrences in some manner recognized, identified, understood and responded to in terms of this understanding. It is a world of sentiments and beliefs, and it includes also human artifacts...for these, also, are “expressions” which have meanings and which require to be understood in order to be used or enjoyed. To be without this understanding is to be, not a human being, but a stranger to a human condition.

Again, these are not the words of an instrumentalist, but rather of someone who advances a non-instrumental understanding of tradition. Nevertheless, O’Hara raises an interesting question concerning how Oakeshott’s understanding of the role of the state might provide insights into the challenges posed by digital modernity. However, as O’Hara himself acknowledges, significant difficulties remain, since the private platforms that dominate digital modernity are not analogous to the modern state. Indeed, Oakeshott was not a minimalist with regard to government, as his essay ‘The Political Economy of Freedom’ reminds us. There is, therefore, scope within his thought for government intervention in relation to private actors. Yet, as O’Hara correctly observes, important questions remain: how can such intervention avoid becoming paternalistic? Does government possess the expertise necessary to regulate these platforms effectively? And how should it respond to rapid technological innovation? There are no easy answers to these questions. An Oakeshottian response may have fallen outside the scope of the chapter, but it is one that I had hoped O’Hara would explore in the future.

The themes raised by O’Hara are taken up, albeit from a different perspective, in Richard Mullender’s chapter on the conservative liberalism of Ronald Dworkin. Although Mullender is quick to point out that both readers of Dworkin and Dworkin himself regarded him as a liberal, ‘there are grounds on which to argue that Dworkin’s contributions to jurisprudence and political philosophy exhibit a conservative dimension’ (p. 159). To develop this argument, Mullender employs Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay ‘The Conservative’, with its characterisation of conservatism as the party of memory and liberalism as the party of hope, as a framework for identifying the conservative disposition within Dworkin’s thought. This disposition is expressed in Dworkin’s idea of “fit”, whereby ‘the judge applies to the dispute must cohere with existing law’ and institutional history when deciding hard cases (p. 169). In short, Mullender finds within Dworkin ‘a combination of “memory” and “hope”’, lending support to the conclusion that ‘his contributions to legal and political philosophy are a liberal-cum-conservative admixture’ (p. 183).

That Dworkin exhibits the conservative disposition is unsurprising, since the conservative disposition is not the exclusive preserve of political conservatism. Indeed, the late philosopher G. A. Cohen also claimed this disposition, and he was hardly a political conservative. What Mullender’s chapter reminds us is that the conservative disposition is inherent in every human being, since each individual has at least one aspect of life in which they prefer the familiar to the unfamiliar. This may be described as a form of natural conservatism. Yet, while Dworkin may draw upon the conservative disposition, he does not ultimately apply it to politics. Indeed, Dworkin may make use of memory, but ultimately it is instrumental to the achievement of the ideal state he hopes to realise. Consequently, hope ultimately overwhelms memory. The memory that is subordinated is that embodied in the formal and authoritative procedures of the rule of law, sacrificed in pursuit of preferred moral and political ends.

That Dworkin exhibits natural conservatism is the main difficulty raised by Beckstein and McGrogan’s introduction: namely, the contested nature of the concept of conservatism itself. Indeed, there is no universally accepted definition of conservatism, nor is there an agreed taxonomy capable of clearly delineating its

various forms. In their introduction, Beckstein and McGrogan attempt to provide such a taxonomy by distinguishing between substantive and procedural conservatism. Yet this taxonomy appears rather limited. For example, natural conservatism is not considered. Moreover, thinkers grouped within these categories often differ in significant respects, suggesting the need for a more nuanced taxonomy. Ironically, their taxonomy of liberalism is considerably more differentiated, distinguishing between classical, social, neo-, and progressive liberalism.

Nevertheless, despite the limited taxonomy of conservatism provided by Beckstein and McGrogan, the diverse topics and approaches adopted by the contributors reflect the richness of conservative thought and the variety of conservative traditions, particularly in relation to their complex relationship with liberalism. It is precisely in this richness and diversity of contributions, which also constitutes a weakness, that the value of the volume comes to the fore. Indeed, David Campbell and Kevin Dowd's chapter on the UK Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic reads, at times, somewhat out of place within the volume. However, it ultimately demonstrates the classic conservative critique of the dangers when scientific knowledge is translated into political practice in pursuit of salvation. Their chapter is a stark reminder of the enduring value of political conservatism within the great conversation of politics.

In the end, *The Conservative Critique of Liberalism* and the wider project behind it—the International Research Network on Critical Theory and Conservative Thought—offer scholars a unique opportunity to explore the possibility of dialogue between critical theory and conservative thought, despite their apparent incompatibility. This endeavour alone makes the project and the book innovative, interesting, and worthwhile. For this Oakeshottian reviewer, however, the project appears to be a folly, since the core axioms of critical theory and conservative thought are fundamentally opposed and ultimately irreconcilable. Nevertheless, one of the defining characteristics of the academic world is its tradition of disinterested scholarship in pursuit of truth. This volume is an admirable contribution to that tradition.

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REVIEW

David Emanuel Andersson, *Understanding Creative Cities*, Edward Elgar, 2026

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David E. Andersson's book revisits the theme of creative cities from a distinctive interdisciplinary perspective. At a time when the concept of the "creative city" is widely used but often vaguely defined, the book offers a rigorous and thought-provoking account of the conditions that make urban creativity possible.

From the very beginning of the Preface, the author makes it clear that the concept of the "creative city" cannot be taken for granted. Before developing his argument, he defines the two key concepts on which the entire book is based: creativity and the city. Creativity is understood in its classical sense as the production of something that is novel, useful, and surprising, while a city is described as a densely populated environment where people share common social and economic spaces. Another aspect highlighted in the Preface is the book's interdisciplinary perspective. The author argues that previous studies of creative cities have often examined the topic from the viewpoint of a single discipline, such as economics, geography, psychology, or sociology. By contrast, his objective is to integrate these different perspectives into a broader framework, while acknowledging that such breadth may come at the expense of greater depth in individual fields. This interdisciplinary ambition reflects the complexity of creativity itself, which cannot be fully understood through the lens of any single discipline. Finally, the Preface introduces one of the book's central ideas: creativity is not simply an individual characteristic but is strongly influenced by the urban environment. According to the author, cities foster creativity by encouraging diversity, spontaneous interactions, openness to new experiences, and vibrant public life. Creativity thus emerges from the continuous exchange of ideas among individuals rather than from isolated acts of genius, making the city itself an active participant in the creative process.

The Introduction (Chapter 1) develops the central argument of the book by showing that cities become creative not by chance, but because specific cultural, institutional, and spatial conditions emerge over time. Using historical examples such as Florence, Amsterdam, and especially London, the author argues that creative flourishing depends on a combination of factors, including tolerance for unconventional ideas, secure property rights, economic opportunities, and social diversity. London is presented as a paradigmatic case in which geography, legal institutions, financial innovation, and intellectual networks interacted to attract artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs, eventually making the city one of the world's leading centres of creativity. The Introduction also broadens the discussion beyond economics. Creativity is linked to individualism, openness to strangers, and the circulation of ideas across social groups. Drawing on an extensive body of literature, the author argues that cultures encouraging autonomy, literacy, tolerance, and interaction with outsiders tend to generate more creative environments. Equally important are the informal encounters that occur in dense urban settings, where people with different backgrounds, skills, and experiences meet and recombine existing ideas in unexpected ways. Another significant contribution of the chapter is the connection it establishes between creativity and

urban form. Mixed land uses, high density, short blocks, and buildings of different ages are presented as urban characteristics that create opportunities for spontaneous encounters and experimentation. In this perspective, the city is not merely a physical container of creative people, but an active ecosystem whose institutions, public spaces, and planning policies can either stimulate or inhibit creativity.

Chapter 2 turns to the question of individualism, one of the book's most original and stimulating themes. The author proposes the notion of "cultural individualism", understood as a combination of emancipative values, self-expression values, and aspirations for freedom. As he writes, this form of individualism "does not connote anti-social atomism, egocentrism or selfishness" but is instead associated with cosmopolitanism, pro-sociality, and universalism (p. 13). This distinction is particularly illuminating because it avoids common misunderstandings surrounding the concept of individualism. Building on this definition, the chapter argues that cultural values are an important determinant of creativity and help explain why creative activity tends to concentrate in particular societies and places. Societies that promote individual autonomy, openness, and broad social interaction appear to provide especially favourable conditions for innovation and scientific achievement, although the author is careful to stress that culture alone cannot account for creative outcomes.

Chapter 3 explores the individual level, examining how personality traits—particularly openness to experience—and everyday social environments contribute to creative behaviour. Creativity is presented as the outcome of an interaction between personal dispositions and the opportunities offered by urban contexts.

Chapter 4 further develops this argument by focusing on urban form and planning. The discussion is especially interesting because it moves beyond conventional planning prescriptions and emphasizes adaptability rather than comprehensive control. Diversity, density, mixed land uses, and opportunities for interaction are presented as key ingredients of creative urban environments, whereas overly rigid planning may suppress entrepreneurship, experimentation, and the emergence of local knowledge. Rather than advocating extensive planning, the author argues for planning approaches that preserve flexibility and allow cities to evolve through decentralized processes. As the author writes, echoing both Jane Jacobs and Friedrich von Hayek: "The creative city is a city that allows for local knowledge—or knowledge of the 'particular circumstances of time and place'—to lead to continual entrepreneurial alterations of land-use patterns and the human activities that those patterns make possible. This implies that decisions about land use incorporate more knowledge if they are decentralized, involving numerous independent decision-makers" (p. 92).

Chapter 5 illustrates these theoretical arguments through the concrete historical example of the jazz scene in Copenhagen, showing how creative individuals and the urban environment can mutually reinforce one another. The case study successfully demonstrates how the conceptual framework developed in the previous chapters can be applied to explain the evolution of an actual city.

Finally, Chapter 6 brings together the various strands of the discussion. Creative cities emerge as the product of interactions operating at multiple scales, including individual characteristics, cultural values, appropriate institutional arrangements, and urban environments. Creativity is fostered by diversity, openness, adaptability, and opportunities for social interaction, and is instead hampered by rigid or overly prescriptive forms of planning. The book concludes with a simple but compelling message: cities cultivate creativity by leaving room for people, activities, and experimentation, embracing flexibility instead of excessive control.

Overall, the book offers a persuasive, well-argued, and genuinely interdisciplinary account of the relationship between *cities* and *creativity*. One of its principal strengths lies in its ability to bring together insights from psychology, sociology, economics, geography, and urban planning within a coherent analytical framework. Rather than treating creativity as an innate quality of exceptional individuals, the author convincingly demonstrates how it emerges from the interaction between people and the cultural, institutional, and spatial environments in which they live. The result is a stimulating contribution that

will be of considerable interest not only to scholars of creative cities but also to researchers and practitioners concerned with urban planning, governance, and innovation more broadly.

REVIEW

What Comes After Glyn Morgan's American Europe?

BRANDON CHRISTENSEN

Isonomia Quarterly

G. Morgan, *The Rise and Fall of American Europe* (Polity, 2026)

The concept of sovereignty, like that of the 'state', may be an indispensable tool for international law—though I am not sure that if we accept the concept there as our starting point, we do not thereby make the very idea of an international law meaningless. But for the consideration of the problem of the internal character of a legal order, both concepts seem to be as unnecessary as they are misleading. Indeed, the whole history of constitutionalism [...] is that of a struggle against the positivist conception of sovereignty and the allied conception of the omnipotent state.

— F. A. Hayek, 1976 (Hayek 2021/1976), p. 257)

Glyn Morgan, a political scientist at Syracuse University's Moynihan Center of European Studies, has written a pithy, timely book on the relationship between the United States and Europe that all classical liberals and libertarians (herewith "liberals" unless specified) should read.

Morgan takes readers back to the end of World War II to identify a state-form that is different than the nation-state people typically use (i.e. China, Brazil, Germany) to make sense of the world: American Europe. It's not a country, but it's not a federation or a vassal or an empire, either. American Europe is a state-form that was created by the US after World War II and is tasked with governance related to American and Atlantic policies, and governance regarding neighboring countries outside of its orbit (Russia, Morocco, Iraq, China, etc.). American Europe was created to counter communism, sure, but also to counter imperial Europe, which American policymakers pinpointed as a prime problem for constant, continuing violence in the region. Morgan summarizes Imperial Europe beautifully:

The larger, more powerful states at the time—including Russia, Austria, Britain, France, and eventually Germany—were all empires with colonial territories within Europe (like Austria's possessions in the Balkans), outside of Europe (like Britain and France's possessions in Africa and Asia) or both within and outside (like Britain with Ireland and India) (p. 106).

Aside from 80 years of relative peace and prosperity (especially regarding interstate conflict between polities within American Europe), American Europe has produced two notable institutions: NATO and the EU. The topic of Morgan's book is how and why American Europe is being replaced by a Civilizational America, and what, if any, alternatives exist to this MAGA-inspired change.

Chapter 1 does a great job explaining in more depth how American Europe came to be. Morgan uses "a worry and three puzzles" (p. 34) to outline this particular state-form's founding era. The worry,

for Americans, was that they would make the same mistakes they made after World War I. “America’s failure” (p. 14) then is still debated but it is often blamed, by historians, on Woodrow Wilson’s idealism, GOP isolationism, ungenerous financial policy, or a combination of these three factors (pp. 14-15). Here I must ask: it was the United States that failed in post-World War I Europe? What about the anarchical states-system in Europe that relied on entangling alliances and the “balancing of power” (a euphemism for state violence)? I am not attacking Morgan in particular here, but rather the assumption—shared widely throughout the world as of this review’s publication date—that post-World War I peace was a US failure. For liberals reading this review, the following notion needs to be hammered home: anarchy and the balance of power failed long before US diplomatic efforts did. Nevertheless, the Americans *did* fail, and post-World War II Americans were worried they’d do the same.

As for the three puzzles, Morgan argues persuasively in regard to the first two: the rise of the Soviet Union, and the American desire to demolish and bury Imperial Europe. The third puzzle Morgan identifies convinces me less but is also the main driving force behind this excellent book: “the reason why the Trump administration—and the MAGA movement more generally—had turned against Europe” (p. 36).

As I write this, there are still two years left on President Donald Trump’s second term, but the sheer overwhelming volume of heated, prevalent, and pernicious takes on President Trump are as common now as they were in 2016. So when Morgan, the Director of a European Studies think tank named after a Democratic senator and housed at a public university, identified Trump and the MAGA movement more generally as a main culprit of American Europe’s downfall, I winced. I also pressed on, and was treated to one of the best analyses on not only the MAGA movement in the US but populism in general I’ve encountered yet (the other one is, coincidentally, also found in *Cosmos + Taxis*; see Lee 2022). Senator Moynihan would be proud. Chapter 2 identifies two distinct factions within MAGA, and the glue that holds them together is a distaste for Western Europe. Morgan argues that this distaste for Western Europe is cultural for one faction (the populist nationalists) and economic for the other (the technological accelerationists). This is a familiar argument, but Morgan adds an illuminating twist: “Western Europe” is really just a proxy for what Morgan calls the “Brahmin Left,” a term he borrows from French economist Thomas Piketty that’s used to encompass a loose, transatlantic political and cultural faction that seeks to impose a sense of rationality and empathy into North Atlantic societies (pp. 9-10). The populist nationalists and technological accelerationists believe these rational and empathetic policies preferred by the Brahmin Left are anything but, and that these policies are actually hurting the United States and Europe. Morgan rightly points out that the populist nationalists and technological accelerationists have nothing in common other than a shared loathing of the Brahmin Left’s political and cultural power, and he even finds glimpses of tension between the two (p. 55). Readers of *Cosmos + Taxis* will, of course, be intimately familiar with this triangle of tension.

I disagree with Morgan’s spectacular twist. I think the triangle of tension and the serious security problems that Europe faces are two very different things, even as I believe both problems are shared by one transoceanic society.

This will be addressed in full below, but first there is more in chapter 2 to review. Morgan’s main target is not the triangle of tension but the pivot toward Russia that he sees happening among populist nationalists. Morgan ties this pivot to longtime complaints about European allies that Republican and Democratic presidents alike have made about the lack of military spending, and constant questioning on the US side of the Atlantic for the necessity of NATO. Morgan argues that the populist nationalists believe China is now the main geopolitical threat of the US, and that 1) therefore Europe has lost its usefulness as a shield for Fortress America, and 2) Russia’s domestic order serves as an example of what the US needs to do to engage in existential struggle with China for global hegemony. Whether Morgan’s assessment of the populist nationalist position is accurate can probably be fine-tuned in debate (there is likely, for example, a deep split within the populist nationalists about American global hegemony), but for this review his assessment suffices.

It is in chapter 2 that the most glaring weakness of the Brahmin Left (I am, alas, forced to assume that Morgan identifies as a member of this faction) is brought to light:

Given that Americans were taught for so long to fear Russia not merely because of Soviet communism but also its religion, culture, and history, it's nothing short of astonishing that in the 2010s US conservatives did a complete about-turn on their assessment of Russia (p. 45).

For those of us who are democrats yet also fearful of democracy, the complete “about-turn” is not “astounding” at all. It is at once a feature of democratic self-governance and perhaps also its executioner without checks and balances, especially non-democratic ones. The Brahmin Left has venerated democracy to a point of excess, as those who fear and criticize democracy's excesses are now merely slandered rather than engaged with respectfully. This fear of democracy, coupled with Europe's serious security problems, will be addressed more fully below, in the hopes that it can build bridges between two of the triangle of tension's three points.

Chapter 3 is perhaps my favorite chapter in the book because it dares to identify three types of Europe that could emerge were “an isolationist US” to pull “back from European security, leaving NATO effectively defunct” (p. 61). Morgan envisions three options for an American-less Europe: 1) European Europe, where European countries disavow their sovereignty over “security and defense policy,” (p. 65; see also Birner 2025) 2), Global Europe, which looks an awful lot like the EU (including a distinct and stark lack of discussion about security), and 3) National-Sovereigntist Europe, where Morgan necessarily brings Imperial Europe and the violent balance of power into the equation. Chapter 5 complements chapter 3 nicely, and so I'll tack them together and treat chapter 4 as the grand finale. It looks at Kennan's critiques of NATO and then outlines three pathways for Europe that don't involve the United States: a “European security architecture,” (p. 97) an anarchical balance of power, or a European nuclear option, where European sovereignties would presumably arm themselves with nuclear weapons in order to deter...themselves.

Morgan looks at these alternatives to an American-less Europe and concludes less that Europeans would be much better off accepting their fate in American Europe, and more that a new state-form is emerging—which he terms Civilizational America - and Europeans need to know how to deal with it. This is chapter 4, and it provides fertile ground for clarifying Morgan's book, building bridges between social liberals (the Brahmin Left) and classical liberals (the technological accelerationists), and putting forth a nuanced alternative (libertarian interstate federalism) to Morgan's assessments that recognize his contributions to what is happening in Europe without necessarily agreeing with his prescriptions.

Morgan argues that the MAGA belief in China-as-a-civilizational-threat drives the logic behind abandoning American Europe and embracing a Civilizational America that focuses on the US in East Asia & the Pacific, and the American hemisphere (Morgan also points out that some factions call for retrenching solely to a Hemispheric position and abandoning East Asia altogether).

This is useful and deserves to be read *but* it lets European sovereignties off the hook for several decades' worth of bad policy decisions. As Morgan repeatedly notes, Europe can't fend for itself and its demos seem more interested in reactionary regulations rather than protecting the property rights of individuals, corporations, and ecclesiastical bodies.¹ It is precisely this—Europe's failure to embrace liberalism and 800 million people in China being lifted out of extreme poverty because of liberal reforms—that could bring social and classical liberals (Morgan's Brahmin Left and technological accelerationists) together to put forth a viable blueprint that tackles MAGA's arguments head on and the problems that have led to Europe's very real stagnation, and it starts with a 1939 article written by somebody who is not mentioned in Morgan's book: F. A. Hayek.

Morgan can't be blamed for not thinking of Hayek when it comes to American Europe. Hayek's federalist ideas were radical and the classical liberal movement has either forgotten Hayek's interstate federalism (Christensen 2021) or allowed intermittent and embarrassingly selective textual readings of Hayek to suffice.² Yet Hayek and his moderately radical federalist ideals are exactly what liberals (social and classi-

cal) need to counter MAGA's anti-Chinese and anti-European civilizationalist cultural outlook (which extends to geopolitical reasoning). Here is Hayek's key argument from the aforementioned article:

Since it has been argued so far that an essentially liberal economic regime is a necessary condition for the success of any interstate federation, it may be added, in conclusion, that the converse is no less true: the abrogation of national sovereignties and the creation of an effective international order of law is a necessary complement and the logical consummation of the liberal program (Hayek 1948/1939, p. 269).

The abrogation of national sovereignties in exchange for federal peace is Hayek's second most important argument, just after his prize-winning contributions to the socialist calculation debate. This federalist option is entirely missing from Morgan's prescriptions, and understandably so given that our age is trapped in a Westphalian prison; but given the dire options that Morgan correctly identifies Europe faces as Civilizationalist America ascends, perhaps liberals need to embrace their radical roots in order to counter civilizational logic (which, again, is ascendant globally and not only in the North Atlantic). Indeed, Civilizationalist America won't just have a MAGA version; a left-wing version will also arise, too. If liberalism, which arose as a philosophy of peace between Catholics and Protestants in Europe (Aligica and Boettke 2026), is to survive the 21st century, it needs an alternative to civilizational logic, and interstate federalism is "liberal civilization." Interstate federalism is what Hayek built out in his three books of political philosophy. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, *The Constitution of Liberty*, and *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* all seek to promote and enhance liberal ideals for the world, and not just for Europe or for nation-states.

The abrogation of national sovereignties under a federal peace does not just affect Europe, either, for it will ensure that Americans re-realize that the US itself is not a national sovereignty but a compound republic currently composed of 50 states. Indeed, those non-interventionists in the US who clamor for America First are simply slotting themselves into an insignificant section of MAGA's vision for Civilizationalist America because they embrace national sovereignty.

If Europe is to escape the fate that Morgan identifies, and again Morgan's analysis is prescient and worth your time, then it is time to abandon the pretenses of national sovereignty. Contemporary European countries have not been sovereign since at least the 1940s, and because of their inability to defend themselves they are unlikely to be sovereign in the 21st century. Given Europe's total and utter dependency on the US, it is time for the former to demand from the latter an equality—of its "states" and its people—under the latter's federal constitution.³ Yes, that's right: Europe's (and North America's) best hope is transatlantic interstate federalism, and not an independent Europe (which, as Morgan demonstrates, is difficult to define, much less envision).

Morgan ends his excellent book by pleading for the Brahmin Left to employ empathy as a foundation for both getting acclimated as second class citizens in Civilizational America and slowly, perhaps over decades or centuries, working on an alternative for a future where Europe is free and independent of its American overseers. I, in turn, end this review by pleading with the Brahmin Left to drop the intransigent pretensions of national sovereignty and begin working with classical liberals on federating the transatlantic world. Classical liberals need social liberals to agree that this federation of "liberal civilization" *has* to be negative; it *has* to be built on top of already-existing institutions rather than created from scratch; and it *cannot* be limited to a geographic or cultural area. Where the negotiations can begin is whether European polities should just join the US as new states in its union, or if NATO or some other transatlantic organization that handles defense and security-related matters can transform into a federal political institution from its current security and defense tasks. If liberals cannot agree on these premises for the negotiated end of national sovereignty, then Morgan's world-class prognosis will likely come to fruition. The end of American Europe indeed.

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NOTES

- 1 This is my summary of his argument; in the book Morgan (2026, pp. 52-56 especially) is far more neutral and even sympathetic to European efforts at regulation on markets, technology, and speech.
- 2 Christensen 2026 highlights one recent example.
- 3 For an interesting thought experiment that tackles this, see Studebaker 2026.

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SIEO refers to the assimilated *Studies in Emergent Order*

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Editorial Information

Aims and Scope

Cosmos + Taxis (C+T) offers a forum to those concerned that the presuppositions of the liberal tradition have been severely corroded, neglected, or misappropriated by overly rationalistic and constructivist approaches. The hardest-won achievements of the *classical* liberal tradition have been the wrestling of epistemic independence from overwhelming concentrations of power, monopolies and capricious zealotries.

C+T publishes papers on complexity, broadly conceived in a manner that is accessible to a general readership with particular emphasis on political economy and social philosophy. C+T is not committed to any particular school of philosophical thought or philosophical style.

C+T offers a forum distinctively engaging the growing confluence of interest in **situated and distributed** liberalism emanating from the Scottish tradition, Austrian economics, and non-Cartesian philosophy.

General Editorial Information

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