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GRAY'S ANATOMY

John Gray

Selected Writings

NEW EDITION

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Foreword to New Edition

> *The privilege of Absurdity; to which no living creature is subject, but man only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it, that profess Philosophy.*
>
> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 5

The writings that have been added in this enlarged edition of *Gray's Anatomy* consist of pieces that appeared after the first edition of this book was published in 2009. Collected in two new sections, 'Interrogations and Admirations' and 'Visions and Illusions', these essays, reviews and excerpts from my books are intended to illustrate what a sense of reality might mean in thinking about ethics, politics and religion. Whether they favour revolution or reform, the thinkers that I interrogate – Marxists such as Eric Hobsbawm, Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek, liberals such as Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker and Peter Singer – believe the human world can be remade through the application of human reason and force of will. In contrast, the thinkers I admire – such as Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott and Leszek Kolakowski – stayed close to human experience and its intractable conflicts.

Philosophers who are devoted to reason cannot help falling into absurdity. Plato and Bentham, Hobbes and Spinoza, Leibniz and Hume, Marx and Mill were great thinkers; but in their different ways they looked for deliverance from being human in a dream of reason that was itself irrational. The view presented here is sceptical, but I leave aside the doubts philosophers have voiced about whether reason yields a true picture of the world and can give objective answers to questions about the good life. The scepticism that is applied in these pieces has to do not with the theory of knowledge but instead with human ideals. As Joseph Conrad wrote to John Galsworthy in 1901, 'Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth, – the way of art and salvation'. Whatever the limits of reason may be, it is not reason

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that governs human life. This need not be an altogether negative conclusion, for the world as it is may ultimately be more humanly habitable than anything that has been envisioned by world-improvers.

The faith that the world can be improved by the use of reason is a defining feature of our time. History to date may be a succession of follies and crimes, with only occasional interludes of civilization; but these interludes are essentially human, and civilization can someday become permanent and universal. Maynard Keynes captured this picture of the human world in his exquisite memoir *My Early Beliefs*. Writing of his Cambridge contemporary and friend Bertrand Russell, Keynes observed that Russell 'sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that human affairs were carried on in a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally. A discussion of practical affairs on these lines was really very boring.' Keynes dissected the beliefs underlying this view of things:

> We were among the last of the Utopians, or meliorists as they are sometimes called, who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards, who can be released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct, and left, from now onwards, to their own sensible devices, pure motives and reliable intuitions of the good.

Keynes was cured of this philosophy by his experience as a member of the British delegation at the Versailles peace conference in 1919, when he watched how the governments gathered there were impelled not by any view of what was needed to rebuild a ruined continent but instead by motives of competition and revenge. Renouncing his earlier way of thinking, he concluded: 'we were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust … only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved.'

Even in later years, Keynes confessed, he still suffered from:

> attributing an unreal rationality to other people's feelings and behaviour (and doubtless to my own, too). There is one small but extraordinarily silly manifestation of this absurd idea of what is

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> ‘normal’, namely the impulse to *protest* – to write a letter to *The Times*, call a meeting in the Guildhall, subscribe to some fund when my presuppositions as to what is ‘normal’ are not fulfilled. I behave as if there really existed some authority or standard to which I can successfully appeal if I shout loud enough – perhaps it is some hereditary vestige of a belief in the efficacy of prayer.[1]

Nearly a century after Keynes renounced it, the Edwardian faith in reason that Keynes dismissed as laughable is held unthinkingly by nearly all who consider themselves thinking persons.

How this state of affairs has come about is a curious tale. During the past few centuries science has advanced enormously and brought about many material benefits. Increasing wealth and rising longevity are spin-offs from the growth of scientific knowledge, which is now practically unstoppable. It is easy to conclude – as practically everyone nowadays does – that civilization can advance in a similar way. But advances in ethics and politics are not cumulative in the way that advances in science can be. What is gained in the quality of life does not build up over long stretches of time. Peace is regularly followed by war, freedom by tyranny and civilization by barbarism. While science may advance in a process in which knowledge grows on the basis of what has been learnt in the past, the larger history of humankind is a succession of cycles.

The reasons for this disparity are not hard to find. The growth of knowledge does nothing to make human beings more reasonable; it only increases their power. The disasters of history are not errors that can be corrected; they flow from flaws of the human animal for which civilization is only a partial remedy. Anyone who holds to the prevailing faith in improvement will tell you they do not expect human life to be transformed all at once; it will become better in a series of slow and faltering steps as human beings are persuaded to live in more reasonable ways. But this familiar liturgy assumes that human beings are already reasonable enough to be persuaded to live more reasonably – an absurd view, as Keynes observed.

Someday, science may explain why human beings are irrational. If so, that knowledge will be used by human beings to pursue their irrational fantasies and rivalries. The Internet may make masses of information freely available; it is also the medium

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through which Isis advertises its savagery. Cyberspace is a realm in which the imagination can roam free; it is also a domain of unceasing warfare. Social media enable people to link up as never before; these media also create a new type of mob rule. Science and technology do not enable humankind to overcome its conflicts, but instead empower human beings to enact their conflicts on a larger scale.

Plainly, faith in reason is irrational. But this irrationality is far from being a disadvantage. On the contrary, it is what gives rationalism its unshakeable power.

From Socrates onwards, philosophers have thought of what they do as promoting a conversion from unreason. (Socrates may not have thought like this, but that is another story.) But if this project is what defines philosophy, the texts that follow are not philosophical texts. The writings collected here are not essays in persuasion. I have no interest in arguing against the religion of world-improvement. What could be more ridiculous than trying to dispel a faith by arguing about it? Instead, addressing those readers who suspect there may be something unreal in this ruling creed, I try to show why their suspicions are well founded.

A key tenet of the religion of improvement is the conviction that violence is inhuman. No one nowadays engages in mass killing without first announcing that it will bring the world nearer to perpetual peace. The Aztecs, whose way of life and death is discussed in Chapter 44, thought differently. They practised human sacrifice and in this they were barbaric; but they were more at one with their victims than modern barbarians who think of those they kill as less than human. Seemingly so alien, the Aztecs saw themselves with a clarity that modern human beings, who at bottom are no different, cannot emulate. It is this inability to confront the truth about ourselves that inspires the faddish fancy, examined in Chapter 38, which imagines that violence is declining.

Some of the greatest Western thinkers have averted their gaze from the roots of human violence. Thomas Hobbes, who is commonly considered a supreme realist, understood violence as being chiefly a means of self-preservation; but among humans violence also serves a need for significance. By killing and dying for what they would like to believe, human beings create meaning in their lives. Setting aside, for a moment, his own rationalist

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philosophy, Hobbes described acting on nonsensical beliefs as the privilege of absurdity, a uniquely human attribute. The modern political religions for which millions have been killed illustrate Hobbes's insight.

The peculiarity of the Communist society envisioned by Marx and Lenin is not that it cannot be realized – an exceedingly banal truth. It is that hardly anyone really wants to live in it. The Bolsheviks engaged in mass killing, and were in turn themselves for the most part killed, for the sake of bringing into being a world that is humanly intolerable. Nothing remains of the new civilization so many of them wanted to believe was being built in Russia. The KGB – the only surviving Soviet institution, now renamed FSB – serves orthodoxy, nationalism and private enrichment. Even the inmost Soviet elite seem to have found the system they had created intolerable.

The same may have been true of some of the Nazis. J. L. Borges understood this similarity. In 1939, when it was not entirely safe to express such views in Argentina where he lived, he wrote: 'I hope the years will bring us the auspicious annihilation of Adolf Hitler, this atrocious offspring of Versailles.' In 1944, Borges explained why Hitler longed to be destroyed: 'Nazism suffers from unreality, like Erigena's hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound and kill for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall risk this conjecture: *Hitler wants to be defeated*. Hitler is blindly collaborating with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him …'[2]

It is not only societies imagined by the far left and far right that are unfit for human habitation. So are some of the societies that have been imagined by canonical liberal thinkers. John Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty* may be refreshing as a tract against conformity. As I note in Chapter 45, Mill had a richer insight into human passions than a latter-day liberal such as Friedrich Hayek. The 'experiment of living' that Mill undertook with his partner Harriet Taylor worked well for them. But do most human beings yearn to live in a liberal society of the kind Mill envisioned? Clearly they do not. Would Mill himself have enjoyed living in a society in which ideals of personal autonomy and self-realization have become a repressive orthodoxy? Possibly not. Yet wars have been launched and regimes overthrown on the basis of the

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fantastical notion that every human being secretly yearns for these fashionable liberal values. The result has been only to inflict enormous suffering on the people that were supposedly being liberated, while undoing some of the most valuable achievements of civilization – such as the rule of law and the prohibition of torture – in the countries that launched these ruinous adventures.

Conflicts of values undid a political experiment in which for a time I had an interest. Margaret Thatcher's period in power was not devoted to implementing any clearly worked-out ideology or programme; there was much improvisation and trimming. But it did serve a vision of restoring a mix of robust individualism with common values that she believed had existed in Britain in the past. The Britain she wanted to revive was largely imaginary. To the extent that something like it had ever existed – in the 1950s – it was a creation of Labour's post-war settlement. Dismantling this settlement (which was already collapsing when she came to power in 1979) produced a society that was at odds with the one she wanted to re-create.

After Thatcher, Britain was more individualistic but less bourgeois; less deferential and more unequal; more entrepreneurial as well as more pluralistic and fragmented. Whether this Britain is better or worse than the country Thatcher inherited – or, as I am inclined to think, better and worse – is a matter of judgement. That it is different from any that Thatcher could have wanted or imagined was only to be expected. As I point out in Chapter 41, there was much that was accidental in Thatcher's rise and fall. But the self-undermining effect of her political vision was preordained. Her attempt to remake the soul of Britain by an act of will was a fatal conceit, and the usual consequences of hubris were bound to follow.

Even the most sceptical philosophers cannot help looking for a unifying thread of reason in human events, when the normal situation is one of conflicts among values that reason cannot arbitrate. Some values may be universally human. But it cannot be assumed that universal human impulses are necessarily benign, or always amenable to rational compromise.

The eighteenth-century Scottish sceptic David Hume parted company with Hobbes in affirming that human beings are not essentially selfish creatures who band together out of fear; they

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are also moved by sympathy, which is one of the sources of morality. For Hume morality was a natural capacity, which enables humans to coexist in peace. What the great sceptic could never explain were the ascetic moralities that are so common in history, preaching and practising the 'monkish virtues' that he abhorred. Nor could Hume have accounted for the militant political religions that have promoted these virtues from the Jacobins onwards (he died in 1776, before the French Revolution) through to the Bolsheviks and Nazis, Maoists and Islamists. He hated ascetic moralities for being inimical to human happiness. But what reason did Hume have for thinking that humans want above all to be happy? An impartial reading of history would suggest otherwise. Nietzsche was closer to the truth when he wrote, 'Man, the bravest animal and the one most inured to suffering, does *not* negate suffering in itself: he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a *purpose* for suffering.'[3]

The worst passages in history are those in which the demand for meaning overcomes the restraints of civilization. Wars of faith – secular and religious – are the price humankind pays for the privilege of absurdity.

The picture of the human world presented in these selections is not so different from that which was widely accepted until a few hundred years ago, when a mutation in a monotheistic view of history as a process of moral redemption engendered the modern faith in improvement. Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, ancient historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides and early modern writers such as Montaigne and Machiavelli held to a more truthful view. So, more recently, did Sigmund Freud, Joseph Conrad and Joseph Roth. For all of them – as for the later Keynes – there was no question of improving the human animal. Civilization would regularly succumb to barbarism, but that was no reason for despair. It was why civilization should be cherished, and where necessary fought for.

Today 'humanity' is surrounded with an aura of reverence little different from that which once enveloped the Deity. It is not the actual human animal that is revered, but a confection of the imagination lacking in pretty much everything that human beings have valued. What is the point of a human world without religions and distinctive ways of life? The world as it actually exists, with all

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its horrors, is more interesting, more beautiful and more worth living in.

If the pieces collected here have any overall aim it is not to convert anyone from or to any belief, but simply to trigger a process of thought. Where that process may lead, and what might be done with anything that emerges from it, is left to the reader.

John Gray
October 2015

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Introduction

The law of chaos is the law of ideas,
Of improvisations and seasons of belief.

Wallace Stevens, 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas'[1]

The world changed out of all recognition during the period in which the writings that are collected here were written. When the earliest of them appeared, over thirty years ago, the international scene was shaped by a struggle between two power blocs – a geopolitical freeze that was mirrored in the realm of ideas. Europe was divided along the boundaries established during the Second World War, Russia was a Communist state and China ruled by Mao. The recent wave of globalization had hardly begun. The rise of Asia was yet to come, and America was by far the most powerful country. In Britain Labour was negotiating a bailout from national bankruptcy with the International Monetary Fund, and Margaret Thatcher was leader of the Opposition. The political classes took it as given that some version of the post-war consensus on the mixed economy would remain in place, while the intelligentsia were occupied in languid disputes over the varieties of Marxism.

Behind this shadow play there were beliefs no one doubted. Liberal democracy was spreading inexorably; the advance of science would enable the affluence of some countries to be enjoyed by all; religion was in irreversible retreat. The path might not be straight or easy, but humanity was moving towards a common destination. Nothing could stand in the way of a future in which 'Western liberal values' were accepted everywhere.

Not much more than thirty years later all these certainties have melted away. The Soviet state has ceased to exist and Europe has been reunified; but Russia has not adopted liberal democracy. In the years after his death in 1976 China shook off Mao's

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inheritance and adopted a type of capitalism – without accepting any Western model of government or society. The advance of globalization continued, with the result that America has lost its central position. The US is in steep decline, its system of finance capitalism in a condition of collapse and its vast military machine effectively paid for by Chinese funding of the federal deficit. All mainstream parties in democratic countries converged on a free-market model at just the moment in history when that model definitively ceased to be viable. With the world's financial system facing a crisis deeper than any since the 1930s, the advancing states are now authoritarian regimes. The bipolar world has not been followed by one ruled by 'the last superpower'. Instead we have a world that nobody rules.

The growth of knowledge has continued and accelerated. At the same time economic expansion has come up against finite resources, with peaking energy supplies and accelerating climate change threatening industrial growth. Rival claims on scarce resources are inflaming wars around the world, and these resource wars are intertwined with wars of faith. Far from fading away religion is once again at the heart of human conflict.

If the global scene at the start of the twenty-first century is different from any that was commonly anticipated, this was only to be expected. A weakness for uplifting illusions has shaped opinion throughout this period. No doubt intolerance of reality is innate in the human mind. Every age has a hallucinatory image of itself, which persists until it is dispelled by events. Secular thinkers imagined they had left religion behind, when in truth they had only exchanged religion for a humanist faith in progress that was further from reality. There is nothing wrong in taking refuge in a comforting fantasy. Why deny rationalists the consolations of faith – however childish their faith may be? The pretence of reason is part of the human comedy. But the decline of religion that occurred in the twentieth century was accompanied by the rise of faith-based politics, a continuation of religion by other means that has proved as destructive as religion at its worst.

Lenin's embalmed body and the saviour-cult orchestrated around Hitler are examples of the twentieth-century sanctification of power. Nazism and Communism were political religions, each with its ersatz shrines and rituals. The Nazi paradise was confined

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to a small section of the species, with the rest consigned to slavery or extermination, while that of the Bolsheviks was open to everyone – apart from those marked down for liquidation as remnants of the past, such as peasants and bourgeois intellectuals. In both cases terror was part of the programme from the start. Humans are violent animals; there is nothing new in their fondness for killing. The peculiar flavour of modern mass murder comes from the fact that it has so often been committed with the aim of creating a new world.

It is important to understand that faith-based violence has not been limited to totalitarian regimes. Starting with the French Jacobins, it has been a pervasive feature of modern democracy. It is not only revolutionaries that have turned politics into a crusade. Liberal humanists who say they aim for gradual improvement have done the same. Like the utopian projects of the far left and right, the liberal ideal of a world of self-governing democracies has spilt blood on a colossal scale.

Even in Britain – supposedly the home of a sceptical, pragmatic approach to government – politics has been understood in terms that derive from religion. The Thatcher experiment is an example. I cannot count the number of times people have asked why I ‘stopped believing’ in Thatcherism. The assumption is that there was once a body of thought that could be described as ‘Thatcherism’ – something I never encountered as a participant observer at the time. More to the point, the question assumes that politics is like religion – some parts of Western Christianity, at any rate – in requiring belief in a creed or doctrine. My view was quite different. Politics is the art of devising temporary remedies for recurring evils – a series of expedients, not a project of salvation. Thatcher was one of these expedients.

The Thatcher era began as a response to local difficulties, only to end by producing another political religion. To be sure, true believers gathered around Thatcher from the start. The right-wing think-tanks of London of the early 1970s were littered with former Communists and Trotskyites who had lost their belief in Marxism but not the need for a political faith. The trend was exemplified in figures such as Sir Alfred Sherman – a founder of the Centre for Policy Studies and an early adviser of Thatcher whose faith in the free market followed the same doctrinaire footsteps as the faith in

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central planning he had as a Communist in the 1930s. For Sherman and others like him the triumph of the free market was pre-ordained.

In the context of the Cold War these enthusiasts had their uses. Their doctrinal turn of mind offered clues to Soviet thinking, in which ideology was surprisingly persistent. The USSR contained fewer convinced Marxists than the average Western university. Even so Soviet perceptions of the world were heavily filtered by Leninist ideas, and ex-Communists who shared this framework were better guides to the Soviet mind than Western specialists. None of the Sovietologists grasped the illegitimacy of the Soviet system, or suspected it might suddenly implode. When the dissident writer Andrei Amalrik, author of *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* (1970), raised the prospect of its collapse his analysis was written off as wildly unrealistic. Yet he was closer to reality than the Western experts who were declaring the USSR unshakable right up to the moment when it collapsed.

As an anti-Communist I shared Amalrik's belief that the Soviet state was not a permanent fixture. During the Cold War, respectable opinion viewed anti-Communism as a grubby and at times shady business, and there are many who still see it that way. I am unrepentant. The defeat of Communism was as worthwhile a goal as the destruction of Nazism. The predominant Western view of the Soviet system was a mix of progressive wishful thinking and cultural prejudice. Western opinion attributed the totalitarian character of the system to Stalin, and then to Russian traditions of tyranny. Lenin – the system's true architect, and a faithful disciple of Marx – was absolved of responsibility. The fact that Soviet repression was from the beginning on a scale not dreamt of in the Russia of the tsars was never admitted. This was not a position confined to the far left. It was maintained throughout the intelligentsia, for whom the only permissible criticism of the Soviet system was that it was not authentically Marxian.

Western Marxism was the subject of the piece originally published in 1989 in the Royal Society of Philosophy journal *Philosophy* that is reprinted as Chapter 15 of the present volume. The Marxist linguist whose study of the labour theory of meaning the piece analyses is an invention, not a real figure. Revai's

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account of the primitive accumulation and expropriation of meaning, of surplus meaning and the atom of meaning, the *ergoneme*, are also invented. These absurd notions were meant to mimic the mumbo-jumbo of Western Marxism, but the parody escaped many readers. (Amusingly, Richard Dawkins has long promoted a rather similar theory of the basic unit of meaning – the meme – and not as a joke.) Among the many people who commented on the piece to me, only one – the late Isaiah Berlin – immediately recognized it as a spoof. When I disclosed that the review was a fiction – as the title of the piece indicated – I was not believed. It is true the fiction contained some elements of fact. Stalin did publish a pamphlet on linguistics in which he considered the position of deaf mutes, concluding that they lack anything that might be called a language. It is also true – though this fact is not mentioned in the piece – that during the purges members of deaf-mute associations were arrested and shot, or sent to the Gulag, after being found guilty of engaging in anti-Soviet conspiracies through the use of sign language. Events such as these are too far-fetched to be included in a spoof.

Anti-Communism had the merit of being a response to actual conditions. Obviously, it was not free markets that brought Communism down. Nationalism and religion in the Baltic States, Poland and Afghanistan, along with Reagan's technically flawed but politically effective Star Wars programme, destroyed the Soviet state. Equally, though the fact eluded most people at the time, a period of profound upheaval was bound to follow. As I wrote in October 1989, commenting on Francis Fukuyama's announcement of the end of history in the neo-conservative journal *National Interest* in August of that year:

> Ours is an era in which political ideology, liberal as much as Marxist, has a rapidly dwindling leverage on events, and more ancient, more primordial forces, nationalist and religious, and soon, perhaps, Malthusian, are contesting with each other … If the Soviet Union does indeed fall apart, that beneficent catastrophe will not inaugurate a new era of post-historical harmony, but instead a return to the classical terrain of history, a terrain of great-power rivalries, secret diplomacies, and irredentist claims and wars.

Inevitably, given the prevailing view of things, this diagnosis – which can be found here in Chapter 16 – was seen as doom-

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mongering. In a delicious inversion, the observation that history was continuing its course was dismissed as apocalyptic. The truly apocalyptic notion that history had ended was embraced as realism.

It was only after the fall of Thatcher that ‘Thatcherism’ appeared on the scene. In the early days one of her close advisers used to refer to her as ‘the reality principle in skirts’. Up to a point it was an apt description. Thatcher confronted the collapse of post-war British corporatism and imposed a new settlement on the country that would last a generation. Yet her initial programme was not devised in any right-wing academy of fine ideas. It was a succession of improvisations, whose aims were not much different from those that Labour had tried and failed to achieve in the late 1970s. Her first goal was curbing union power, with the defeat of inflation a close second.

Both were feasible objectives, and were in fact achieved. The semi-imaginary Britain Thatcher wanted to restore – a country of un-shackled markets and conservative values – was further away than ever. Free markets overturn established ways of doing things, including traditional moralities. The revolution in the economy Thatcher wanted did take place, but the country it produced had no resemblance to the chintzy replica of 1950s Britain she had envisioned. Old hierarchies were dissolved, along with the monoculture of post-war Britain. Conservatism ceased to exist as a coherent political project, and the Conservative Party was forced to make peace with the society that, contrary to her intentions, Thatcher had helped bring into being. The pleasantly ironic upshot of her experiment was the liberal Britain that exists today – a country more diverse and more tolerant than in the past, if in some ways also more fragmented.

If Thatcher made Britain in some ways more liberal it was as an unintended consequence of pursuing other ends. The doctrinaires who invented ‘Thatcherism’ – the word, incidentally, was a coinage of the left – believed that free markets could be installed, throughout the world, by conscious design. Like Thatcher herself, they misread the fall of Communism. Certainly it was a major advance. In the authoritarian state established by Putin Russians are freer and living standards are higher than at any time in the history of the Soviet Union. That is why Putin is probably the most

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popular Russian leader since the last tsars. At the same time, however, the fall of Communism was also a defeat for the West.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks aimed to realize Marx's utopian project, while turning Russia into a modern Western state along the way. The neo-liberals who came to power under Yeltsin opted for a type of market Leninism rather than for central planning, but they too wanted to modernize Russia on Western lines. Central planning was replaced, but not by the free market. A new type of command economy controlled by a shifting coalition of oligarchs and the intelligence services emerged instead. Putin's Russia is not a regime committed to global expansion; it has abandoned the militant political religion that underpinned the former Soviet Union. Instead it is reasserting its claims over what it considers its historic sphere of influence, while using the energy resources it controls to promote its strategic interests. In geopolitical terms Russia is once again what it has been for most of its history, a Eurasian empire warily positioned between East and West.

The end of the Cold War was followed by a period of triumphal delusion, with the victorious powers acting as missionaries for their own version of political religion – a belief in democracy as a universal panacea. It was not the first time something like this had happened. A similar response underpinned the ill-fated European settlement that was put in place after the First World War. Woodrow Wilson welcomed the collapse of the Habsburg Empire as leading the way to a Europe of self-governing nations. What followed was an era of xenophobia, ethnic cleansing and ultimately genocide.

Many circumstances led to disaster in inter-war Europe, but the savage logic of national self-determination was an integral part of the process. Enabling rulers to be held accountable and changed without violence, democratic government has definite advantages. But democracy does not always expand freedom, or even prevent atrocities. For the minority populations of Eastern and Central Europe the ramshackle empire of the Habsburgs was a protector. Joseph Roth, one of the most perceptive inter-war European writers, observed that it had come to be believed that 'every individual must now be a member of a particular race or nation' – in other words, a member of a group defined by the exclusion of others. A Jew from the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, Roth

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viewed the spread of ideas of national self-determination with foreboding. If the Habsburg monarchy collapsed, he feared, the result would be a type of modern barbarism. Mocked as a reactionary, he foresaw Europe's future with a clarity possessed by none of his progressive contemporaries.

The highly civilized Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the brutal despotism of Saddam Hussein have very little in common. Saddam's Iraq was a modern state, modelled on the Stalinist Soviet Union, while the Habsburg monarchy was a pre-modern survival. Saddam ruled with a degree of violence unimaginable in Habsburg Europe. But when these very different regimes were overthrown the results were not dissimilar. Replacing a secular dictatorship in Iraq with Islamist democracy has left women and gays, religious minorities and even the Shia majority at risk as never before. Outside the Kurdish Zone where a separate state has been set up, Iraqis are less free than at any point in the country's history.

Another debacle is under way in Afghanistan. The current Afghan war has been described as unwinnable and yet too important to lose. Certainly it cannot be won, if only because it has no achievable objectives. Here it resembles some earlier exercises in imperialism. When they expanded into Africa, Asia and Latin America, European colonists claimed to be advancing the cause of civilization. The process was in fact extremely violent, and at times overtly genocidal. In South-west Africa (present-day Namibia) at the start of the twentieth century, somewhere between half and three-quarters of the Herero people were exterminated under German colonial rule. The methods used included forced labour, starvation, mass poisoning and shooting, and death by disease while incarcerated in concentration camps (where captured Hereros also perished while being subjected to medical experiments designed to prove their racial inferiority). For these colonists subjugated peoples were expendable resources – if they ceased to be useful, they were destroyed. But imperialism of this kind was not only an exercise in predatory barbarism. Quite often it was also absurd.

In *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, the subject of the essay that appears as Chapter 25, Marlow recounts how the French, who 'had one of their wars going on thereabouts',

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anchored a warship off the African coast. The ship was shelling the bush:

> In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceedings, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight ...[2]

Afghanistan is being shelled from planes and helicopters whose fire-power far exceeds that of the French warship. Many civilian casualties will be inflicted and the war will go on, but otherwise nothing will happen. Nothing *can* happen.

Promoting freedom by force is not so much impractical as nonsensical. Liberal fundamentalists believe freedom can be packaged into a system of rights that can be delivered anywhere in the world, but as the history of the West demonstrates, there is more to freedom, and for that matter to civilization, than a regime of rights. A society can be civilized without recognizing rights, while one based on rights may be tainted with barbarism. Austria–Hungary abolished torture in 1776 as the result of an edict by Maria Theresa, an absolute monarch. More than two hundred years later, the leader of the world's preeminent liberal democracy licensed the practice as part of a worldwide crusade to defend human rights. At the same time habeas corpus – a defence against arbitrary power dating back to medieval times – was indefinitely suspended. In effect the US has undergone a regime shift in which constitutional restraints on executive power that were in force during much of its history no longer apply. With a new president in charge the old regime may be restored, but there can be no guarantee. Regimes come and go.

The renormalization of torture illustrates a theme running throughout the pieces collected here. Progress in science and technology is a fact, whereas progress in ethics and politics is a fiction. There are universal human goods and evils; the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century was a genuine gain. But advance in civilization is not like the growth of knowledge, which is cumulative and irreversible. Old evils return, usually with new

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names. What we see as unalterable features of civilized life vanish in the blink of an eye.

When ‘Torture: a modest proposal’, reprinted as Chapter 21 of the present volume, was first published in the *New Statesman* on 17 February 2003, a few weeks before the invasion of Iraq, many readers viewed it as an exercise in satire without much topical bite. Not all of the readers noticed it was a satire. Despite appearing under the title ‘A Modest Proposal for Preventing Torturers in Liberal Democracy from Being Abused, and for Recognizing their Benefit to the Public (with Apologies to Jonathan Swift)’ and featuring a photo-shop portrait of me wearing a Swift-like hairpiece, readers telephoned the magazine to cancel their subscription.

At the time I was struck by the loss of cultural memory these calls revealed. Whatever the merits of my own effort, Swift’s *Modest Proposal* – suggesting that Irish families suffering from poverty could improve their condition by selling off their children to be eaten by the rich – was once the most celebrated satire in the English language. The indignant calls to the magazine suggested this was no longer the case. The argument that a universal right to be tortured should be enforced, with states that refuse to recognize it being subject to regime change, failed to arouse their suspicions. The proposal that torturers need counselling to overcome the psychological traumas that go with their profession sparked no sense of absurdity. Months and years later I continued to receive protests taking me to task for my indecent suggestions.

By that time reality had overtaken satire. The abuses of Abu Ghraib had been committed, exposed, denied, condemned and forgotten – consigned to the memory hole where awkward facts disappear in Orwell’s *1984*. The techniques used to torture Iraqi detainees – sexual assault, simulated electrocution and attacks by dogs, among others – were no longer employed, as far as anyone could tell, in American centres of confinement. Redefined as stressful interrogation techniques, water-boarding and sensory deprivation were adopted as the methods of choice. An administration lauded by neo-conservatives for its stand against moral relativism ditched a moral prohibition that only a few years ago was regarded as absolute. Torture was taken up as a weapon

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in the fight for human rights, and the liberal torturer became a defining figure of the age.

My modest proposal was written in the belief that when Iraq was invaded torture would be used. The French had used it in Algeria and the Soviets in Afghanistan, in each case on a vast scale. It was on the cards that the Americans, who were fighting a similar neo-colonial war in Iraq, would also use it. The idea that torture might be needed in the 'war on terror' was in the air. Professor Alan Dershowitz, the distinguished Harvard civil libertarian, had already presented his elegantly reasoned arguments for 'torture warrants'. Tony Blair – an exceptionally talented politician with the priceless gift of never doubting his own sincerity – sold the Iraq war as the beginning of a liberal world order in which military intervention would be used to enforce human rights. For many liberals it was an easy sell. Toppling Saddam was part of the war against tyranny, a chapter in the story of human emancipation. If torture aids the noble cause of progress, how can any enlightened person fail to support it?

The ironies here are many layered. The result of a long campaign begun over two hundred years ago by Montesquieu and Voltaire, the prohibition of torture is one of the genuine achievements of the Enlightenment. Yet today partisans of Enlightenment values defend torture as part of the global struggle to defend Enlightenment values against Islamist fundamentalism. Militant liberal interventionists and belligerent neo-conservatives have been prepared to relax the prohibition on the ground that it may be necessary for the continuation of progress.

There are precedents for this position. A previous generation of Enlightenment militants was also ready to use torture as a means to progress. Lenin and Trotsky made the methodical use of terror the basis of Soviet power. Lenin's 'Hanging Order' of December 1918 instructed that capital punishment – which Kerensky's Provisional Government had abolished – be used on peasants who resisted grain-requisitioning, specifying that the hangings take place in full public view. Trotsky defended shooting hostages in the Russian civil war, dismissing criticism as 'Quaker–vegetarian chatter'. Neither Lenin nor Trotsky ever questioned the legitimacy of torture, which the Soviet regime used routinely from

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the time it came to power. For these progressives torture was an essential weapon in the cause of humanity.

Neo-cons and liberals of the militant tendency who defend the practice of torture are continuing an authentic Enlightenment tradition. Lenin was not mistaken in seeing himself as continuing a European revolutionary project. Soviet Russia and Maoist China were Enlightenment regimes in which progress and terror marched side by side. Even the Nazis were able to invoke a nineteenth-century Enlightenment tradition of 'scientific racism' to rationalize their crimes.

Of course the Enlightenment was a highly contradictory movement. It contained thinkers such as Spinoza, who despite his faith in reason knew that humans would always live by illusions; sceptics such as David Hume, for whom history was the working out of chance events; Schopenhauer, who used the work of Kant – the supreme Enlightenment philosopher – to argue that history is a kind of dream; and Freud – the greatest twentieth-century Enlightenment thinker – who showed that humans could only ever be partially sane. But it was the Enlightenment belief in progress that had mass appeal, and here religion comes back into the picture. Like much else in secular thought the idea of progress is a legacy of Christianity.

Most of the religions that have ever existed lack the idea of salvation. In animism, which is the primordial religion, humans are part of the natural world; they do not need deliverance from it. Even among salvation religions there are many visions of what salvation involves. Pre-Christian Europe contained cults such as the Orphics, who saw it as release from the burden of transmigration – a view also found among Hindus and Buddhists. For Manicheans and Gnostics, it meant emancipation from the material universe.

The belief that salvation is a type of historical event is an innovation, most likely originating around three thousand years ago with the Persian prophet Zoroaster. The belief that history is a battle between good and evil that good can win derives from Zoroastrian traditions. So does the belief, which is unknown in ancient Hebrew thought, in an approaching end-time. For Jesus, the heterodox Jewish prophet from whose teachings Paul invented the Christian religion, salvation meant a new world

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created by God in a final battle with evil. Despite Augustine’s attempt to defuse this millenarian myth it persisted into medieval times, helping make the Middle Ages an era of constant warfare. In modern times the belief that God could defeat evil was translated into secular terms, and became a strand in the Enlightenment. Substitute for God a divinized humanity, and you have the myth that lies behind radical secular politics from the Jacobins onwards.

The impact of this vision went far beyond revolutionary movements. It also produced meliorism – the faith in gradual improvement of liberal humanists, who although they deny any belief in a single, world-transforming event still believe that the world can be remade by humanaction. Until some time around the second half of the eighteenth century no one believed ‘humanity’ could fashion the future. When this belief began to spread it was not, as secular humanists like to think, a departure from Christian religion. The Enlightenment was hostile to Christianity, but a Christian framework still shaped the view of history adopted by most Enlightenment thinkers. Ancient Greek and Roman humanists, such as the hedonist philosopher Epicurus and his disciple Lucretius, rejected the religions of their time (without denying the existence of the gods); but their goal was to achieve tranquillity by withdrawing from the world, not to change it. They had no dreams of universal human emancipation. The world-transforming hopes of modern humanism derive not from these ancient thinkers but from Christianity, with its promise that salvation is open to all.

There have been times when belief in progress has been a civilizing force. Before it is anything else civilization is the restraint of violence, and it was the belief in progress that inspired the Enlightenment thinkers who began the campaign for a ban on torture. But it was also belief in progress that fuelled many of the crimes of Communism and colonialism, and which energized the liberal struggle for self-determination that helped release ethnic savagery in inter-war Europe. Another version of the progressive faith licenses torture in the ‘war on terror’. In its belief that violence can renew society Islamism is a prototypical modernist movement; it is not by accident that Islamists so often use ideas lifted from

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Lenin. Yet Islamism is not a threat of the order of Communism or Nazism, and there is no reason why it cannot be contained.

What is worth defending in liberal societies is not their belief in progress. As I argue in the first of the pieces collected here, originally published in my book *Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000), it is the practice of toleration – in other words, the attempt to achieve a civilized *modus vivendi* between different ways of life. The trouble with *modus vivendi* is that it demands a stoical commitment that may be lacking. Faced with the long haul of civilization there will be many who find barbarism more exciting.

At present the most powerful decivilizing force is resource war, which is ultimately a by-product of human population growth. The perennially unpopular Thomas Malthus is featured in the earliest of these essays, 'John Stuart Mill and the idea of progress', published in 1976 and appearing here as Chapter 2, while a Malthusian argument also features in 'An agenda for Green conservatism' (1993), reprinted here as Chapter 24. As Mill argued, it is only when human numbers are controlled that progress in science can be matched by lasting improvement in human affairs. A society in which scientific advance is used to enhance the quality of life rather than increase production or population could be more humanly fulfilling than any that exists today.

Since the essay on Green conservatism was written environmentalism has moved from the fringes of politics on to the centre ground in many countries. In Britain Green ideas have been part of the reinvention of the Conservative Party. But population control remains a taboo, and the stationary-state economy I advocated a decade and a half ago seems to me now just another utopia. As the American paleo-anthropologist and poet Loren Eiseley noted in 1969: 'Basically man's planetary virulence can be ascribed to just one thing: a rapid ascent, particularly during the last three centuries, of an energy ladder so great that the line on the chart representing it would be almost vertical.'[3] Human expansion over the past few centuries is a byproduct of fossil fuels. Now these fuels are running out or are too dirty to use safely, and the energy-intensive civilization that enabled the spike in human numbers is no longer viable. A low-energy society using high-tech devices such as nuclear fusion and

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the artificial synthesis of food is theoretically possible, but humans have overshot the planet's capacity to support them. Whatever is done now cannot alter that fact.

A global resource war is already under way. The first Gulf conflict of 1990–91 was an oil war and nothing else. The conflict in Iraq is also in part an energy war, with the US and its allies, Iraq's several communities and Iran scrambling to secure control of the country's oil. So too are conflicts in post-Soviet regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia. Again, water wars are brewing in many parts of the world. Behind the incessant rant about democracy and rights it is resource wars that are shaping the future.

A pervasive and probably incurable unreality permeates contemporary politics and culture. The record of the past century shows that incremental change is rare, whereas revolutionary upheaval is normal. Time and again entire societies have vanished and whole ways of life have been extinguished. Yet even the most radical critics of contemporary societies seem to believe their own societies are immortal. It does not occur to them that their civilization may simply disappear as so many others have done in the past. Scientific and technological advance makes this more rather than less likely.

The belief that knowledge is intrinsically benign is perhaps the definitive modern myth. The pacification of the world by canals and railways, the power of radio and television to conjure away tyrants, the role of the Internet in giving birth to a peaceful world – these and many other whimsical hopes have all foundered on the same intractable fact. Knowledge advances, while the human animal stays the same. *Homo rapiens* will not cease to be predatory and destructive, nor will *Homo religiosus* cease to pursue the intimations of faith.

Contemporary humanism is a religion that lacks the insight into human frailty of traditional faiths. In envisioning the universe as the work of a divine person Western monotheism has always been anthropocentric, but it has preserved a sense of mystery, the insight that the nature of things is finally unknowable. In contrast secular rationalists have promoted a type of solipsism. Like the Tlönists of Borges's fable, examined in Chapter 5, they think the real world and their intellectual constructions are – or can be

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made to be – identical. Hence the ornate theories of justice devised by credulous philosophers, the elaborate systems of incentives designed by *bien-pensant* economists and the recondite schemes for taxing emissions advanced by Greens – just the latest of many attempts to reorder human life by the use of reason.

Humankind is not a collective agent that can decide its destiny. If humans are different from other animals it is chiefly in being governed by myths, which are not creations of the will but creatures of the imagination. Emerging unbidden from subterranean regions, they rule the lives of those they possess. Many of the worst crimes of the last century were the work of people possessed by what they believed to be reason. Science is believed to confer a superior rationality on its initiates, but science cannot make us into a rational animal of the kind imagined by humanist philosophers. Humans can anthropomorphize anything, except themselves.

A little realism would surely be useful. Accepting that we are flawed and our problems not fully soluble need not be paralysing; it could make us more flexible and resourceful. But no realist will try to convert the world. The myth-free civilization of secular rationalism is itself the stuff of myth. Myths are fictions, which cannot be true or false; but fictions can be more or less truthful depending on how they capture human experience. No traditional myth is as untruthful as the modern myth of progress. All prevailing philosophies embody the fiction that human life can be altered at will. Better aim for the impossible, they say, than submit to fate. Invariably, the result is a cult of human self-assertion that soon ends in farce.

The line of thinking that is traced in this book runs in an opposite direction – not only in questioning the idea of progress but also, and more fundamentally, in rejecting the idea that it is only through action that life can be meaningful. Politics is only a small part of human existence, and the human animal only a very small part of the world. Science and technology have given us powers we never had before, but not the ability to refashion our existence as we wish. Poetry and religion are more realistic guides to life.

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From one angle the writings collected here can be read as a vivisection of contemporary belief, and some readers are sure to demand a replacement for the creeds that have been dissected. In the current climate of needy uncertainty this is an inevitable reaction, but it also misses the point. In our everyday dealings we all rely on a kind of animal faith in the trustworthiness of things. But belief is dangerous in politics, while the core of religion has never been doctrinal. The life of the spirit is not a matter of subscribing to a set of beliefs, and only people bent on converting the world trouble themselves with creeds. The obsession of secular rationalists with true belief is an inheritance from Christian traditions deformed by Greek philosophy, which from Socrates onwards preached the fanciful dogma that reason, virtue and the good life are, in the end, one and the same. Keats's negative capability – 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and certainty' – seems to me a more interesting way to live, and more likely to yield glimpses of truth.

The point of showing the flimsiness of all that is seemingly solid is not to come up with an immovable truth, and persuade the reader to accept it. Persuasion is a missionary enterprise, the goal of which is conversion. Instead the aim is to present a record of what one observer has seen, which readers can use as they will.

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Part One

LIBERALISM: AN AUTOPSY

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1

Modus vivendi

The liberal state originated in a search for *modus vivendi*. Contemporary liberal regimes are late flowerings of a project of toleration that began in Europe in the sixteenth century. The task we inherit is refashioning liberal toleration so that it can guide the pursuit of *modus vivendi* in a more plural world.

Liberal toleration has contributed immeasurably to human well-being. Nowhere so deep-rooted that it can be taken for granted, it is an achievement that cannot be valued too highly. We cannot do without that early modern ideal; but it cannot be our guide in late modern circumstances. For the ideal of toleration we have inherited embodies two incompatible philosophies. Viewed from one side, liberal toleration is the ideal of a rational consensus on the best way of life. From the other, it is the belief that human beings can flourish in many ways of life.

If liberalism has a future, it is in giving up the search for a rational consensus on the best way of life. As a consequence of mass migration, new technologies of communication and continued cultural experimentation, nearly all societies today contain several ways of life, with many people belonging to more than one. The liberal ideal of toleration which looks to a rational consensus on the best way of life was born in societies divided on the claims of a single way of life. It cannot show us how to live together in societies that harbour many ways of life.

Toleration did not begin with liberalism. In ancient Alexandria and Buddhist India, among the Romans, the Moors and the Ottomans, different faiths coexisted in peace for long periods. Yet the ideal of a common life that does not rest on common beliefs is a liberal inheritance. Our task is to consider what becomes of this

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patrimony in societies which are much more deeply diverse than those in which liberal toleration was conceived.

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

The philosophies of John Locke and Immanuel Kant exemplify the liberal project of a universal regime, while those of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume express the liberalism of peaceful coexistence. In more recent times, John Rawls and F. A. Hayek have defended the first liberal philosophy, while Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott are exemplars of the second.

The ideal of toleration as a means to truth was stated canonically by Locke. In Locke's account, liberal toleration was far from being sceptical about truth in religion or morality. It presupposed that truth had been found, and imposed a duty on government to promote it. It was toleration of things that were judged to be bad or false.[1]

Locke understood toleration as a pathway to the one true religion. He did not extend toleration to Catholics or atheists, if only because he was not confident that persuasion would lead them to that faith. Locke's defence of toleration was that it enables us to discover the best life for humankind. He never doubted that there was such a thing. Throughout its history, the liberal ideal of toleration as a means to a universal rational consensus has rested on the same conviction.

Yet from the beginnings of liberal thought there was another understanding of toleration. Nothing in Hobbes suggests he favoured toleration as a pathway to the true faith. For him, toleration was a strategy of peace. Indifferent to belief, the sole concern of government was with practice. In this Hobbesian view, the end of toleration is not consensus. It is coexistence.[2]

For liberal thinkers who sought a rational consensus on the best life, toleration was a remedy for the limitations of human understanding. As Voltaire put it: 'What is toleration? It is the

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appurtenance of humanity. We are all full of weakness and errors; let us mutually pardon each other for our follies.'[3] Liberal thinkers have never been over-sanguine about the prospects of people reaching agreement in their beliefs about the good life. They have always been too conscious of the force of the passions to view reason as anything more than a frail power in human affairs.

It was this manifest imperfection of human reason that underpinned the ideal of toleration as a means to consensus. The hope of a rational consensus on values supports the liberal philosophies that prevail today. Yet the idea that the persistence of many ways of life is a mark of imperfection has little to support it.

Rational inquiry in ethics does not yield consensus on the best life. It shows that the good life comes in many varieties. The idea that the exercise of reason produces agreement is at least as old as Plato's Socrates. Even so, there has never been much to support it. Reason can enlighten us as to our ethical conflicts. Often, it shows them to be deeper than we thought, and leaves us in the lurch as to how to resolve them.

Liberal regimes are often viewed as solutions to a modern problem of pluralism. Yet what is most notable about the early modern societies from which liberal regimes emerged is how homogeneous they were. Few, if any, late modern societies display as much consensus in their values and beliefs. It is not only that they differ greatly from one another. Most of them contain several ways of life, honouring different goods and virtues.

The fact that society contains different forms of ethical life is far from being peculiarly modern. On the contrary, in their diversity of ways of life late modern societies have something in common with the ancient world. What is new in the modern world is not acceptance of diversity in styles of life. It is hostility to hierarchies.

The cultures from which European moral philosophy emerged contained many forms of ethical life. Greek polytheism expressed the belief that the sources of value are irreducibly plural. If it recognized the idea of the best human life, it was one in which many distinct and at times conflicting sources of value were honoured. In their acceptance of many sources of value, the Greeks were at one with other ancient cultures: ancient Judaism

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imposed few universal obligations; Hinduism recognized different duties in different stations and stages of life.

Ancient societies were more hospitable to differences than ours. This is partly because the idea of human equality was weak or absent. Modernity begins not with the recognition of difference but with a demand for uniformity. There is nothing new in the idea that the good life may vary with different people. To think that it is distinctively modern is a mere prejudice.

Ancient pluralism found few echoes in Greek philosophy. The founders of European ethical theory were monists. Neither Plato nor Aristotle was in any doubt that one way of life was best for humankind. Whether the good for humans was finally one, as Plato imagined, or many, as Aristotle was sometimes ready to admit, the best kind of life was the same for everyone – even though they never doubted that it could be lived fully only by a few leisured Greek males. In this classical view, conflicting judgements about the human good are symptoms of error. For the founders of European ethical theory, as for the Christians who came after them, conflicts of value were signs of imperfection, not a normal part of ethical life.

From its beginnings, moral philosophy has been a struggle to exorcize conflict from ethical life. The same is true of political thought. European political philosophy has been deeply marked by the resistance to conflict that shaped Greek ethics. In the city, as in the soul, harmony has been the ideal. Most liberal thinkers have taken over the Socratic, Christian and Enlightenment faith in the harmony of values. But an ideal of harmony is not the best starting-point for thinking about ethics or government. It is better to begin by understanding why conflict – in the city as in the soul – cannot be avoided.

In the form that we have inherited it, liberal toleration is an ideal of rational consensus. As heirs to that project, we need an ideal based not on a rational consensus on the best way of life, nor on reasonable disagreement about it, but instead on the truth that humans will always have reason to live differently. *Modus vivendi* is such an ideal. It embodies an older current of liberal thought about toleration, and applies it to our own new circumstances.

Modus vivendi expresses the belief that there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive. Among these there are some

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expression of the fact that their interests are in many ways opposed. When communities contend for power over scarce resources, they are likely to seek to justify their rival interests by arguments of fairness. Where interests are at odds and political power is at stake, shared principles of justice are likely to yield incompatible judgements of what justice demands.

But conflicts over what justice demands do not come only from these familiar facts. Justice itself makes incompatible demands. When justice requires that restitution be made for injustice done to communities in the past, the result may be unjust to present generations. A claim for the return of land that was unjustly expropriated may collide with a no less just claim to the land that is based on generations of working it. Such conflicts do not arise from an imperfect sense of justice. They express the truth that justice itself encompasses conflicting values.

Even if a conception of justice could be formulated that received universal assent, it would make conflicting demands about which reasonable people could differ. Once again, this is not because human reason is imperfect. It is because incompatible solutions of such conflicts can be equally reasonable.

That conflicts between universal values can be settled in incompatible ways is one reason why people belong to different ways of life. The many ways in which humans can live well embody different settlements among discordant universal values. Contrary to the liberal ideal of toleration, the fact of divergent ways of life is not a result of the frailty of reason. It embodies the truth that humans have reason to live differently.

At the same time, some conflicts of value do arise from rival views of the good. They come not from rivalry among values that are universal but from the different goods that are honoured in particular ways of life. Some goods that are central in some ways of life are absent, or else marginal, in others. In late modern societies, personal autonomy and romantic love are highly valued; but these rival goods are far from being valued by everyone. Today, as in the past, there are ways of life that do not celebrate them, or which condemn them.

To be caught between the demands of different ways of life is a common source of moral conflict. Many people face conflicts among values for which there is no single right solution. The fact

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that ways of life honour different goods and virtues is not a mark of imperfection. It is a sign that humans can live well in different ways.

Yet not all ways of life allow humans to live well. There are universal human goods and evils. Some virtues are needed for any kind of human flourishing. Without courage and prudence no life can go well. Without sympathy for the suffering and happiness of others, the artefact of justice cannot be maintained. Forms of life that are deficient in these virtues are lacking in the conditions of human well-being. Such values are generically human. Because they are universal they can be used to assess any particular way of life.

That some values are incommensurable does not mean that all ways of life have the same value. The bottom line for value-pluralism is the diversity of goods and evils, not of ways of life. Different ways of life can be more or less successful in achieving universal goods, mitigating universal evils and in resolving conflicts among them.

Even so, universal values do not fit together to compose an ideal life – for the species, for particular societies or for individuals. Rather, if universal values can be rivals, there can be no such thing as an ideal life. There may be a best life for any individual; but not one that is without loss. In particular ways of life there may be better or worse solutions to conflicts of value; but none that meets fully every legitimate claim. There are better and worse regimes, and some that are thoroughly illegitimate; but none that fully realizes all universal values, and is thereby a model for all the rest.

The most fundamental differences among ways of life arise from the manner in which they deal with conflicts among values that are universal. Universal values enable us to assess particular ways of life; but they do not add up to a universal morality.

In the world as we find it, even the barest requirements of a life worth living cannot all be always met in full. Toppling a tyranny may trigger civil war. Protecting a broad range of liberal freedoms may result in the regime that guarantees them being short lived. At the same time, supporting a strong state as a bulwark against anarchy may worsen the abuse of power. Wise policy can temper these conflicts. It cannot hope to overcome them.

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Conflicts of value go with being human. The reason is not that human beings have rival beliefs about the good life. Nor is it – though this comes closer to the nub of the matter – that the right action sometimes has wrong as its shadow. It is that human needs make conflicting demands. The idea of a human life that is without conflicts of value runs aground on the contradictions of human needs.

It is not only that, because they make incompatible demands on scarce material resources, human needs may be practically at odds. More, they can be met fully only in forms of life that cannot be combined. The lives of a professional soldier and a carer in a leprosarium, of a day trader on the stock market and a contemplative in a monastery, cannot be mixed without loss. Such lives embody virtues that do not easily coexist; and they may express beliefs that are contradictory. Yet each answers to a human need.

The best human lives are very different from one another, and often incompatible. This is not a truth of logic. It is a fact about human nature. As such it is not unalterable. Perhaps, as technologies of genetic engineering advance, human beings will be tempted to alter the biological endowments that have enabled them to live in so many different ways. There is nothing to say such attempts cannot succeed; but if they do they will destroy much that has hitherto been of value in human life.

Conflicts of value come from the competing needs of our common human nature. A kind of moral scarcity is built into the fabric of human life. It is because human needs are contradictory that no human life can be perfect. That does not mean that human life is imperfect. It means that the idea of perfection has no meaning. The idea of conflicting and incommensurable values is far from the Augustinian notion that all things human are imperfect. Augustine contrasted the imperfection of the human world with the perfection of the divine. By contrast, rivalry between incommensurable values destroys the very idea of perfection.

The fact that good harbours conflicts of value does not mean that the human condition must always be tragic. To be sure, tragic choices cannot be eliminated from ethical life. Where universal values make conflicting demands, the right action may contain

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wrong. When values clash in this way, there may be irreparable loss. Then there is surely tragedy.

But the plurality of values signifies more than simply tragedy. It means that there are many kinds of life in which humans can thrive. Where these lives are so different from one another that their worth cannot be compared, it makes little sense to speak of gain or loss. When such lives cannot be combined, they need not be antagonists; they may be alternatives. If we choose among them, as sometimes we must, the choice need not be tragic. It may simply bespeak the abundance of flourishing lives that is open to us.

If this is true, it has always been so. Value-pluralism is an account of ethical life, not an intepretation of pluralism in late modern societies. If it is true, it is a truth about human nature, not the contemporary condition. Nevertheless, value-pluralism has a special application to late modern societies.

In nearly all contemporary societies the coexistence of many ways of life is an established fact. Though distinct, these ways of life are not independent. They interact continuously – so much so that it may be hard to tell the difference between them. Indeed, since many people belong to more than one, it may be impossible to distinguish them completely. Ways of life are tricky things to get to know. They do not come ready labelled. There is no sure-fire method of enumerating them. And they come in many varieties.

There is the way of life of religious fundamentalists and secular liberals, of countryfolk and 'young urban professionals', of Taliban and Quakers, of first-generation immigrants and that of their children, of Homer's warrior-class, the Desert Fathers and twenty-first-century Hasids, and indefinitely many more. It is impossible to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met for a style of human activity to qualify as a way of life. Nor is it necessary. We can distinguish them by a loose bundle of criteria.

Ways of life must be practised by a number of people, not only one, span the generations, have a sense of themselves and be recognized by others, exclude some people and have some distinctive practices, beliefs and values, and so forth. Often these criteria do not yield a clear result. Two communities may honour many of the same values but be locked in an historical conflict. We might say of them that they have the same way of life but are

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divided in their allegiances to the regime under which they live. (Think of Ulster.) Or two communities may have distinctive and opposed beliefs about the historical sources of their present conflicts, contrasting attitudes to a number of social issues, and a strong propensity to exclude one another (by avoiding intermarriage, for example). Then we might be inclined to say they have conflicting ways of life. (Think again of Ulster.) What counts as a way of life may not always be decidable.

When the standard types of contemporary liberal thought refer to pluralism they mean the diversity of personal ethical beliefs and ideals. That is not the kind of pluralism that should most concern political philosophy. Late modern societies are notable for the diversity of ways of life they contain. Immigration and the partial erosion of the cohesive national cultures that were constructed earlier in the modern period have increased the number of ethnic and cultural traditions that coexist in the same societies. At the same time, continuing cultural experimentation has produced a number of new styles of life. *This* fact of pluralism was not foreseen in liberal thought. Even now it has not been fully comprehended.

The conflicts of value that rightly shape the agenda of political thought come not from the divergent ideals of individuals but from the rival claims of ways of life. Recent liberal orthodoxy passes over these conflicts because it takes for granted that one way of life is dominant in society. In contrast, value-pluralism has particular relevance to late modern societies in which, by choice, chance or fate, many ways of life have come to coexist.

Liberal thought needs revision if the ideal of toleration is to be refashioned to suit this circumstance. In standard liberal accounts, pluralism refers to a diversity of personal ideals. Liberal thought rarely addresses the deeper diversity that comes when there are different ways of life in the same society and even in the lives of the same individual. Yet it is this latter sort of pluralism that should set the agenda of thought about ethics and government today.

To think of this condition as a peculiar disability of modern times is mistaken.[4] The pot-pourri sometimes called Western civilization has always contained conflicting values. Greek, Roman, Christian and Jewish traditions each contain distinctive goods and virtues that cannot be translated fully into the ethical life of the others.

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thing as an ideally liberal regime. Because rights make conflicting demands that can reasonably be resolved in different ways, the very idea of such a regime is a mistake.

To say that there cannot be an ideal political regime is not to mount a defence of imperfection in politics. It is to reject the idea of an ideal regime. Different regimes can rightly resolve conflicts among vital human rights in different ways. Some such settlements are better than others, but there is nothing which says that the best regimes will resolve conflicts among rights in similar ways.

On the contrary, because their circumstances and histories vary so much, the best regimes are very different from one another. (So are the worst.) Politics abounds in tragic choices. Even so, it is not because of the tragedies of politics that the idea of an ideal regime lacks sense. It is because the best regimes come in many varieties.

When we differ deeply as to the content of the good, an appeal to rights will not help us. For in that case we will differ as to which rights we have. Fundamental differences about rights express rival conceptions of the good. When rational inquiry leaves our views of the good deeply at odds, it is vain to appeal to rights. Basic human rights can be justified as giving protection against universal human evils; but even such rights clash with one another, and incompatible settlements of their conflicts can be equally legitimate. When universal evils clash, no theory of rights can tell us what to do.

It is the same with social justice. We cannot avoid judgements of fairness regarding the distribution of goods in society. The notion that fairness in procedures is all that society needs in the way of a shared conception of justice, which Hayek made familiar,[5] has little to be said for it. Yet no contemporary society contains a consensus on fairness that is deep or wide enough to ground a 'theory of justice'.

There is no more consensus on what justice means than there is on the character of the good. If anything, there is less. Among the virtues, justice is one of the most shaped by convention. For that reason it is among the most changeable.

When many ways of life share the same society, it is natural that the sense of justice should vary. It is therefore hardly

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surprising that liberal philosophers differ about the most fundamental requirements of justice. Today, most liberal thinkers affirm that justice is the supreme virtue of social institutions; but some declare that it demands equal distribution of social goods, others that it requires respect for the supposed fact that each of us owns his or her natural endowments, yet others that it involves matching resources with basic needs or merits – and still others that it has nothing to do with distribution at all. Such differences are to be expected. They mirror differences in moral outlook in the wider society. What is surprising is that they are not seen as an objection to the enterprise that most contemporary liberal thinkers have in common – the attempt to construct a theory of justice. When recent liberal thinkers claim that liberalism is a strictly political doctrine, they mean that it does not depend on any comprehensive conception of the good. They never tire of telling us that the demands of justice must take priority over any ideal of the good. They appear to have overlooked the fact that different views of the good support different views of justice.

Only this oversight can account for the fact that in 'political liberalism' nothing of importance is left to political decision. The basic liberties and the distribution of social goods are matters of justice, and in political liberalism what justice demands is a matter not for political decision but for legal adjudication. The central institution of Rawls's 'political liberalism' is not a deliberative assembly such as a parliament. It is a court of law. All fundamental issues are removed from political deliberation in order to be adjudicated by a Supreme Court. The self-description of Rawlsian doctrine as political liberalism is supremely ironic. In fact, Rawls's doctrine is a species of anti-political legalism.[6]

Liberal legalists differ about the rights we have. Egalitarian legalists, such as Rawls and Dworkin, think we have welfare rights to resources, whereas libertarian legalists such as Nozick and Hayek insist that the only human rights are rights against aggression and coercion. These are fundamental differences. They reflect different beliefs about whether human beings can be said to own themselves, how they acquire property rights in natural resources, and what their well-being consists in.

Liberal legalists are at one chiefly in their common illusion that their views on rights do not express rival views of the good. In

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reality, Rawls and Hayek have opposed conceptions of justice, not because they take different stances in the philosophy of right, but because they hold to antagonistic conceptions of the good life. In their accounts, as in all theories of rights and justice, differing views of rights spring from different views of the good.

What these egalitarian and libertarian variants of liberal legalism have in common is more fundamental than the points at which they differ. Each supposes that principles of justice and rights can be formulated that are at once highly determinate and ideally universal. (That the later Rawls appears to have retreated from the ideal of universality does not affect the present argument.)[7]

Libertarian liberals such as Nozick believe that a universal economic system is required by justice. For them, rights of property and laws of contract are not social and legal conventions, which can reasonably vary in accordance with the changing requirements of human well-being. They are direct applications of universal human rights. It is not merely that modern economies cannot prosper without well-functioning market institutions. Rather, the institutions of the market embody timeless dictates of justice. Indeed, on this strange view, only a single type of market economy – the highly singular type of capitalism found intermittently in some English-speaking countries over the past century or so – is fully compatible with the demands of justice.[8]

Thinking of market freedoms in this way, as derivations from fundamental human rights, is a fundamental error. Like other human freedoms, the freedoms embodied in market institutions are justified inasmuch as they meet human needs. Insofar as they fail to do this they can reasonably be altered. This is true not only of the rights that are involved in market institutions. It is true of all human rights.

The institutions of the market advance human well-being to the extent that they enable individuals and communities with different or incompatible goals and interests to trade with one another to mutual advantage. This classical defence of market institutions can be given another formulation. Individuals and communities animated by rival and (in part) incommensurable values can interact in markets without needing to reconcile these rival conceptions of the good. Market institutions assist personal autonomy and social pluralism by enabling such communities to

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replace destructive conflict by beneficial competition. In short, there is a value-pluralist defence of market institutions; but there is no one best variety of market institutions, either for every society or for every context in a single society.

Markets are not free-standing. They are highly complex legal and cultural institutions. They do most to promote pluralism and autonomy when they are complemented by other, non-market institutions. Without the 'positive' freedoms conferred by enabling welfare institutions, the 'negative' liberties of the market are of limited value.[9]

Egalitarian liberals such as Rawls do not claim that only one kind of economic system can be just. They recognize that justice can be realized in a variety of economic systems. Depending on historical circumstances, sometimes socialism may be best, at others some species of capitalism. In Rawlsian theory, justice is silent on the choice of economic systems. Despite this, whatever system is chosen must satisfy Rawls's principles of distribution.[10]

This last requirement presupposes that an overlapping consensus on distributive issues can be reached across the numerous ways of life that exist in late modern societies. But insofar as different ways of life are animated by different ideals of the good, they will think of issues of distribution differently. A strongly individualist way of life will take for granted that the social unit of distribution is the individual. Others will nominate the family or intermediate social institutions for that purpose.

The several ways of life that may be found in most contemporary societies do not share a conception of the primary goods of human life. They are animated by different conceptions of the good life, which may overlap enough to make compromise possible, but which have too little in common to permit the development of a single, overarching conception of justice.

For liberal legalists, when different ways of life clash, all that needs to be done is to ask what justice demands. Once the principles governing an ideally liberal constitution have been stated, they need only to be applied. Applying the law is applying a theory of justice to particular cases; and there are no hard cases that cannot be decided. But when society contains not one but many ways of life, each with its own conception of the good, will there not be as much divergence in views of fairness as there is in

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understandings of the good? When ways of life differ widely in their view of the good, will they not support different views of justice?

Liberal legalists aim to circumvent conflict about the good life by appealing to ideas of justice and rights. In this they claim a lineage that goes back to Kant, who sought to develop a political philosophy based solely on the right. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation of Kant, a pure philosophy of right is a quixotic enterprise. The right can never be prior to the good. Without the content that can be given it only by a conception of the good, the right is empty.

A strictly political liberalism, which is dependent at no point on any view of the good, is an impossibility. The central categories of such a liberalism – 'rights', 'justice' and the like – have a content only insofar as they express a view of the good. At the same time, insofar as they have any definite content, claims about rights and justice are enmeshed in conflicts of value. If we differ about the good life, we are bound to differ about justice and rights. Political liberalism presupposes that justice can stand aloof from conflicting claims about the good. In truth the enterprise of a theory of justice is undone by these conflicts.

Recent liberal political philosophy ascribes infinite weight to a value that is almost infinitely complex. The requirements of justice are not everywhere the same. Because expectations vary from society to society, what is just in one may be unjust in another. What justice demands is not a matter of subjective preference, but it varies with history and circumstances.

Universal human values do not generate a single view of justice. They frame constraints on what can count as a reasonable compromise between rival values and ways of life. In this way, universal human values set ethical limits on the pursuit of *modus vivendi*. Like liberal toleration, *modus vivendi* is far from being the idea that anything goes.

Peaceful coexistence is not an *a priori* value. In this it is no different from any other human good. It is desirable only insofar as it serves human goals and needs. There is no argument which shows that all ways of life are bound to pursue it. Nevertheless, nearly all ways of life have interests in common that make *modus vivendi* desirable for them. Even ways of life that do not recognize

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human values spreads, it is bound to undermine this self-understanding.

Value-pluralism does not leave everything as it is. It is a subversive doctrine. It undermines all claims about the best life for the species. Accordingly, it is inimical to fundamentalism of every kind, whether it originates in religious faith or in the dogmas of the Enlightenment.

Totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes claim that conflicts of value are illusory – at any rate in the long run of history, or in heaven. If value-pluralism is true, that claim itself embodies an illusion. Pluralism about values undermines illiberal claims about harmony. At the same time, it works to subvert the self-interpretation of liberal cultures in which they are precursors of a universal regime or way of life.[13]

Universal values are not the ground of a universal civilization. Through their conflicts they explain the fact that no such thing has ever existed. The persistence of many ways of life is a natural response to species-wide conflicts. Humans are highly inventive animals. From universal conflicts they are continuously devising particular forms of life. Unless new technologies succeed in altering human endowments radically, this will always be true.

The belief that we are destined to live in a universal civilization is a commonplace in societies shaped by Enlightenment thinking. Yet it has scant support in history. In truth, it is not a result of historical inquiry, but rather the product of a discredited philosophy of history.

All political philosophies express a philosophy of history. This is most obviously true of those varieties of liberalism that deny possessing any such thing. The Rawlsian school affects a stance of neutrality or silence regarding questions in the philosophy of history. Yet Rawls's political philosophy can claim to be something more than the pursuit of the intimations of American academic liberals only if its account of the fact of pluralism fits a broad range of modern societies.

In truth, Rawls's interpretation of the fact of pluralism and his account of overlapping consensus are relevant to the majority of contemporary societies only if they are destined to become increasingly like the United States – as Rawls imagines it to be. In effect, this is to subscribe to a specific interpretation of history –

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an Americocentric version of a Positivist philosophy which affirms that as societies become more modern they are bound to become more alike.

Describing the Positivist interpretation of history, Stuart Hampshire writes:

> The positivists believed that all societies across the globe will gradually discard their traditional attachments … because of the need for rational, scientific and experimental modes of thought which a modern industrial economy involves. This is an old faith, widespread in the nineteenth century, that there must be a step-by-step convergence on liberal values, on 'our values'.

The difficulty with this theory, as Hampshire concludes, is that it has been falsified by history: 'We now know there is no "must" about it and that all such theories have a predictive value of zero.'[14]

This Positivist interpretation of history has had a practical influence. Since the last decades of the twentieth century many governments and some transnational institutions have formed their policies on the unexamined assumption that only one economic system is compatible with the requirements of modernity. In this, they are influenced by neo-liberal ideologues who believe that in promoting the free market they are easing the birth of a universal economic system that history would anyway have made inevitable.

The idea that only one kind of economic system is compatible with modernity is of a piece with the notion that as different societies become more modern they are bound to become more alike. In fact, as different societies become more modern, they develop different modes of economic life. In Japan, modernization has meant not the replication of any other mode of economic life, but instead the development of an indigenous variety of capitalism which has many unique features. The same is true in India and China.

Subject to constraints of geography, competition and power, different societies develop modes of economic life that express their different ways of life. Where, as in most late modern societies, there are several ways of life, there tend to be a number of distinct types of productive enterprise, expressing different family structures, religious beliefs and values.

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