

## **Breaking Up is Hard to Do: John Gray's Complicated Relationship with the Liberal Project**

### **Introduction**

John Gray has long criticized contemporary liberal theorists for what he takes to be their ignorance of the history of the liberal tradition. In his own work, he presents liberalism as having two contrasting faces: today's dominant Enlightenment liberalism and an older, wrongly neglected, *modus vivendi* liberalism. Enlightenment liberalism is identified with the project of specifying the universal scope of and limits to governmental authority. It aims to secure a single political regime valid for all rational people by transforming traditional forms of morality through the application of critical reason.

In his most recent work, Gray has located his objections to liberalism as part of a larger assault upon humanism. Against the belief that humanism follows from naturalism, Gray argues that the two positions are antithetical. A consistent naturalism rules out the utopianism of the Enlightenment project by acknowledging our imperfect condition. More positively, it means recognizing value pluralism in political life. Value pluralism entails that human diversity is not something that reason might show to rest upon a mistake but is an inescapable consequence of the free exercise of that reason.

Gray proposes that we should give up on Enlightenment liberalism and instead join Hobbes in seeing the task of politics to be to secure peaceful coexistence between different ways of life. His Hobbesian position is said to be wholly naturalistic in giving up any idea of human perfection, rejecting both the requirement that citizens participate in the Enlightenment task of rationally transforming themselves and the related hope that they might coexist within a single liberal regime. "It is," he writes in *Two Faces of Liberalism*, "better to step back from Kant to Hobbes, and think of the liberal project as the pursuit of *modus vivendi* among conflicting values."<sup>1</sup> Gray thinks of the attempt to secure a *modus vivendi* as a second face of liberalism, one that holds that different politi-

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<sup>1</sup>John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 104.

cal settlements are appropriate in different times and places.

This paper argues that in developing his own position, Gray does more than simply “step back” to Hobbes; rather, he reformulates Hobbes’s arguments by adding to them elements of Enlightenment liberalism that he claims to reject. Gray is committed to the view that in accepting our situation as part of the natural world we should embrace what he calls the truth of value pluralism and recognize that any legitimate political settlement must acknowledge a “universal minimum content of morality.” Contrary to his assertions, these claims tacitly retain the two elements—the transformative and the universalistic—that are central to the Enlightenment liberalism and render it problematic. The paper concludes by suggesting that Gray is torn between rejecting that face of liberalism and offering his own value-pluralist version of it because of a misplaced concern with moral relativism.

### Gray as Consistent Anti-Utopian

Gray has intrigued and infuriated his many critics by providing a famously moving target.<sup>2</sup> But despite attracting criticism for his apparently ever-shifting position, a single theme runs through his writings. This is his antagonism to what he regards as utopian political projects and the assumptions about human nature upon which they are built. Such projects, notably Marxism, regard politics as the means to achieve a single human good. They are said by Gray to ignore the contingency and particularity of historical circumstances, a neglect that inevitably leads to disaster. As he remarks, “All societies contain divergent ideals of life. When a utopian regime collides with this fact the result can only be repression or defeat. Utopianism does not *cause* totalitarianism ... but totalitarianism follows whenever the dream of a life without conflict is consistently pursued through the use of state power.”<sup>3</sup>

For the early part of his intellectual life, Gray took liberalism to stand opposed to utopian political projects. But a significant moment came when he began to identify liberalism itself with utopianism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Gray was an advocate of neoliberalism, an ideology articulated in the work of F.A. Hayek and embodied in the New Right. He supported neoliberalism as the only practicable response to

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<sup>2</sup>The level of interest and controversy that Gray’s writings have attracted is reflected in the special issue of the journal *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (vol. 9, no. 2, 2006) focusing on his writings. This issue was subsequently republished as John Horton and Glen Newey (eds.), *The Political Theory of John Gray* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 73-74, emphasis in original.

specific circumstances, namely, the failings of the British post-war consensus and, more generally, the collapse of Soviet-style central planning.

Gray subsequently came to regard neoliberalism as self-defeating. This is because it destroyed the inherited conditions within which social life takes place by remaking them in terms of market relations. However, he was most interested not in the particular details of that defeat but rather in neoliberalism's status as a form of utopianism. Neoliberalism is, he wrote, comparable to communist planning; it is "a managerialist Cultural Revolution ... a Maoism of the Right, ... [a] permanent revolution of unfettered market processes."<sup>4</sup> Against it, he turned to conservatism, in particular the work of Michael Oakeshott. Gray is sympathetic to Oakeshott's opposition to "rationalism in politics," accepting his criticism of Hayek that planning to avoid central planning is itself a form of the same style of (for Gray, utopian) politics. Yet Gray came to think that conservatism too is caught up in the same problems that beset neoliberalism. The political success of neoliberalism meant that conservatism is no longer a possible response, since the very institutions and forms of life that conservatives had defended no longer exist. And in addition, Gray detected in Oakeshott a hint of the rationalism that he was so critical of in others. This is seen in his view that the modern state may, in the form of his preferred "civil association," claim authority based solely on allegiance to formal principles rather than a shared cultural identity. For Gray, this takes Oakeshott in the direction of Kant and contemporary Kantian political theorists.<sup>5</sup>

For Gray, the virtue of writers such as Hayek and Oakeshott lies in their awareness of the dangers of utopianism, even if they ultimately succumb to some version of it. In this way, he thinks they should be distinguished from Kantian liberals such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. The utopianism of writers such as Rawls and Dworkin attracted the large part of Gray's critical attention in his writings of the 1990s. These writers are wholeheartedly and for him unreflectively committed to the attempt to identify a single, universally valid political regime. This is "the project of specifying universal limits to the authority of government and, by implication, to the scope of political life. The task of liberal theory was to specify the principles, and sometimes the institutions, in which this universal limitation on political power was expressed and embodied."<sup>6</sup> Those who subscribe to this project are said to pay no attention to concrete circumstance, deploying instead "an unhistorical and abstract

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<sup>4</sup>John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>John Gray, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 44-45.

<sup>6</sup>Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 131.

individualism in the service of a legalist or jurisprudential paradigm of political philosophy.”<sup>7</sup>

Gray’s principal interest in such writers is that he sees them as the latest manifestation of a broader “Enlightenment project.” In his characterization, the Enlightenment took its task to be to overcome traditional forms of knowledge. Pre-modern societies viewed the process of acquiring knowledge to be a gradual one, building upon traditions that they valued as the storehouse for generations of wisdom. Enlightenment thinkers took it to be their mission to subject such received wisdom to the light of critical reason. They insisted upon a firm distinction between tradition and rationality, taking any knowledge that was not produced and validated by the methods of the new sciences to be primitive falsehoods. Their project was in this way transformative, that of “refounding morality and society on universal, tradition-independent rational principles.”<sup>8</sup>

The thinkers of the Enlightenment belonged to a variety of intellectual movements and wrote in very different contexts. For this reason, some have rejected the very idea of an Enlightenment project. Brian Barry, for instance, dismisses as a crude caricature the notion of an Enlightenment project that can “be captured in a few airy remarks about ‘Reason’ and so on.”<sup>9</sup> Gray is, however, aware of this objection. He acknowledges the differences between Enlightenment writers, which concern not only their different conceptions of reason but also issues such as how far they were committed to a notion of human progress and the different conceptions of a universal cosmopolitan society upon which they thought humanity would converge. However, he does not think these differences upset the idea of a single Enlightenment project. Thinkers such as Barry resemble, he argues, those revisionist Marxists who seek to show that Marx was not committed to economic determinism. In both cases, the argument is an apology that focuses on side issues and obscures the central thrust of the position in question.<sup>10</sup> For all the differences between Enlightenment figures, a significant number were committed to the project of constructing a universal civilization through the application of human reason. This project is, moreover, one that continues to inform current thinking: it is “the project that animated Marxism and liberalism in all their varieties, which underpins both the new liberalism and neoconservatism, and to which every significant body of opinion

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>9</sup>Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake*, pp. 124-25.

in the United States continues to subscribe."<sup>11</sup>

Gray's understanding of the Enlightenment is much indebted to the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre. He joins MacIntyre in thinking that the Enlightenment project was self-undermining: the very process of ceaseless rational disclosure came to apply to the Enlightenment itself by showing up the absence of foundations for its own values and practices, a phenomenon that he calls its "self-undermining effect."<sup>12</sup> And, like MacIntyre, Gray maintains that the self-undermining nature of the Enlightenment impacts upon liberalism. For them both, the Enlightenment was not simply a project of philosophers but of liberal society as a whole, a society hostile to tradition and received sources of authority. Liberalism is itself a project, one every bit as revolutionary as Marxism. It takes over the Enlightenment concern to transform traditional moralities, and goes on to claim that rational beliefs are capable of being accommodated within a single political regime.

Gray departs from MacIntyre, however, because he considers the Enlightenment project part of a larger Christian tradition. Whereas MacIntyre reacts to liberalism by calling for a form of Thomism, for Gray they are both aspects of the same thing: "the Enlightenment project of unifying all values under the aegis of a rational reconstruction of morality is merely a long shadow cast in the slow eclipse of Christian transcendental faith."<sup>13</sup> His solution is not to return to Thomism or to any other ideal. Rather, he recommends that we accept our imperfect condition and adopt what Heidegger called "releasement," whereby "we let things be rather than aiming wilfully to transform them or subject them to our purposes."<sup>14</sup>

It is only in his most recent writings that Gray's reasons for thinking all utopian projects necessarily doomed to failure have become clear. He has increasingly come to emphasize that all these projects share in the assumption (or "illusion," as he has it)<sup>15</sup> that humans can escape their animal condition. In works such as *Straw Dogs* and *Black Mass*, the fundamental division in contemporary life is said to be between humanism and naturalism. For Gray, naturalism is not the counterpart to humanism, but contradicts it. This is because humanism is just another version of the Christian belief that humans might secure salvation: for Christians by overcoming the Fall; for humanists by overcoming our animal nature. A consistent naturalism, in contrast, opposes any thought that humans

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 162-63.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>15</sup>John Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London: Granta Books, 2004).

might transcend nature—for example, by employing our common reason in order to achieve a singularly rational politician regime. Gray claims that outside of natural science, the idea of progress is a myth. Any improvement in the human condition will be temporary, likely to be lost in a generation or two, and the costs of achieving it (as the case of the Soviet Union demonstrated) intolerably high.

In giving up on the idea of progressive political projects, and more generally on the idea of moral progress, Gray has been thought by some to be a nihilist.<sup>16</sup> He reacts dismissively to this claim, however. For him, nihilism is merely a post-Christian condition. Specifically, it is a reaction to the realization that no sense can be made of the Christian belief in salvation. “The perception that history is without meaning is threatening only to those who inherit from Christianity a need to find meaning in history, and this discloses a general truth about nihilism.”<sup>17</sup> On this point, it is instructive to compare Gray with a further critic of modern liberalism, Leo Strauss. Like Gray, Strauss sees nihilism as part of contemporary life. He argues that it stems from the liberal rejection of natural right, which has the result that what is counted as right is socially determined and therefore relativistic. In turn, this is said to provoke nihilism: if we think our convictions amount to nothing more than local preference, this means we do not really believe in them.<sup>18</sup> For Gray, in contrast, nihilism stems not from giving up on natural right but from a reaction to Christianity in general, specifically, the special status that it grants to human beings. For this reason, their proposals to address nihilism differ significantly. Strauss sought to respond to nihilism through a recovery of natural right, but, as Gray points out, this is no answer at all. “The difficulty with Strauss’s belief that we can cure nihilism by returning to a classical view of things is that he never gives any ground—other than the need to escape nihilism—for accepting such a view.”<sup>19</sup> Such acceptance can only be an act of faith, one that it is impossible to make today: the classical view depended upon a teleological account of the natural world that has been invalidated by natural science. The correct response to nihilism follows rather from accepting what natural science teaches us about ourselves. In particular, it is a matter of coming to fully acknowledge our place as part of the natural world.

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<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, George Kateb, “Is John Gray a Nihilist?” in Horton and Newey (eds.), *The Political Theory of John Gray*, pp. 193-210.

<sup>17</sup>John Gray, “Reply to Critics,” in Horton and Newey (eds.), *The Political Theory of John Gray*, pp. 211-35, at p. 228. See also John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002), p. 128.

<sup>18</sup>Strauss writes: “The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is identical with nihilism.” Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Gray, *Black Mass*, p. 185.

Gray hopes to encourage his readers to do just that. He recommends that we seek “not to change the world ... [but] to see it rightly.”<sup>20</sup> If we set aside the Christian and post-Christian humanist belief in the inevitable progression of history, we also set aside the issue of nihilism. If we come to see things rightly, we do not give ourselves over to nihilism but to understanding our proper place in the world: “When we turn away from our all-too-human yearnings we turn back to mortal things.”<sup>21</sup> In politics, this amounts to giving up on utopian projects and accepting human diversity. As Gray writes, “there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive. Among these there are some whose worth cannot be compared. Where such ways of life are rivals, there is no one of them that is best. People who belong to different ways of life need have no disagreement. They may simply be different.”<sup>22</sup>

### Post-Enlightenment Liberalism and Value Pluralism

Gray argues that differences on matters of value or ways of life are not a contingency that might have been otherwise. Rather, they reflect a fact about the world, which he calls *value pluralism*. In keeping with his insistence on a wholly naturalistic understanding of the world, value pluralism is said to be “a truth about human nature, not the contemporary condition.”<sup>23</sup>

Gray's understanding of value pluralism is developed from the work of Isaiah Berlin. Value pluralism contains three elements. First, conflict between different values, for example, liberty and equality, cannot be rationally resolved by reference to a single overarching standard. Second, individual values themselves contain a plurality of interpretations that, again, cannot be rationally resolved; in the case of liberty, Berlin points out that this concept has at least two understandings. Third, different ways of life will generate different values; Gray writes: “The virtues of the Homeric epics and of the Sermon on the Mount are irreducibly divergent and conflicting, and they express radically different forms of life. There is no Archimedean point of leverage from which they can be judged.”<sup>24</sup> The first and second elements of value pluralism occur *within* forms of life, whereas the third occurs *between* them, but the point is the same in each case: there is no possibility of a single harmonious settlement of values. Different people and ways of life will value different

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<sup>20</sup>Gray, *Straw Dogs*, p. xiv.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>22</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>John Gray, *Berlin* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1995), pp. 46-47.

things, and cannot be criticized for doing so by reference to a uniquely rational standard.

In Berlin, Gray finds a profound attack on the monism that he takes to be central to Western thought. Greek philosophy and Christian theology were, Berlin argued, united in holding that all values and goods are ultimately consistent with each other. His insight was to see that this is not the case. At the same time, Gray insists that this does not commit either of them to relativism or skepticism. Both are in fact cognitivists, “in-sist[ing] ... that values and conflicts of value are matters of knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Value pluralism is in fact “a species of moral realism, which we shall call *objective pluralism*.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the similarities between them, Gray goes beyond Berlin in applying value pluralism to liberalism itself. Berlin argued that, given the irreducible plurality of value, individuals require a protected sphere of “negative liberty” to choose among them. Gray argues that this is a mistaken inference, and that Berlin ignored his own best insight by falsely assuming that negative liberty is the cardinal value. If we take value pluralism seriously, we must recognize that negative liberty itself is not a freestanding value existing independently of the judgments of particular human beings but is rather the reflection of such judgments. Liberals seek to protect individual liberty by a guaranteed sphere of rights, but, as Gray points out, “rights claims are never primordial or foundational but always conclusionary, provisional results of long chains of reasoning that unavoidably invoke contested judgements about human interests and well-being.”<sup>27</sup>

For Gray, Enlightenment liberalism fails to recognize the dependency of the right on particular views of the good. For this reason, he thinks of even Rawlsian political liberalism as a form of Enlightenment liberalism. This goes against Rawls’s understanding of his own project. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls asserts that: “Political liberalism is not a form of Enlightenment liberalism, that is, a comprehensive liberal and often secular doctrine founded on reason.”<sup>28</sup> This is because political liberalism dispenses with the idea of rational foundations and instead regards liberal societies as a contingent historical development, bound together not by rationality but by feelings of solidarity among citizens who are divided on matters of value. Gray is sensitive to Rawls’s attempt both to avoid political rationalism and to accommodate pluralism, but nevertheless thinks that his project remains a form of the Enlightenment liberal

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>26</sup>Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake*, p. 70, emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>28</sup>John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. xl.



project. Rawls is commended for recognizing that the freedom provided by liberal societies will necessarily result in disagreement; he “grasps an insight of profound importance when he argues that this deep pluralism in modern society is not just a brute historical fact but instead the result of unfettered use of human powers in a context of freedom.”<sup>29</sup> Yet after grasping this point, he is said then to forget it by assuming that underlying such pluralism is widespread agreement on liberal values.

Some commentators disagree with this interpretation. Paul Kelly argues on behalf of Rawls that although he seeks to provide a single framework of justice, this nevertheless allows for different settlements about the priority of particular rights: “Much of the plausibility of Gray’s critique depends upon the claim that liberalism tends towards a single unique constitutional form that is valid in all times and all places. That is not required, and it is not claimed by any of the main theorists of liberalism.”<sup>30</sup> However, this misses the force of Gray’s critique. Kelly is correct to say that for Rawls, different local settlements are permissible so long as they stay within the limits set out by the principles of justice, but Gray’s point is that those principles are themselves undone by value pluralism. The distinction between the right and the good cannot be drawn, because the right itself is given content only by a particular view of the good. “A strictly political liberalism, which is dependent at no point on any view of the good, is an impossibility. The central categories of such a liberalism—‘rights’, ‘justice’, and the like—have a content only insofar as they express a view of the good.”<sup>31</sup>

As an illustration, Gray contrasts the ways in which different countries have come to regard freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup> Several European countries have laws against hate speech, laws that explicitly limit the freedom of expression of those who would use racist language. In contrast, in the U.S., judges regularly strike down attempts to limit hate speech. The difference between European legislatures and the American judiciary stems not from a disagreement about whether curbing speech limits freedom of expression, because self-evidently it does. Rather, the difference turns on judgments about whether such curbs are justified; whether it is legitimate to limit free speech for the sake of some other value, in this case freedom from hatred and persecution. Such judgments are not universal, but reflect particular historical circumstances—in this case the importance placed by many in North America on liberty of thought and expression compared to understandable concerns about ra-

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<sup>29</sup>John Gray, *Endgames: Questions in Late Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>30</sup>Paul Kelly, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 67.

<sup>31</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

cism in parts of Europe in the shadow of the Holocaust.

Gray spends some time arguing with particular writers such as Rawls, but his concern is ultimately the Enlightenment liberal project in its entirety. That project is said not only to be incapable of accommodating value pluralism, but is itself a cause of conflict between different values. Although they may concede that a universal liberal polity might never be realized, proponents of the liberal project continue to view it as a desirable aspiration, one that provides the ideal-type for all ways of life. The damaging consequences of this belief in a single regime of rights leads, Gray has claimed, to events such as the current Iraq war. This is said to be a manifestation of “a new kind of imperialism guided by liberal principles of human rights.”<sup>33</sup> He also notes the support given by some liberals for torture as the means to protect Western societies—societies that many regard as at least approximating the ideal universal polity—from terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

Gray’s is a damning indictment of liberal thought that claims not just to have uncovered internal inconsistencies in the positions of individual writers, but to show that liberalism itself is committed to projects that are unrealizable. But, as he argues in *Straw Dogs*, his value-pluralist view that tells us that we cannot achieve everything should not be taken as a counsel of despair. Different values will conflict—what is required by justice might, for instance, conflict with the need for security—but this is only pessimistic if we measure it by reference to an unattainable standpoint such as that promised by the Enlightenment liberal project.

This modest and pluralist position is, Gray claims, itself found within the liberal tradition. The currently dominant Enlightenment liberal project takes liberalism to be the basis for a universal political settlement. But he urges us to return to an alternative form, the original “face” of liberalism. This face of liberalism aims to derive not a single way of life but rather *modus vivendi*, a peaceful settlement between rivals:

Liberalism has always had two faces. From one side, toleration is the pursuit of an ideal form of life. From the other, it is the search for terms of peace among different ways of life. In the former view, liberal institutions are seen as applications of universal principles. In the latter, they are a means to peaceful coexistence. In the first, liberalism is a prescription for a universal regime. In the second, it is a project for coexistence that can be pursued in many regimes.<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, we should renounce both universalistic religion and its nominally secular liberal variant and take our task to be the accommoda-

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<sup>33</sup>Gray, *Black Mass*, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup>Gray satirizes liberal attempts to justify the use of torture in his essay “Torture: A Modest Proposal,” in *Heresies*, pp. 132-38.

<sup>35</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 2.

tion of the pluralism that marks modern societies. Gray argues that rather than seeking to specify a single framework valid for all rational people and ways of life, we should recognize that different regimes are appropriate in different circumstances. We must give up the attempt to transform ourselves and our differences, and instead respect each other's particularity.

### ***Modus Vivendi* as a Transformative Political Project**

I want now to argue that, notwithstanding his antihumanist critique of the transformative and universalistic elements of Enlightenment liberalism, Gray himself can be seen to call for them both in developing his own *modus vivendi* liberal alternative.

Although Gray recommends a return to the original face of liberalism, he is troubled by the thought that a *modus vivendi* might be so permissive that it treats as legitimate any political settlement no matter how unpleasant. He is very critical of what he regards as the illegitimate elevation by liberals of one form of life as the ideal for everyone, something that he dismisses as "Western cultural imperialism."<sup>36</sup> Yet he also seeks to assure us that "*modus vivendi* is far from being the idea that anything goes."<sup>37</sup> To be sure, Gray insists that *modus vivendi* need not be liberal. Depending on circumstance, it will sometimes be the case that liberal regimes are legitimate, and sometimes nonliberal ones. However, as he writes: "*modus vivendi* articulates a view of the good."<sup>38</sup> That view stems from recognition of value pluralism that takes the good to be irreducibly plural and accordingly holds that it is diminished by any attempt to reduce pluralism. Any legitimate *modus vivendi* requires that citizens see that the good is plural: "It tells us to reject theories which promote a final resolution of moral conflicts, since their result in practice can only be to diminish the goods that have generated our conflicts."<sup>39</sup>

It might be objected that to claim that monism diminishes the good begs the question of whether there really is such a plurality, rather than—as, for instance, religious monists would say—a single good surrounded by and possibly even endangered by falsehoods. If one takes this monist view, then one certainly will not think that the fact that other people attach importance to other values or ends in life is a good reason to tolerate or respect them. Gray has a response to this objection, but in making it he moves towards the transformative aspect of the liberal project that he

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

strongly opposes. This is, as we have seen, to say that we must come to recognize and accept value pluralism as a truth. As he writes, “Conflicts arising from the clashing universalist claims of religious fundamentalists are founded on errors.”<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he describes those who adhere to such beliefs as suffering from “illusions.”<sup>41</sup>

Gray’s project can in this way be seen to be transformative in that it requires monists to become value pluralists. Monists must set aside their beliefs and come to accept value pluralism, thereby stilling conflict between competing ways of life: “Internalising the truth of value pluralism within a human subject or culture has the effect of dissolving such rivalries.”<sup>42</sup> However, internalizing the truth of value pluralism can only have the effect of dissolving rivalries by transforming the views of the good that gave rise to them. The transformation would, moreover, in many cases be a considerable one. As John Horton notes, “adherents of a universal religion very likely would think that their way of life at least lacked the value that they thought it had if their belief in a universal religion was merely illusion.”<sup>43</sup>

In a response to Horton, Gray attempts both to acknowledge the difference that internalizing value pluralism would make to monotheists’ attitudes yet downplay its significance. He writes that the fact that a way of life may be based upon an illusion does not render it meaningless; it is a mistake to believe “that the value of a way of life depends on its being based on true beliefs. Many human lives have been based on illusions and many of them have been worthwhile.”<sup>44</sup> This misses the force of the problem, however, for while it may be true that human beings often derive value from illusions, they do not do so knowingly. Although outside observers such as anthropologists might take the view that a way of life valued by its adherents is nevertheless based on an illusion, Gray requires that proponents of that way of life *themselves* recognize its illusory nature. He does not acknowledge what a substantive difference this would make to their self-understandings, or how one might find value in a way of life that one simultaneously believes to be illusory.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>John Gray, “Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company,” in Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (eds.), *Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 85-103, at p. 91.

<sup>41</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 21.

<sup>42</sup>Gray, “Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company,” p. 91.

<sup>43</sup>John Horton, “John Gray and the Political Theory of Modus Vivendi,” in Horton and Newey (eds.) *The Political Theory of John Gray*, pp. 43-57, at p. 48.

<sup>44</sup>Gray, “Reply to Critics,” p. 220.

<sup>45</sup>One instance of the latter might be atheists and agnostics who nevertheless participate in religiously informed cultural practices. Examples would include secular Jews and Muslims. However, I doubt many such people would be prepared to describe those practices as “illusions.”

At certain points Gray shows that he is aware of a tension here, and counters it by saying that he does not require that people become value pluralists. In *Two Faces of Liberalism*, he claims that *modus vivendi* does not “aim to convert the world to value pluralism.”<sup>46</sup> Yet as we have seen, he also thinks that those not converted to value pluralism are suffering from an illusion, the remedy for which is to internalize it as a truth. Gray's position here is therefore the bizarre one that people should accept *modus vivendi* but not the truth that motivates it in the first place.<sup>47</sup> The tension is seen further in that at other times he is very clear that there is a close relation between value pluralism and *modus vivendi* liberalism. In a recent comment he writes: “*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.”<sup>48</sup> This latter claim is more consistent with his account of the truth of value pluralism, but it is made at the cost of accepting that *modus vivendi* liberalism will require the transformation of the (illusory) beliefs of many.

Gray's use of the word “illusion” is significant for understanding his project. Illusions contrast with reality, and indicate that he hopes in his own writings to identify the way things really are. This aim replicates the Enlightenment concern to replace unfounded belief with rationally justified knowledge.<sup>49</sup> In arguing that we give up the illusionary liberal project in the name of recognizing the reality of value pluralism, Gray moves considerably beyond Hobbes's concern to cope with the conflict that we find in the world by asking us to rationally transform ourselves and our understanding of our values. Just as the Enlightenment claims knowledge of a single good, value pluralism claims that through the use of reason we will see that the good is irreducibly plural. If this transformation takes place, we will all thereby see that different beliefs each express a view of the good and are therefore all valid. And as we will now see, Gray follows the Enlightenment project further in specifying a universal standard that he thinks can be used to determine the validity of different values and ways of life.

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<sup>46</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

<sup>48</sup>Gray, “Reply to Critics,” p. 224.

<sup>49</sup>Gray equivocates on his attitude towards illusions. Sometimes, as in his response to Horton, he advocates tolerance of them. In *Straw Dogs* he goes so far as to suggest that human life without illusions is impossible to imagine, and that they may be part of the human condition. However, when the illusion is that of the liberal project, he does not extend to it this genial tolerance, but seeks to “see it rightly” by exposing and overcoming it.

### Pluralism and the Universal Minimum Morality

By requiring that citizens internalize value pluralism, Gray promotes a form of the transformative element of the Enlightenment project. But in addition, he can be seen to take up the task of the liberal project by specifying universal limits to political authority. He identifies what he calls the “universal minimum content of morality,” something that is said to be derived from human nature. Distinguishing himself from communitarian writers, he writes that “the claim that there are generically human evils does not rest finally on a consensus of belief. It rests on the fact that the experiences to which these evils give rise are much the same for all human beings, whatever their ethical beliefs may be.”<sup>50</sup> These include genocide, institutionalized torture, suppression of minorities, the humiliation of citizens, destruction of the environment, religious persecution, and the general failure, as Gray puts it, to “meet basic human needs.”<sup>51</sup>

However, if pluralism is as pervasive as he believes—so much so that the universalistic liberal project cannot be carried out successfully because it is unable to accommodate pluralism—it is not possible to identify a universal standard existing alongside that plurality. Gray’s claim is that the universal minimum content of morality and value pluralism are consistent because different societies will each grant different values importance but nevertheless share the view that certain practices are illegitimate. However, he cannot make this claim if we take seriously his understanding of value pluralism. To recall, value pluralism combines three elements: that conflict between different values cannot be rationally resolved by reference to a single overarching standard; that individual values themselves contain a plurality of interpretations that cannot be rationally resolved; and that different ways of life will generate different values. The second element in particular conflicts with the idea of a universal minimum morality. In the case of religious persecution, Gray sets his face against most liberals by thinking that restrictions on religious liberty are sometimes justified. Noting that “[i]n Singapore there is full freedom of religious practice and belief, but proselytism is forbidden,” he comments that this is a legitimate means to create peaceful coexistence in that country.<sup>52</sup> However, some would say that such restrictions amount to a form of discrimination, because a central tenet of their faith is being denied them. In the case of humiliation, although we may agree that it is generally undesirable, what one person experiences as humiliating may be different from that of another.

This indeterminacy regarding universal evils is seen also in Gray’s

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<sup>50</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

claim for the existence of universal virtues. He writes that prudence, sympathy and courage are universal, but once we unpack what we mean by these terms we may find that we mean very different things by them; for example, what one person takes to be sympathy might, to someone else, be a matter of cowardliness. This is a point that Gray has himself made against *liberal* values such as autonomy: "What shows up as personal autonomy in liberal morality may be disobedience or selfishness from the standpoint of traditional values."<sup>53</sup> However, this objection applies to *all* values. In making his case for universal virtues, Gray acknowledges that this "does not mean it is always easy to distinguish between different interpretations of a universal human virtue and the different virtues of particular cultures."<sup>54</sup> This suggestion, made in the text in parentheses, indicates that he is aware that there is a difficulty when it comes to identifying universal virtues, but he seems to believe that it does not impact upon his thesis that such things exist. However, if we take value pluralism as seriously as he wishes, there is good reason to think that it does.

This point can be developed by comparing Gray to another critic of liberalism, Stanley Fish. In Fish's characterization, the liberal project is "the fashioning of a form of government that assures order and stability without installing in a position of privilege and political mastery any of the views held by a diverse citizenry."<sup>55</sup> Fish argues that the liberal project is disabled by the absence of a perspective that is not implicated in any particular value or way of life. Its premise guarantees that the liberal project cannot successfully be carried through, for if it is animated by the recognition that disagreement is endemic and intractable, the failure to reach agreement on matters of justice follows necessarily as a matter of simple logic.

Fish's objections to the liberal project are very similar to those of Gray. However, he presses his case against liberalism in a way that helps illustrate how far Gray is himself open to the objection that he universalizes his own view of the good and turns it into a political project. In the case of political liberalism, Fish identifies several forms of purported common ground, showing in each case how it contains a particular substantive value. One of these is procedural rules, which are said to regulate conflicting views without themselves expressing such a view. Fish shows how procedures are inescapably substantive, both when it comes to deciding which to employ, and in interpreting how they are to be applied to particular cases. The appeals liberals make to supposedly value-

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>55</sup>Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 175.

free notions such as fairness, neutrality, impartiality, or reasonableness, are in fact appeals to formulas that contain their own particular value judgments and views of the good.

Gray of course rejects the idea that procedures can stand outside of culture and history, and delights in pointing out the way in which supposedly neutral principles—for example, freedom of speech—always turn out to reflect particular values and circumstances (this gives rise to questions such as whether to limit hate speech). However, Fish identifies two further forms of supposedly common ground, to both of which Gray is committed. The first is a general standard (“Be good,” “Don’t be cruel”) that supposedly stands free of particular disagreements. Fish argues that the problem with such a standard is that it is either couched at such a high level of generality that it is useless in helping to address those disagreements, or it is given substantive and thus controversial content. The second form of common ground is the supposedly universal distaste for certain views. Here, Fish objects that “views supposedly rejected by everyone will always have supporters who must then be eliminated or declared insane so that the common ground will appear to be really common.”<sup>56</sup> Gray’s claim that certain things are universal evils, and that some values constitute part of any decent life, combine these points. In a point directed at political liberals such as Rawls but which I take to apply equally to Gray, Fish notes that: “if the absence of common ground ... initiates a search for a form of government that will accommodate diversity, you cannot begin the search by identifying a common ground the absence of which motivates the search in the first place.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Between Enlightenment Liberalism and Moral Relativism**

I have no quarrel with Gray’s account of goods and evils, only with his claim that they are not the reflection of particular interests and values but possess universal validity. In maintaining that they do, he does exactly what he takes supporters of the Enlightenment liberal project to do: assert that his own beliefs have the status of universal values while dismissing those who think differently. Despite his claims to discard the two elements of that project—the universalistic and the transformative—he can be seen to advocate them both in his own account of *modus vivendi* liberalism.

Why, though, should Gray, a staunch opponent of the Enlightenment project and its political manifestation in liberal theory, come to propose a project that is itself both transformative and universalistic? Here we can

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 169.



return to Strauss. Gray differs from Strauss in that although they both take nihilism to be increasingly a part of modern life, for Gray it is merely an overreaction to the Christian and humanist belief that history is a story of inevitable human progress. For him the cause of and solution to both utopianism and nihilism is the same, namely, to see things rightly by recognizing and accepting our animal condition. But although Gray is untroubled by nihilism, he shares Strauss's concern with relativism. This leads him not simply to see but to propose a more active response.

Gray understands relativism as the view that our moral outlooks are culturally independent of each other and as precluding any understanding or criticism from the outside: "that our moral outlooks are embodied in different world-views. Accordingly, we cannot reason about them. Rather, each of us is trapped in one of them."<sup>58</sup> Such a view would preclude him from arguing that certain practices, such as torture, are objectively wrong. He is thus very dismissive of those, such as Richard Rorty, whom he takes to be relativists.

Gray's concern with relativism can, I think, be seen if we compare how we might expect him to respond to a certain kind of objection with how he does in fact respond. George Crowder has written that for Gray, when faced with a choice between values, "we can only decide by reference to our own arbitrary preferences or by some procedure elected at random."<sup>59</sup> Gray could quite legitimately respond to Crowder that the fact that values cannot be compared in overall value does not lead to this undesirable situation. That our reasons for holding one value rather than another are not ones that every person must accept does not reduce them to mere preferences, for we will have reasons for them that we think are important or answer to our particular situation. Similarly, any procedure we use to decide between values will itself be a reflection of what is taken to be important rather than a reflection of an "Archimedean point," but this does not make that procedure random. We will have reasons for thinking it superior to alternatives, even though we recognize that other people and societies who value different things may adopt a different procedure. By trivializing the complex historical considerations that give rise to ways of life as merely "arbitrary" or "random," Crowder makes precisely the move to which Gray objects in Enlightenment liberalism, that of downplaying the diversity of human life in favor of a supposedly rational universalism.

It is striking, however, that Gray does not think this response sufficient. He is clear that: "Any standpoint we adopt is that of a particular

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<sup>58</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup>George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 116.

form of life and of the historic practices that constitute it.”<sup>60</sup> But at the same time, he proposes a standpoint that is said to be universal. He thinks that the universal minimum means that he can criticize world-views 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.

A concern with relativism can, I think, also be seen to underlie a subtle but important change in Gray’s understanding of what is entailed by value pluralism itself. In his books *Enlightenment’s Wake* and *Berlin*, he followed Joseph Raz in holding that some values are incommensurable, by which he meant that they cannot be compared. Some writers have found this understanding of incommensurability problematic. To claim that two values cannot be compared seems to require that we recognize them to be values, and the very fact that we are able to do so suggests that they are in fact commensurable. To say that incommensurability denies the possibility of comparison is, therefore, it has been claimed, self-refuting.<sup>61</sup> Gray does not explain why, but he came to qualify his view by acknowledging that incommensurability does not rule out the comparison of different values.<sup>62</sup> He no longer asserts that values cannot be compared, but rather argues that there is no single scale that we are required to use when making comparisons: values “can be compared endlessly—but they cannot be compared with one another in overall value.”<sup>63</sup> In making this amendment, however, Gray goes on to say that they *can* be compared in overall value to the extent that certain values are said to fall short of the universal minimum.

That is to say, Gray’s concern to avoid relativism drives him back to the transformative and universalistic elements that he himself objects to when they feature as part of the liberal project. Sometimes the tension between his two concerns—his rejection of utopianism and his concern to avoid relativism—appears within a single passage. For example, in *Two Faces of Liberalism*, he writes that: “The case for *modus vivendi* is not that it is some kind of transcendent value that all ways of life are bound to honour. It is that all or nearly all ways of life have interests that make peaceful coexistence worth pursuing.”<sup>64</sup> If we accept the claim made in the first sentence and disavow any transcendent value to which all citizens must adhere, then this might appear to commit us to moral

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<sup>60</sup>Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake*, p. 79; see also Gray, *Berlin*, p. 155.

<sup>61</sup>See, for example, Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 265.

<sup>62</sup>He acknowledges that he has revised his position on this matter in Gray, “Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company,” p. 102.

<sup>63</sup>Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 135.

relativism. To avoid this, the next sentence introduces the claim that there are interests that “all or nearly all” ways of life share, something that is for all practical purposes indistinguishable from a nonrelative transcendent value of the kind that Enlightenment liberal theory seeks. Gray’s closeness to Enlightenment liberalism in substance if not in name is also evident when he writes: “The aim of *Modus vivendi* cannot be to still the conflict of values. It is to reconcile individuals and ways of life honouring conflicting values to a life in common. We do not need common values in order to live together in peace. We need common institutions in which many forms of life can coexist.”<sup>65</sup> If the word “liberalism” were substituted for “modus vivendi” in this passage, this would stand as an accurate summary of political liberalism.<sup>66</sup>

That Gray revises *modus vivendi* into a version of the liberal project is particularly striking given that there is reason for thinking the original Hobbesian form would suit his needs. The complaint that many writers level against a *modus vivendi* is that it is not a principled political settlement, but a relativistic accommodation to contingent circumstances. This concern, central to Rawls’s attempt to distinguish a *modus vivendi* from an overlapping consensus, has been summed up by Kelly, who speaks of it leaving people to “the vagaries of political compromise, in which the most powerful group will always be able to dictate the terms.”<sup>67</sup> Although Kelly writes this as a warning of a danger to be avoided, the situation he describes is inescapable. Much of the force of his objection is a function of the manner in which it is presented: the language of “vagaries” and of brute power dictating terms is clearly not dispassionate, and disguises the fact that things are often far more benign than this. Compromises need not lead to these unfortunate consequences, and indeed are often granted by the majority.<sup>68</sup> And if successful, a *modus vivendi* is likely to lead to a more stable settlement than critics such as Kelly allow because, as Horton has suggested, citizens are led to support the institutions that gave rise to it.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>66</sup>Given Gray’s overt hostility to liberal theory but his implicit acceptance of some of its claims, it is not surprising that commentators are sometimes unclear how best to describe him. Kelly, for example, refers to Gray as a “pluralist anti-liberal” but then, a few pages later, as a “sceptical liberal.” Kelly, *Liberalism*, pp. 118, 127.

<sup>67</sup>Kelly, *Liberalism*, p. 118.

<sup>68</sup>For example, so stern a critic of multiculturalism as Brian Barry allows for what he calls a “pragmatic case for exemptions,” exempting (e.g.) Sikhs from the British law requiring motorcyclists to wear crash helmets. Barry, *Culture and Equality*, pp. 50-54.

<sup>69</sup>Horton, “John Gray and the Political Theory of Modus Vivendi,” p. 50.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine what I have presented as Gray's inability to move away from liberalism and utopian political projects. Gray makes some telling criticisms of the Enlightenment liberal attempt to transform traditional forms of morality by subjecting them to critical reason in order to achieve a universal liberal regime. In its place he recommends that we accept naturalism, something that precludes perfectionism and entails accepting the irreducible diversity of human life. Yet for all his criticisms of humanism and its political manifestation in Enlightenment liberalism, Gray seems, however reluctantly, to be committed to a project that is in substance the same. His concern with the prospect of a "mere" *modus vivendi* and anxiety to avoid moral relativism drives him to claim that value pluralism places constraints on any legitimate political settlement, and in specifying those limits he proposes his own version of the transformative and universalist projects. Value pluralism, a doctrine that Gray invoked in order to accommodate the diversity that we find in the world around us, is transformed into a project that limits it. I suggest that his inability to move away from Enlightenment liberalism suggests that the attempt to formulate a genuinely accommodationist liberalism is bound to fail. If one is really convinced that one should aim "simply to see," this precludes making claims for positions such as a universal minimal morality. If on the other hand one wishes to do more and to prescribe limits to any legitimate political settlement, then one's position is inevitably substantive, arranged from some particular viewpoint and thus likely to be experienced as illegitimate from some other.<sup>70</sup>

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