

The Dark Enlightenment of John Gray

GRAEME GARRARD

Cardiff University

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