

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.