

GRAY'S PROGRESS:  
FROM *LIBERALISMS* TO *ENLIGHTENMENT'S WAKE*

JEREMY SHEARMUR

The progress of that darkness . . . from its first approach to the period of greatest obscurity.

William Robertson, *History of the Reign of Charles the Fifth*

I HAVE KNOWN JOHN Gray for quite a few years, and have long admired his work. We were among the (very few) political theorists in the U.K. who, in the early 1970s, had an interest in the work of Hayek, and more generally in issues relating to classical liberalism. During the 1980s, he emerged as the most powerful and effective theorist of classical liberalism in the U.K., notably through his re-interpretations of John Stuart Mill in *Mill on Liberty* (1983a), his *Hayek and Liberty* (1984), and his overview and critical assessment of the liberal tradition, *Liberalism* (1986). We had, over the years, various discussions about Hayek and liberalism—as Gray mentions in his *Hayek on Liberty*—and in that connection we shared many intellectual concerns; notably, with problems about how classical liberalism related to particular traditional cultures, and about the value of lives that did not involve autonomy in any significant sense. Our discussions about these and related matters were occasional, and typically by telephone or at Liberty Fund conferences. In the course of one of these conversations, I suggested to Gray that he might consider collecting some of his essays on liberalism into a volume, as he kindly

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mentions in the preface to *Liberalisms*—which was the result. Since that time, however, we have not been in more than very occasional contact, and I have not had the opportunity to read his writings systematically. It was for this reason that I particularly welcomed the opportunity to review his work;<sup>1</sup> not least because it tells an interesting story of Gray's shift away from the classical liberalism which we shared, and to which I still subscribe, through conservatism, to the espousal of a position which brought him, intellectually, to Nietzsche and to Heidegger, and, politically, to writing a column in the leftish *London Guardian*, and close to the "new" British Labour Party.<sup>2</sup>

#### LIBERALISMS

As Gray tells the first part of this story in the Preface to his *Liberalisms* (1989), his progress represents a progression through various attempts to provide foundations for liberalism, until he reached the point where he gave up on this project and, in a sense, on liberalism itself. This does, certainly, take place. But in some respects the story is more complex, as I shall explain.

As disclosed by the papers in his *Liberalisms*, Gray starts with an appreciative, but not uncritical, discussion of such liberals as Mill and Popper. He then offers a critique of both Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and of Nozick, for each offering what Gray describes as a contractarianism<sup>3</sup> that while having pretensions to universality, has what are, actually, culturally specific premises. There is then a critical exploration of strengths—and also problems—of the indirect utilitarianism that Gray elsewhere attributed to Mill, and which also in part informs Hayek's work, and some useful discussion of a bevy of problems

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<sup>1</sup>*Liberalisms* (1989); *Post-Liberalism* (1993a); *Beyond the New Right* (1993b); *Enlightenment's Wake* (1995a), and *Isaiah Berlin* (1995b). This project started with a plan for a review essay of the first three volumes, but not only did the project grow, Gray's output meant that it seemed that by the time I had read and thought about one volume, two more had appeared. I plan to continue this critical survey, starting where I have left off, on a future occasion.

<sup>2</sup>David Willetts (a former student of Gray's) took issue with Gray as one of "Blair's Gurus," in his *Blair's Gurus* (1996). Gray, as far as I can tell, did not then object to this designation, as I seem to recall seeing him in a posed photograph with some of the other "gurus," in a newspaper at around the time at which Willetts's study came out.

<sup>3</sup>The designation of Nozick's approach as "contractarian" itself being a slightly strange description.

relating to liberalism (such as the contented slave), and of natural law theory. After an acute but highly critical paper on Hayek, Gray then turns to the later Rawls. For Rawls's later ideas Gray shows some sympathy, but argues that there is such diversity within specific contemporary Western cultures, that what, on Gray's account, one can obtain from Rawls's approach is only an updated version of Hobbes; an approach which Gray also identifies with that of James Buchanan. Gray concludes that what one can derive from this is limited and culturally specific in its scope—and is close to Oakeshott's account of "civil society," of whose views Gray then offers a sympathetic exposition. Gray finally goes back to savage Mill for lacunae and indeterminacies in his approach, and to offer a critique—which seemed to me less than compelling—of several broad strands in liberal argument.

From all of this, two things emerge. By the end of *Liberalisms*, Gray has turned his back upon foundationalist argument. This—at least in my view—is reasonable enough; indeed, one might have thought that someone with the interests reflected in the opening pieces in this collection—Mill's *On Liberty* and Popper—should not have had much sympathy for it in the first place. But when he is engaged in polemical argument against liberalism, Gray's work seems haunted by foundationalism—at least in his account of what it is that he is turning his back on. For when Gray speaks critically of the enterprise of liberalism, he depicts it in very strange terms. First, he demands that justification should be produced in a quite unrealistic manner; for example, he complains (1989, p. 42), that no "transcendental justification" is offered; or, later, that there is no "deduction from conceptual analysis or from rationally certified principles" (p. 100). But it is not clear why a reader of Mill or of Popper—or, indeed, of any work in recent epistemology—would demand such a thing. Second, Gray takes liberals to task for a lack of determinacy or completeness in their views; complaining—to use an example from *Enlightenment's Wake*—because Mill's principle of liberty does not offer an immediate way of resolving problems such as those posed by "electronic bugging devices or long-distance cameras" (1995, p. 132). But after Gödel's work, there can surely be no reasonable expectation of completeness of this kind.<sup>4</sup> Third, Gray also sometimes takes liberals to task for offering their views as compelling for

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<sup>4</sup>I am not, here, claiming that Gödel's work has political significance, but rather that, if formal systems of even a certain limited degree of content are incomplete, it should surely not surprise us to find incompleteness in other areas.

all times and all places. But in the light of Mill's remarks about Akbar, and many other cases to which Gray refers us at other points in his essays, it is clear that Gray knows better. Indeed, there is a sense in which polemics—which are well-represented in these collections—bring out the very worst in Gray. For while when he is not engaged in polemical argument Gray can give a good, sympathetic, yet critical account of other people's work, when he turns to polemics, Gray offers accounts of other people's views in which he can recognize no good in them. This is odd, as one of the strange features of Gray's writing is that he frequently offers us criticisms of various positions which he himself seems to have held until fairly recently, but which are then characterized in the most pejorative of terms, and as if only a fool or a knave could hold them.

There is also the issue of Gray's own position. This is worth considering in two parts; his substantive views, and his views about the character of argument in political philosophy. In substantive terms, there is a sense in which his views do not, in fact, change *all* that much over this collection (indeed, until we get almost to the end of his *Enlightenment's Wake* the variations in his substantive views are in *some* ways quite small). Broadly speaking, Gray is—and through much of his work remains—a classical liberal, with conservative and pluralist tendencies. His account of civil society is of a form of social organization in which people live under the rule of law, in market-based societies (in his account of which he largely follows Hayek, and others in the "subjectivist" tradition in economics). Gray is concerned, however, about the social prerequisites of such societies, in the sense that they are not, in his view, available to all or even good for all. And he is concerned, too, about the adverse impact of markets—and more generally, as his work develops, of rationalistic argument—upon the social prerequisites of liberal market-based societies. As a consequence of his engagement with others in arguments concerning liberalism, Gray comes to the conclusion that it is autonomy rather than a simple negative liberty of preferences which is morally significant, and that the value of freedom has to be understood in relation to a normative account of the value of human life. All this stays fairly stable through his discussions, but it is given different interpretations—and offered in the context of very different political rhetoric—at different points in his various essays in *Liberalisms*.

It is at the level of methodology, however, where his views seem to me most problematic. In one sense, as exemplified both in his account of methodological issues in political theory in the course of a critique of Gerry Cohen, and in his practice in many of these essays, everything is fine. He is there engaged in the discussion of the

respective merits of different theories, and evaluation of their pros and cons both theoretically, and in terms of related empirical issues, in which latter context he invokes ideas from Lakatos about research programs as a critical tool.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, a sense in which other things erupt into his work—and, in my view, have a deleterious effect upon it.

The first of these is his flirtation with Oakeshott. This fits in well enough with themes which make their mark prior to Gray's more explicit identification with Oakeshott's work; namely, his concern with the cultural specificity of liberalism, and his scepticism toward what can be achieved by philosophical argument. There is, as I have mentioned, also a neat convergence between Gray's critical reworking of the later Rawls, his interpretation of what can be achieved using Buchanan's contractarian approach, and his interpretation of Oakeshott's ideas. However, Gray goes, briefly, into a more fully Oakeshottian mode. In this he joins other Oakeshott admirers in taking what seems to me an unduly uncritical attitude toward Oakeshott's broader enterprise (although Gray does note respects in which Oakeshott's ideas share some of the problems of Hayek's). Even at his most Oakeshottian, however, Gray does not take the project seriously. For one striking feature of Oakeshott's approach to philosophy is that he treats political philosophy as something that—in Hegelian fashion—can take to wing only at dusk, offering reflections upon practice, rather than in any sense being able to offer suggestions to practitioners. Gray, rather than treating political philosophy as a reflective abridgment of practice (as would a consistent Oakeshottian), is to be found commending “civil society,” and to those of whose existing practice his views can in no sense be understood as an abbreviated account (1989, p. 212). In terms of substantive political argument, however, this lapse from Oakeshottian purity marks a significant move in Gray's views. For in this connection he refers (p. 212) to “those societies throughout the world which under the shocks of modernity discover the necessity of forging a civil society where none had existed.” Gray's view is close to the idea that a modest and pluralistically interpreted version of classical liberalism becomes appropriate as a normative ideal for, if not necessarily being

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<sup>5</sup>I personally think that he would have done better to follow Popper on research programs than Lakatos. Compare, for some argument, my “Popper, Lakatos and Theoretical Progress in Economics” (1991), and for the application of the resulting ideas to political thought, chapter 1 of my *Hayek and After* (1996a).

achievable by, all societies as they undergo modernization; an idea which we will discuss later.

At another level, however, Gray takes the Oakeshottian project very seriously indeed; or, at least, the view about the character of philosophy that results from it. For Gray from this point on sometimes treats argument in political philosophy as if it could at best achieve a kind of clarificatory reflection on our political practices, and one that is made relative to a specific tradition or form of life. But the problem is that Gray never offers us any detailed argument that Oakeshott's philosophical views, on the strength of which we were being invited to take such an approach, are themselves correct (something which would seem to me quite a task). Indeed, Gray's move is similar to that which is made by some postmodernists; namely, that they are impressed by a particular piece of philosophical reasoning—say, Rorty's—which, *if it were correct*, would suggest that traditional philosophical argument is misconceived, and then *assume* its correctness, interpreting this as providing a rationale for not, subsequently, being willing to enter into argumentation as to whether that initial piece of reasoning was correct!

Gray's partial embrace of a kind of postmodernism (partial because, as we will see, for a while some things are exempted), also brings with it a Rorty-like giving up on philosophy. This is both amusing, and disastrous, by turns. It is amusing because Gray, just like Rorty before him, ends up saying that, implicitly, all philosophy is impossible, but some is less impossible than others. Just as Rorty the anti-philosopher can be found still espousing—without visible means of support—the form of eliminative materialism which he held at the last point when he still thought that philosophy was a legitimate activity, so Gray the anti-philosopher is to be found holding many of the conclusions that he came to, when he was last a philosopher—namely, an Oakeshott-influenced classical liberalism.

The disaster is that the turn away from philosophy starts to bring out the worst in Gray. I have already noted the problems that arise when he turns to polemics. Something worse now arises, in the sense that, alongside good, solid nonfoundationalist philosophical and theoretical argument, we get what can only be described as Gray hectoring us. We get a succession of authoritative judgments about all kinds of issues, delivered without argument or evidence, a little like the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of a secular Pope, and accompanied by sharp and often unpleasant put-downs to those with whom he disagrees. Gray's work is striking for the very large range of material that it covers, and for his ability to engage with and to say genuinely important things about many issues. But if one reads these

essays in any quantity, one becomes struck by their tone, and by Gray's willingness to offer us comments about almost everything. My reaction to this may, clearly, be a matter of personal taste. But there is a sense in which I think that Gray has become corrupted by his own meta-philosophical views. While—as in his discussion of Cohen—he has set out an account of philosophical method which suggested how one can combine rigor with a nonfoundationalist approach, Gray seems to me to end up without the kind of argument about how his views are to be preferred to those of others that his own earlier account suggested would be necessary to back them up.

#### *POST-LIBERALISM*

By the end of Gray's *Liberalisms*, we have reached a view that is then elaborated through much of his *Post-Liberalism* (1993a). This, as I have indicated, involves an attachment to a scaled-down version of classical liberalism. Gray favors civil society—a form of human association in which there is the rule of law, private property, and civil freedoms, but not necessarily Western-style market capitalism or political freedom after the fashion of Western democracies. This is seen as a specific cultural achievement; one which is good for us—we, who live within it—but which is not necessarily the best for everyone. Gray's defense of it is in terms drawn variously from Oakeshott and Buchanan (when understood as relativized to a specific historical culture). He also starts to draw increasingly on Berlin in connection with the theme of the incommensurability of values, and on Raz on the significance of autonomy, as allowing people within such societies the freedom to make choices between different incommensurable alternatives. There are also occasional references to the later Wittgenstein and, in some of the final essays, to Dreyfus's interpretation of Heidegger's "perspectivism." As to government, Gray's view of its proper role, until almost the end of the collection, is that it should restrict itself to the provision of what is needed for the functioning of civil society (p. 265): "government," Gray tells us, "is ill-fitted to act as guardian or protector of any of the traditions it shelters;" and while he distances his view from that of a Nozickian minimal state, what he is commending is described as "akin to the limited state of classical liberalism."

I have spelled all this out, in order that the contrast between this and what is found in the final chapter of *Post-Liberalism*, written (presumably in 1991) especially for the book, will be clear. For in this, the same themes—and ideas from the same trinity of writers: Oakeshott, Berlin, and Raz—are put to work in new ways. One problem of the

collection, to that point, is that a lot of work seemed to be being done by ideas about the incommensurability of values, drawn from Berlin, without Gray's interpretation of what is involved being spelled out in any detail, or defended. This is now remedied; but in ways that serve to revise dramatically some of what Gray is offering to us.

In his final chapter, "What is dead and what is living in liberalism," Gray sets out initially to criticize some themes within liberalism, making use of his interpretation of Berlin's pluralism. Gray now argues for an *objective* pluralism of value, related to various forms of life; one which, in Gray's interpretation, is not to be cashed out in terms of the experiences, actual or—it would seem—even hypothetical, of people within these forms of life. Choice also plays no essential role, other than in *our* particular form of life. This leads Gray to an account in which it is at least possible that unchosen subservience can be part of the good life in other cultures, if this should lead to human flourishing (it is not always clear, when Gray refers to "the standpoint of human flourishing," as in (1993a, p. 308), if he means that *each* individual must flourish). By way of contrast, in our own culture, autonomy is valuable even if it may not be valued, and science and art are to be pursued at, it would seem, the public expense, even if (most) people do not value them.

What Gray says about value pluralism is a somewhat strange mix: at one level, it is rather trite, in the sense that it is not clear that any liberal—apart, possibly, from Ayn Rand—really wanted to claim that there was only one rational form of life, and that the details of how we conduct ourselves could be dictated by reason alone. Further, as Gray notes in subsequent essays, value pluralism could be interpreted in ways that are supportive of liberalism. Gray's account, however, is not of this kind. For *his* value pluralism is one of forms of life. He offers a picture in which there are various radically different forms of life, each of which has its own, *objective*, virtues. In this connection, Gray takes issue with value relativism, and also with Rorty, and espouses a form of culturally pluralistic moral realism, the details of which are—alas—not set out.

Gray then offers an account of what is valuable within our own tradition, in part in terms of the idea of civil society, in part in terms of ideas drawn from Berlin and from Raz. The latter's work is then made use of to develop the notion, to which reference was made earlier, that the value of freedom is to be understood in terms of a view of the value of human life. This is interpreted in terms of autonomy which, in turn, is understood by Gray—following Raz—as depending, essentially, upon the presence of cultural diversity. (This becomes a seed out of which grows an argument for governmental



intervention for the sake of such autonomy.) Gray concludes his account by suggesting that various different strands within liberalism, which he has also been criticizing in terms of these ideas, can be accorded some legitimacy when they are reinterpreted in the light of his ideas about civil society, and when their universalistic and monistic metaphysical pretensions are restricted.

Gray's work is striking. But it is also rather strange. For while he was earlier claiming a great deal of modesty in terms of what philosophy can deliver, here he commits himself to some quite contentious ideas—such as his version of moral realism—albeit with little argument. Further, there are two respects in which his ideas seem somewhat alarming. First, Gray seems perfectly happy to swallow—and indeed to advocate—what seems to me to amount to the view that the happy slave may be leading a good life in a culture other than our own. There is also the idea—to be found in Taylor's attack on liberalism in his "Atomism" (1979), and then as part of a distinctive account of welfare liberalism within Raz's work<sup>6</sup>—that, to put it bluntly, the rest of us can legitimately be conscripted for the sake of providing autonomy to others or for the sake of our own true interests. It does not look as if we have to be convinced that the fostering of autonomy is good (and not just our own autonomy, to boot), before we can be made to pursue it, or to provide the wherewithal for others to do so.

Second, there is an oddity about Gray's entire position. It is that his objective value pluralism seems to suggest that some people—or at least Gray—are in a position to discern what is of value about life in other cultures of which they are not members, and also to pass judgments about it which go against the choices that people in those cultures are actually making or trying to make. I would not wish to claim that such a thing is impossible (not least, as I do not share the kind of scepticism about philosophy that Gray exhibits at other points in his work); but I do think that it can be done only with great care and a great deal of humility. What is not clear is how *Gray* is entitled to make such claims, given the kinds of arguments that he is here advancing. When he discusses cultural pluralism, he sometimes invokes the later Wittgenstein (in the "Swansea" version). Gray might be reminded that Winch, in his "Understanding a Primitive

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<sup>6</sup>See Raz (1986). I would like to thank David Boonin-Vail for discussion of the relations between Taylor and Raz in the late 1980s, although he bears no responsibility for the claims that I am making here.

Society," was faced with the problem that, when treated from such a perspective, other societies would seem to be closed to our understanding; a position from which Winch was only able to extract himself by what seems to me considerable backtracking, in the sense of admitting the existence of universal features of the human situation which confront different cultures in a manner that has to be understood as culturally unmediated.<sup>7</sup> Gray, however, seems to hold both to a radical pluralism and to the view that he can be a kind of connoisseur of cultures—without explaining how he could have such knowledge. And this knowledge is, itself, something that he *needs*, as his argument seems to depend, crucially, not on the claim that there is *something* going on in other cultures that we cannot fathom, but that there is *flourishing* going on there. At a certain level, Gray needs to make a case for the *value* of what is occurring in other cultures, which indicates that it is to be classified in terms similar to how things of value are to be classified in ours. (To be sure, Gray does at one point indicate that he follows Berlin in taking the view that different cultures are not mutually incomprehensible; but if that is the case, he cannot at the same time use Wittgensteinian arguments that would, *prima facie*, have just this feature to them.)

Three other problems are worth noting. The first is that the shared use of concepts may mask all kinds of conflicts and forms of domination. What is good in a culture for some is, to say the least, not necessarily good for others. Gray's view here seems to risk legitimating terrible things being done to some people by others, for the sake of something that is valuable (I say "risk," as I was still left unsure whether he was accepting the underlying liberal view that cultures are only desirable if they allow for the flourishing of *each* individual). Any inclination to accept the nonliberal version of his argument should be given pause by considering one's reaction to pleas for the aesthetic value—and its role in a certain kind of human flourishing—of a really good *castrati* choir! In addition, when, as he does from time to time, Gray argues against the views of communitarians, he raises significant points about the existence of pluralism and diversity within, and mutual influences between, different traditions (1993a, pp. 262–63). But he does not stop to explore what this would mean for his willingness to invoke ideas of a common culture, at other places in his own argument.

Second, there is an ambiguity about the identification of a culture (something that, as Gray notes in a later essay, liberals may raise

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<sup>7</sup>See Winch (1970); note Winch's remarks at the very end of this piece.

against him, but which he does not seem to me to answer). Gray is critical of chattel slavery; for example as it existed in the U.S. But surely one could have found defenders of this peculiar institution who would have been happy to assure him that it was a distinctive form of life; one which—as is surely the case—allowed for the practice of certain kinds of virtues which were not to be found in the commercial society of the North. It is just not clear how claims as to what makes for a form of life are to be validated. Further, one might argue that, today, it is difficult to see any form of social organization standing outside the effects of commercial society; and this, in turn, meaning that civil society, in one form or another, would represent its preferred form of organization; at least for the Gray of *Post-Liberalism*. This, in turn, would make much of his argument for pluralism, supposing it to be correct, of largely historical interest.

Finally, I have a concern about Gray's reliance here upon a notion of civil society. It is not that I do not myself, as a classical liberal, favor something like this, as that I don't really understand what, on Gray's account, gives it the characteristics for which he favors it. Within civil society, Gray seems to think that a (modified) version of liberal universalism should hold good. But why? That is to say, it seems unclear whether the nub of his argument on this issue is economic, or moral. Consider, say, a society which in all other respects is a civil society, but which discriminates in relation to the status of its inhabitants (e.g., it might, say, give members of a particular ethnic group a special status, as does Malaysia; or it might distinguish between citizens and guest-workers, as does Germany). Such distinctions don't seem to be something that Gray favors. But it is not clear whether his argument is that such societies will not thrive economically (and, if so, why), or if there is in his view some connection between the character of such societies as civil societies, and their creation of the basis for certain kinds of moral truth—through argument about which we would then discover the (internal) case for liberal autonomy.<sup>8</sup> This latter claim might, indeed, fit what Gray says about dispositional moral realism; but if this is what is going on, it is a great pity that he did not spell out how all this is supposed to work!

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<sup>8</sup>I was not quite clear as to whether Gray at this point thought that the precondition for the operation of Raz's argument is any kind of civil society, or just "ours." That is, was its force supposed to be telling in Japan—which he describes as a non-Western style civil society—too?

## BEYOND THE NEW RIGHT

*Beyond the New Right* (1993b) opens with a paper, “Limited Government: A Positive Agenda,” which displays Gray at his worst. In saying this, I do not mean that the piece is not readable, interesting, and stimulating. Gray at his worst is better than many other writers at their best. It shows Gray at his worst, in two respects. First, Gray offers his own recipe as to what the British government should do, down to the *details* to tax policy. This, for a noneconomist who has spent a fair bit of time taking his professional colleagues in political philosophy to task for *their* hubris, takes the biscuit. In the course of his discussion, he commends to us Hayek’s ideas about the denationalization of money; not least because Gray has worries, of a public choice kind, about the ability of government to provide a stable money supply. One problem here, however, is that in an earlier piece on Buchanan, and then subsequently in this collection, Gray is to be found endorsing Shackleian views within economics. These however will at best allow us to claim that people may benefit from uncoerced one-to-one exchanges; they really do not allow us to say anything much about what we can expect from the macro-level outcomes of market processes (Shearmur 1990 and 1996a, chap. 5). But *this*, after all, is what one *does* need to say, if one is commending a view such as Hayek’s with regard to money. For the advantages of it—as Gray claims them—are supposed to be the providing of overall stability in respect to the value of money, not of benefits which occur only at the level of each individual actor, in one-on-one transactions.

Second, in the course of this same piece, Gray sets out a case for (limited) redistribution. He does this, in part, by way of a claim that the stability of a market-based society may be in danger if this is not done; a claim for which he offers no evidence. The other part of his argument involves his offering some suggestions about the case for special assistance toward the poor but academically gifted, by way of a bluff reference to “sound principles concerning equality of opportunity” (1993b, p. 42), the contents of which are not specified.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I, indeed, gained from such arrangements myself. From the perspective of those who receive them, they are fine; as they may indeed seem from that of those who advocate such largesse from the pockets of other citizens. What is not so clear is that there is a case for such forcible redistribution being something that looks reasonable from the perspective of those from whom the resources are extracted—who, among other things, will typically be less well-off than, in the longer term, will those who will be in receipt of such awards.

This is something that might go down better in a political speech than it does in a collection of papers on political philosophy.

There then follows a paper on "The Conservative Disposition," which was initially published by the Centre for Policy Studies, and represents Gray at his most conservative so far. Gray's now-familiar concerns are there, but he expresses himself in "traditionalese"—the paper including rhetoric about mystery, tragedy, people having the misfortune to be atheists; ideas about identities being conferred upon people by their unchosen histories (p. 65), and the advice that (p. 50): "people are better employed in struggling to reconcile themselves to their circumstances, on the whole, than in striving to alter them."

Gray also, however, announces an ambitious list of the proper tasks of government, including such things as the tending of fragile and precious traditions, assisting in the reproduction of a common culture, and being concerned about the virtue of its subjects (pp. 50–51). He expresses worries about the challenge to local knowledge posed by the pressures of an open society (p. 52), and offers a kind of "tough-love" approach to the underclass. He also favors the government's subsidizing religious education, provided that the groups in question do not "flout the central norms of liberal civil society" (p. 58), and expresses concern for the preservation of a minimal shared culture. He also offers a criticism of monistic approaches—whether in theory or in policy—and indicates a willingness to limit both markets ("the conservative individualist will never concede hegemony to the market" [p. 63]) and the ordinary processes of government ("there may be good reasons for removing elements of the market from the political process" [ibid.]), the upshot of which seems to me to be that he favors a realm of political discretion, which would be responsive to the suggestions of those who wish to offer it advice; such as John Gray.

The third item in the collection, "Moral Foundations of Market Institutions" is a more substantive piece of work, and is interesting as an attempt to offer a reinterpretation, in terms of Gray's developing views, of the German "Social Market Economy" tradition. The central theme of this paper is that market institutions are to be valued because of their contribution to individual well-being (interpreted in terms of Raz-influenced ideas about autonomy); ideas which are then also argued to offer a rationale for an "enabling welfare state." The paper offers a case for a market economy, and contains some useful developments of arguments from the Austrians, Michael Polanyi, and Shackle against central economic planning, and some arguments of Gray's against both Marxism and Raymond

Plant and David Miller's pleas for market socialism. Gray argues that the realistic political choices lie in a spectrum between a libertarian conservatism and an egalitarian but market and private property based social democracy. Within this, he argues for a "humane social market economy" (p. 123); an ideal that the paper commends to those both on the Left and on the Right of the political spectrum, the latter of whom he hopes will turn to it from the "panaceas of the libertarian New Right" (p. 122). What this means, in practical terms, is that one should accept that people have satiable basic needs. (Gray refers to, but does not really answer, an earlier paper of his own, *not* included in these collections, in which he argued that there were huge problems about taking any such view of the medical needs of the elderly;<sup>10</sup> his discussion here concluding with a reference to euthanasia! [p. 106].) Gray is reluctant to suggest that what such needs are could be determined by means of theoretical argument (p. 88), and suggests that: "Identifying basic needs and specifying resource levels for their provision is . . . a matter for rational public discourse" He also refers to the role, in identifying these needs, of the "shared norms and common life of the society" (p. 107). Indeed, despite the fact that Gray himself makes use of public-choice analysis when it suits him, one of the more striking features of this article is a kind of rehabilitation of the political. (Indeed, from this point onward in his writings the political comes back increasingly into favor, with a critique of liberals for their wish to "abolish politics" becoming a substantive theme in *Enlightenment's Wake*; see, for example, 1995a, p. 76.) "The economic system," Gray also tells us "has to be consciously shaped" (1993b, p. 117); and after referring to the role played in his favored arrangements, of the "constant vigilance of a citizenry steeped in a culture of liberty" (p. 120), he offers an express criticism of public choice theory:

Excessive cynicism about democratic political life in Britain should not be allowed to convince people of the impossibility of [reforms of the kind that Gray is suggesting]. There is a real danger that the Public Choice model of the economics of politics . . . could blind people to the shared norms which pervade political life. (1993b, p. 120)

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<sup>10</sup>See Gray (1983b, pp. 174–84). Gray discusses problems of modern medicine more fully in his "Agenda for Green Conservatism," and there offers what seems to me a good case for euthanasia—something which I strongly favor. My complaint, rather, was that Gray does not adequately address the problem of the nonsatiability of medical need as a call upon the resources of others.

I would certainly agree with Gray that public choice theory should not be accepted uncritically; but my concern is that the basis on which Gray seems to assess it is less that of its explanatory adequacy (Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedman 1996), than whether it happens to fit the argument that he wishes to offer us, at any particular time. We will return to the issue of Gray, politics, and public choice a little later. A further problem is that Gray does not address the issue of whether the policy goals that he wishes to commend to us are in fact goals for which it is reasonable that resources should be taken from some, and given to others. One may welcome the idea that all should flourish; but it is quite another matter as to whether this is a goal the achievement of which one should put ahead of one's other concerns; still more, one that government, on Gray's advice, should force one to pursue if one thinks that other matters represent better uses of one's time and money. Any defense of the kind of position that Gray is offering would also need to address the question of why, say, it is other people in one's own country whose concerns should have this kind of charge upon one—in a way that others in other countries who may be worse off presumably don't.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear, however, that Gray would consider any of this an issue that he should address. For he tells us, in connection with governmental funding of art and science: "the underlying argument is that the activity . . . is itself an intrinsic good, whose value is not reducible to the satisfaction of personal preferences" (1993b, p. 113). And he makes disparaging comments about "judgments of the value of pigeon-fancying or pornography against the plays of Shakespeare" (p. 112). In raising this issue, I am not wishing to argue that we always want what is good for us; but it does seem to me important that the perspective of each individual be addressed, and that good reason be offered as to why, say, the funds of someone who is interested in pigeons but not in Shakespeare should be diverted to expenditure on the latter.

The final paper in this connection is "An Agenda for Green Conservatism." In it, Gray offers a kind of rapprochement between conservatism and the Green movement, although the conservatism is very much Gray's version, and thus contrasts with the less market-oriented approach that, say, Andrew Sullivan had earlier used when addressing this task (Sullivan 1985). Green theories largely play bit parts in Gray's exposition of his own ideas, or are taken to task for

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<sup>11</sup>It is a real merit of Miller's *On Nationality* (1995) that he does try to address this issue, although in my judgment his argument is not successful.

their neglect of the virtues of markets and of private property; they also serve to increase Gray's growing hostility toward some forms of classical liberalism. Gray himself offers a mixture between the assertion of various philosophical views, and the proffering of various policy suggestions.

On the former score, Gray is at his least individualistic to date, writing of human individuals as "exfoliations of the common life" (1993b, p. 136). He also writes that:

The ultimate locus of value in the human world is not . . . in individual choices but in forms of life. This should lead us to qualify, even to abandon, the ideal of the autonomous chooser (which I have myself elsewhere endorsed [there follows a reference to his "Moral Foundations of Market Institutions"]) in favour of the recognition that the good life for human beings . . . necessarily presupposes embeddedness in communities. (p. 137)

Gray's views here are interesting in that they represent, in part, a return to the theme that he explored in the final chapter of *Post-Liberalism*. But they seem to me to go beyond this, in that up to this point, he has been critical of views—to which he has referred in connection with Sandel and with Scruton—which see the individual in modern Western society as radically situated. What is strange—but not, I fear, uncharacteristic—is that Gray here offers no account of why he has now rejected the arguments that had previously led him to be critical of this notion.

One other point of significance is the pessimism that runs through Gray's essay. Indeed, it seems to me to be a striking feature in Gray's personal make-up, and to indicate a deep incompatibility between him and liberalism; it is also a theme that gets its most striking—and apocalyptic—expression in the final essay of *Enlightenment's Wake*. The optimism that is part and parcel of liberalism does not have to be a matter of an uncritical belief in the inevitability of progress; but it does seem to me that it is difficult to be a liberal if one feels that there is no hope of doing things a bit better than we have managed to, to date. And this is an attitude which I suspect to be at odds with Gray's concerns about "reverence for nature and the tragic sense of life of genuine paganism" (p. 177), and with his swingeing critique of:

the whiggish, anthropocentric, technological optimism by which all modernist political religions are animated and which has, in the form of neo-liberalism, infected most of what passes today as conservatism. (p. 176)

On the policy front, Gray's approach is robust. He suggests to Greens the merits of property and market mechanisms (and, indeed,



Hayek's ideas for the denationalization of money, a policy about which he had expressed second thoughts in another paper in this collection), and he champions a form of educational vouchers and ideas about medicine which are influenced by Ivan Illich. (At the same time, he says harsh things about the voucher schemes of some economic liberals, the only feature of which that would distinguish them from Gray's ideas would seem to be that they are a little *less* radical than what Gray is proposing.) Gray is also more generally critical of market liberalism, referring to the need for urban strategic planning authorities "of a sort that can only be unthinkable to doctrinaire advocates of laissez-faire" (p. 161), and advocates various ideas about worthy forms of governmental activity, from the subsidy of traditional farming, to energy policy and a "negative capital tax." Gray's individual suggestions here may—or may not—be sound. What seems to me disturbing is that when, as in Gray, they are combined with a critique of any notion of a limitation of government by rules, they look as if they are a recipe for the imposition on the rest of us of the whims of an elite. Gray, in the "Introduction" to the volume, talks of "the soundness and vitality of cultural traditions," as opposed to "constitutional devices or rules," as being what should constrain government (p. x). With this, and with his concern about all kinds of political disputes transforming themselves into issues of constitutional law, I, as an Englishman, have a certain visceral sympathy (I also believe here there just happens to be an overwhelming rational case for what in turn are in fact some traditional English practices!).<sup>12</sup> If one takes such an approach seriously, problems

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<sup>12</sup>On one particular point here, I am not totally in jest. I think that, for example, Mount's case against British practice, and for a written constitution, *The British Constitution Now: Recovery or Decline?* (1992), is badly in error, for reasons that have been exhibited by American—and now Australian—activist law. I am all in favor of checks and balances. But the problem with a written constitution is that it gives one rule by lawyers; and often elderly and idiosyncratic ones, to boot. The whole tradition of legal reasoning, while good in its place, is inappropriate for handling issues of public policy (because of its dependence on the happenstance of what goes before it, the particularities of the particular cases before it and of how they happen to be argued, and because of the path-dependency of precedent in legal decision-making). The very design of the court structure, and the proper concern for the independence of the judiciary, has the unintended consequence of rendering judges in a Supreme or High Court largely immune to criticism, in the sense that they do not have to *answer* criticisms made of their judgment, and are thus also not in a position to clarify obscurities and errors in their judgments until such time as another relevant case happens to arise. All told, while I am no

would seem to arise when—as in the United States as opposed to England—a country itself is radically pluralistic, in terms of the traditions and ways of life which it encompasses. Second, and more significant, is what Gray identifies as his own radicalism: “conservatives,” he tells us, “cannot help becoming radicals” in the face of hubris (1993b, p. 128). But it is not clear in what sense Gray’s suggestions—e.g., that we should follow Illich in respect to medicine and education—can be understood as constrained by tradition, and thus, indeed, how a government which chose to be guided by Gray’s ideas would be constrained, at all.

Gray’s “Introduction” is interesting for other reasons, too. He claims that, while their ideas had merits, “the libertarian and classical liberal ideologues of the New Right” believed that “the riddle of history [was] solved” (p. v). This, it seems to me, is very wide of the mark. To be sure, there were some uncritical enthusiasts; but in academic circles there was—among the very few who could be described as having such ideas—a great deal of self (and mutual) criticism.<sup>13</sup> What is remarkable is that this self-criticism was also to be found among the *institutions* of the “New Right” themselves, as Gray silently testifies: bodies such as the Institute for Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies, and the IEA Health and Welfare Unit, which are dependent for their finances upon private donations and which might thus be expected for this very reason to be somewhat uncritical of their core ideas in their publications, themselves published three of the four essays that comprise this collection.

What does Gray here have to offer in place of the ideas of the New Right? It is “the homely truths of traditional conservatism”; and Oakeshott and Polanyi, instead of Hayek and Popper (by whom, it seems to me, the “New Right” was not significantly influenced;

fan of politics, here I would prefer a parliamentary system with more effective checks and balances to a bunch of elderly lawyers, any day; although I would at the same time stress its role as a constitutional order.

<sup>13</sup>Gray later returns to a similar charge in his “Undoing of Conservatism,” in his *Enlightenment’s Wake*, in which, after quoting Smith on the “disadvantages of commercial society,” he comments that “these moral and cultural shortcomings of a commercial society . . . figure less prominently, if at all, in the banal discourse of free market ideology,” (1995, p. 98); something to which, as one of those involved in the production of such “discourse,” banal or otherwise, I personally take exception, having discussed this issue almost—as friends have politely suggested—to the point of obsession.

understandably, as Popper did not share their views).<sup>14</sup> Gray also includes both Berlin and Keynes among his heroes—the latter perhaps a surprising figure, but one which, it seems to me, well fits the elitism that is now implicit in Gray's argument.

ISAIAH BERLIN

Gray's "Modern Master" on Berlin (1995b) is of some importance to us here. For not only is the book as much about Gray's own concerns as it is about Berlin (such that, say, Berlin's interesting early work in analytical philosophy<sup>15</sup> is discussed only incidentally), but in it, Gray develops—and makes some significant changes to—the positions that we have been exploring so far.

First, Gray sets out in some detail his case for the significance of Berlin's objective value pluralism. However, Gray says no more here about the details of his views concerning dispositional realism than he has previously. By what he says about value pluralism, I was left somewhat unimpressed. One needs, in my view, to consider this in three stages. First, there is the level at which we might compare things as being of value, as such. Here, Gray is clearly right that we may not be able to make rational comparisons between examples of, say, different aesthetic genres (he gives the example of different architectural designs of churches). Exactly the same, however, is surely true of apples and oranges: we may be able to say that one orange is better than another one, but not to make an "objective" ranking between an orange and an apple, just because they have such different features.

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<sup>14</sup>Compare, on this, my *Political Thought of Karl Popper* (1996b). To anticipate the results of some research upon which I am currently engaged, it is also interesting to note that Polanyi was not a liberal in Hayek's sense. While he made common cause with him against advocates of planning in the 1940s, there is a parting of the ways with Hayek in the 1950s, with Polanyi favoring the "Butskellite" approach of the anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom, to which Hayek was hostile. Hayek, in a comment on the proceedings of their conference on "The Future of Freedom" (1956) in which he participated on the invitation of Polanyi, commented in dissent that what was being done seemed to him the writing of an obituary of liberty. See Hayek Archive, for material on the conference, and correspondence with Polanyi, including the invitation; see also Coleman (1989).

<sup>15</sup>Compare, for example, A.J. Ayer's references to Berlin's work in analytical philosophy in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936); *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956); and *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (1973).

Second, however, it may be the case that, given who we are, or the situation in which we are acting, we may be able to make a rational preference for one rather than another of the options before us; one which, indeed, could in some cases be subjected to, and pass, intersubjective scrutiny. We may, say, be thirsty, in which context the juice of the orange may for us outweigh the merits of the texture of the apple. We may, for example, have acquired dispositions which enable us to appreciate the merits of one of the things in a way in which we cannot the other (e.g., we may have an extensive knowledge of, and a real feel for, classical music, but not much experience with jazz; or of one style of architecture, but not of another). We may have a history such that there is no real sense in putting to ourselves the choice between the (surely incommensurable) pleasures of the rest of one's life being spent as a member of a gender other than that which one has assumed up to the present time. Or it may, simply, be the case that one has, say, taste for wine rather than for curry, or, more simply, milk versus plain chocolate, relative to which one is not indifferent to the pleasures which one, rather than the others, of these afford.

Now, we may put the matter one step further back, and may ask: but what—if we could speak of such a thing—about the choice of such dispositions, and so on? Suppose that we could choose between having a taste for one rather than the other kind of chocolate. On the pluralist account we are in a situation in which either choice brings with it a succession of striking things to be enjoyed—but where one cannot fully enjoy both. Further, let us also assume that, when the pros and cons of one rather than the other are fully explicated, one cannot, in the case under consideration, find reason to prefer one to the other. *Prima facie*, it will then not matter which choice one makes—the upshot of such value pluralism will thus then be the same as indifference or subjectivism (although to be sure, there may be things—such as white chocolate—between which and one's favored choice there is not neutrality). It would seem, here, not to matter to the individual in question—or, indeed, to the impartial spectator—which choice is made.

But there is a further twist. It is that it would not seem—if we concentrate upon matters of value only—that it is important that a choice is made, at all. If there is, in the end, nothing to choose between the options, it is not clear why one should be upset if someone else has made the choice on one's behalf. (There are versions of value pluralism which are not of this character; for example, versions that offer what is, in effect, a version of Mill's argument that only *we* typically have the knowledge on the basis of which a choice can be made

as to which among different options is best, or which will best satisfy us. But this would seem to depend on the idea that there is *not* incommensurability between the choices being made—that we, typically, will be able to make the *right* choice, and that others will not. Alternatively, it may matter to us for *other* reasons that we, rather than someone else, make the choice.)

If my account here is correct, Gray's view of the significance of value incommensurability is defective. For while incommensurability is, indeed, a widespread feature at the level of objects of our choice, it is not so clear that it is once our situated selves as situated choosers are brought onto the scene. And insofar as there really is incommensurability there, it would seem as if it leads to indifference or, in *these* areas, to something equivalent to the subjectivism of the kind that was well criticized in Leo Strauss's argument that Berlin's views amount to a form of relativism (Strauss 1989), and against which Gray tries to defend Berlin.

Gray's own conclusions are very different: he takes incommensurability as hitting liberalism. There are, I think, two reasons for this. The first is that, after what I would take to be some equivocation as to whether his earlier argument about incommensurability does really hit liberalism, he applies value pluralism to ideas about justice, and so on, as well as to that about which people are making choices, and argues, for example, that principles of liberty or justice cannot be insulated from problems raised by value incommensurabilities (1995b, p. 147). Here, it seems to me, his argument is faulty. For he explicates his argument by way of the example of the way in which some people's claims for sexual freedom may be in conflict with other people's freedom to hire those whom they want, to teach in the schools to which they wish to send their children. But the force of his example—which is real, and is not only an American phenomenon<sup>16</sup>—is, surely telling only insofar as those holding the values themselves take an absolutistic attitude toward them; in respect of which they are at fault. If those in dispute were to accept—as is plainly the case—that their arguments for their ideas as compelling are not telling for all rational agents, or even all their compatriots, it would be difficult to see how they could reject the idea that it was possible for other people of good will to disagree with them, and in consequence to accept arrangements that allow people the freedom to differ in respect of such matters.

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<sup>16</sup>A student of mine, Graeme Grant, wrote an interesting honors thesis at Australian National University on issues raised by this issue in Australia.

There is also another, and very strange, feature of this aspect of Gray's work. One theme that also recurs in Gray's later criticisms of liberalism is the idea that there is no rational convergence in respect of matters of value. (It is, for example, to be found as part of his summing up of his critique of the Enlightenment, in 1995, p. 161.) However, he had also discussed just this notion earlier, in connection with contractarian method (1989, p. 166). But there, Gray's argument had led up to an *endorsement* of James Buchanan's contractarian approach, which Gray had interpreted as leading to an argument for a modest version of civil society. Given that Gray himself had earlier offered us an argument from these same premises to civil society—a minimalist classical liberalism—it seemed to me odd that he did not go back to reconsider this very argument, but, instead, concentrated on arguments from incommensurability or even from a simple failure of convergence in respect of value judgments, as if they, in themselves, are fatal to liberalism. I do not myself believe that Buchanan's contractarianism is fully compatible with liberalism (Shearmur 1992), but given that Gray had earlier seemed to suggest that it was, and that one might at least get a case for something like a civil society out of it, I was surprised that he did not return to reconsider that strand of argument, explicitly. (Indeed, I was struck that as Gray's criticism of liberalism develops, he seldom stops to consider whether his critical points hold good against classical liberalism, as well as against welfare liberalism.)

Gray also has, however, another line of argument. This, it seems to me, depends upon his taking ideas about the value of forms of life seriously; essentially, it is based on a nonindividualistic reading of value pluralism in terms of a pluralism of forms of life, of the kind that has been intimated earlier. About this, however, there seems to me three problems. First, it is not clear that if one upholds it, one is really claiming that the life of every person is better in a nonliberal society, and if not, if Gray is really favoring the imposition of a kind of localized perfectionism on others, against their will. Second, Gray, it seems to me, gets into trouble in respect to National Socialism, in that the ideals which inspired this seem, indeed, to be a form of life in a sense that fits Gray's ideas.<sup>17</sup> Against it, Gray argues from the "minimalist universalism" that is present in Berlin's thought. But it is not clear why this is not, also, grist for Gray's pluralist mill—not

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<sup>17</sup>To avoid this consequence, Gray would seem to me to have to spell out ideas about what would and what would not count in more detail than he has done to date.

least, as we are dealing with an actual concrete form of life (something with which, in Gray's view, we should be concerned, rather than with abstractions) which rejected these very ideas.

Third, however, there is a sense in which it seems to me that Gray is not sufficiently concerned with the coherence of the arguments that he is himself offering. One way in which Gray's book on Berlin is striking, is that, early on, Gray is to be found criticizing some of the ideas which come over most strongly in his *Beyond the New Right*. The "common life" of which we were invited, in that book, to see individuals as "exfoliations" is now depicted as flawed: "the idea of an uncorrupted text of common life . . . is a mere illusion: we have no reason to suppose that practice or tradition is coherent" (1993b, p. 7). This is not a new idea in Gray, for he has, earlier, referred to much this same idea in the course of an explanation as to why pluralism and thus autonomy are important. But the notion of the situated self seems to draw Gray back, such that not only is much of his argument about incommensurability made in terms of what are presented as if they were intact traditions, but he also says (1995b, p. 118) things such as "the interior life [of the individual is] a shadow cast by the common life." This view also spills over into Gray's sympathy toward Berlin's positive view of nationalism, and also, later, to some striking ideas about "communities, or ways of life" as the principal bearers of "rights (and duties)" as opposed to individuals (p. 138), and to a welcoming of the revival of Russian nationalism.

On this issue, it seems to me that it is Gray's occasional scepticism that is in order. To be sure, we are in significant ways socially constituted, and local attachments are of great importance. But there is no reason whatever to suppose that these are naturally cashed out in terms of nation states or a pluralism of distinct legal orders. Further, while Gray notes that "In most if not all pluralist political orders, there has been legal provision for migration from community to community" (1989, pp. 138–39), there seems no special reason to suppose that this should be so, or why, on the basis of Gray's views, it ought to be so, especially if such migration were judged to risk undermining the integrity of these cultures.

This more communitarian and traditionalist strand in Gray's thought seems to me to risk engaging him in a kind of Arcadian fantasy. Community and tradition are, after all, contested, and subject to continuing disputes and exercises in self-reinterpretation. There is a real sense in which, when Gray speaks of tradition, what we get is one particular—and elite—cut on what has been going on; one which, because it proffers itself as a partial articulation of tacit

knowledge, rather than as a particular voice contending for dominance, is apt to misrepresent itself. Further, it would seem to me difficult to identify any community or tradition which now has an integral character—and which, indeed, has been untouched by the impact of “commercial society.” To the extent to which I am right about this, Gray would, as I have suggested earlier, seem to be preoccupied with something that does not exist.

#### *ENLIGHTENMENT’S WAKE*

This collection of Gray’s (1995a), the Preface of which is dated September 1994, starts with a critical piece, which condemns what Gray calls “the new liberalism”—notably, Rawls, and the writings to which his work has led—in powerful terms, as having “done little more than articulate the prejudices of an Anglo-American academic class that lacks any understanding of the political life of our age” (1995a, p. 1). In the course of his article Gray makes what, in my view, are some good points; notably, about the weaknesses of an approach within political philosophy which does not integrate its work closely with work within the social sciences. He also has some delightful *bon mots* (such as “Kantianism in one country” as a description of the enterprise of the later Rawls). However, Gray’s piece is also strikingly unfair to the work with which he is dealing, in the sense that he does not, in the course of his article, explain what the problems are with which this work is concerned, and why they are of interest (even though he may disagree with them). Should he do this? I would argue that he should, because he has admitted as much in his own work. The article that forms the first chapter of *Enlightenment’s Wake* was first published in 1992. In July 1994, Gray completed his *Berlin*. In the course of this, when he gets down to more serious philosophical argument, Gray is to be found engaged with the same tradition’s approach to problems of value pluralism. In this connection, Gray is critical of the ideas of Rawls; but he discusses them very seriously, and refers to them as “cogent and worthy of serious consideration” (1995b, p. 147). Yet, shortly after sending this book to the press, Gray follows it up with a collection that reprints his 1992 article, which is scathingly dismissive of this whole genre of work.

It might have seemed excessive for me to have gone into such detail. But there is a sense in which this indicates something important about Gray’s most recent work. Not only, as I have suggested in my discussion of his *New Right* and *Berlin*, does Gray flip-flop back and forth between different views—as on community—each of



which is expressed with robust confidence but without reference to his own earlier arguments against it. But some of his more recent work contains a fair bit of posturing and playing to the gallery. In one three-page chapter, we are told of the “shallow and narrow understandings of conventional Sovietology,” a “banally over-familiar” interpretation of Russian history, and Mrs. Thatcher is criticized as having “embarked on the absurd and doomed enterprise of recruiting support for the anachronistic figure of Gorbachev.” It is not that, when he has criticisms to make, there is nothing to them: Gray is always an interesting and frequently a highly acute writer. Rather, it becomes tedious to find Gray striking a pose of finding work by other political theorists preposterous, and also when he seems to find it difficult to refer to a view that he does not share, without directing abuse at it.

There then follows a piece on toleration(!), which while containing some interesting ideas—notably, an exploration of the role that may be played for the toleration of what is judged to be bad, and also for the tolerance of indifference—seems to me in the end to fall into a variety of separate strands which cut against one another. (For example, his opening strand of argument seemed to suggest a great deal of cultural self-confidence on the part of those who felt able to tolerate things that they did not think worthy; the later, more sceptical, ideas about indifference, to rest upon ideas the spread of which might well seem to undermine the earlier viewpoint.) Further, there is an appeal to ideas about a “common culture,” where it is not clear—or, the sceptical reader might say, only too clear—who is to do the interpreting of this.

Gray then has a couple of pieces on Eastern European problems, one of which is a formidable survey of the problems of different possible paths to a civil society. I cannot judge the soundness of Gray's argument. But to be able to offer such a powerful and detailed argument at all, when one specializes in other matters, seems to me to exhibit just what a remarkable talent Gray has. Making here a sceptical use of the Social Market perspective that we have met earlier, Gray argues that there is no exemplar that such countries might follow; although he expresses some interest in China as a possible example of something that might develop into a market-based society without civil society.

These, in turn, are followed by four pieces which argue against liberalism and—more generally—against what Gray considers to be the “Enlightenment project,” and also against his own earlier hopes for conservatism. Much of the material to which Gray appeals is by this point familiar, although what we are offered is, now, a view

which strongly favors cultural pluralism, which is given preference over the individual (although individualism and civil society—the diversity of which he is inclined to stress—are seen as the fate of many of us). Gray favors politics over constitutionalism, rejects ideas of governmental neutrality as amounting to a “disestablishment of a common culture” (1995a, p. 78), and emphasizes political allegiance as “presuppos[ing] a common cultural identity” (p. 80). Market institutions are seen as “stable and enduring only insofar as they are embedded in the common cultures of those whose needs they exist to serve” (p. 91), and this, in turn, is interpreted to mean that “[market institutions] must be harnessed and guided by political constraints if they are to serve human values” (p. 116). All of this is accompanied by a rejection of conservatism—in two senses. First, Gray expresses scepticism toward a view which sees cultural traditions as untouched by rationalistic political discourse (although this does not, it seems to me, lead to his looking critically at his own stress on common culture). Second, Gray gives up on modern political conservatism, on the grounds that he sees such movements as having been captured, beyond hope of recall, by the classical liberalism that he now despises,<sup>18</sup> stating that “the task of conserving . . . the best elements in our institutional inheritance will pass to parties which presently think of themselves as being on the Left” (p. 118).

The quotation with which I ended the previous paragraph has one odd-sounding element to it: that it is put in the form of a kind of historical prophecy. This, indeed, points to something that has invaded Gray’s later writing. What, in his earlier writings, would have been offered as arguments, are now often offered as anticipations of history, or lessons that we are supposed to draw from it. Moral arguments in liberalism—say about the possibilities of convergence in moral argument if people were to adopt certain procedures, which are being commended to them—are taken as refuted by the actual course of history. Indeed, we are offered statements like the following “the regimes which are emerging not only will confound Enlightenment expectations of a convergence on liberal values but also fail to satisfy minimal conditions of moral acceptability for their subjects” (p. 83), as if they furnished a critique of liberalism’s moral arguments. We are also told that “The old ‘systems debate,’

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<sup>18</sup>Thus ruling out the kind of move that one has seen—to my personal regret—in Australia, of the (conservative) Liberal Party having lurched back from a more classical-liberal perspective (albeit of a highly economic kind) toward a kind of moralistic interventionism.

between 'planning' and 'markets,' was resolved decisively on the terrain of history" (1995a, pp. 87–88).

But all this—and there is a lot more of it—is as silly as it is weird. It is silly because while what happens in history may be suggestive, it can clearly count as a refutation of some view only insofar as that view was actually instantiated; and this would be a matter for detailed argument, and would typically leave other versions of similar ideals, untouched. (Specific claims may be hit, for example views that claim that some task can be accomplished in only one way; but this is not typical of much in political philosophy.) The view is weird, in that it is almost as if Gray—perhaps, as a result of an infection caught while reviewing him—has taken over Fukuyama's vapid historicism, in which, in some sense, history is to be our moral judge.

Now, there is one sense in which Gray is raising a point that is important; namely, that liberals do, surely, owe their critics a clear account of the sense in which they are arguing that liberalism is related to history. To have raised this as an issue, and to have drawn attention to many important problems about it, seems to me a major contribution of Gray's more recent work. To address this issue properly would be a major task, requiring detailed work in historical sociology. My own initial—and highly tentative—response would be along the following lines. First, I would happily argue that (classical) liberalism is worthy, not because it exemplifies every form of perfection, but that it offers us an account of a good society in which people can pursue many good things, and also cooperate with one another, in ways that do not necessarily involve the exploitation of others. I would further argue that it has a particular relationship to what Adam Smith theorized as commercial society; namely, that such a society offers us a form of social organization the functional requirements of which fit classical liberalism particularly well—although not without problems, not least of which are some which were raised by Smith himself. At the same time, there can be many different forms of commercial society—both in the sense in which, say, Northern Italy, Britain, and the U.S. are very different places, from a cultural point of view, and also because there are clearly, at the moment, some very different forms of commercial society in Asia. (Though whether these will stay all that different with the passing of time, is another matter: I was struck, when writing a draft of this essay, by a news report that Malaysia was threatening to round up young people, and detain them in some kind of summer labor camp, because of what were seen as decadent influences from the West, coming with market-borne prosperity; something that does

not augur too well for the internal stability of that country's culture, or Gray's hopes for the East, more generally (Savill 1997).

In addition, while one may feel regret about this—especially when it leads to the destruction of a traditional culture, when people receive nothing much of cultural value in its place—there is a sense in which the spread of the influence of global markets seems almost unstoppable. (Clearly, any such claim is conjectural, and any such tendency is conditional; and as Gray himself at one point reminds us, we must not forget about Cleopatra's nose [1995a, p. 117].) But what is offered by market-based societies seems overwhelmingly attractive to people, such that they will find it hard to reject, even when—under the passing influence of, say, Gray—we might wonder if it is in their best interests. And one problem is clearly that, if traditional authorities set out to resist such influences, their own character becomes thereby changed. As a result, at the level of amateur historical sociology—on which, as far as I can see, nothing much hinges; not least because what options are available would clearly be path-dependent, and so not affect the case for liberalism as being compelling for those in our situation—if I were to chance my arm, I would conjecture that modern market-based societies transform all that they touch. Further, I would then argue that once such societies have been so touched, a form of civil society that allows them autarchy if not autonomy, in Benn's terminology,<sup>19</sup> makes for the best life. In saying this—and in view of Gray's historicized mode of argument, I need to spell this out—I do not mean that such arrangements will, necessarily, be attainable. (And indeed, the actual results of the impact of global markets on traditional societies may be dire.) Rather, my view is that things would be better if they could be attained, and that it would be a useful occupation of academics of all kinds, to work together—and with those who know the people concerned (and with the people concerned)—to consider how these problems might be addressed, without imposing solutions upon them.<sup>20</sup>

In saying all this, I must stress that I do not wish to say that the issues that I discussed many years ago with Gray, and which have preoccupied him in the work that we are here considering, have

<sup>19</sup>See Benn (1988). I would like to thank James Taylor for drawing my attention to the significance of this work in the present context.

<sup>20</sup>Grace Goodell's *The Elementary Structures of Political Life* (1986) is here remarkable for suggesting—at least to me—that if they are left alone and have security in respect to their property, peasants may be able to get along fine, taking a canny and critical view as to proposals for how their lives might be improved.

gone away. There are a host of interesting problems about the cultural pre-requisites to market-based societies and to liberalism, about how we can reconcile our interest in being members of large-scale open societies and our particular attachments; and about how, also, we can reconcile the openness to change that we cannot easily anticipate with the localism that seems a necessary part of most of our lives. Yet, while striking things are said about these issues in the course of Gray's work, and some ideas about policy measures are thrown off which might bear exploration, it is not in the end clear that he really makes any contribution to *solving* any of these problems, at all. Yet, given that this is what Gray has been discussing all through his writings, and his work is not, say, of the abstract character of that of, say, Nozick, this surely would not have been an unreasonable hope. This happens, not least, because when Gray does offer suggestions, he does not, typically, stop to explore what their difficulties might be, and to suggest how these might be overcome—or to look again at the critical arguments that might be advanced against them, even on the basis of his own work.

The last two of the four pieces to which I earlier referred offer further criticism of liberalism, along the lines that we have met so far, with yet further stress being placed upon the priority of pluralism over liberalism. Indeed, it might not be *too* unfair to see Gray as depicting liberalism as an unavoidable option for those unlucky enough not to have a real identity (compare 1995a, p. 128). He expresses concern for the harmonious coexistence of communities, and again speaks warmly of a return to politics, rather than legalistic constitutionalism. In "From Post-Liberalism to Pluralism," the last of these articles, he repudiates his earlier argument (from *Post-Liberalism*) that it is civil society that will be best in modern-style societies, in favor of a "political and legal pluralism, in which the fundamental units are not individuals but communities" (p. 136), which, as mentioned earlier, become, for Gray, the "principal bearers of rights." He is not, however, exactly commending this to us, as what is best; for "whether a pluralist political order is appropriate is itself a matter of time, place and circumstance" (p. 139), for personal guidance on which it would seem to me that we have to ask Gray, rather than any theory that he is offering us.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>This opens up a major issue, upon which I can comment only briefly. It is that those who, for whatever reason, eschew the offering of a general theory in response to such problems (however tentatively), simply leave us with the issue: how, then, should decisions be taken? They may be genuinely skeptical, and have no idea; but it seems to me that in many cases one

What all this would mean is not always easy to fathom. Gray does say:

the current regime in China might well be criticized for its policies in Tibet; but such a criticism would invoke the intrinsic value of the communities and cultural forms now being destroyed in Tibet, not universalist conceptions of human rights. (p. 140)

This made me wonder if Gray's judgment on, say, the desirability of someone's being tortured to death, or being used as a kind of organ bank for spare parts, would be a matter of an almost aesthetic judgment on whether they were otherwise part of some form of life that Gray thought rich. But, in passing, Gray also refers to "the standpoint of individual well-being" (p. 142), and so it would look as if an underlying—and universalistic—ethical individualism is still there, somewhere.

The pattern on which Gray's essay collections have been designed has been that they contain various published papers, together with a final chapter—in which Gray typically breaks new ground. This he certainly does in *Enlightenment's Wake*, in that, rather than a set of variations on Oakeshott, Berlin, Raz, Hayek on money, and vouchers (which latter, he is still offering us in chapter 6), we get something new (although it is prefigured by some earlier material). This time, it is Heidegger, Nietzsche, and appreciative but critical engagements with MacIntyre and Rorty (with bit parts played by Adorno and Horkheimer). Gray offers, on this occasion, a new version of his jeremiad about liberalism and the Enlightenment. (His account of this seems, increasingly, to depict the uncritical foundationalist rationalism and scientism, and central planning, of which some leading liberals whose work he knows well have been highly critical, as if they were in some sense the essence of liberalism and of the Enlightenment. However, as he has, in an earlier account, indicated [p. 66] that "it is not [his] intention here to enter into dialogue" with those who consider his depiction of the failures of the Enlightenment greatly exaggerated, to raise such objections may be pointless.) This time, however, his theme is nothing less than the End of Western Civilization. The broad argument is that "For Nietzsche, as for myself" (p. 148), the entire Western tradition of critical rationalism has undermined itself, leaving us with nothing but instrumental rationality. There seems, on Gray's account, to be little or no hope for us. All that we can do is take up a kind of sanitized Heideggerian

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can reasonably conjecture that it is something like their own personal judgment that is supposed to fill the gap, so that their position is not as modest as it might initially seem to be.

*Gelassenheit*. (Gray is clearly worried about Heidegger and Nazism, reassurances about which crop up from time to time, in a manner which irresistibly reminded me of John Cleese's "Don't mention the war" in *Fawlty Towers*.)

The Rorty-like move, on which I commented earlier, comes back with a vengeance, in that while "we no longer possess anything like a coherent moral vocabulary" (p. 148), and philosophy in anything like its traditional sense is clearly dead, Gray pops up commending to us the very pluralism that he had earlier developed on the basis of specific philosophical arguments, his claims for the objective status of which he must now implicitly repudiate. (He had previously gone out of his way to stress that Raz's work, and his own espousal of Berlin's dispositional moral realism, meant that he was no relativist.) Liberalism is seen as particularly disadvantaged, because of its claims to truth. But given that the human situation is typically one of interaction with others of different backgrounds and attachments, I find it difficult to imagine how socialization into any one of these is supposed to take place without some kind of claim being made as to its objective merits, of exactly the sort that Gray thinks cannot be made. Accordingly, should he be right, it would seem to me highly problematic for *all* possible forms of life, if they are in interaction with one another.<sup>22</sup>

Gray has some more specific suggestions, commending to us "respect for the integrity of cultures, and for their differences" (p. 180), and offering various steps that might be taken to protect them from "the hegemony of global technology and markets." What is not clear to me is *why* he thinks that we should respect these things—more, say, than autonomy (indeed, given the intellectual nihilism of this essay, I might even say ostriches); for it does not seem open to him, now, to offer us arguments as to why we should do so. He also has some striking comments about science. Gray tells us:

Modern science, in so far as it is more than a Baconian instrument for the mastery of nature, depends on a faith in an ultimate scheme of things that is ultimately metaphysical . . . [adding that] this metaphysical faith ceases to be available to us as the transcendental affirmations of Christianity become ever fainter traces in Western culture. (p. 163)

Gray does not, alas, give us any indication of the argument that is supposed to underlie this remarkable latter claim (which, presumably, is his interpretation of the thrust of an aspect of Nietzsche's

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<sup>22</sup>Unless, say, they were intrinsically nonuniversalistic—as is Judaism, on most interpretations.

work). This is a pity. For it would have been interesting to see what the argumentative basis is for what is a truly path-breaking contribution to the philosophy of science. For if Gray is right, then all the detailed argument about the pros and cons of scientific realism, including all the papers that have been offered—by both physicists and philosophers—on how it relates to the details of the interpretation of quantum theory, and the various modifications of quantum theory that have been developed in the light of this discussion, have all been unnecessary. Indeed, it all shows just how remarkable a scholar Gray is, that in a few words he can resolve such issues.

But there is more. Gray, on the final page of his book tells us, after writing off science, Christianity, and philosophy, that:

The present inquiry embodies the wager that another mode of thinking—found in some varieties of poetry and mysticism, for example—can assert itself against the domination of the forms of thought privileged by both science and philosophy in Western cultures. It is with these humiliated modes of thought that the prospect of cultural recovery—if there is such a prospect—lies. (p. 184)

In the face of this, it would clearly be presumptuous of me to say anything further.<sup>23</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

My overall reaction to Gray's work is that I find his arguments (where this is what he is offering) interesting, but unconvincing. I agree with his criticism of foundationalist argument; but, as I have indicated, I was not sure why he took it seriously from the start, and I take strong exception to his tendency to depict it as coextensive with liberalism, the Enlightenment, or Western Civilization. I am sympathetic to his long-standing concern about the interrelation between political and economic institutions, and more general cultural issues; but it seems to me that these are more worries that it is appropriate to raise within liberal approaches (Shearmur 1996a and 1996b), rather than something that can serve as the basis for an alternative to them. There seems every reason to suppose that there is more room for pluralism with regard to "modern" societies than some people would have us believe; and it is certainly interesting to watch the development of non-Western market-based societies, although I suspect it may be premature to conclude that they can *stay* radically different from what we are more used to in the West.

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<sup>23</sup>With an eye to Ramsey's famous comment on Wittgenstein, a low whistle might, perhaps, be in order.



I would agree with Gray on the perils of legalism, and of the proliferation of rights; but this again seems to me a matter for argument within liberalism (not least because it also relates significantly to the argument about the relative merits of modern or welfare liberalism, and of classical liberalism). I would also agree that discretionary activity, informed by theoretical ideas or by statescraft, by an elite, may play a significant role within a good society; but this is something that—as I have argued elsewhere (Shearmur 1996a and 1996b)—it again seems to me that we should try to accommodate as far as possible within the voluntaristic but constitutional apparatus of classical liberalism. One reason for advocating this is that—as Gray's writings exemplify—those who favor it may, in their enthusiasm for its possibilities, forget all the qualms that they have previously expressed about the problems of political power.

Gray is, I think, right in his objections to the universalism of the formulations of many versions of liberalism. But what is called for is clarification, rather than revision. First, those liberals who have reflected on history have typically acknowledged that there were forms of society for which liberalism was not suitable. We may all, surely, agree with Gray that there are virtues—and interesting vices<sup>24</sup>—that it was possible for people to practice in nonliberal societies; but properly have qualms about commending those societies, precisely because the virtues depended upon what would seem to us to be the exploitation of others. I have written “seem to us;” but by this it should not be supposed that I am here introducing a serious element of relativism. I currently see no reason to question this judgment; although—and this I would take to be significant for liberalism, and to be an attractive feature of its claims to universality—such a judgment is open to question from any perspective. But, at the same time, to claim that something is desirable is not the same as claiming that one knows how to exemplify it; and it is, indeed, regrettable that many people, today, look as if they are losing things of cultural value in older societies, but not necessarily getting much back in return. The problem, however, is that, for reasons that I have outlined, it is not clear to me that there is anywhere else to go.

Of course, *within* liberalism pluralism is open to us, in the sense that there will be various different ways of doing things that are compatible with broadly liberal ideas. It is a limited pluralism, in the

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<sup>24</sup>I am not, by this flippant remark, wishing to dismiss the line of argument that Gray opens up, to the effect that vices may have a necessary role to play in relation to virtue. However, his argument is not developed in sufficient detail for me to be able to sensibly discuss it here.

sense that some forms of life cannot be practiced within it, or can be practiced only by minorities (who may, indeed, be tolerated in a sense that Gray has described). But given that any greater a degree of pluralism is likely to involve the exploitation of the individual, it is not clear that it can be welcomed.

What does Gray himself offer? For Western societies—and, more particularly Britain—it would look to me a return to a model in which the Great and the Good exercise paternalism for the sake of the social fabric, within a highly controlled market-based society. (If Gray is, indeed, a significant influence on Tony Blair, it makes me profoundly grateful that I am not living in the U.K.) It would be intellectually interesting to see if this could be pulled off, in a situation which Geoffrey Sampson presciently referred to as “the end of allegiance;”<sup>25</sup> more specifically, in which the lower middle class indicated that they would no longer be willing to defer to the judgments of their social betters. There is also good reason for their reaction, in that it is not clear that, in Britain, that elite had done too well. Further, while Gray is now more willing to look with favor on an activist government than he was when he regularly invoked public choice theory against those whom he was criticizing, he still owes us an account of how what he believes to be the good ideas will win out in the policy-making process. Indeed, there seems to me a danger that Gray, when referring to the political process, reverts to the kind of Pollyannaish pluralist view, of which he would, justly, earlier have been scathing, as when (1995a, p. 77) he refers to “a political settlement that encompasses a compromise among conflicting interests and ideals.” Gray is, in his later writings, critical of what Hayek had to say about the problems of social justice (his attitude toward which shifts from earlier fulsome praise to condemnation of Hayek’s “rationalistic critique” (1995a, p. 187, 20, n. 20), without discussion of the respects in which he now thinks that Hayek was incorrect). Gray may be right in the view—that Popper offered before him—that Hayek’s condemnation of “social justice” may be politically unacceptable. But it may require dramatic powers on the part of government to produce, within an increasingly internationalized economy, distributional outcomes which are in accordance with people’s moral judgments, while the costs of withdrawing from such international arrangements may be unacceptably high. There may, surely, be ways in which we have to accommodate our moral intuitions to the stuff of the social world, and recognize—if, indeed, Hayek’s argument is good—that we may not

<sup>25</sup>See Sampson (1984). Compare, also, Gray (1995, p. 99), for a passing reference to the “vanishing of authority.”

be able to achieve all that some of us might like to, in distributional terms.

And what of Gray? It might seem difficult, by the end of *Enlightenment's Wake*, to think where he should go next. I will conclude by offering a suggestion. One striking feature of Gray's later work is that he does not offer us general theories as to what should be done; rather, what is appropriate would seem to depend on the particular nuances of the situation that we are in. And, further, we would seem in need, if Gray's account holds good, of John Gray himself to tell us what we need to do, and when. Gray, on a couple of occasions, opines that in Romania it is "probably only the institution of monarchy" that retains legitimacy (1995a, p. 40). This struck a chord, and reminded me that in John Godolphin Bennett's autobiography, *Witness*, he tells the story of how he, as an Englishman traveling in the Balkans, was invited to become king of Albania (Bennett 1974). Given Gray's tendency toward imperiousness in his style, his pretensions to omniscience, his fondness for conceptualizing the rights of people in Britain as things that they enjoy "as a subject of the Queen" (1995a, p. 25), and his obvious interest in having a significant influence on public policy, I was led to wonder whether, if Gray is right about feelings toward the monarchy in Romania, they might consider—should the position become open—inviting him to take it up, at least for a few years. Once Gray had got ruling out of his system, he might then feel able to return to the more limited tasks within political philosophy at which, when he puts his mind to it, he can really excel.

We will consider Gray's actual work after *Enlightenment's Wake*, in a subsequent study.

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