A counter-enlightenment of the present: a defence of John Grays' *modus vivendi* liberalism
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I

A central question in contemporary political thought concerns the problem of legitimacy and pluralism. On a first pass, political legitimacy concerns the question of the acceptability of state coercion: under what conditions is such coercion acceptable? Pluralism, in this context, concerns the radical differences between persons and groups in modern states with regards to the central moral and normative questions which constitute (broadly speaking) the political domain. Pluralism presents a problem for political legitimacy insofar as it seems, on the face of it, to preclude settling the question of acceptability in terms of political or moral principle: given a reasonable wide form of pluralism, it is doubtful that all citizens will find any one political or moral principle as an acceptable basis for coercion. This problem is especially concerning for liberals, insofar as they see liberalism as a doctrine which tolerates pluralism. One of the most prominent contrary liberal solutions to this problem arises out of the work of the later Rawls (cf. 1987, 1993, 1997). According to Rawls, the solution lies in the notion of an overlapping consensus. The basic idea is that people and groups which affirm radically different ways of life – comprehensive doctrines – can jointly accept the civil liberties constitutive of a liberal regime on the basis of reasons internal to their own comprehensive doctrines. That is, they can justify a liberal regime by drawing on reasons based on considerations drawn from their own views about the good life (for instance, a secular humanist could endorse civil liberties on the basis of her adherence to the mutual worth of each human). The upshot, according to Rawls, is that we arrive at the acceptability of a liberal regime without requiring everyone agree to a single basis.

Over the course of several decades John Gray has been a consistent critic of the later Rawls, and in particular, a critic of the idea that an overlapping consensus solves the problem of pluralism. On Gray's view, the Rawlsian solution only deals with a kind of superficial pluralism. In arguing that subjects will rationally converge (for a multitude of different reasons) upon liberal principles, Gray argues, Rawls still assumes that acceptability requires rational convergence upon a single way of life. True, the reasons for accepting this way of life may vary, but for Gray, this just lands us back in the seat of the problem of pluralism: why, in the face of serious political controversy, should we assume that the only acceptable political regime is the one arrived at through a Rawlsian overlapping consensus? Gray's own response to the problem, developed over a series of papers, is, on a first pass, to ditch the requirement that acceptability rides on rational convergence on a single political arrangement. Instead, he argues, the problem of pluralism shows us that there isn't a single way of life or political arrangement that is, for all subjects and times, singularity acceptable. Rather, he argues, if we are to save liberalism from the problem of pluralism, we must instead see it not as the only acceptable regime, but rather, as a *modus vivendi*: a way of life:

> 'Instead of seeing liberalism as a system of universal principles, we can think of it as the enterprise of pursuing terms of coexistence among different ways of life. Instead of thinking of liberal values as if they were universally authoritative, we can think of liberalism as the project of reconciling the claims of conflicting values.'[1]

For Gray, the solution to the problem of pluralism is to see liberalism as an institutional arrangement which may be acceptable to parties with conflicting values by facilitating peaceful coexistence. We should not, he

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[1] Gray 2000, pg. 33.

argues, demand that agents accept liberalism as a singularly acceptable regime. It is only by embracing the contingency of liberalism, and tempering its pretentions, that it can survive.

Gray's *modus vivendi* has, inevitably, attracted rebuttals. In order to avoid the charge that *modus vivendi* justifies unjust, dominating regimes, Gray suggests that peaceful coexistence is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for acceptability. On one reading, Gray argues that a liberal modus vivendi is legitimate only when it generates a peaceful coexistence and protects a set of human rights. Call this the universal moral minimum (UMM) reading. The problem, argues Sleat (2019), is that if we adopt the UMM, it isn't clear that Gray, any more than Rawls, avoids saddling liberalism with a contestable foundation. For it looks like suggesting that a UMM is part of the criterion of legitimacy means that Gray is committed to a set of contestable foundational norms.

My primary aim in this paper is suggest another reading of Gray's defence of a *modus vivendi* liberalism. This reading, which I call the anti-exceptionalist reading, suggests that Gray doesn't need to commit to something like the UMM in order to avoid the problem of dominating regimes. Borrowing from John Horton, I will suggest that if we construe Gray as suggesting that legitimacy is a matter of the acceptability of a regime to those subject to it, we can avoid the problem of domination without subscription to universal norms.

II

My argument will begin with a closer look at Gray's criticism of Rawlsian political liberalism. This will not be a strict exegesis of a single Gray paper on the topic (there are many), but instead, will be a reconstruction of what I take to be the common argumentative strand across the relevant papers.

Let us return to the problem of pluralism. In his later work, Rawls suggests that defending the legitimacy of a liberal regime must take into consideration the fact of pluralism – the fact that reasonable people accept different comprehensive doctrines, which we can understand as broad framework which determines what is valuable in a human life[2] (for instance, Thomistic Christianity, or Millian utilitarianism). As a result, he suggests that we cannot hope to justify a liberal regime on the basis of a particular comprehensive doctrine, as it would mean the exclusion of reasonable people who reject this particular doctrine. Instead of justifying a liberal regime on a comprehensive doctrine, Rawls argues that we can justify a liberal regime on the basis of what *political liberalism* (PL). The argument Rawls presents for PL is very complex, and can be interpreted differently. I can therefore only provide a general summary. The argument, as I understand it, has two elements. First, we identify what Rawls calls a *political conception of justice*. A political conception of justice:

> …is not formulated in terms of a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical or moral doctrine but rather in terms of certain fundamental intuitive ideas viewed as latent in the public political culture of a democratic society.[3]

The idea, as I understand it, is that there is a set of 'freestanding' values that are implicit in the public culture of a liberal regime. That citizens are free and equal, and have the moral capacity for participation, Rawls argues, are such freestanding values. The second element of PL is the notion of an *overlapping consensus*. Individuals or groups who endorse distinct comprehensive doctrines achieve an overlapping consensus on a political regime where each of these individuals or groups can endorse this regime for reasons internal to their comprehensive doctrine. By internal reasons, what is meant are reasons generated by commitment to a

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[2] Rawls, PL, pg. 175.

[3] Rawls 1987, pg. 6.

particular comprehensive doctrine. Rawls argues that what he calls the political conception of justice is justified because it can be the object of such an overlapping consensus. For instance, a Christian can endorse the idea of the equality citizens on the basis of the New Testament, whereas a Kantian can endorse it on the basis of the autonomy of agents. The upshot, then, is that the basic structure of a liberal regime can get round the problem of pluralism because it is freestanding in the sense that parties with opposed comprehensive doctrines can converge on, for instance, the freedom and equality of citizens without requiring each subject to this regime to endorse a single comprehensive doctrine. Instead, each agent can endorse this account for their own reasons.

It is by overlapping consensus that Rawls claims that PL is able to accommodate pluralism within a liberal regime. We can see that the liberal state is acceptable to all reasonable people if we allow them to deploy reasons internal to their own conceptions of the good life. According to Gray (cf. 1993, 1995, 2009), however, Rawls does not succeed here. While Gray thinks that there is a sense in which the overlapping consensus can deal with pluralism, the gist of his argument, as I take it, is that it cannot deal with a deeper, more substantive, and more realistic form of pluralism. PL thus fails to meet the ambitions it sets out for itself. Let's take a closer look at this argument.

Perhaps the best way to frame Gray's criticism of PL is by starting with a passage:

> For Rawls … political philosophy is the application of the constitution of the state of the moral point of view, where this is conceived as the impartial or impersonal point of view. The enterprise of the political philosopher is that of propounding and grounding a political morality – one that is agent neutral in that it does not rest on particularistic loyalties or conceptions of the good but instead has its foundation in universal principle of justice or rights.[4]

This, I think, captures the heart of Gray's critique of PL. While Rawls claims to have taken account of pluralism, Gray argues that PL is only able to deal with a superficial form of pluralism. For despite the fact that persons with distinct comprehensive doctrines may be able to find distinct internal reasons to endorse a liberal regime, Rawls insists that the political conception implicit in the public political culture of a liberal regime is itself a *moral* conception:

> The first feature of a political conception of justice is that, while such a conception is, of course, a moral conception, it is a moral conception worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely, for political, social and economic institutions.[5]

For Rawls, a stable liberal regime requires that all parties endorse a moral principle which he takes to be latent in liberal political culture – impartiality or equal respect. The pluralism in PL comes in at the level of justification. Distinct reasonable comprehensive doctrines may justify this moral principle in distinct ways. But for Rawls, justifying a liberal regime amounts to justifying a particular set of foundational norms. Gray's main complaint, as I understand him, is that the Rawls of PL fails to deal with the problem of pluralism. While Rawls modifies his theory of justice in light of disagreement over the good life, it is a kind of *superficial* pluralism insofar as the acceptability of a liberal regime is specified in terms of a particular moral conception of the person. So, while there can be some normative disagreement, this normative disagreement cannot extend to the question of the principles motivating the acceptability of civil liberties. This is a superficial pluralism for Gray because the problem of pluralism does in fact extend to the principles motivating the

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[4] Enlightenment's wake, pg. 3.
[5] Rawls, 1987, pg. 3.

acceptability of civil liberties. Rawls ignores the fact that if we take value pluralism seriously[6], the principle of equal respect *is itself* contestable and capable of being rejected as unacceptable by parties we would want to say are reasonable. For instance, why must equal respect ground civil liberties and not prudence? Rawls appears to be begging the question by insisting that we begin with a particular moral conception of acceptability. For this is precisely what is at issue if we take the problem of pluralism seriously. Thus, Rawls fails to solve the problem of legitimacy in the face of pluralism. The political conception of justice is itself a partisan moral doctrine which can be reasonably rejected as a criterion of legitimacy by parties subject to state coercion.

<div align="center">III</div>

We have now encountered Rawlsian political liberalism and Gray's critique. This paves the way for an articulation of Gray's alternative strategy for dealing with the problem of legitimacy in the face of pluralism. The basic strategy, as I understand it, is to relax the justificatory burdens required for the acceptability of a liberal regime. Rather than requiring, with Rawls, that each agent must, for whatever internal reason, converge upon accepting a liberal regime on the basis of equal respect for persons, Gray argues that no such convergence upon a single foundational principle is required (or desirable) for justifying a liberal regime. Rather, what is important in terms of legitimacy is that each party find a liberal regime acceptable, whether on moral or prudential grounds. It constitutes a way of life – a *modus vivendi*, which may be acceptable on grounds of a commitment to a moral principle of equal respect, but can just as legitimately be accepted on the prudential basis that it (in accordance with the prisoners dilemma) generates a peaceful settlement between individuals and groups with divergent interests. In short, the fundamental element of Gray's *modus vivendi* is a broadening of the scope of acceptable grounds for ascent to a liberal regime.

One of the main advantages claimed for *modus vivendi* liberalism by Gray is that it does a much better job of dealing with the problem of pluralism. For 'the pursuit of *modus vivendi* is not a quest for some kind of super value. It is a commitment to common institutions in which the claims of rival values can be reconciled'.[7] The idea is that agents can see civil liberties, for instance, as a non-ideal or second best compromise with others who do not share their political vision. In this sense, it is perhaps more 'realistic' than the liberal vision emphasized by Rawls in PL. One problem which arises for this view, however, is what we can call the *problem of domination*. The problem, summarized, is as follows:

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[6] What stands in the background of Gray's critique of Rawls just articulated is a commitment to a kind of robust value pluralism of the kind endorsed by Berlin (…) and Raz (1989, 1996):

> Value-pluralism is the doctrine …which takes the plurality of valuable activities and ways of life to be ultimate and ineliminable. This radically changes our understanding of pluralism. On a reductive-monistic view [of value] when on trades the pleasures (and anxieties) of a family life for a career as a sailor one is getting, or hoping to get the same thing one is giving up, be it pleasure, desire satisfaction, or something else. One gives up the lesser pleasure one would derive from family life for the greater pleasure of life at sea. If value-pluralism is correct this view is totally wrong. What one loses is of a different kind from what one gains. Even in success there is a loss, and quite commonly there is no meaning to the judgment that one gains more than one loses. When one was faced with valuable options and successfully chose one of them one simply chose one way of life rather than another, both being good and not susceptible to comparison of degree. [6] Raz 1996, pg …

[7] Two faces of liberalism, 25.

One familiar complaint about *modus vivendi* is that it effectively justifies any form of political association as long as it creates and maintains order and stability, regardless of how unjust it might be. In effect, *modus vivendi* is a theory in which anything goes'[8]

If we focus primarily on peace and stability as criterion for acceptability, then it's not clear that we will end up with a state which is anything like just or desirable. Indeed, we might be setting ourselves up for a kind of domination along Hobbesian lines. This is an even deeper worry for Gray insofar as he wants to justify a *specifically liberal* regime. Liberal regimes are not simply stable regimes. They afford special provides to protection of the individual from both the state and other agents. At best, stability and compromise seem like a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving a liberal settlement.

Gray does, to be fair, anticipate and respond to the problem of domination. In his (2000), he says:

> The requirements of legitimacy that all contemporary regimes should meet are not free-standing rights of recent liberal orthodoxy. They are enforceable conventions, framed to give protections to human interests that make any kind of worthwhile life impossible. A regime is illegitimate to the extent that its survival depends upon systematic injury to a wide range of these interests.[9]

The basic idea here seems clear enough. Stability and peace are necessary but not sufficient conditions for an acceptable *modus vivendi*. It also must protect 'human interests' that make a worthwhile life possible. Legitimacy, for Gray, isn't simply a matter of stability. A regime must afford protection to those goods which are part and parcel of valuable lives for those under the regime. Presumably, moreover, a liberal regime would meet this condition, at least insofar as the civil liberties it entrenches – freedom of association and speech, for example – facilitate worthwhile human lives. So if we add this condition, we end up with a specification of modus vivendi legitimacy which seems to avoid the problem.

The issue, however, is that while this is a prima facie plausible response, it isn't adequate as it stands. In fact, certain things Gray says about it seem to suggest that it is inconsistent with taking pluralism seriously. Sometimes Gray alludes to understanding these interests as a 'universal moral minimum'. If we understand human interests in this way, however, it looks like we are back to the essentially Rawlsian problem of trying to justify a regime on essentially contestable grounds. For what consists a moral minimum, one might think, is a matter of what one takes to be of foundational value, and people disagree about this. In the next section, I will look at an argument against Gray due to Sleat (2019) which sees him as advocating an UMM. I will suggest that Sleat's criticism of combining UMM with *modus vivendi* is successful. Despite this, in the section that follows I will argue that instead of suggesting that we should reject Gray's project altogether, it suggests an alternate reading of his theory of legitimacy.

IV

In his (2019), Sleat argues that subscription to a UMM is not tenable for defeating the domination objection to *modus vivendi*. Because he articulates the objection in a clear and straightforward way, I think it will be easiest to just cite the relevant passage:

> Gray does, to be fair, accept that there 'can be no once-and-for-all list of such [human] rights, since the content of these evils alters with changes in human life. That is why it makes sense to revise or phase out some rights, and to create new rights' (2000: 114). But though this is to give a historical rather than

[8] Sleat, 2019, 189-10.
[9] Two faces of liberalism, pg. 107.

essentialist account of human rights, it misses the extent to which questions as to which rights we revise, which we phase out, and which we create is going to be a highly political process. At the very least, those questions have not and will not be answered through some form of fully autonomous moral reasoning. As such, Gray's human rights cannot be treated as universal but ideologically neutral conditions that somehow stand authoritatively over all politics—these conditions 'are minimal standards of decency and legitimacy that apply to all contemporary regimes, but they are not liberal values writ large' (2000: 109)—but will instead be more specific to particular historical forms of life. They are neither standards that all people have or do accept, nor are they values that all people afford the same significance as liberals such that they can stand as conditions of political legitimacy. And if that is right, then again it seems that in trying to address the concern that modus vivendi effectively legitimates even the most grossly unjust political associations, it is forced into taking a position on precisely the matters on which it wishes to remain neutral in order to make agreement between people who hold radically divergent views possible. The lack of historical and political sensitivity in relation to the conditions of legitimacy represents a significant problem for a modus vivendi that claims the advantage of being closer to the realities of politics. And this will be true for any account of modus vivendi that relies upon some universal moral minimum as a condition of legitimacy, for that minimum itself will always be part of politics or partly political and hence cannot provide the sort of incontestable and non-partisan normative criteria that is sought.

The argument, as I see it, is that if Gray suggests that, in addition to securing peace and order, a regime must protect a set of individual (human) rights of the kind exemplified by a liberal regime, then he is committed to holding that there is, after all, a kind of set of foundational values that all legitimate regimes must exemplify. They may exemplify these values in different ways, but nevertheless, Sleat argues, this means that Gray is effectively open to the same criticism as Rawls – why should we take *this* contestable set of values as primary? It seems that Gray has no more shed liberalism of its commitment to seeing acceptability as grounded on a set of foundational values then Rawls has. It may be brought in 'by the back door', but it seems to be a problem nevertheless.

My own view is that Sleat is more or less correct here. While the domination objection is to be taken serious by those sympathetic to those who wish to see liberalism, first and foremost, as a modus vivendi, it will not do to try and tie the modus vivendi account of legitimacy to a UMM. All this does is reify a set of individual rights in the way Gray professes to avoid. Rather than simply reject Gray's *modus vivendi* liberalism as incoherent, however, I think we can render his theory coherent if we unearth an alternative response to the problem of domination from his writings.

<center>V</center>

Gray sometimes writes in a manner which suggests that he doesn't mean to say that 'human rights' are foundational, immutable values. For instance, in *Two Faces of Liberalism*, he says:

> Human rights are not immutable truths, free-standing moral absolutes whose contents are self-evident. They are conventions, whose concerns vary as circumstances and human interests vary.[10]

Here he qualifies human rights. They are simply contingent 'conventions'. This is important because it points away from the UMM reading of Gray endorsed by Sleat. Instead, it suggests that the kinds of values which will be protected by a legitimate *modus vivendi* will be a matter of local circumstances. In what follows,

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[10] Gray Two Faces of Liberalism. Pg. 106.

I will suggest that this reading provides another way to theorize liberalism as a form of *modus vivendi*, one which doesn't, moreover, fall prey to Sleat's objection.

Let me first recap the problem. A *modus vivendi* is first and foremost concerned with securing a peaceful settlement in a situation of value pluralism. However, this seems to face the problem of domination. Peace seems like a necessary rather than a sufficient condition for legitimacy. On one way to read Gray, he gets around this problem by suggesting that a peaceful settlement is only acceptable if it entrenches the kind of human rights typical of a liberal regime. So we get a defence of a distinctly liberal form of *modus vivendi* decoupled from the kind of normative foundations plaguing Rawls. This is the UMM reading of Gray. However, as Sleat has shown, endorsing this reading means that modus vivendi is just another species of moral foundationalism. It turns out, that is, that the parties agreeing to a settlement will have to agree on the rights typical of a liberal regime. The upshot is that Gray is only able to deal with the kind of superficial pluralism that is dealt with by Rawls in PL.

The fundamental problem with the UMM reading, I think, is that it implies that human rights are immutable, and that as a result, the acceptability of a political regime is immutable and unchangeable. Moreover, because these are the kind of rights typical of a liberal regime, this means that a liberal regime has a kind of justificatory universality: liberal regimes are uniquely legitimate by virtue of facilitating a UMM. As we have seen, however, this drains the motivation from taking the *modus vivendi* route in the first place: if we tie legitimacy to immutable rights, then we fall back to a foundationalism with regards to legitimacy. What Gray needs, then, is a way of endorsing a specifically liberal solution to the problem of domination without bringing in a universalism by the back door.

A clue to a getting around the problem with the UMM reading is found in the passage above. Here Gray suggests that rights are 'conventions'. This suggests to me that rights are contingent and provisional rather than arising from a set of universal foundational norms. If there isn't a set of universal norms underpinning rights, however, then it makes no sense to suggest that political legitimacy is tied to a single normative criteria. After all, if there were such a single criteria, it would presumably be tied to a single normative foundation which would act as the normative source of that criterion. So, in the absence of such a single set of norms, we are forced to reconceive legitimacy somewhat. I suggest that what Gray has in mind here is something similar to John Horton's (2010, 2019) conception of legitimacy. For Horton, legitimacy is a matter of a regime being acceptable to the parties subject to it, for whatever reason, be it prudential, moral, or something else.[11] This, in effect, renders legitimacy a *local* matter: what is acceptable to parties will depend on the social and political situation in which they are embedded. Now given that human nature is fairly stable, and that there are certain political arrangements that any agent would find intolerable, there is a certain core of values exemplified by all such acceptable regimes. But Horton's point is that what is acceptable in any time and place is entirely an empirical matter. There is no single uber set of values, nor does it even make sense to try and rank them. They can always conflict, and there is no context-independent means of adjudication.

If we understand Gray as endorsing this conception of legitimacy, then we can say that liberalism can be seen form of locally acceptable modus vivendi regime, e.g. one which sets acceptable limits to state power in our own, broadly Western, context. It is broadly acceptable to us, here and now. Let us call this the *anti-exceptionalist* reading of Gray's *modus vivendi* liberalism. I argue that if we understand Gray in this way, we can avoid the inconsistences plaguing the UMM reading. The problem with the UMM reading is that it solves the problem of domination only be reifying a set of rights, and thus undermining the claim to be more

realistic than, say, PL. On the anti-exceptionalist reading, a liberal *modus vivendi* isn't legitimate because it protects a set universal human rights. Rather, it is legitimate because it is acceptable here and now. But – and this is a key point – on the supposition that humans will not accept intolerable coercion as legitimate, what is acceptable here and now will *not* be tantamount to domination or anything goes. It will exemplify some set of those values required for a tolerable human life. What is very important to point out here is that on the anti-exceptionalist reading, that a regime protects such values is not part of what justifies it as legitimate. This is the job of local acceptability. Rather, it's just that, as a matter of empirical fact, the types of regimes humans will find acceptable have the feature that they will exemplify some of these values.

The upshot is that a liberal regime is simply one kind of *modus vivendi* – one kind of regime that is locally acceptable. If we take this route, we avoid having to tie the legitimacy of a liberal regime to convergence on a single, universal set of values. One consequence of this, however, is that we must give up saying that liberalism is a uniquely good form of *modus vivendi* – it is simply one way of life that can, under certain circumstances, be acceptable. Acceptability, as we have seen, rules out some regimes as illegitimate – those that would not be acceptable – but it doesn't prescribe any best regime. Indeed, given value pluralism, as understood by Gray, the very notion of a uniquely best regime doesn't even make sense, because there is no ultimate way of adjudicating between conflicting conceptions of foundational values. Some liberals may find this unacceptably realist.[12] I, however, embrace the possibility of making liberalism more realistic. However, it does have the advantage of dealing with the more substantive pluralism that Gray suggested the Rawlsian cannot deal with. For Rawls, those with differing comprehensive doctrines must converge upon accepting specific moral principles as the basis for a liberal regime. The problem is that these moral principles are themselves contestable. The same problem plagues the UMM reading of Gray, according to Sleat (and I agree). If we read Gray as an anti-exceptionalist, however, we can see him as embracing pluralism 'all the way down'. A liberal regime doesn't rest on a particular moral foundation upon which all parties must converge upon. It only demands that the parties subject to the regime accept it as legitimate. It makes no demands whatsoever as to what the reasons must be, nor does it demand that all agents converge upon a single rationale (within different comprehensive doctrines). So, while this reading of Gray is much thinner in normative content, it is certainly more faithful, I think, to his explicit acceptance of a deep and substantive value-pluralism.

<div align="center">VI</div>

I would like to conclude this paper by suggesting that, as least on my reading, Gray deserves to be considered a thinker in the tradition of the counter-enlightenment. There is a case to be made that one of the enduring legacies of the enlightenment is what Oakeshott called the rationalist state of mind.[13] For the rationalist, social and political institutions can – and should be – subjected to the tribunal of reason. Those which do not make the grade, moreover, should be reconstructed according to abstract principles and plans. In politics, for instance the rationalist seeks to 'improve' upon those social institutions which have organically developed by subjecting them to various sorts of planning. He also seeks to remove the putative contingences of our political situation by, for instance, motivating our regimes by means of tying them to universally binding moral principles. Though Oakeshott didn't put it in these terms, I think that one of the central traits of the rationalist is a desire to tie all existing institutions to foundational axioms or premises. The rationalist, that is, is a thoroughgoing *epistemic foundationalist*.

Supposing that I am correct here, and that a primary trait of the enlightenment project (broadly construed) is a kind of epistemic foundationalism, then we can see why, at least on my reading which rejects

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[12] Note here on realism .....

[13] Oakeshott, the politics of rationalism and other essays ....

subscription to the UMM, Gray deserves to be considered a thinker of the counter-enlightenment. By endorsing thoroughgoing pluralism of value, Gray attacks the very intelligibility of a foundationalist politics. There is no single, Archimedean point from which we can adjudicate the competing claims of individuals and groups. While we presumably need political institutions, we must temper our ambitions for them. Indeed, Gray rails against political 'universalism', and the most plausible reading of political universalism is as a species of foundationalism: certain political institutions are universal and rationally being because they are grounded in rationally compelling moral principles:

> The world-historical failure of the Enlightenment project – in political terms, the collapse and ruin, in the late twentieth century, of the secular, rationalist and universalist political movements, liberal as well as Marxist, that that project spawned, and the dominance in political life of ethnic, nationalist and fundamentalist forces – suggest the falsity of the philosophical anthropology upon which the Enlightenment project rested … The falsification of this view by historical experience is a phenomenon which conventional liberal thought, for which cultural difference is either a form of atavism or else of subjective preference whose place is in private life, has found too threatening to explore. On the alternative view that I … develop, the propensity to cultural difference is a primordial attribute of the human species; human identities are plural and divers in there very natures, as natural languages are plural and diverse, and they are always variations in particular forms of common life, never exemplars of universal humanity.[14]

While we can justify a liberal regime, we must accept as a fact that such a regime is radically contingent, and as a result, *unexceptional*. For there simply is no super-value which all rational agents find acceptable. Liberalism is just one way of securing a minimally acceptable settlement between potentially warring parties. Rationalism is a non-starter, at least in the political domain. This anti-exceptionalism, I think, ties Gray to Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger who, although for very different reasons, converge upon the idea that human reason is severely circumvented by its fallibility and situatedness, and that we will do better by acknowledging this. Indeed, Gray is very fond of the Heideggerian term '*glassenheit*', or '*releasement*': weaning ourselves from willing.[15] In my view, one of the enduring legacies of Gray's project for the present day can be usefully summarized by a paraphrase of this: we do well by weaning ourselves from willing too much of our political theories.

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