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Contemporary Political Theory as an Anti-Enlightenment Project

[NB: I am aware that the argument of this paper – that the majority of contemporary political theorists seek to dissociate themselves from the Enlightenment – isn't actually much of an argument. I am currently beginning a book project that will seek to defend the Enlightenment (to some extent or another) from the attacks of its contemporary critics; the material gathered here includes part of the introduction and the introductions to each of the five substantive chapters, along with a few underdeveloped remarks at the beginning and end that seek to tie things together. In other words, this material wasn't written as a stand-alone paper, so I apologize if it seems incomplete – it is! I also apologize for the length; for those who don't have the time or desire to read it all, the main line of argument comes in the first 18 pages, with the rest fleshing out some details. I will, however, be eager to hear your thoughts about the charges I have outlined, and especially if I have missed any major critics or criticisms of the Enlightenment.]

Like it or not, we are all children of the Enlightenment, utterly incapable of escaping the clutches of ideals and arguments put forth over two centuries ago. Or so, at least, many critics of the Enlightenment seem to believe. Michel Foucault claims, for instance, that the Enlightenment has largely determined "what we are, what we think, and what we do today,"[1] and John Gray insists that "all schools of contemporary political thought are variations on the Enlightenment project."[2] There is, of course, something to such claims: given the number of values, practices, and institutions that we have inherited from the eighteenth century, it is difficult to imagine what our world would look like *without* its Enlightenment heritage. Yet it is remarkable how few political theorists still defend this heritage; in fact, I can think of few topics on which recent work in political theory has displayed greater consensus than on the conviction that the Enlightenment outlook is radically problematic. This paper will seek to show that the bulk of contemporary political theory, so far from being a series of "variations on the Enlightenment project," can in fact be better described as a series of *criticisms* of that project. I will begin with a broad survey of the critics of the Enlightenment since World War II and then discuss in more detail what I take to be the five main criticisms leveled against the Enlightenment today: its belief in universal foundations, its overconfidence in reason, its enabling of oppression, its hostility to "the other,"

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[1] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", trans. Catherine Porter, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 303.
[2] John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), viii; see also John Gray, *Voltaire* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 48.

and its atomizing individualism.

The Enlightenment's Critics: An Overview

The Enlightenment has been condemned almost since the moment of its inception. The earliest attacks came from the conservative and religious right (especially in Catholic France),[3] although the most formidable of the Enlightenment's eighteenth-century opponents was surely Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great critic of the arts and sciences, luxury and refinement, self-interest and cosmopolitanism.[4] The initial wave of hostility toward the Enlightenment peaked in the wake of the French Revolution and the Terror, with figures such as Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, and J. G. Herder leading the charge in blaming the *philosophes* for their supposed radicalism, atheism, and absolutism. This hostility diminished somewhat in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as movements such as Romanticism, Idealism, utilitarianism, and historicism replaced the Enlightenment as the main focal point of theoretical concern, although thinkers from G. W. F. Hegel to Friedrich Nietzsche (at least in his "later period") did take care to register their disagreements.[5] Since World War II, however, opposition to the Enlightenment has surfaced with renewed vigor and from nearly every direction, uniting conservatives and liberals, pluralists and communitarians, postmodernists and religious fundamentalists; it is this more recent opposition to the Enlightenment with which I will be concerned in this paper.

The rise and growth of contemporary opposition to the Enlightenment began when several scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century accused it of being the main cause of the most momentous problem the world was then facing: the emergence of totalitarianism. Perhaps the best-known such accusation came in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's magnum opus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Writing in the midst of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust (although from the safe refuge of California), Horkheimer and Adorno sought to explain "why

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[3] See Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[4] See Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Arthur Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity" *American Political Science Review* 90.2 (1996): 344-60; and Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming 2008), chapter 1.

[5] For a helpful survey of the opponents of the Enlightenment since eighteenth century, see Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism," and they found their culprit in the Enlightenment and "enlightenment thinking" more generally.[6] The Enlightenment's "instrumental reason" inculcates an overwhelming concern for efficiency and gives people enormous power while at the same time undermining any objective basis for morality, they argue, and the ultimate result has been the death camps of the Third Reich. When Horkheimer and Adorno baldly state that "Enlightenment is totalitarian,"[7] then, they mean that it leads (indirectly but inevitably) to fascism – an argument that has been repeated, in various forms, by a number of scholars since their time.[8]

Soon after the war ended, a number of Cold War liberals began to lay totalitarianism of the opposite kind at the Enlightenment's feet, blaming it for engendering not fascism but communism. Jacob Talmon, for instance, contended that the *philosophes*' rationalism led them to believe in the existence of a perfect, comprehensive, natural order in the world, and to see temporary coercion as justified for the sake of the harmonious, democratic, and free future that they believed would emerge once that order was realized.[9] He argues that the Enlightenment gave birth to "totalitarian democracy," the belief that true freedom can only be attained through collectivism and the extension of politics into every sphere of life – an outlook that he claims has been shared by all totalitarianisms of the left, from the Jacobins to the Bolsheviks. An even better-known argument along these lines was put forward by Isaiah Berlin, who contended that while the thinkers of the Enlightenment were supporters of freedom and opponents of intolerance in their own time, their rationalistic outlook ultimately led to terrible oppression. According to Berlin, the Enlightenment was "monist," meaning that its proponents believed that the world and everything in it forms a systematic, coherent whole and is subject to a set of universal and eternal laws that are knowable

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[6] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1947] 2002), xiv.

[7] Ibid., 4; see also 18.

[8] For a number of different arguments that the Enlightenment bears a major responsibility for fascism in general and/or Nazism in particular, see Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1968] 1990); George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chapter 7; and Lawrence Birken, *Hitler as Philosophe: Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

[9] See Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, [1952] 1970), 1-4, 249-53.

by human beings.[10] In his view, monism ineluctably leads to utopianism – the belief in and search for an ultimate solution to all human problems – and this is precisely what led to the Soviet gulags and other monstrosities of the twentieth century; in other words, Berlin sees totalitarianism as implicit even if dormant in Enlightenment thought. Talmon and Berlin were two of the earliest prominent figures to link the Enlightenment with communism, but this link has now become widely accepted among contemporary scholars.[11]

The Enlightenment was also roundly criticized around this time by a number of conservative thinkers who blamed it for undermining tradition and religion without putting anything in their place other than a misguided confidence in reason. Michael Oakeshott, for instance, saw the *philosophes* as rationalists who had no use for tradition, prejudice, and habit and who believed in the idea of a perfect, rational political order that can and should be implemented universally and at all costs.[12] He claims that the *philosophes* advocated wiping the slate clean and building society anew from scratch (as in the American and French Revolutions) rather than prudently repairing or reforming their society's existing traditions – a viewpoint that invariably leads to dangerous social engineering. Another leading conservative thinker of this period, Leo Strauss, saw the Enlightenment chiefly as a battle against revealed religion, which is a battle that he claims it could never win since religion is based not on rational grounds but rather on an omnipotent and unfathomable God.[13] Thus, the Enlightenment's commitment to reason ultimately rested on faith – faith that revelation is untrue and that there is no such God. The dangers inherent in an unquestioning faith in reason are, according to Strauss, evidenced by the great increase in

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[10] See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux [1973] 1998), 243-46.

[11] The works that link the Enlightenment to communism are simply too numerous to list; there is now widespread agreement that the *philosophes*' ideals inspired Jacobinism, which in turn inspired Marxism and communism. One likely cause of this near-consensus is the fact that Marx and Engels themselves saw eighteenth-century French materialism as one of the key intellectual sources of communism. See, for example, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, trans. Richard Dixon and Clemens Dutt (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1844] 1975), 147-57; and Friedrich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, [1880] 1972), 605-8.

[12] See especially Michael Oakeshott, "The New Bentham," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1932] 1991). Although he started from hermeneutical rather than political concerns, Hans-Georg Gadamer reached a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between the Enlightenment and tradition, famously asserting that "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second edition, trans. Joel Weinscheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed & Ward, [1960] 1989), 270; see also 271-82.

[13] See Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Fred Baumann (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, [1935] 1987), 10-11.

human power that has accompanied progress in science and technology, which, combined with the rise of value relativism, has made modern man into "a blind giant."[14] Yet another distinct example among the mid-century conservative opponents of the Enlightenment can be found in the writings of Eric Voegelin, a Christian thinker who blamed the *philosophes* for focusing on the profane and rational rather than the sacred and mysterious, thereby dissolving the transcendental glue that held Western civilization together. According to Voegelin, the spiritual and intellectual crises that have accompanied modern secularization were brought about by thinkers like Voltaire, who, he asserts, "has done more than anybody else to make the darkness of enlightened reason descend on the Western world."[15]

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the Enlightenment began to emerge from a very different quarter with the rise and spread of postmodernism. Indeed, the Enlightenment is *the* main antagonist of many or most postmodernist thinkers; as Daniel Gordon writes, "'Enlightenment' is to postmodernism what 'Old Regime' was to the French Revolution. The Enlightenment, that is to say, symbolizes the modern that postmodernism revolts against. It is the other of postmodernism: not only that which preceded postmodernism but that in opposition to which postmodernism defines itself."[16] Postmodernist thinkers tend to see the Enlightenment's supposed universalism, rationalism, foundationalism, and naturalism as dangerously "hegemonic," "logocentric," "totalizing," and "essentialist"; given our current awareness that all values and beliefs have particular and human, all-too-human origins, they maintain, the Enlightenment's universal claims regarding reason and progress have become absurd and oppressive. These Enlightenment claims made up one of the key "metanarratives" toward which Jean-François Lyotard famously expressed his "incredulity," for example.[17] According to Lyotard, the Enlightenment's grand theories about the progressive liberation of humanity through science and

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[14] Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?: The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, [1981] 1989), 264.

[15] Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 32.

[16] Daniel Gordon, "Introduction: Postmodernism and the French Enlightenment," in *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History*, ed. Daniel Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

[17] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1979] 1984), xxiii-xxiv; see also Jean-François Lyotard, "Tomb of the Intellectual," in *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press [1983] 1993), 6.

the possibility of a universal rational consensus are now untenable and obsolete, because we now realize that no such theory can adequately describe and contain us all. All grand theories or metanarratives – even those whose expressed intent is universal emancipation, like the Enlightenment's – entail exclusion and coercion, the elimination of diversity and difference, which is why Lyotard frequently associates the Enlightenment idea of rational consensus with terror.

Another critique of the Enlightenment that is often designated as postmodernist can be found in Michel Foucault's influential analysis of what he dubbed "the classical age." Foucault attempted to expose the dark side of the supposedly "humanitarian" and "progressive" Enlightenment, and to show that every apparent victory of Enlightenment ideals of "freedom" and "reason" in fact resulted in new and even more insidious forms of domination and control. In his view, the Enlightenment culminated not in the Nazi death camps or Soviet gulags, but rather in the Panopticon, the model prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in which automatic and continuous surveillance exercises discipline even more surely than did the dark dungeons and corporal punishment of previous ages.[18] To be sure, not all postmodernist critiques of the Enlightenment are quite this damning. Richard Rorty, for instance, rejects the foundationalism that he ascribes to the Enlightenment – its attempt to find objective, timeless, universal truths about the natural world, human nature, and morality – but wholeheartedly endorses the Enlightenment's *politics*, above all its aim to maximize freedom, toleration, and decency and to minimize cruelty, suffering, and humiliation.[19] He claims that we can and should hold onto the Enlightenment's liberal political ideals even as we jettison its philosophical baggage.

Alongside the postmodern "turn" emerged an array of literature blaming Enlightenment thinkers for ignoring, belittling, or even encouraging the exploitation of individuals and groups whom they saw as "other" because of their nationality, ethnicity, race, or gender. Edward Said,

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[18] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, [1975] 1979), 200-209.

[19] See Richard Rorty, "The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," in *What's Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 19-21. Rorty's tactic of embracing the political but not the philosophical side of the Enlightenment has recently become a common one within several different schools of thought; for instance, similar positions are taken by Gary Gutting, one of Rorty's fellow neo-pragmatists, and by Chantal Mouffe, one of the foremost proponents of "radical democracy." See Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163-64, 174-75; and Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?", in *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, [1988] 1993).

who is generally regarded as the founder and most significant figure of postcolonial studies, argues that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment formed the origins of "Orientalism," the European constructions and representations of the non-European world that were used to justify and extend Western power over the East.[20] Thus, he views the Enlightenment as a crucial source of the evils of Eurocentrism and colonialism – evils that are now routinely associated with this period. Enlightenment thinkers are also frequently accused of having been racist. Cornel West argues that "racism permeated the writings of the major figures of the Enlightenment"; according to West, Montesquieu "leaned toward support of the idea [of white supremacy]," while "Voltaire's endorsement of the idea of white supremacy was unequivocal" and "Hume's racism was notorious."[21] Similarly, Charles Mills contends that the vast majority of Enlightenment thinkers embraced a "Racial Contract" that partitioned humanity into two groups, "whites" and "nonwhites," and privileged the former, allowing them to rule over and exploit the bodies, land, and resources of the latter.[22] Moreover, many feminists have condemned the Enlightenment's emphasis on impersonal, scientific reason and autonomous individuality as inherently androcentric.[23] Jane Flax, for instance, argues that while the Enlightenment at least ostensibly aimed at the emancipation of all, in fact its neutral and egalitarian façade served as a cover for a system of male dominance and a patriarchal social structure.[24] Susan Hekman, for her part, writes of the "inherent sexism of Enlightenment epistemology," above all its exclusive concern with a "masculine" notion of abstract, rational, objective, and universal truth, and claims that through this notion of truth "Enlightenment thought fostered the oppression of women."[25] In short, many

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[20] See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), especially 116-20.

[21] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, [1982] 2002), 61-62. This is far from West's only criticism: he also refers to "the bland universality, glib generality, and monotonous uniformity of the Enlightenment" and accuses it of harboring a Gadamerian "prejudice against prejudice." Ibid., 32, 28; see also Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 57-64.

[22] See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 26-27, 55-57, 122.

[23] Of course, not all feminists are hostile to the Enlightenment; indeed, many "liberal feminists" – those who simply assert and seek the equal rationality, dignity, and rights of women – appeal quite self-consciously to Enlightenment ideals and principles; see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, third edition (New York: Continuum [1985] 2001), chapter 1. Nevertheless, the majority of feminists today – including most "radical," "cultural," and "postmodern" feminists – argue that these Enlightenment ideals are insufficient or even detrimental for the feminist cause.

[24] See Jane Flax, "Is Enlightenment Emancipatory?", in *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[25] Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University

scholars have concluded that the supposedly "neutral" Enlightenment notions of rationality, equality, autonomy, and universality in fact privilege the white European male, serving as a mask for – and tool of – colonialism, racism, and sexism.

While most postmodernist thinkers associate the Enlightenment with foundationalism and absolutism, not all of the Enlightenment's detractors share this view; indeed, some critics make virtually the opposite accusation, claiming instead that the Enlightenment's skepticism regarding authority and tradition eventually undermined all absolute values and thereby plunged the modern world into morass of relativism and nihilism. (We have already seen that quite distinct versions of this charge were leveled by Horkheimer and Adorno, Strauss, and Voegelin, for example.) One of the most prominent critics of recent years, Alasdair MacIntyre, in fact claims that the Enlightenment was both foundationalist *and* nihilistic – or, more precisely, that it necessarily led to nihilism because it pursued the wrong kind of moral foundations. MacIntyre identifies the "Enlightenment project" as that of seeking "an independent rational justification for morality" in enduring features of human nature.[26] (In fact, he seems to have been the main popularizer of the term "the Enlightenment project," which was virtually unheard of until the past few decades.) This project not only failed but *had* to fail, in his view, above all because of the Enlightenment's scientific, non-teleological worldview: he claims that there is no way to ground moral principles in human nature without assuming that human nature is teleological, that there is some ultimate end or purpose for human beings.[27] While the Enlightenment's *aim* was foundationalist, then, its ultimate *effect* was to undermine the earlier (teleological) justifications for morality without putting anything in their place. As a result, he argues, today's liberal societies – the heirs of the failed Enlightenment project – lack any shared norms or common moral life, and their inhabitants remain disconnected and directionless.

Following MacIntyre's lead on this latter point, many communitarians have blamed the Enlightenment for the ills that beset contemporary liberalism. Michael Sandel argues that today's prevailing public philosophy is a procedural liberalism inspired by the Enlightenment (especially

Press, 1990), 8, 119.

[26] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 1984), chapter 4.

[27] See ibid., chapter 5.

Kant), one that attempts to put "the right" (principles of justice) before "the good" (the community's ends or purposes) and thus to remain neutral toward the moral and religious views of its citizens. According to Sandel, putting the right before the good requires an implausible understanding of individuals as "unencumbered selves" who stand back from their experiences and attachments and freely choose their ends; worse, this mistaken view of the self encourages a kind of radical, self-interested individualism and thereby erodes the bonds that hold the community together.[28] Similarly, Charles Taylor argues that the Enlightenment ideal of "disengaged reason," according to which individuals can rationally choose their own identities, encourages people to view their lives in wholly individual terms and to regard society as only a means to their own ends – that is, it encourages atomism.[29] Taylor argues that, contra the Enlightenment, true freedom consists not in mere "negative liberty" – the absence of restrictions or the ability to choose one's own course in life – but rather in self-determination of a kind that can only be found in and through a political community. In seeking to free humanity from the shackles of authority and tradition, then, the thinkers of the Enlightenment adopted an outlook that isolated individuals from one another and thereby undercut the possibility of *true* freedom, the kind that comes from public life and self-government. Communitarians also frequently contend that the Enlightenment's disregard for the importance of communal bonds serves to undermine morality and family life, a case that is memorably articulated by James Q. Wilson:

> …a fatally flawed assumption of many Enlightenment thinkers [is] that autonomous individuals can freely choose, or will, their moral life. Believing that individuals are everything, rights are trumps, and morality is relative to time and place, such thinkers have been led to design laws, practices, and institutions that leave nothing between the state and the individual save choices, contracts, and entitlements. Fourth-grade children being told how to use condoms is only one of the more perverse of the results.[30]

In large part due to the criticisms leveled by various postmodernists and communitarians,

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[28] See Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1982] 1998); and Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Sandel does not discuss the Enlightenment directly or at great length in either of these books, but he elsewhere affirms that the kind of procedural liberalism they discuss "is perhaps the fullest expression of the Enlightenment's quest for the self-defining subject." Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self" *Political Theory* 12.1 (February 1984), 87.

[29] See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 82, 193-97, 413; and Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 3-11.

[30] James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 250; see also 218, 244-46; and James Q. Wilson, *On Character: Essays by James Q. Wilson* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1991), 37-38.

"Enlightenment" has come to be seen as something of a dirty word in contemporary political theory, such that even many liberal thinkers – who would seem to be the naturally allies of the Enlightenment – now do their best to distance themselves from this period and outlook.[31] The leading liberal theorist of recent years, John Rawls, initially articulated a theory of justice that explicitly appealed to Enlightenment figures such as Kant and Hume, even if he distorted their thought somewhat to suit his own purposes.[32] In his later work, however, he shifted course, insisting that whatever his outlook is, it "is not a form of Enlightenment liberalism."[33] He uses the epithet "Enlightenment liberalism" to denote a "comprehensive" or "metaphysical" liberalism, one that relies on a comprehensive philosophical doctrine about ultimate meaning or the good life and thus requires imposing a set of controversial ethical ideals (such as individualism and autonomy) on people who live reasonable ways of life in conflict with these ideals. He proposes instead a non-Enlightenment, purely "political" liberalism that makes no claims to universality or truth, that "stays on the surface, philosophically speaking" so as to respect a plurality of reasonable ways of life in a manner that Enlightenment liberalism cannot – a proposal that has been embraced by a multitude of other political liberals.[34]

Even this kind of move away from the Enlightenment has proven insufficient for many pluralist and *modus vivendi* liberals, who claim that political liberalism is still too imbued with Enlightenment-style assumptions. These latter groups insist that people deeply disagree on matters of justice as well as on matters of ultimate meaning and the good life, and thus that Rawls's "overlapping consensus" on liberal political principles is little more than Enlightenment universalism in sheep's clothing. (They frequently highlight Rawls's contention that such an overlap will occur among all *reasonable* worldviews, which they claim demonstrates his outlook's continued indebtedness to the Enlightenment.) These thinkers argue that taking pluralism seriously requires abandoning the Enlightenment hope of finding or producing a universal consensus, and instead seeking only to find terms by which individuals or groups who live

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[31] As Gerald Gaus writes in his survey of contemporary theories of liberalism, "The main current of contemporary liberal political theory seeks to develop a post-Enlightenment account of politics." Gerald F. Gaus, *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism: Public Reason as a Post-Enlightenment Project* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), x.
[32] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[33] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, paperback edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xl.
[34] John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14.3 (Summer 1985), 230.

according to radically diverse ethical doctrines can coexist peacefully. William Galston, for instance, argues that liberals go astray in identifying liberalism with the Enlightenment and its emphasis on individual autonomy and self-directedness. Rather, he maintains, they ought to take their bearings from what he calls the "post-Reformation project" of dealing with religious differences, a project that emphasized toleration of diversity rather than autonomy.[35] The Enlightenment does not sufficiently "give diversity its due," and thus "To the extent that many liberals identify liberalism with the Enlightenment, they limit support for their cause and drive many citizens of goodwill – indeed, many potential allies – into opposition."[36]

Galston's critique of the Enlightenment is mild, however, compared to the sweeping and vitriolic denunciation found in the work of John Gray. Gray manages to collect almost all of the currently fashionable criticisms of the Enlightenment into a single book – a book that is, inevitably, entitled *Enlightenment's Wake*. Like other pluralists and *modus vivendi* theorists, he claims that the thinkers of the Enlightenment implausibly and vainly sought to forge a universal consensus on liberal political principles, but he does not stop there: like many communitarians, he argues that they encouraged atomistic individualism and undermined the very idea of a common culture; like many postcolonialists, critical race theorists, and feminists, he argues that they sought to suppress and devalue cultural diversity and difference; like many postmodernists, he claims that they believed in the dubious idea of a "generic humanity" that is the same in all times and places; like many conservatives, he argues that they failed to see that there are certain problems in political life that are permanently intractable to rational solution; and like those who see totalitarian tendencies in the Enlightenment, he sees the totalitarian Soviet regime as "one of the Enlightenment's most stupendous constructions."[37] Ultimately, Gray argues that "The legacy of the Enlightenment project… is a world ruled by calculation and willfulness which is humanly unintelligible and destructively purposeless."[38] Enlightenment ideals have, in his view, left the Western world "plagued with anomie and nihilism" as well as "desolated traditional cultures in

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[35] See William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24-26.
[36] Ibid., 24, 26.
[37] Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 33.
[38] Ibid., 146.

every part of the globe and visited devastation on their natural environments."[39] Thus, it is with

little sorrow that he announces that our age is distinguished by "the collapse of the Enlightenment

project on a world-historical scale" and that this collapse may be "a prelude to an irreversible –

and, perhaps, not to be lamented – Western decline."[40]

Gray's work constitutes what is perhaps the rhetorical high point of anti-Enlightenment

animus among today's most prominent political theorists, although a few slightly lesser known

works manage to surpass even Gray's in shrillness of tone and comical direness of outlook.

Rajani Kanth's *Breaking with the Enlightenment*, for instance, argues that "the three ideational

colonnades, on which the entire edifice of the Enlightenment rested" were a triumphalist science

that was "virile, misanthropic, misogynist, determinist, intolerant and subjugationist"; a

"materialist totalitarianism" that "united phenomena as far apart as Patriarchy, Imperialism,

Colonization, environmental degradation, [and] destruction of the community and social ties"; and

a liberal, progressivist ideology that was "blatantly Stalinist" in that it sanctioned "rabid,

catastrophic *violence* [as] an entirely legitimate means to enshrine and defend [its] wonderful

principles."[41] In their attempt to carry out their progressivist ideology, Kanth claims, "the doughty

warriors of the Enlightenment…have torched, raped, pillaged, and plundered the world, and all in

the name of progress."[42] Thus, there is only one option left for us: "we may choose to break with

the Enlightenment – or let it, wantonly, break us."[43] Not to be outdone, William Ophuls's

Requiem for Modern Politics literally blames "the Enlightenment paradigm of politics" for

"Everything that does not work, all that we hate and fear about the modern way of life."[44] The list

of the ills that he attributes to our embrace of the Enlightenment outlook includes

> Explosive population growth, widespread habitat destruction, disastrous pollution,
> and every other aspect of ecological devastation; increasing crime and violence,
> runaway addictions of every kind, the neglect or abuse of children, and every other
> form of social breakdown; antinomianism, nihilism, millenarianism, and every

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[39] Ibid., 16, 178.

[40] Ibid., 1, 183.

[41] Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, *Breaking with the Enlightenment: The Twilight of History and the Rediscovery of Utopia* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 94, 98, 101, 105. See also Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, *Against Eurocentrism: A Transcendent Critique of Modernist Science, Society, and Morals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 91.

[42] Ibid., 119.

[43] Ibid., 113.

[44] William Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics: The Tragedy of the Enlightenment and the Challenge of the New Millennium* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 267.

other variety of ideological madness; hyperpluralism, factionalism, administrative despotism, and every other manifestation of democratic decay; weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, the structural poverty of underdevelopment, and many other global pathologies.[45]

He concludes that "the Enlightenment project has failed – and failed badly, exposing humanity to an unprecedented planet-wide catastrophe-in-the-making that is the ironic product of its highest ideals."[46] Still another scholar, Geoffrey Harpham, has recently compared the Enlightenment – to its detriment – with the Spanish Inquisition.[47]

One of the few leading theorists of recent years who is generally seen as a *supporter* of the Enlightenment, Jürgen Habermas, applauds the emancipatory potential that he sees as inherent in the Enlightenment's universalism and argues that the modern project should be rehabilitated and completed rather than abandoned – something for which he has been taken to task by a host of postmodernist opponents.[48] Yet even Habermas is ultimately ambivalent about the Enlightenment outlook and its legacy: although he sees the views of his fellow critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno as excessively pessimistic,[49] he shares enough with them to conclude that recent history has made a mockery of the Enlightenment's most grandiose dreams and its naïve faith in the value of scientific and technological progress. He writes that "The 20th century has shattered [the] optimism" of the Enlightenment, above all its "extravagant expectation" that the advance of the arts and sciences would promote moral progress, just institutions, and human happiness.[50] He is especially wary of the Enlightenment's emphasis on instrumental reason, for he claims that when this kind of reason prevails in the social world instead of a more collective, "communicative" reason – when, to use Habermasian parlance, "the lifeworld" is "colonized" – the predictable result is a Weberian loss of meaning and widespread Durkheimian anomie.[51] Further, many of

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[45] Ibid., 267-68.
[46] Ibid., 279.
[47] See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "So…What *Is* Enlightenment?: An Inquisition into Modernity" *Critical Inquiry* 20.3 (Spring 1994), 550. [524-56]
[48] See especially Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," trans. Seyla Benhabib, *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 3-14.
[49] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, Beacon Press, [1981] 1984), part 4; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, [1985] 1987), chapter 5.
[50] Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 9.
[51] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of*

Habermas's followers go even further in rhetorically dissociating themselves from the Enlightenment. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, attempts to formulate a "post-Enlightenment defense of universalism," one that would eschew the Enlightenment's "metaphysical props and historical conceits" such as "the illusions of a self-transparent and self-grounding reason, the illusion of a disembedded and disembodied subject, and the illusion of having found an Archimedean standpoint, situated beyond historical and cultural contingency," all of which have "long ceased to convince."[52]

All in all, then, it seems that the revival of Enlightenment criticism after World War II has grown to encompass virtually every school of political theory today. It should be noted, however, that not all of the thinkers I have mentioned thus far are *wholly* critical of the Enlightenment. Berlin, for instance, is sometimes seen as a proponent of the *philosophes'* outlook despite his criticism of their monist tendencies because of his support for the their campaign against intolerance and superstition.[53] Likewise, Taylor finds much to admire in the Enlightenment's moral views even if he thinks its ideal of disengaged reason has impoverished modern political life, and, as we have already seen, Rorty embraces the political but not the philosophical side of the Enlightenment – its liberal ideals of freedom and toleration but not the foundations on which they were purported to rest. Even Horkheimer and Adorno seem to hold some reservations in their condemnation of the Enlightenment: their otherwise relentlessly critical work ends on a surprisingly optimistic note – even if that note only lasts for a sentence or two[54] – and at one point Horkheimer hoped to complement the "negative" *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with a sequel, a "positive" account of the possibilities of enlightenment entitled *Rescuing the Enlightenment* (*Rettung der Aufklärung*).[55] On the other hand, the concluding lines of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Functionalist Reason, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, [1981] 1987), part 8, especially 326, 355.

[52] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-4; see also 7-8.

[53] For the argument that Berlin is best seen as a think in the Enlightenment tradition despite his reservations, see Roger Hausheer, "Enlightening the Enlightenment," in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003); and Robert Wokler, "Isaiah Berlin's Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment," in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003). For a contrary view, see Graeme Garrard, "The Counter-Enlightenment Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 2.3 (October 1997): 281-96.

[54] See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 172.

[55] See Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12: *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 594-605; and Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17: *Briefwechsel 1941-1948*,

ring rather hollow after all that came before it, and the sequel to this work was never written; given their view of the relationship of enlightenment to mythology, it seems exceedingly doubtful that Horkheimer and Adorno could have found a way to rescue the Enlightenment from what they saw as its own self-destructive tendencies. And even Berlin, Taylor, and Rorty stress the dangers and absurdities of the Enlightenment outlook more than its beneficial aspects; indeed, much of their careers were devoted to gigantic campaigns against the Enlightenment's monism, individualism, and foundationalism, respectively.

Perhaps the most perplexing case of all is that of Foucault, who, in a series of essays near the end of his life, explicitly aligned himself with the Enlightenment project of Kant, of all people.[56] The ostensibly unhistorical, rationalist, and idealist Kant would seem, at first blush, to be nearly the antithesis of Foucault, who preferred the historical, the critical, and the concrete.[57] While Foucault protested against the intellectual "blackmail" that insists that one has to be simply either "for" or "against" the Enlightenment,[58] I think it is reasonable to regard him as an anti-Enlightenment thinker in the sense that the other critics discussed in this paper are, even in spite of his late endorsement of the Enlightenment outlook. This endorsement must be read, after all, in light of the *kind* of Enlightenment outlook he was referring to: in his late essays Foucault reads the Enlightenment, by way of Kant's famous essay, as roughly equivalent to the activity of critique – "the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility,"[59] a "mode of critical interrogation" or an

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ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996), 873, 884.

[56] See Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," trans. Colin Gordon, *Economy and Society* 15.1 (February 1986): 88-96; and Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" For a discussion of some of the differences between these essays and the development of Foucault's thinking on these issues, see James Schmidt and Thomas E. Wartenburg, "Foucault's Enlightenment: Critique, Revolution, and the Fashioning of the Self," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

[57] This apparent incongruity has, unsurprisingly, attracted the attention of numerous scholars. Many of them, most famously Habermas, have argued that Foucault's late embrace of the Enlightenment was in fundamental contradiction with the arguments and themes that he had pursued throughout his career, and thus revealed either a contradiction in his thought or a last-minute change of heart; see Jürgen Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's *What is Enlightenment?*", in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). For attempts to exonerate Foucault from this charge to some degree, see Amy Allen, "Foucault and Enlightenment: A Critical Reappraisal" *Constellations* 10.2 (2003): 180-98; and Schmidt and Wartenburg, "Foucault's Enlightenment."

[58] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", 312-13.

[59] Foucault, "What is Critique?", 386.

"ontology of the present,"[60] "a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."[61] As has been pointed out, this kind of commitment to transgression, uncertainty, and self-fashioning sounds rather more like Nietzsche than Kant.[62] Given that the Enlightenment under whose banner Foucault was content to march is quite different from the familiar commitment to reason, science, and progress, and that he devoted the majority of his career to showing how the light of reason and the advance of the sciences go hand in hand with an intensification of insidious power relations, it is difficult to accept that he was a child of the Enlightenment in the conventional sense of the term.

While the Enlightenment's critics often present themselves as boldly defying almost every strand of thought since the eighteenth century, then, I would argue that the opposite is closer to the truth: the far greater part of political theory since World War II has agreed that the Enlightenment outlook falls somewhere on the spectrum from hopelessly naïve and archaic to fundamentally and dangerously misguided. Indeed, this seems to be something of a consensus in recent work in political theory: what attitude or belief could unite such otherwise disparate thinkers as Horkheimer and Berlin, Strauss and Foucault, Rawls and MacIntyre, *except* their shared disdain for the Enlightenment's ideals and aspirations? Moreover, the critics whom I have briefly mentioned thus far constitute only the tip of a veritable anti-Enlightenment iceberg, one that includes religious fundamentalists who are averse to the Enlightenment's secularism, nationalists who object to its cosmopolitanism, multiculturalists who frown upon its universalism and implicit devaluing of difference, anti-globalizationists who disapprove of its commercialism, environmentalists who are hostile to its aspiration to conquer the natural world through science and technology – the list could go on seemingly indefinitely. Many Enlightenment scholars have observed that anti-Enlightenment prejudices are in fact so pervasive that they have been enshrined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* since 1891:

> enlightenment, *n*.
> 1. The action of enlightening; the state of being enlightened…
> 2. Sometimes used…to designate the spirit and aims of the French philosophers of

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[60] Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," 96.
[61] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", 312.
[62] See Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, "Between Nietzsche and Kant: Michel Foucault's Reading of 'What is Enlightenment?'" *History of Political Thought* 20.2 (Summer 1999): 337-56.

the 18th c., or of others whom it is intended to associate with them in the implied charge of shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority, etc.[63]

Darrin McMahon summarizes the current climate well when he notes that while the Enlightenment does still have its defenders in the academy today, "on the whole, Enlightenment bashing has developed into something of an intellectual blood-sport, uniting elements of both the Left and the Right in a common cause."[64]

Given the often bewildering variety of criticisms that are leveled against the Enlightenment, it may be helpful at this point to condense them into a handful of arguments that encompass as least the bulk of the most prominent charges:

- *Belief in Universal Foundations.* Perhaps the most widespread criticism of the Enlightenment in contemporary political theory relates to its supposed insistence on the existence of universal, ahistorical, transcultural foundations for morality and politics. It is widely assumed that Enlightenment thinkers were either unaware of or dismissive of the historical and cultural differences among peoples and beliefs, and that this renders their outlook utterly implausible and dangerously exclusive.

- *Overconfidence in Reason.* Although the Enlightenment's belief in universal foundations is probably the foremost problem in the eyes of most *contemporary* critics, historically speaking the chief charge leveled against the thinkers of this period is that they believed reason could do anything and everything; critics have long contended that the key to the Enlightenment outlook was an overconfidence – many have said "faith" – in reason's power and compass. This charge takes several different forms: the Enlightenment is often blamed for its "rationalism" (its excessive faith in *a priori*, abstract reason), for instance, but it is also frequently blamed for its "positivism" or "scientism" (its reliance on instrumental reason and emphasis on science and technology). This charge is often accompanied by the claim that the Enlightenment outlook entails a naïve optimism regarding the possibility of progress, a conviction that the advance of knowledge will inevitably produce a corresponding advance in human well-being.

- *Enabling of Oppression.* Another major allegation of recent years is the claim that while the thinkers of the Enlightenment proclaimed themselves to be proponents of freedom and tolerance, their ideals and principles ultimately resulted in terrible oppression. Many critics have contended that the Enlightenment outlook has a "dark side" – whether its instrumental notion of reason, its rationalistic utopianism, or its blindness to the insidious relationship between knowledge and power – that works against its well-intentioned aims and instead produces profound *un*freedom.

- *Hostility to "the Other."* Often connected with the charge of oppression is the contention that the thinkers of the Enlightenment were dismissive of or even hostile toward

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[63] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
[64] McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 12.

individuals and groups whom they saw as "different" or "other," which included virtually everyone other than white European bourgeois males. Behind the Enlightenment's seemingly neutral, egalitarian, and progressive façade, its detractors allege, lay a tendency toward and justification for the exclusion, marginalization, and exploitation of these "others" – hence the frequent association of the Enlightenment with practices such as slavery and colonialism.

- *Atomizing Individualism.* A final major criticism is that the Enlightenment's goals of universality and neutrality lead to a focus on individuals and rights rather than communal ties and duties, which in turn serves to encourage atomism and to undermine the moral fabric of the community. By ignoring the shared values and attachments that invariably give meaning to people's lives and identities, many critics claim, the Enlightenment outlook reduces people to self-interested, rights-bearing atoms and thereby makes a healthy community impossible.

The next five sections will examine these five critiques in more detail. The variations on these critiques could be multiplied almost without limit, but I will limit myself to discussing a few of the most typical, powerful, and/or influential examples: on the Enlightenment's belief in universal foundations, I will focus on the critiques of MacIntyre, Gray, and Rorty; on its overconfidence in reason, those of Strauss, Oakeshott, and Berlin; on its enabling of oppression, those of Horkheimer and Adorno, Talmon, and Foucault; on its hostility to "the other," those of Said, Mills, and Flax; and, finally, on its atomizing individualism, those of MacIntyre (again), Taylor, and Gray (again).

Belief in Universal Foundations

Alasdair MacIntyre claims that universalism and foundationalism are *the* defining features of the Enlightenment; he identifies the "Enlightenment project" as that of finding "an independent rational justification for morality," or of going beyond tradition and authority to discover universally valid foundations from which to derive ethical and political principles that all people (and peoples) would find compelling.[65] He maintains that Enlightenment thinkers sought to ground moral principles in enduring features of human nature – whether in reason (as in Kant) or the in passions (as in Diderot and Hume) – so as to ensure their universal validity. It was the universality of these principles that, in their eyes, would make them "rational"; such principles

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[65] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 4. For a compelling argument that MacIntyre's portrait of the Enlightenment project in *After Virtue* is profoundly misleading, see Robert Wokler, "Projecting the Enlightenment," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

would be "undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places."[66] MacIntyre claims that the thinkers of the Enlightenment largely agreed with one another about what the content of this rational morality would include – keeping one's promises, telling the truth, the sanctity of marriage and the family, and so on – but he argues that this was only because they inherited these norms from their shared Christian past.[67] What the Enlightenment identified as the universal dictates of human nature were in reality only the prejudices of eighteenth-century Northern Europe.

That the Enlightenment failed to establish a universally valid foundation for morality and politics is of course far from a novel claim, but MacIntyre goes on to argue more controversially that the Enlightenment project not only failed, but *had* to fail, above all because of its lack of a teleological conception of human nature.[68] In the classical tradition that stretched from Aristotle to the Middle Ages, the task of ethics was to show how human beings could realize their true or essential nature – their *telos*. But the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment denied that human nature is teleological, that there is some end or goal that human beings were meant to realize. In eschewing the idea of a human *telos*, MacIntyre claims, the Enlightenment eliminated the central concept and purpose of all previous ethical thought, and thus the elements of previous traditions that they sought to preserve – the rules or precepts of morality that they inherited from Christianity and the classical world – were rendered incomprehensible. These rules or precepts were meant to show how human beings might realize their true end, and they could no longer be justified once the idea of a true human end was eliminated; they could not be *derived* from human nature, as Enlightenment thinkers sought to do, precisely because they were meant to show how to *educate* or *correct* untutored human nature.[69] The Enlightenment project was "inevitably unsuccessful," MacIntyre claims, because its proponents sought "to find a rational basis for their

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[66] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 6; see also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 51-52. In a more recent work, MacIntyre admits that some eighteenth-century thinkers such as Diderot were aware of "the crucial differences between the cultures of modern Europe and those of other times and places," but he continues to insist that "for the majority of Enlightenment theorists," morality "has no history. It is incapable of development." Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 176.
[67] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 51.
[68] Ibid., chapter 5.
[69] See ibid., 52-55.

moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other."[70]

John Gray argues that MacIntyre's attempt to revive or recover a traditional, teleological, pre-modern outlook is both impracticable and undesirable,[71] but he enthusiastically concurs with MacIntyre's depiction of the Enlightenment project as the search for an independent rational justification for morality, as well as with MacIntyre's contention that this project has failed since Enlightenment thinkers have proven unable to deliver on the promise of universal moral foundations.[72] The far greater part of *Enlightenment's Wake*, however, focuses less on the Enlightenment's search for moral foundations than on what Gray calls "the Enlightenment project of a universal civilization," meaning the attempt to create a civilized, secular, cosmopolitan society based on rational principles. According to both the liberal and Marxist forms of this ideal, the realization of a universal civilization would mean the global realization of an ideal society – an ideal that would be the same for all of humanity – and thus an overcoming of almost all major human conflicts. According to Gray, it was the Enlightenment's central hope and belief that the spread of reason would lead to a universal consensus on what the good life entails and on what kind of regime would best promote such a life.

On Gray's reading, the Enlightenment project of a universal civilization was underwritten by both a philosophy of history and a philosophical anthropology. According to the Enlightenment's philosophy of history, all societies should and will eventually shed their indigenous cultural traditions and local practices and converge on a single, rational model of civilization.[73] Gray acknowledges that some Enlightenment thinkers believed that progress – the

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[70] Ibid., 55.
[71] See Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 147, 151-52, 175-76.
[72] See ibid., 147-51.
[73] See ibid., 64-65, 121, 125, 159, 167. When Gray moves beyond generalizations about the Enlightenment to assess the writings of an actual Enlightenment thinker – indeed, "the Enlightenment thinker *par excellence*" – he is forced to concede that Voltaire, at least, did not see human history as a march toward a universal, rational civilization and that "He was too alive to the quiddities of human circumstances and too alert to the sufferings of individual human beings to subscribe unambiguously to any grand scheme of human progress." Gray, *Voltaire*, 52, 12; see also 2, 11, 37, 45. But Gray is not one to let facts get in the way of his generalizations: he continues to insist, even in this work, that "all Enlightenment thinkers – from the French *philosophes*, the compilers of dictionaries and encyclopedias with whom the Enlightenment is most commonly identified, through Hume and Kant, to the nineteenth-century positivists, Marxists, and liberals whose posterity we all are today – subscribed to a single project" that consisted above all in a

process of worldwide modernization and Westernization – would take place in fits and starts, or proceed in a series of stages, but he insists that they all agreed on its ultimate desirability and inevitability. An equally important (and problematic) component of this project of a universal civilization, in his view, was the Enlightenment's philosophical anthropology, which subscribed to the notion of a "generic humanity," a human nature that is the same everywhere and always and that would thrive in precisely this kind of civilization.[74] Since cultural differences are, in the Enlightenment view, incidental and transitory rather than essential and permanent attributes of human beings – something that people *choose* rather than inherit – nothing ultimately stands in the way of the creation of the universal civilization to which they aspired.

Gray argues, however, that the Enlightenment project has run aground on the reef of pluralism. The problems that pluralism presents for the project of a universal civilization are, he maintains, both theoretical and practical or historical. The theoretical problem is posed by the subversive truth of value pluralism, the idea that there is an irreducible diversity of sometimes irreconcilable goods or values, and that when these values come into conflict there is no rational standard by which the conflicts can be resolved.[75] The impossibility of rationally solving certain moral and political dilemmas sets sharp limits on the ability to forge a universal consensus and, as Gray writes, "renders the Enlightenment conception of the historical progress of the species meaningless or incoherent."[76] The more practical problem that Gray points to is posed by the historical fact that our age is one "in which political life is dominated by renascent particularisms, militant religions and resurgent ethnicities" as well as by "nationalism, easily the most powerful political phenomenon in the contemporary world."[77] The persistence of these kinds of "irrational" attachments and loyalties have confounded the expectations of Enlightenment thinkers who expected them to fade away as humanity converged on a universal civilization. The key examples here, for Gray, are the East Asian nations that have continued to flourish in the modern world without adopting Western values, which he claims may constitute "the most radical empirical

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"faith in a universal civilization." Ibid., 17. See also Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 123-24.

[74] See ibid., 65-66, 124-25; and Gray, *Voltaire*, 35.

[75] See Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 9, 67-71, 73, 141, 161.

[76] Ibid., 69.

[77] Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 2, 13; see also 31-32, 65, 82-83, 145, 168-69.

falsification of the Enlightenment project hitherto."[78]

Although Richard Rorty shares almost none of the pessimism about liberalism that is found in the works of MacIntyre and Gray, he offers yet another well-known and influential critique of the Enlightenment's universalism, foundationalism, and ahistoricism. Rorty ascribes to the Enlightenment the conviction that it is possible to discover both the timeless Truth regarding the natural world and what is universally Right in the moral realm – that human beings can have access Nature and Morality as they "really are." The Enlightenment's belief in these kinds of capital-lettered abstractions was, he claims, a sort of holdover from Christianity, "a survival of the religious need to have human projects underwritten by a nonhuman authority."[79] Despite the rise in secularism that occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people still felt a deep metaphysical need to believe in an objective moral truth, and according to Rorty Enlightenment thinkers attempted to locate such a truth in human reason, which they believed was the same in all times and places; they insisted that "there is a relation between the ahistorical essence of the human soul and moral truth, a relation which ensures that free and open discussion will produce 'one right answer' to moral as well as to scientific questions."[80] And for Enlightenment thinkers, that "one right answer" could, of course, be nothing other than their own liberal ideals of tolerance, natural rights, and the moral equality of all individuals.

Rorty claims, however, that as a result of the intellectual progress that has taken place since the eighteenth century, these beliefs are simply no longer credible. Contemporary intellectuals have rightly given up on the idea that there is some ahistorical "essence" of human beings, something that is common to all people qua people, as well as the idea that human reason has access to an objective reality or moral truth. The Enlightenment's philosophical vocabulary is now outdated, according to Rorty, not because it has been proven false in some metaphysical sense, but rather because we now realize that *all* vocabularies are historically and culturally contingent and thus that *no* vocabulary is metaphysically "true" in the sense of "corresponding to an objective reality." Hence, Rorty says that he aims to replace the Enlightenment's vocabulary

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[78] Ibid., 83.
[79] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52.
[80] Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy", in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 176.

with a more mature ("de-philosophized") vocabulary, or "to do to Nature, Reason and Truth what the eighteenth century did to God."[81] However crucial the Enlightenment's transcultural, foundationalist claims were as rhetorical tool in the original rise and implementation of liberal ideals, they are now implausible and so must be discarded.

In stark contrast to MacIntyre and Gray, however, Rorty does *not* contend that Enlightenment politics are therefore doomed to failure. He maintains that there were *two* Enlightenment projects – a philosophical project that sought to ground its principles in Nature and Reason and a political project that aimed to create "a world without caste, class, or cruelty."[82] And while he rejects the foundationalist philosophical project, he gives the Enlightenment's liberal political project his unqualified endorsement.[83] Indeed, one of Rorty's main purposes, throughout his writings, is to show that the Enlightenment's political project does not rely on its philosophical project, meaning that we can remain committed liberal citizens even if we do not believe in any objective foundations that would prove liberal values to be eternally true or universally valid. We can and should adhere unflinchingly to liberal values not because they are "true" but simply because they are *ours*, because we as members of the "rich North Atlantic democracies" care deeply about them.[84] In fact, Rorty sees the rejection of foundationalism as a kind of continuation or extension of the Enlightenment's own principles, such as its anti-authoritarianism and its skepticism regarding non-human powers.[85] In rejecting the Enlightenment's philosophical project as implausible, then, he claims to remain faithful to its most important ideals.

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[81] Rorty, "The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," 19; see also Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxxviii; and Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 57.

[82] Rorty, "The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," 19; see also Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 56-57; and Richard Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

[83] See Rorty, "The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," 19-21; and Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?", in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 34.

[84] Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism" *Journal of Philosophy* 80.10 (October 1983), 585. Graeme Garrard has argued that Rorty's ethnocentric defense of liberalism, which defends liberal values because they are part of "who we are," in fact contradicts even the *political* project of the Enlightenment, because one of the Enlightenment's key political values was a principled *rejection* of ethnocentrism, or the privileging of one's own society or values simply because they are one's own. Graeme Garrard, "The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Rorty" *Critical Review* 14.4 (2000), 432-34.

[85] See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 57; and Rorty, "The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'," 20.

Overconfidence in Reason

One of the most influential and controversial thinkers of the post-World War II era, Leo Strauss, understood the Enlightenment chiefly as a battle against revealed religion, but he argues that this was a battle that it did not and indeed *could not* win, at least on theoretical grounds. Reason cannot refute the claims of religion because religion does not see itself as dependent on (or even accessible to) reason; religion rests instead on the existence of an omnipotent and unfathomable God, and thus it simply cannot be proven false through rational argument.[86] The Enlightenment's commitment to reason, then, ultimately rested on faith – faith that revelation is untrue and that there is no mysterious and miracle-working God. In fact, Strauss claims that many Enlightenment thinkers themselves recognized – either consciously or unconsciously – the dubiousness of their case against revelation, as witnessed by the fact that they turned to mockery and propaganda rather than reasoned argument in their struggle against the Church; they sought to overcome revelation not by disproving it but by laughing at it.[87] These tactics led Strauss to wonder aloud whether "the Enlightenment…deserves its name or whether its true name is Obfuscation."[88]

Given that the theoretical battle between the Enlightenment and revealed religion ended in a stalemate, Strauss claims, the Enlightenment's proponents attempted to secure a victory on practical grounds. They sought to buttress their claims of superiority and to prove the value of their method by conquering the natural world through reason, science, and technology and by organizing politics on rational principles, thereby improving humanity's estate. In "a truly Napoleonic strategy," Strauss writes, the Enlightenment renounced the direct refutation of orthodoxy and "turned to its own special project, civilizing the world and man."[89] Whereas ancient and medieval thinkers had attempted to keep science or philosophy as the preserve of the few, Enlightenment thinkers sought to cultivate the pursuit of knowledge in order to increase human power; they strove to put theory in the service of practice, to use it to attain security and

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[86] See Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 10-11.
[87] See ibid., 11; and Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press [1930] 1997), 142, 146.
[88] Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1995), 173.
[89] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 13.

prosperity or "comfortable self-preservation."[90] Yet for all of the successes that science and

technology have brought to the modern world, Strauss claims, the lack of corresponding moral

advances and the rise of value relativism have left modern man "a blind giant."[91] The

Enlightenment's expectation that moral and political progress would accompany the advance of

science and technology was "based on wholly unwarranted hopes" and has been "empirically

refuted by the incredible barbarization which we have been so unfortunate as to witness in [the

twentieth] century."[92] Indeed, Strauss goes so far as to suggest that the unprecedented

development of science and the liberation of technology from moral and political control "has

made universal and perpetual tyranny a serious possibility."[93]

 According to Strauss's account, the many problems associated with the Enlightenment or

"first wave of modernity" helped to pave the way for the second and third waves of modernity,

which were initiated by Rousseau and Nietzsche, respectively.[94] Rousseau saw that the attempt to

conquer nature in order to relieve humanity's estate would do little more than alienate humanity

from nature and turn life into a "joyless quest for joy,"[95] and Nietzsche showed that modern

rationalism ultimately destroys itself, culminating in nihilism – the death of God and hence of all

truth and morality. Thus, the Enlightenment bears the ultimate responsibility for what Strauss

frequently calls "the crisis of the West" or "the crisis of modernity," which consists above all in

the fact that people can no longer credibly distinguish between good and bad or right and wrong,

and thus no longer believe wholeheartedly in themselves or their purpose.[96]

 Michael Oakeshott, another leading conservative thinker of the mid-twentieth century,

diverged from Strauss in his belief that modernity was fundamentally problematic or in crisis, but

joined him in condemning the Enlightenment for its dogmatic faith in reason. In one of his

earliest essays he claimed that Jeremy Bentham, despite having done much of his work in

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[90] See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3-4; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 23; and Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 299.

[91] Strauss, "Progress or Return?", 264.

[92] Ibid., 267; see also Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?", in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1959] 1988), 37.

[93] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 23.

[94] See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, [1975] 1989).

[95] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 251.

[96] See, for example, Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," 81.

nineteenth-century England, should be seen as a *philosophe*, the "companion in thought" of such eighteenth-century figures as Helvetius, Diderot, Voltaire, and d'Alembert, and he gives an outline of the character and beliefs of the typical *philosophe* in order to substantiate this claim.[97] He maintains, first, that the *philosophe* has an overwhelming and indiscriminate confidence in knowledge; his "hydroptic thirst for information" leads him to see all knowledge as equally significant and keeps him from learning anything thoroughly or profoundly.[98] The second key element in the *philosophe*'s character is his "general credulity."[99] His "tough hide of self-confidence" shields him from troubling doubts, but it also keeps him from examining any of the presuppositions on which his thinking rests; hence, while the *philosophe* sees himself as bold and freethinking, in reality he is naïve and shallow.[100] Finally – and perhaps most importantly, in light of Oakeshott's later career – he claims that "the *philosophe* is a rationalist…he believes that what is made is better than what merely grows, that neatness is better than profusion and vitality."[101] He seeks to make life reasonable by imposing order on it rather than to appreciate life for what it is, in all its fascinating diversity and complexity.

This discussion of the *philosophes* in "The New Bentham" contains the first foray in Oakeshott's struggle against rationalism, a struggle that would be among his central preoccupations in the 1940s and 1950s. The rationalist, as he elaborates in his best-known essay on this subject, stands "for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason'….he is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual."[102] The rationalist sees that which is consciously or deliberately planned and executed as inherently better than that which grows up and establishes itself unconsciously over time, and hence he endeavors to continually bring the laws, customs, and practices of his society before the supposedly infallible tribunal of reason, and

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[97] See Oakeshott, "The New Bentham," 137.
[98] Ibid., 138. See also Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1933] 1966), 1-2.
[99] Oakeshott, "The New Bentham," 138.
[100] Ibid., 138-39.
[101] Ibid., 139.
[102] Michael Oakeshott, Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1947] 1991), 5-6.

to discard those that are found wanting by its standards.[103] Oakeshott claims that prime examples of this dangerous rationalist tendency to dismiss tradition and custom and to attempt to construct a society from scratch can be found in Enlightenment-inspired documents such as the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and he attributes to Voltaire the belief that "the only way to have good laws is to burn all existing laws and to start afresh."[104] Rationalists also tend to be collectivists, on Oakeshott's account: they believe that the proper role of government is to impose a comprehensive pattern of conduct on all subjects alike, to enforce conformity to a "common good" that the government itself determines.[105] The *philosophes*, for example, understood governing to be the activity of an elite who would impose virtuous conduct upon people so as to bring about a "new age of virtue, happiness and justice" – a viewpoint that led to Jacobinism in their time just has it led to social engineering in the twentieth century.[106]

Another famous postwar critique of Enlightenment-style rationalism was leveled by Isaiah Berlin. Berlin was far from wholly critical of the Enlightenment; indeed, he once wrote that "The intellectual power, honesty, lucidity, courage, and disinterested love of the truth of the most gifted thinkers of the eighteenth century remain to this day without parallel. Their age is one of the best and most hopeful episodes in the life of mankind."[107] Despite his sympathy with the Enlightenment's fight against superstition and oppression, however, Berlin put a far greater emphasis on its faults; indeed, he consistently depicted Enlightenment ideals as false, naïve, absolutist, and ultimately dangerous. He seems to have largely viewed the Enlightenment through the lens of its opponents, the thinkers of "the Counter-Enlightenment."[108] Like thinkers such as

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[103] See ibid., 8, 26.

[104] See ibid., 9, 11, 32-33; and Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1951] 1991), 53.

[105] See Michael Oakeshott, "The Political Economy of Freedom," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1949] 1991), 398-401; and Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1958] 1993), 89-110.

[106] See ibid., 97-98.

[107] Isaiah Berlin "Introduction," in *The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 29; see also Isaiah Berlin, "Montesquieu," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Viking, [1955] 1980), 159.

[108] See, for example, Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment"; Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, [1960, 1965] 1976); Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994); and Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry

Giambattista Vico, J. G. Hamann, J. G. Herder, and Joseph de Maistre, Berlin consistently ascribed to the Enlightenment the conviction that human nature is fundamentally the same in all times and places, subject to only minor variations at the cultural and historical margins; that there are objective goals and norms that are common to all human beings; that these goals and norms are all compatible with one another, and can be ascertained through tools akin to those used in the natural sciences; and that vice and misery are wholly the result of ignorance and superstition, and thus that a perfect society is in principle possible, even if extraordinarily difficult to attain. Despite the profound differences among the thinkers of the Enlightenment, Berlin insists that there was near-universal agreement on these central dogmas.[109]

Berlin's main charge against the Enlightenment, in other words, is that it was "monist," meaning that Enlightenment thinkers believed that the world and everything in it forms a systematic, coherent whole and is subject to a set of universal and eternal laws that are knowable by human beings. According to Berlin, this viewpoint pervades the entire Western tradition from Plato to the present day, with only a few scattered exceptions, but it finds a high point in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when it reached a level of consensus rarely achieved before or since.[110] Against this outlook, he sided with the Counter-Enlightenment and its emphasis on value pluralism (although he was careful to distance himself from the Counter-Enlightenment's reactionary tendencies). Throughout his books and essays Berlin repeatedly – even monotonously – insists, contra monism, that values are plural, that they can and do conflict with one another, and thus that agonizing choices and tradeoffs are inevitable features of the human condition. Thus, the idea of a final solution or perfect society, in which all good things coexist, is not only practically unattainable but conceptually incoherent.[111] Further, the monist attempt to identify and implement a final solution – to impose a single set of norms on all societies and all individuals – is not only profoundly illusory, in Berlin's view, but also profoundly dangerous. The belief in the possibility of an ultimate solution to all human problems is, he memorably asserts, the one belief that, "more

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Hardy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

[109] See, for example, Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," 243-46.

[110] See Berlin, "Montesquieu," 136.

[111] See, for example, Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10-11; and Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux [1958] 1998), 238-39.

than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals."[112] In Berlin's eyes, monism ineluctably leads to utopianism or a quest for perfection in politics, and it was precisely this kind of misplaced faith in social reconstruction that led to the monstrosities of the twentieth century – the gulags, the gas chambers, the massacre of millions in the name of the nation, the race, the class, the party, the forces of history, even liberty itself.[113] For Berlin, then, the Enlightenment was, in a way, illiberal despite itself: the thinkers of the eighteenth century aimed to preserve and defend individual freedom, but their monism ultimately resulted in oppression.[114]

Enabling of Oppression

Perhaps the best known argument that the Enlightenment was ultimately totalitarian is found in Horkheimer and Adorno's brilliant yet bleak and bewildering opus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which locates the main source of the Enlightenment's totalitarian tendencies in its emphasis on instrumental reason.[115] This type of reason is a tool; it is concerned with procedures rather than purposes, means rather than ends. As Horkheimer explains in a series of lectures expanding on the themes of their book, instrumental reason equates truth with mere "success," and it thereby undermines reason as it was traditionally understood.[116] According to the traditional view, reason was an objective feature of the world, one that could give people insight into the true nature of reality and provide moral standards to help guide their lives. But in their battle against

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[112] Ibid., 237. See also Isaiah Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux [1975] 1998), 580.
[113] See Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13.
[114] Berlin makes this claim quite explicitly in describing the aim of a series of celebrated radio lectures that he gave in 1952: he tried to show, he says, "that the great eighteenth-century philosophers were ultimately responsible for a lot of intellectual tyranny, ending in the Soviet Union, in the *gulag*; that these good men, who were against superstition, falsification, authority, and were great liberators, had nevertheless preached doctrine which led, albeit in a somewhat perverted form, to tragic consequences." Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Humphrey Carter, *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3, 1946-1996* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 127.
[115] Even the authors' friends and colleagues found the work bleak and bewildering: when Horkheimer asked Leo Löwenthal if he knew of any eminent authors who might recommend it for publication, Löwenthal responded, "Huxley, as far as I know, does not read German, and Joyce is dead." Quoted in James Schmidt, "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" *Social Research* 65.4 (Winter 1998), 810.
[116] In a letter to his friend and colleague Friedrich Pollock, Horkheimer characterizes *The Eclipse of Reason*, which comprises a series lectures he delivered at Columbia University in 1947, as an "exoteric version" of the much more difficult *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17, 687-8; see also Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, [1947] 1974), vii.

religion and the Church, he maintains, Enlightenment thinkers overshot their mark and ended up depriving reason of all substantive content, thereby undermining the objective concept of reason itself.[117] From this point forward, reason could be used to gain practical mastery over the natural world but not to supply direction or purpose to human life. The Enlightenment thus reduced all notions of truth and reality to science and instrumental reason, a deed for which the twentieth century would pay a terrible price.

One consequence of the Enlightenment's scientific, positivistic outlook, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, was that it undermined the possibility of making moral distinctions or identifying any absolute moral ends; instrumental reason can help to determine the best *means* to a given end, but it cannot determine what substantive end(s) people ought to pursue. Their discussion of Enlightenment morality focuses especially on the "dark writers of the bourgeoisie," above all Nietzsche and the Marquis de Sade, who allegedly lay bare the true nature of Enlightenment thinking by pursuing its implications to their logical conclusion.[118] The authors argue that the ultimate moral consequences of the Enlightenment were revealed in the character of "enlightened Juliette," the anti-heroine of de Sade's *Histoire de Juliette*, who finds enjoyment in torture, violent orgies, and the callous murder of her own family and friends. She violates virtually every conventional moral norm in the pursuit of personal pleasure, and she does so with a cool calculation and ruthless efficiency that Horkheimer and Adorno find reminiscent of the Enlightenment's value-neutral instrumental reason.

The best-known aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason, however, is their claim that it has led, via a fateful "dialectic," to totalitarianism. On their account, the rise of twentieth-century fascism and the horrors of the Holocaust cannot be understood as sudden and regrettable aberrations from Enlightenment ideals of toleration and liberty; rather, they were the fateful and inevitable consequence of the Enlightenment's core principles. Instrumental reason not only greatly increases the powers that human beings can wield without giving them any real guidance on how to use these powers, they argue, it also results in an overwhelming concern with efficiency and utility, thus leading people to view the natural world and even their fellow

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[117] See ibid., 17-18.
[118] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 92.

human beings as little more than objects to be exploited: "Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them."[119] It is no accident, they suggest, that Hitler and his Nazi machine made generous use of carefully coordinated regulations, controlled experimentation, scientifically-informed racial classifications, bureaucratic distancing, and mechanized extermination factories in their implementation of the Final Solution: these hallmarks of instrumental reason can be put in the service of any end, no matter how diabolical, and so the potential for mass slaughter is inherent in Enlightenment thinking itself. Thus, the famous opening lines of Horkheimer and Adorno's book lament that while Enlightenment thinkers aimed at "liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters," in the end "the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."[120]

A number of scholars have argued that the Enlightenment outlook resulted in communism rather than fascism; perhaps the fullest case along these lines was put forward by Jacob Talmon, who argued that the Enlightenment led not only to Jacobinism and the Terror (a familiar claim since the time of Burke and Maistre), but also to Marxism and twentieth-century totalitarian communism. He claims that it was the *philosophes'* belief in a single, universal, natural order – and in the ability of human beings to grasp it through *a priori*, abstract reason – that lay beneath the Enlightenment's totalitarian tendencies. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno attributed these tendencies to the Enlightenment's empiricism and instrumental notion of reason, then, Talmon (like Oakeshott and Berlin) attributed them on the contrary to its rationalism and objective notion of reason. The opposition between empiricism and rationalism in fact plays a key role in Talmon's narrative: he calls empiricism "the ally of freedom" and associates it with liberal democracy, and he describes rationalism as "the friend of totalitarianism" and associates it with what he dubs "totalitarian democracy."[121] According to Talmon, liberal democrats see politics as a matter of trial and error, a pragmatic attempt to find practical solutions to specific problems, and they see politics as a limited activity, just one of many meaningful spheres of human life. Totalitarian democrats, on the other hand, believe in the existence of a perfect, universal, natural

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[119] Ibid., 6.
[120] Ibid., 61.
[121] Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 1-2, 4.

order to which all of society should be made to conform, and hence there is, in their eyes, no part of human thought or action that falls outside the political realm. Totalitarian democrats too affirm the value of liberty, but they believe that it is to be found not in "spontaneity and the absence of coercion" but rather in "the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose."[122] Talmon claims that *both* of these viewpoints can be found in the writings of the *philosophes*, who were empiricists and rationalists at the same time, and that the separation of the two types only occurred when their somewhat muddled outlook was put to the test during the French Revolution.[123]

Talmon argues that the *philosophes'* empiricism – their insistence that theories and arguments must be based on and justified by experience – was directed not against philosophical rationalism, but solely against religion and tradition, along with the super-rational claims of authority made on their behalf. This side of the *philosophes'* outlook was vitiated and the rationalist side was strengthened, he claims, by the decline of the traditional order during the eighteenth century: the weakening of religious belief and the power of the Church seemed to leave the state as the only valid source and sanction for morality, and the subversion of status, privilege, and hierarchy led to the abstract idea of "man *per se*," thereby rendering irrelevant any accidental characteristics or group loyalties that people may have had.[124] These changes led the later *philosophes* to view the role of government as that of enforcing conformity to a universal pattern, of promoting virtue and social harmony by making everyone fit into the comprehensive "natural" order. According to Talmon, they saw temporary coercion as justified for the sake of the harmonious, democratic, and free future that they believed would emerge once the natural order was realized. This kind of attempt to do away with all evils and to realize a comprehensive, natural order is inevitably totalitarian, according to Talmon, for it is "bound to clash with the inveterate irrationality of man's ways."[125] In his view, the equation of an all-embracing and all-solving creed with liberty motivated not only Robespierre and Saint-Just but also Lenin and Stalin,

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[122] Ibid., 2. This dichotomy is, of course, nearly identical to Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive liberty. Berlin notes in his eulogy to Talmon that they had in fact discussed these ideas with one another during a visit that Talmon made to Oxford in 1947. See Isaiah Berlin, "A Tribute to My Friend" *Forum* 38 (Summer 1980): 1-4.

[123] See Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 3, 5, 29.

[124] See ibid., 3-4, 29, 249-50; and Jacob L. Talmon, *Utopianism and Politics* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), 9-11.

[125] Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*,, 4; see also 35, 253-54.

and indeed *all* forms of totalitarian democracy. Whatever differences may have existed between the Jacobins, Babouvists, Blanquists, Communists, Socialists, and Anarchists, Talmon insists that "they all belong to one religion" and were all intellectual descendents of the *philosophes*.[126]

Still other critics have claimed that coercion and oppression are inevitable consequences of the Enlightenment outlook not because it has led to fascism or communism, but rather precisely because it has led to Western liberal democracy, with all of its subtle yet sinister forms of compulsion. The most famous proponent of this view is, of course, Foucault. Many of Foucault's major works are dedicated to describing the classification and domination of marginalized classes and groups during what he calls "the classical age"; he attempts to expose the "dark side" of the supposedly "humanitarian" and "progressive" Enlightenment, and to show that every apparent victory of Enlightenment ideals in fact resulted in new and even more insidious forms of domination and control. In *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, he explains how the process of controlling individuals developed hand in hand with the scientific disciplines used to acquire knowledge about human life. The real purpose of disciplines like criminology, psychology, and medicine, he claims, is to enable the creation of what he calls "docile bodies": useful subjects, people who conform to a standard, who are certifiably sane or healthy or competent, who can be used and transformed, and who are, above all, obedient.[127] Thus, he turns the Enlightenment view of the relationship between knowledge and power on its head: whereas the classical age believed that knowledge would set humanity free, Foucault claims that it actually ends up trapping people more efficiently into modern forms of power – hence his frequent combination of the two into a single hyphenated concept, "power-knowledge." As he suggests in a 1978 interview – or rather suggestively asks, as is his habit – "Couldn't it be concluded that the Enlightenment's promise of attaining freedom through the exercise of reason has been turned upside down, resulting in a domination by reason itself, which increasingly usurps the place of freedom?"[128]

Foucault's paradigm example of the disciplinary technology of the classical age is the

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[126] Ibid., 12; see also 249-53; Jacob L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), viii; and Jacob L. Talmon, *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution: The Origins of Ideological Polarisation in the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 535-36.
[127] See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135-69.
[128] "Interview with Michel Foucault," conducted by Duccio Trombadori [1978], in *Power*, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), 273.

Panopticon, the model prison designed by Jeremy Bentham.[129] In contrast to the dark dungeon of the medieval world, the prisoners in the Panopticon are bathed in light, but Foucault claims that it is precisely through this light that modern society exercises its discipline; the increased visibility allows power to be exercised automatically, continuously, and anonymously. Given that the inmates cannot see into the observatory tower that stands at the center of the prison, they have to assume that there is someone watching over them whether there really is or not, and so they in effect become their own guardians; physical or corporal punishment is no longer necessary because constant surveillance exercises discipline even more surely. And Foucault claims the classical age sought to exercise this kind of discipline not just on the criminal population but also in hospitals, asylums, barracks, schools, factories – throughout society, and on every individual. Rather than being exercised by a political elite or ruling class, modern forms of power come from innumerable places and exist in endless networks in which everyone is enmeshed; they help to shape, fashion, and mold the very parameters of the self, thus creating what he calls the "disciplinary society."[130]

Similarly, Foucault argues that the political advances of the eighteenth century that have traditionally been associated with expanding freedom – the rise of liberal democracy, or of "an explicit, coded and formally egalitarian juridical framework, made possible by the organization of a parliamentary, representative régime" that "guaranteed a system of rights" – in fact had a "dark side," for they were underwritten "by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines."[131] Even as sovereign authority is placed in the hands of the people rather than the few, the disciplines provide a guarantee of their ultimate submission; even as people come to be seen as equal under the law, the disciplines place them into hierarchies and subordinate some to others; and even as people are given almost unprecedented formal liberties, the disciplines restrict their actions through ever-more effective and individualized mechanisms of social control. Foucault had little doubt which age and which

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[129] See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200-209. For a similar argument about Bentham and the Enlightenment that was also published in 1975 – and that also details "the Gestapo dream of complete physical and mental control over a group of human beings" – by a scholar coming from a very different (Christian conservative) perspective, see Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 59-60.

[130] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 209.

[131] Ibid., 222.

thinkers were responsible for these developments: in a sentence that could serve as a summary of his critique of the classical age, he says that "The 'Enlightenment' [*Lumières*], which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines."[132] No matter how well-intentioned its aims may have been, the Enlightenment was not only (or even mostly) a movement toward greater freedom, but also (and especially) one toward greater hegemony and social control.

Hostility to "the Other"

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is powerful critique of Western (particularly British, French, and American) attitudes toward and representations of the non-Western world (particularly the Islamic world of the Middle East). Said argues that "the Orient" is a Western construct, one used to justify and strengthen Western power over the East; drawing on Foucault's view of the relationship between knowledge and power, he sees Orientalism as a tool of European domination, a means by which the West systematically seeks to construct and control its Eastern "other."[133] His analysis focuses chiefly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he sees the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as the real origin or starting point of modern Orientalism.[134] From the time of Homer until the early eighteenth century, he claims, European views of the Islamic world were "ignorant but complex"; Europeans during these periods were uninformed about the East and therefore generally depicted it as different and "exotic" – and not infrequently as blasphemous – but they also often saw it as intriguing and imposing, a power to be feared and respected.[135] Starting with the rise of modern Orientalism in the eighteenth century, however, Western thinkers and writers tended to depict the Orient as irrational, weak, barbaric, and childlike, in contrast to the West's rationality, strength, civilization, and maturity. Of course, such of a view implies that the peoples of the Orient need to be firmly ruled by others and thus provides a convenient justification for Western derision and exploitation.

Modern Orientalism arose during the eighteenth century for a number of reasons, according to Said: first, continuing European exploration led to increased contact with the East

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[132] Ibid., 222; see also 169.

[133] See Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

[134] See ibid., 3, 22, 42, 116-20; and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 58.

[135] Said, *Orientalism*, 55.

and a marked rise in travel literature and reports; second, the growth of the disciplines of history and anthropology led to increased study of the East's past (and to study of the modern East as a clue to the West's past); third, the pluralism and historicism of thinkers such as Vico, Herder, and Hamann led to increased sympathetic identification with non-European peoples; and finally, the "impulse to classify nature and man into types" led to increased investigation into the Eastern physiological and moral "character" or "type."[136] Said states that these four developments "are the currents in eighteenth-century thought on whose presence the specific intellectual and institutional structures of modern Orientalism depend. Without them Orientalism…could not have occurred."[137] In his view, the increased knowledge about the East in the eighteenth century had mostly pernicious effects, as it was largely used to confirm and enhance the West's political and cultural hegemony: "even as Europe moved itself outwards, its sense of cultural strength was fortified. From travelers' tales, and not only from great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured."[138] The Orientalist outlook that the Enlightenment inaugurated soon became so dominant, Said claims, that by the nineteenth century "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric."[139]

The charge of racism is also frequently leveled against Enlightenment thinkers. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills argues not only that most Enlightenment thinkers were racist, but that they were essentially and necessarily so. That is, he argues that their racism was not an unfortunate but contingent artifact of the time in which they lived, an unnecessary aberration from their otherwise sound outlook, but rather a central component of their thought, inextricably connected to their fundamental ideals and basic premises.[140] According to Mills, the *real* contract of the modern world is not an abstract social contract of the kind described by Hobbes, Locke,

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[136] See ibid., 116-20.
[137] Ibid., 120.
[138] Ibid., 117. Said elsewhere acknowledges that "Most French Enlightenment thinkers, among them Diderot and Montesquieu, subscribed to the Abbé Raynal's opposition to slavery and colonialism," but he quickly asserts that even the "Liberal anti-colonialists" among Enlightenment thinkers who "take the humane position that colonies and slaves ought not too severely to be ruled or held" still "do not dispute the fundamental superiority of Western man or, in some cases, the white race." Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 240-41.
[139] Said, *Orientalism*, 204.
[140] See Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 26-27, 55-57, 122; and Charles W. Mills, *From Race to Class: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 243-45.

Rousseau, or Kant, but what he calls "the Racial Contract," which "is not a contract between everybody ('we the people'), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ('we the white people')."[141] This contract is an exploitative one, as it partitions the population into two groups – "whites" and "nonwhites" – and privileges the former, allowing them to rule over and exploit the bodies, land, and resources of the latter. Mills claims that this racial contract was accepted and embraced by virtually all Enlightenment thinkers, including not only "the contractarians Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant" but also "their theoretical adversaries" such as "the anticontractarian Hume."[142] Ultimately, he argues that "the Racial Contract is 'orthogonal' to the varying directions of their thought, the common assumption they can all take for granted, no matter what their theoretical divergences on other questions."[143]

According to Mills, Enlightenment thinkers converged on a basic partition between whites and nonwhites because they all needed a way to reconcile the obvious contradiction between their "proclamations of the equal rights, autonomy, and freedom of all men" and "the massacre, expropriation, and subjection to hereditary slavery of men at least apparently human" during their time.[144] They did so, he claims, by denying nonwhites their personhood and claiming that they constituted a separate category of naturally subordinate beings to whom different rules must obviously apply. Enlightenment thinkers simply translated the geographical and theological dichotomies that had been so prevalent throughout Western history (Greek and barbarian, Christian and infidel) into a racial one (white and nonwhite), thereby providing an explanation of and justification for exploitative practices like slavery, colonialism, and aboriginal displacement and extermination – practices that had brought (and were bringing) the West so much wealth, power, and prestige.[145] This racial dichotomy is, he says, "the unacknowledged dark side of the Enlightenment ideal. Simply put: one set of rules for whites, another for nonwhites. All persons are equal, but only white males are persons."[146] The basis on which Enlightenment thinkers separated nonwhites from whites was not simply their race, but also their supposedly inferior

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[141] Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 3.
[142] Ibid., 94; see also 17, 64-72.
[143] Ibid., 94.
[144] Ibid., 64.
[145] Ibid., 23-24.
[146] Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 70; see also Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 55-56.

cognitive capacity: they posited the existence of "a raced incapacity for rationality, abstract thought, cultural development, [and] civilization in general" and argued that such capacities were central in making people fully human (Mills includes in this indictment Locke, Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and Mill).[147] Thus, he contends that "Enlightenment reason…has been…thoroughly corrupted by its accommodation to white supremacy"[148] and concludes that "It would be a fundamental error…to see racism as anomalous, a mysterious deviation from European Enlightenment humanism. Rather, it needs to be realized that…*European humanism usually meant that only Europeans were human*."[149]

Whereas Mills argues that nonwhites were excluded from the Enlightenment's putatively universal ideals, Jane Flax contends that the same was true of women. She acknowledges that it can be tempting for feminists to appeal to Enlightenment principles in trying to further the cause of women's emancipation; women have frequently utilized concepts such as natural rights, human equality, and due process in pursuing gender justice, and the idea of an objective reason that would ultimately produce universal emancipation has obvious appeal.[150] Yet, she argues, "despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of the Enlightenment, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy. Feminist notions of self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within its categories."[151] While Flax recognizes that feminist and postmodernist outlooks do not always agree on all questions, she insists that they share a common cause in contesting and "decentering" many of the Enlightenment ideals that are still prevalent in the contemporary West.[152] Like

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[147] Ibid., 59-60.

[148] Mills, *From Race to Class*, xviii.

[149] Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 26-27. Somewhat incongruously, Mills concludes *The Racial Contract* by acknowledging that postmodernism is ultimately "an epistemological and theoretical dead end" and proclaiming that his own outlook is "pro-Enlightenment." He is quick to note, however, that he has in mind something akin to "Habermas's radical and to-be-completed Enlightenment," although divorced from "Habermas's Eurocentric, deraced, and deimperialized vision of modernity." Ibid., 129. Mills elsewhere describes his project as that of "turning the apparatus of liberal Enlightenment theory to radical ends" or of "radicaliz[ing] the Enlightenment." Mills, *From Race to Class*, 219, 247.

[150] See Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relation in Feminist Theory" *Signs* 12.4 (1987), 625; Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 230; and Jane Flax, "Beyond Equality: Gender, Justice and Difference," in *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, ed. Gisela Bock and Susan James (London: Routledge, 1992), 195.

[151] Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 183; see also 143.

[152] See ibid., 140-3; and Flax, "Beyond Equality,", 196.

postmodernists, she claims, feminists call "for a transvaluation of values – a rethinking of our ideas about what is just, humanly excellent, worthy of praise, moral, and so forth,"[153] although they do so not necessarily because they believe that there *is* nothing that can be so valued; rather, they suspect that the prevalent Enlightenment formulations of these values are inherently gendered, reflecting and reifying the ideals and experiences of "a stereotypically white western masculine self."[154]

In other words, Flax argues that feminists should resist the temptation to appeal to Enlightenment principles not only because Enlightenment claims about things like the self, equality, reason, and progress are implausible (as many postmodernists have shown), but more importantly because they are positively harmful for the cause of women. The Enlightenment conception of the asocial, ahistorical, and autonomous self, for instance, requires ignoring the fact that selves are socially constituted – that things like our gender and our relations with our families play key roles in shaping our identities – and thereby devalues these aspects of our lives.[155] The Enlightenment understanding of equality too is blind to the realities of gender, in Flax's view: the ostensibly laudable attempt to see and treat everyone in the same way in fact requires assimilating women into a pre-existing male norm rather than accepting and appreciating their differences.[156] Further, the Enlightenment's notion of an objective, impersonal reason is a decidedly masculine one, premised on the exclusion of "feminine" attributes such as emotion, sensibility, and intuition; still worse, its notion of rational discourse reflects a gendered division of labor, in which men engage in abstract thought in the public sphere while the women are kept in a separate sphere of domesticity and reproduction where they do little more than manage the physical necessities of daily life.[157] For all of these reasons, Flax argues, the Enlightenment's belief in progress is immensely dubious as well: there can be no "innocent" or neutral knowledge, and there is no reason to expect that the expansion of knowledge will inevitably lead to universal emancipation.[158] In fact, so far from being emancipatory for all, the Enlightenment necessarily and by design

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[153] Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 20.
[154] Flax, "Beyond Equality," 196-7; see also Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relation in Feminist Theory," 626.
[155] See Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 229.
[156] See Flax, "Beyond Equality," 193, 196; and Flax, "Is Enlightenment Emancipatory?", 87.
[157] See ibid., 82-85.
[158] See ibid., 87; and Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence," in *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 133.

excludes women from its compass: "Enlightenment discourse was not meant to include women, and its coherence depends partially on our continuing exclusion."[159] In short, Flax contends that a system of male dominance and a patriarchal social structure lie behind the Enlightenment's neutral and egalitarian façade.

Atomizing Individualism

Although he disavows the label "communitarian,"[160] MacIntyre ranks among the many critics who condemn both contemporary liberalism and its progenitor, the Enlightenment, for undermining the possibility of a healthy community. It was the failure of the Enlightenment to find a rational justification for morality after it pulled the teleological rug from under our moral values, he suggests, that led to the chaos of our moral and political culture.[161] Post-Enlightenment philosophy has proven unable to provide the shared framework for moral discourse that religion had earlier provided, and the result has been a world *without* such a framework. The ultimate effect of the failed Enlightenment project, then, has been to cast the modern individual into an open sea, drifting aimlessly, without compass or destination. As heirs of this failed project, we are surrounded by a myriad of moral choices and possibilities with no grounds for choosing among them other than our own subjective, groundless preferences – a condition that MacIntyre calls "emotivism." Thus, post-Enlightenment moral discourse consists of "interminable" disputes between "incommensurable" moral and political arguments (such as the familiar clashes between equality and liberty, or rights-based and utility-based claims of social justice) that cannot be settled by any independent or impersonal criteria.[162]

While the Enlightenment project of identifying an independent, rational basis for politics and morality failed and had to fail, according to MacIntyre, the attempt to carry it out is still alive and well. Indeed, he sees contemporary liberalism and its goal of founding a social order based on

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[159] Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 230.
[160] See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to my Critics," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 302.
[161] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 36, 39.
[162] See ibid., chapter 2.

universal, rational norms as an extension of this project.[163] But, of course, he argues that

liberalism's attempt to find a neutral basis for settling moral and political disputes too has failed,

for he sees liberalism as a tradition like any other, with its own eminently contestable conceptions

of rationality and justice.[164] Further, he claims that the very attempt to avoid relying on any

particular conception of the good prevents liberal societies from achieving a common vision or a

common moral life. Liberalism's Enlightenment-inspired goals of neutrality and universality

undermine the bonds that once came from a shared allegiance to and shared pursuit of a common

set of virtues, and contemporary liberal societies have proven unable to find any other bonds with

which to replace the ones that it has destroyed. Liberalism aspires to do little more than establish

a neutral framework among competing individuals, and as a result the inhabitants of the

contemporary West remain disconnected and directionless. Thus, the apocalyptic conclusion to

After Virtue envisions the possibility of "coming ages of barbarism and darkness" and suggests

that our only hope is to be delivered by another St. Benedict who could guide us in "the

construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life

can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."[165]

A more subtle, yet still damning, critique of the communal effects of Enlightenment ideals

can be found in the work of Charles Taylor. Taylor argues that the Enlightenment ideal of

"disengaged" or "self-responsible" or instrumental reason dismisses the possibility of an

intrinsically important purpose or meaning in life.[166] The Enlightenment thus abolishes the space

for what Taylor calls "strong evaluation," the recognition or valuing of some goods as inherently

worth choosing or seeking, regardless of whatever one happens to desire at any given moment.[167]

He concedes that Enlightenment thinkers sought to debunk the idea that life has any point or

meaning beyond itself for humanitarian reasons: they believed that talk about "spiritual goods"

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[163] See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 335.

[164] See ibid., 345-46.

[165] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

[166] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 19. It should be noted that Taylor admits that a few Enlightenment thinkers – he singles out Diderot and Hume – had far more subtle views and were far less confident in the efficacy of disengaged reason than the "radical Enlightenment" that he focuses on. As with most critics, however, Taylor continues to paint the Enlightenment in fairly broad strokes. See ibid., 340-47.

[167] See ibid., 4, 332-33; and Charles Taylor, "The Immanent Counter-Enlightenment," in *Canadian Political Philosophy: Contemporary Reflections*, ed. Ronald Beiner and Wayne Norman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 386-87.

and "higher" modes of life often implied a denigration of "ordinary life" and prevented people from taking their fate into their own hands and choosing their own goals or way of life, unconstrained by authority or tradition.[168] He nevertheless insists that this viewpoint is "wildly wrong," because our selves or identities are inescapably not only connected to but also constituted by our moral concerns or ideas about the good; strong evaluation is an essential part of the human self and so cannot be escaped or ignored.[169] Thus, while the thinkers of the Enlightenment adhered to some admirable moral ideals – universal benevolence, the alleviation of human suffering, the improvement of the human condition – their outlook left them unable to give an adequate account of *why* these ideals are good or worth pursuing; there was no way for them to plausibly combine their reductive ontology with their moral impetus.[170]

The Enlightenment's belief in the sufficiency of disengaged reason and denial of strong evaluation are not only intellectual errors, according to Taylor, but have also led to a certain kind of shallowness and emptiness in modern life, an impoverished mode of experience that leaves little room for authenticity or self-realization and thus breeds malaise and discontentment.[171] According to the ideal of disengaged reason, individuals are capable of standing back from their society and their historical situation to rationally choose or mold their own identities; such a view naturally encourages people to view their lives and purposes in individual terms and to regard society as only a means to their own ends.[172] Following Hegel, however, Taylor argues that an individual's identity can only be properly understood in relation to his or her community, that ultimately "one cannot be a self on one's own" and thus that the Enlightenment view of the self is narrow and unconvincing.[173] Also following Hegel, he argues that true freedom consists not in mere "negative liberty" – the absence of restrictions, the enjoyment of individual rights, the ability to choose one's own course in life – but in self-determination of a kind that can only be found in

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[168] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 81-85, 322-32; and Taylor, "The Immanent Counter-Enlightenment," 387, 390.
[169] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 30; see also chapters 2-3.
[170] Taylor's point is less that these Enlightenment thinkers failed to "ground" their views adequately than that they lost sight of their own moral sources, i.e. the fact that their emphasis on "ordinary life" and their aspiration to improve the human condition were inheritances from Locke's providential deism. See ibid., 335-40.
[171] For a statement of Taylor's diagnosis and his attempt at a "retrieval" of the ideal of authenticity, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
[172] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 82, 193-97, 413; and Taylor, *Hegel*, 3-11.
[173] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 36.

and through a political community (what he calls "situated freedom").[174] Taylor contends, then, that it was precisely the desire to free humanity from the shackles of authority and tradition that led Enlightenment thinkers to adopt an outlook that isolated individuals from one another and thereby undermined the possibility of true freedom, the kind that comes from public life and self-government.

Almost all of these themes are, unsurprisingly, echoed and intensified in Gray's wholesale attack on the Enlightenment. Gray maintains that the idea of "community" invoked by communitarian critics of liberalism is just as generic and devoid of reality as the abstract individual of the liberal outlook,[175] but he agrees with the communitarians that the supposedly autonomous individual of liberal theory is nothing more than a "cipher," a fictional being without a history or an identity, denuded of the special attachments that make people who they are.[176] Echoing MacIntyre, he argues that the Enlightenment-inspired liberal view envisions society as founded on a set of abstract, universal principles rather than a particular yet common culture, but a unanimous consensus on such principles is impossible and the lack of a common culture only leads to social fragmentation and a low-intensity civil war among conflicting social groups.[177] He further claims that Enlightenment ideals have given rise to "legalism," meaning the attempt to remain "neutral" regarding deep moral conflicts and to resolve them through legal formulas like unconditional and non-negotiable rights rather than through the messier process of political give-and-take. In Gray's view, this misguided and futile attempt to abolish *politics* from the political world requires ignoring people's identities and cultural traditions and ultimately makes conflicts *less* rather than more tractable by limiting possibilities for compromise.[178]

The problems caused by liberal individualism are, according to Gray, exacerbated by the preeminence of science and technology in the modern world and by the push for a global free market – both of which he predictably associates with the Enlightenment project of a universal

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[174] See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 160; and Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
[175] See Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 7-8, 15, 80, 109, 129; and John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000), 118-22.
[176] See Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 4-5, 120-21.
[177] See ibid., 24-25.
[178] See ibid., 22, 76-77, 137.

civilization. In attempting to encompass all knowledge into a single scientific system, he maintains, the Enlightenment contributed to the erosion of local and traditional forms of knowledge and thus ultimately led to disenchantment and nihilism.[179] Equally problematically, the Enlightenment attempt to use science and technology to improve humanity's lot has led people to see the non-human world as little more than a resource to be dominated and exploited, with inevitably destructive consequences for the natural environment.[180] He sees this twin devastation of nature and culture as "the real legacy of the Enlightenment project to humankind," the part of the modern worldview that "Westernization has most lastingly and destructively transmitted to non-Western cultures."[181] This transmission has been expedited, of course, by the connected ideal of a global free market, which he claims brings with it social ills of its own, including rampant inequalities, pervasive economic insecurity, and the collapse of families and communities. Gray asserts that in the United States, "the world's last great Enlightenment regime," free markets have led to "social breakdown on a scale unknown in any other developed country," and suggests that the human costs of this "false Utopia" of a global free market may ultimately rival those of the equally false (and also Enlightenment-inspired) utopia of communism, under which tens of millions of lives were taken through totalitarian terror.[182]

Conclusion

Taken together, these five arguments seem thoroughly damning. Given how naïve, implausible, and dangerous Enlightenment principles are widely taken to be, it is no wonder that contemporary political theorists seem so loath to acknowledge – much less defend – our Enlightenment heritage. The agreement that the Enlightenment is now dead is so widespread that it sometimes seems as if any study of its principles and ideals must be, as the subtitle of Robert Bartlett's book has it, "a post-mortem study."[183] On the other hand, it is always prudent, before nailing the coffin, to make certain that the corpse does not in fact have a pulse. If the

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[179] See ibid., 145, 154-55, 178.
[180] See ibid., 158, 166, 178, 182.
[181] Ibid., 178, 158.
[182] John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (New York: New Press, 1998), 2-3; see also Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, 88-90, 181.
[183] Robert C. Bartlett, *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Post-Mortem Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

Enlightenment outlook were as obviously misguided as its critics claim, then it would be difficult to understand why so many scholars expend so much energy denouncing it; as Robert Darnton, one of the preeminent historians of the eighteenth century, amusingly notes, "the Enlightenment seems to have life in it yet, because it is still a whipping boy, and one doesn't whip cadavers."[184] It is my hunch – a hunch that I hope will bear out in my current book project – that the vast majority of the criticisms that I have discussed in this paper are based on grossly caricatured understandings of Enlightenment thinkers, and that there are a myriad of resources within eighteenth-century thought to respond to the charges leveled against it. Given how much we have inherited from this time period, its legacy remains of great importance for us; just as our understanding of the American founding (Lockean liberal or classical republican? Christian or secular? "We the people" or a conspiracy of the propertied elite?) influences the way we understand the contemporary United States, our understanding of the Enlightenment forms an important part of how we understand ourselves and our world. There is of course no question of returning to the eighteenth century; we have experienced too much and learned too much to return (or to *want* to return) in any simple sense. But precisely when there are so many anti-Enlightenment forces afoot in the world, it seems especially important to thoroughly understand our Enlightenment heritage before joining in the chorus of denunciation. We may be surprised to find that, contrary to the assumptions of much recent work in political theory, the legacy that the Enlightenment has bequeathed to us is on the whole an auspicious one.

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[184] Robert Darnton, *George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 12.