

Reply to Critics

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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.