BEYOND EXCLUSIVE HUMANISM

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Government

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Washington, DC November 4, 2010
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary liberal theory and the theoretical justification thereof are intimately related to the pre-political worldview of exclusive humanism. This form of humanism maintains the primacy of human life and flourishing to the exclusion of any transcendent values. The veracity of this form of humanism has recently been questioned by a number of political theorists including John Gray, Charles Taylor and Václav Havel. This dissertation investigates the merits of their critiques, pitting them against self-avowed humanist partisan Richard Rorty. It evaluates the merits of the alternatives to exclusive humanism offered by the aforementioned authors. What consequences for liberal theory and culture would going beyond exclusive humanism entail?
Whenever I came to a difficult point in the dissertation or was simply exhausted, I would pull out a piece of paper and begin to write my acknowledgements. I would think of all the people who had educated, motivated and sustained me throughout the years of my doctoral study, and those who did so well before. I now own reams of handwritten acknowledgements in notebooks, on the backs of articles and scribbled on pieces of scrap paper, so many in fact that it would be impossible for me to reproduce them all here. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to very many friends and loved ones and although I do not list all your names here, please know that you are precious to me.

In a special way, of course, I recognise the mentorship of my advisor Prof. Bruce Douglass. In his musings on education, the Polish philosopher Józef Tischner wrote that upbringing and education are work with and upon a person who is in the process of maturing. It therefore creates between teacher and pupil bonds analogous to fatherhood - not as the passing on of life, but as the passing on of hope. The teacher is a confidant of the pupil’s hope; he is its support and strength. Prof. Douglass, you have been a true teacher in this sense; the bearer of my hope.

I also sincerely thank professors Patrick Deneen, Colin Bird and Richard Boyd for their help and guidance along the way. I further acknowledge my fellow political theorists at Georgetown for their solidarity in the ordeal, especially: Hamutal Bernstein, Craig French, Kristine Miranda and Briana McGinnis.

Finally, I thank my parents Henryk and Irena Olearnik and my brother Gabriel. This journey has taken me far from home but your love and support has always been close beside me.
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Introduction

*Liberalism needs to move beyond exclusive humanism? Sounds suspiciously like metaphysics...*

Ever since John Rawls attempted to free liberalism from metaphysical claims, political theorists have been embroiled in debates over neutrality concerning the good, the reasonableness of comprehensive doctrines and the continual reliance on substantive truth claims in politics. A lively public debate – especially, though not exclusively in the United States - has also ensued about the role of religious discourse in the public square. The present investigation however does not engage in those well-rehearsed and, frankly, tired debates. In drawing attention to the problematic nature of the exclusive humanist worldview, which in many ways lies beneath many of those debates of the 80’s and 90’s, neither does it aim at getting at the same issues in a peculiar and oblique way. Rather it is interested in answering the following question: what, if anything, do contemporary critiques of humanism entail for liberal theory and liberal culture?

This enquiry is prompted by a number of recent critiques of humanism - a fact made all the more intriguing by the diversity of their provenance. Its primary task is to examine the validity and persuasiveness of these critiques, both on their own merits but also by considering responses to them. A secondary, though no less important task, is to determine what the results of this investigation entail for liberal theory; a finally, to examine the alternatives to the humanist worldview.
Before embarking on any of these endeavours however, several preliminary tasks must be carried out. The first is to define the kind of humanism under consideration; that is, to clarify the term ‘exclusive humanism’. The second is to establish the relationship between exclusive humanism and procedural liberalism.

**What is exclusive humanism?**

Humanism is best thought of as a worldview or life-stance which identifies and promotes the value of human beings and carries with it a series of obligations about how we ought to live and treat others.\(^1\) This succinct description is largely accurate, if not exhaustive, of all forms of humanism despite significant differences in terms of their specific content. The humanist worldview has a long and complex history, one which has seen Renaissance, Enlightenment and Modern iterations – to name but a few examples. None of these are of immediate concern, however, since the humanism under consideration here is supplied by Charles Taylor’s term ‘exclusive humanism’.

Exclusive humanism, Taylor specifies, consists in the combination of two elements – one practical; the other theoretical. The practical element avows the primacy of human life, largely understood in material terms as the valuing of physical life and its necessary corollaries – food, shelter, alleviation of sickness and pain, education, employment, opportunity for a personal life and so forth. The second-order element supplies the additional claim that there is nothing beyond the primacy of human life as outlined in the terms above.\(^2\) This characterization acts as a good working

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definition of the prevailing form of contemporary humanism. However it requires a further precision which Taylor himself does not supply.

Exclusive humanism, like every other kind of worldview, can function in a variety of ways. It is important to disambiguate. The present investigation will be primarily concerned with exclusive humanism which functions as a pre-political foundation; that is to say, which functions as a minimal conception affirming the moral claim that human beings have intrinsic worth (‘The First Anthropocentric Principle’) and the epistemological claim that reality can only be judged from a human perspective (‘The Second Anthropocentric Principle’).

It is important to differentiate between a pre-political foundation and a comprehensive doctrine, the latter of which would articulate a complete conception of the good covering all recognized values and virtues within one rather precise system. Humanism has, of course, functioned as a comprehensive doctrine. Historically, humanist notions of the ‘autonomous individual’ became central to our modern self-understanding and helped to supply the substantive underpinnings of liberal politics. Even today exclusive humanism continues to function as a complete moral conception in some quarters, as the manifestos of various humanist associations attest, issuing a robust set of first-order political, social and ethical commitments.³

For reasons that will shortly be articulated it will be necessary to limit the present inquiry to a form of exclusive humanism that functions as a pre-political foundation or minimal conception. It will become clear however that the authors under

³ See for example The British Humanist Association http://www.humanism.org.uk/
consideration will be rather less disciplined in keeping to these functional distinctions; therefore where exclusive humanism functions as a comprehensive doctrine, or as will more often be the case, as well-defined set of practical commitments that eschews a metaphysical conception of the good, this will be duly brought to the reader’s attention.

**What is the relationship between exclusive humanism and procedural liberalism?**

The second preliminary task is to explain the relationship between exclusive humanism and contemporary liberalism. It is undertaken in order to pre-empt what would otherwise be the first objection to the entire project. Whether the critiques of humanism are valid or not - so the objection would go - is irrelevant to most forms of contemporary liberalism which, following the Rawlsian model, do not commit themselves to any single worldview or set of beliefs. Granted – the objection will continue – a convincing case could be made that early modern liberalism derived normative principles such as individual autonomy, freedom and equality from enlightenment humanism and as such any critiques of these humanist principles would affect liberalism in turn. But, the justification of *political* liberalism does not depend on a single comprehensive doctrine such as enlightenment humanism but on a network of concepts in the ‘public political culture’ that make up the overlapping consensus. Therefore any critiques of humanism, however sound, would only have a minimal impact on political liberalism.

Such an objection would be well-taken if what were under consideration were a *strictly* procedural form of liberalism, or better, an ‘operational liberalism’ or *modus vivendi*. This would indeed be impervious to the critiques of exclusive humanism as outlined above. But as Larmore has correctly indicated procedural or political
liberalism is distinct from both its substantive and operational variants. Procedural liberalism, he clarifies, can be thought of as occupying a position between two extremes: one lies in basing political neutrality on substantive ideals that shape our overall conception of the good life (i.e. Mill and Kant), the other consists in basing it solely on a strategic bargain between rivals who are roughly equal in power (i.e. Hobbes).⁴

Larmore, Rawls and others of their ilk are careful to distinguish procedural liberalism from its operational cousin. It is true that according to the procedural model a plurality of doctrines (even incompatible ones) can co-exist within a single framework of democratic institutions. A well-ordered society need not be united in its basic moral and ontological beliefs; it is enough that it shares a political conception of justice that can be upheld by an overlapping consensus of different comprehensive doctrines. However, although this kind of liberalism avoids committing itself to any single comprehensive doctrine, it nevertheless requires a minimal moral consensus, a ‘shared cultural norm’ or a common ‘background culture’ to serve as its normative underpinning. It also stipulates that the comprehensive doctrines allowed to function in the public sphere must meet the demands of public reason.

This relates to exclusive humanism in the following way: the shape of a modern liberal state, even of a procedural sort, flows out of reasons rooted in its culture and history - this is true even of a society’s basic concept of reasonableness. In Western societies at least, the content of this background culture is supplied by humanism. In other words liberalism depends on the minimal claim that human beings are

endowed with a special dignity, that their well-being ought to be promoted and their suffering minimised. Even procedural liberalism depends on a form of humanism; not as a comprehensive doctrine but as a pre-political foundation. It is for this reason that any critiques of that worldview if it is found to be valid, will also affect liberalism.

**Where to find an advocate for exclusive humanism?**

The first challenge in examining the validity of these critiques is to find an advocate for exclusive humanism; a procedural liberal willing to defend and explicate the content of this minimal moral framework. This task has been overlooked by most procedural liberals because, to put it simply, it has not been deemed necessary. The focus has been on how to reconcile a common political conception of justice with a diversity of comprehensive doctrines. The question of the validity of the pre-political foundation which informs both our sense of justice and reasonableness has gone unanswered because it has gone unasked.

This is not a criticism of procedural liberalism which has hitherto not thought of itself as needing to supply such a justification. Larmore again rightly argues, although the basic respect for persons in advance of the laws they give themselves is a necessary prerequisite to the democratic order, we do not have to begin from a position of radical scepticism. Doubt, like belief, requires justification and there has simply been no reason to question our basic respect for persons or the exclusive humanist worldview.

Until recently, that is. The critiques of this worldview that will shortly be examined should leave us convinced that its veracity has definitively been called into question. The gauntlet has been thrown down. Fortunately, there is an outspoken
advocate of the exclusive humanist worldview and procedural liberal ready to take it up. Unlike the throat-clearing, arm-waving that goes on with others in this regard, Richard Rorty expresses no reservation about stipulating that it would be better if all of us could somehow learn to approach life in an exclusively humanist way, albeit on anti-essentialist grounds.

He would, of course, never concede that the liberalism he promotes involves anything like a full-blown vision of the good, such a substantive theory would be wholly incompatible with his own professed anti-foundationalism. And yet, despite the eschewal of rationalism and embrace of historical contingency, he remains a passionate and unabashed advocate of exclusive humanism. Virtually everything about the substance of his beliefs is humanistic in a manner reminiscent of J.S. Mill: the fact that we have ‘no good philosophical reasons’ to ground humanist values should not deter us from doing so, he says, this is because although the values we hold may be arbitrary since they are no more arbitrary than anyone else’s we should just accept the contingency and get on with being less cruel to one another.5

Although Rorty’s argument will precede the critics of humanism about to be considered, his stance on exclusive humanism can be thought of as a pre-emptive defence of the position which they will dispute. There can be no gainsaying that Rorty’s brand of liberalism is esoteric. He cannot be thought of as representative of the entire liberal tradition or even of the whole of procedural liberalism, but he is selected from amongst his peers because of his willingness to act as an advocate for exclusive humanism. Like those who will ultimately be his critics, Rorty is not indifferent to questions of background culture. He prides himself on calling liberals

to be more active in promoting that culture and ushering in what he refers to as a ‘liberal utopia’. He does not seek to justify exclusive humanism as a true but thinks that that ought not to prevent it from issuing a series of very definite practical commitments. The only way in which to understand this state of affairs, without accusing Rorty of being disingenuous, is to state that the exclusive humanism functions for him not as a comprehensive doctrine but as a minimal conception or pre-political foundation. Rorty is not to be thought of as a renegade on the fringes of political liberalism, a straw man for critics of exclusive humanism to send to the pyre but as someone who is best placed to respond to their critiques. What Rorty has in common with them is his explicit concern for articulating and cultivating the background culture on which liberalism depends. Liberalism, that is, not just as a set of political institutions and practices but as a culture.

It is further worth noting that other procedural liberals do not feature prominently in this investigation for the selfsame reason. Their focus has so overwhelmingly been directed on a different issue. Rawls, for example is not concerned with fostering the kind of culture that can sustain political liberalism, but rather on how, given a certain background culture, political liberalism can obtain. The question has been how to have a political conception of justice common to us all given ‘the fact of pluralism’. The question that concerns us in this investigation is whether exclusive humanism can support liberal institutions and political practices as well as motivate us to uphold them. In fact there is an even broader question at stake; what kind of pre-political foundation is needed to foster a just and stable society?
What’s wrong with exclusive humanism?

Humanism is nothing more than a secularised version of Christian morality and equally erroneous. That is the view articulated in the latest work British political theorist and disaffected liberal, John Gray. The claim that human beings are endowed with a special dignity, that their well-being ought to be promoted and their suffering minimised, the claim that is the cornerstone of even procedural versions of liberalism, to say nothing of its substantive versions, is completely unfounded. Worse still, not only is it rationally unjustifiable (something that need not bother an anti-foundationalist like Rorty), it is malign and dangerous.

Gray’s first line of attack against humanism is against the ignoble and sordid character of the individuals and culture it produces, but the ‘knock-out punch’ with which he follows is that humanism has led it to cultivate the kind of rapacious egoism that can only spell doom for planet earth. The issue, in other words, is ecology. Unless Rorty, or other liberals can show that their desire to minimise cruelty applies to more than just other human beings, this sort of humanism only confirms Gray’s worst fears:

The limits that are imposed on our powers and hopes by the dependency on the earth are denied. The earth has no life of its own that might overthrow the hubris of its briefly dominant animal species. For postmodernists the changing face of nature is a mirror-image of human thought and activity, not an independent reality...unlike any other animal we are free to deconstruct and reinvent ourselves, endlessly and without limit. We are not, as all other animals clearly are, ephemeral parasites lodged in the skin of our planetary host.6

Gray proposes the alternative view of biocentricism to replace humanism. The Gaian perspective, as he calls it, understands the biosphere as a single, living, planetary organism and is fully compatible with scientific reductivism. On this view

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the earth dedicates itself only with the renewal of life, it has no special concern for humankind and ‘it is the most potent antidote within late modern culture to the hubris of humanism’. If Gray’s view were correct and if biocentricism were adopted as the minimal moral conception of society then a procedural or political liberalism would no longer be possible. It would have to be replaced, according to Gray, by a *modus vivendi* or what has been referred to above as an operational form of liberalism.

Even if Gray’s biocentric alternative is deemed unsatisfactory, as it ultimately will be in the present investigation, as long as the core of his critique of humanism stands it poses a problem for procedural liberalism that can no longer be ignored. The pre-political foundation that was taken for granted by procedural liberals has irrevocably been called into question and the humanism defended by Rorty has done little to assuage Gray’s attacks.

**Alternatives?**

What then is the alternative? Reject procedural liberalism and embrace a *modus vivendi*? The internal problems of Gray’s anti-humanist substitute for humanism suggest that this solution is less than satisfactory. A further alternative is afforded by Charles Taylor. Like Gray, Taylor’s reflections on contemporary liberalism, both in terms of liberal theory and modern culture more broadly construed, lead him to conclude that there is something highly problematic about the type of humanism which nourishes political liberalism. By adding the qualification ‘exclusive’ to humanism Taylor is able to prise apart something that Gray conflates. Gray’s critique of humanism rejects both the First and the Second Anthropocentric

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7 Ibid., 170.
principles, but he focuses on rebutting the first, which states that human beings are the sole or at least central locus of value in the world, and that other values are only admitted when they serve human flourishing. In rejecting this principle Gray feels compelled to reject any practical commitment to uphold human life or promote human flourishing. He does not allow for the possibility that to view reality from a non-anthropocentric perspective does not require the desacralization of human life.

In one sense Taylor concurs with Rorty; the current consensus in liberal societies about the practical primacy of human life is the fruit of modernity’s exclusive humanism. However, in contrast to Rorty he thinks that without nourishment from transcendent ideals it simply does not have the means to sustain or reproduce itself. Its fruit is only good for a season. Put more prosaically, Taylor is concerned that exclusive humanism has been ‘free-riding’ on the transcendent sources which it explicitly denies or about which it remains silent. Were it to give up on them completely however, its practical commitments would have no chance of survival. In other words, his response to both Rorty and Gray is the following: liberalism needs to be supported by a minimal humanist conception but it is not humanism per se that is the problem only the current form. What is needed instead is a form of humanism that is open to the transcendent.

In what does such a humanism consist and on what grounds can it be considered as a favourable alternative? Part of the trouble with Taylor’s alternative is that he is not explicit enough in delineating what he means by transcendence. However a definition supplied by Jacques Maritain, author of Integral Humanism, nicely captures Taylor’s position. Maritain says ‘I call “transcendent” all forms of thought, however diverse they may otherwise be, which find as principle of the world a spirit
superior to man, which find in man a spirit whose destiny goes beyond time, and which find at the center of moral life a natural or supernatural piety.\(^8\) Despite interpretations to the contrary, Taylor’s transcendent humanism is not to be thought of as a full-throated confession of religious faith – his own Roman Catholicism, for example. Were this the case his form of humanism would cease to function as a pre-political foundation and would instead become a favoured comprehensive doctrine to the exclusion of others. This would transgress Taylor’s own avowed commitment to procedural liberalism one which respects the overlapping consensus and which envisions true pluralism in society.

Taylor’s criticisms of exclusive humanism are not designed to repudiate liberalism but to allow it to fulfil its promise. However despite Taylor’s convincing appraisal of the inadequacies of exclusive humanism and the benefits of a humanism that is open to the transcendent there remains a problem, one greater than even the vagaries of his definitions of transcendence; very little indication is given about the practical effect the adoption of a non-exclusive form of humanism would have on procedural liberalism.

**What does this entail for liberal theory and liberal culture?**

This leads us to the final two interlocutors of this discussion who do attempt to answer this question. Czech playwright, dissident and former president Václav Havel and his mentor Czech philosopher Jan Patočka both claim that liberalism’s shortcomings can only be redressed by reflecting upon the sources of man’s moral worth and by liberating ourselves from the oppressive strictures of an exclusive humanism.

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Like Taylor, although their work precedes his, they make a plea for a humanism which is open to the transcendent, though which does not ossify into metaphysical or religious dogmatism. The benefit of reflecting on Havel and Patočka’s work in addition to Taylor’s is the non-Western perspective they offer. As outsiders, or rather as ones who arrived late to liberal democracy following a struggle with totalitarianism, they are better able to articulate the practical advantages a non-exclusive form of humanism has for liberal democracy – especially in a globalising world.

The perspective of a transcendent horizon provides a greater realism and humility about the human condition; it can prevent utopian thinking in the face of ever-expanding technological possibilities, and it is able to articulate the badly needed basis for a shared minimal moral conception which alone can ensure a genuine and lasting coexistence between cultures and peoples. Humility, respect for nature, anti-utopianism, much of this will sound familiar from Gray indeed all save the call for a radical depopulation of humanity. But there is another difference. Whilst Gray believes that a shared minimal moral conception is not possible - that a *modus vivendi* is the only alternative - Havel demurs. A shared moral conception, minimal in nature and able to support a plurality of comprehensive religious and metaphysical positions, is possible but only on the avowal of a transcendent reality. Neither Havel nor Patočka conceive of the transcendent in a dogmatic way, it is for them an undeniable reality but one which is necessarily underdetermined. In fact it may be that many of the mechanics of liberal institutions will continue to work in the manner envisioned by Rawls and other procedural liberals. This call for new openness to transcendence at the level of liberalism’s pre-political foundation may
appear to be such a small change to the present state of affairs that it is difficult to foresee what practical consequences it might entail.

To be clear, it will make possible two radical differences on a practical level. Firstly, it will allow us to imagine a shared moral conception that is acceptable to members of the West and non-West alike. As Havel puts it, if a shared moral conception is ‘to be more than just a slogan mocked by half of the world, (it) cannot be expressed in the language of a departing era, and must not be mere froth floating on the subsiding waters of faith in a purely scientific relationship to the world.’

Rather, it must be expressed by acknowledging the transcendent sources that nourish individual cultures. Secondly, only such a pre-political foundation will be adequate to the task of forming culture necessary to uphold liberal values. Only a humanism that can disengage itself to offer principles in the world superior to man’s self-interest can cultivate the ability for sacrifice and solidarity - both necessary elements of liberalism.

The adoption of a non-exclusive humanism as a pre-political foundation would not so much change the structure or institutions of political liberalism but as Stephen White says in his reflection on weak ontology, it would allow us to inhabit them differently.

The purpose of this investigation is not to repudiate the work of thinkers such as Rawls, Larmore, Nozick and Raz, to question the coherence of the overlapping consensus or the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis comprehensive doctrines. Its aim

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rather is to reveal a dearth of theorization surrounding the issue of procedural liberalism’s pre-political foundations. White talks about this in terms of a growing ‘ontological drift’. Despite the difference in terminology, his observation is consistent with our own:

The sense of living in late modernity implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West. The recent ontological drift might then be characterized generally as the result of a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those “entities” presupposed by our typical ways of seeing the world. One of those entities most thrown into question has been or conception of the human subject.\textsuperscript{11}

At issue is an emergent need to re-examine the conception of the human subject, to discover what the basic constraints on human beings are and the common moral insights they share in building a political community.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 503.
Chapter 1: A Defence of Humanism

Rorty’s belief in the superiority of liberal democracy puts him good company with other contemporary liberals. However many of the more serious arguments advanced against humanism are overlooked by other procedural liberals who are loathe to pledge their allegiance to any single worldview. Rorty exhibits no such reticence. He is prepared to cast himself as a humanist and fully embrace the union of liberalism and humanism. He is not the only contemporary liberal thinker who fits that profile, but he is arguably the most outspoken and he consistent in his total renunciation of residual Kantian desires to escape historicity and contingency. The remainder of the chapter examines his particular brand of liberalism which is careful to avoid the kind of metaphysical commitments characteristic of early modern liberals. He denies the existence of an essential human nature, arguing that human beings, their values, culture and political views are historically contingent and mutable. However he thinks that we can continue to work towards the creation of a liberal utopia nevertheless.

Consideration of Rorty’s work should disabuse us of the idea that contemporary liberalism, even of the procedural sort, has fully abandoned its commitment to a certain type of humanism. Despite its separation from the strongly rationalist and universalistic premises of Enlightenment liberals, it comes close to the old secular humanist creed. Rorty is convinced that he can to hold onto the anti-foundationalist insights of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault while not letting go of the liberal hopes envisioned by Kant and Mill.

Can humanist values be separated from their essentialist foundations? Doesn’t the embrace of contingency only lead to moral relativism, which can easily justify an anti-liberal form of politics? This is where a great many of the critiques against Rorty are directed. Foundationalists, as he calls them, criticise him because they think his ‘public values’ can only be justified by appealing to strong metaphysical claims. They further argue that either his project is doomed to failure or must tacitly reintroduce the metaphysical claims it explicitly rejects. Anti-foundationalists, on the other hand, agree with his rejection of strong metaphysical justifications but maintain that this necessitates a renunciation of humanism and the liberal ideals that go with it.

Legitimate as this concern is, it has no direct bearing on the present investigation: firstly, because Rorty’s attempt to defend procedural liberalism in anti-foundationalist way (i.e., by embracing historicism) is not incoherent, but secondly, because Rorty is still affected by criticisms of humanism even accepting his anti-foundationalist assumptions. In other words, this evaluation of Rorty is not immediately concerned with adjudicating the philosophical contest between foundationalism and non-foundationalism. This is partly because the scope of the present enquiry is unavoidably limited, but partly it is because praxis takes a certain priority over theory. The debate between theories of truth is of central importance, but politics cannot wait for a consensus on philosophical presuppositions nor ought politics be dissolved into philosophy or made dependent upon it. The primary concern of this chapter is not whether Rorty is able to secure a victory over realism but whether his position can satisfy its own justificatory criteria.
He may be right that an anti-foundationalist form of liberalism which promotes humanist values is not incoherent, but is it able to provide the pre-political foundation needed to secure a liberal society?

I.

It is worth prefacing this question with a description of the kind of humanism under consideration. Humanism is not to be thought of as one of the competing comprehensive doctrines to be found in pluralistic liberal societies but as its pre-political foundation. Rawls stipulates that comprehensive doctrines must meet the minimal criteria of reasonableness, such as respect for human life and individual conscience, to enter the overlapping consensus. Together with thinkers like Larmore, Ackerman and Dworkin, he understands the doctrine of state neutrality as a principled constraint. This implies that there is a worldview, however minimal, which exists prior to the competing comprehensive doctrines that inform first-order decisions. In Rawls’ own words: ‘justice as fairness is intended as a political conception of justice for a democratic society, it tries to draw solely upon basic intuitive ideas that are embedded in the political institutions of democratic society and the public traditions of their interpretation’. (Italics added)

What is this worldview? What is the content of these shared intuitions which provide a workable basis for political liberalism? It is a form of humanism, one which discards the old Enlightenment, pre-romantic attachment to a universally accessible truth, but which still shares many of the same essential features. Before

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describing these features and their relationship to political liberalism in greater
detail, it must be emphasised that any critiques mounted against this form of
humanism are of the utmost relevance to procedural liberalism. They cannot be
dismissed by appealing anti-foundationalism, since even a procedural form of
liberalism relies on a ‘basic intuitive ideas’ and ‘settled convictions’. And these, it
will be argued, are dependent on a form of humanism which if shaken so will they
also be.

The only kind of liberalism that would remain unaffected by the critiques of
humanism would be an organizational kind akin to what Rawls has referred to as a
modus vivendi. This is little more than an institutionalisation of the power
dynamics already existing within a given society. Organizational liberalism,
according to this definition, has no independent or stable identity; it simply
manifests the results of pragmatic accommodations between disputing parties and is
therefore constantly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of power. Of course, this is not
what most liberals have in mind when they speak of political liberalism. Every kind
of liberalism which strives to be more than a modus vivendi depends on an
allegiance, however minimal, to a pre-political set of beliefs.

Regrettably most contemporary liberals suppress their humanist commitments.
Perhaps they consider them to be so self-evident or at least so widely accepted as
not to warrant discussion. Perhaps they think that by explicitly advocating a
humanist worldview they will compromise their avowal to uphold a non-substantial

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16 Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus” section 3. Larmore uses this terminology
slightly differently; he refers to this kind of approach to liberalism as a ‘Hobbesian’. ‘In this
view, individuals who have different ideals of the good life, but are roughly equal in power,
make strike a bargain, according to which the political principles to be established will not
favor any of these rival ideals.’ Charles Larmore, The Morals of Modernity, (Cambridge:
form of liberalism. This is not the case with Rorty. He is thoroughly Rawlsian in his embrace of political liberalism, insisting that it does not depend on metaphysical justification and entails state neutrality but he is fully prepared to cast himself as a humanist. He fleshes out the somewhat vague content of what other procedural liberal refer to as ‘our shared beliefs’, ‘our common consensus’ or ‘minimal moral conception’. Although many such figures continue to make the sort of claims that in the past were thought to require metaphysical support, most are reluctant to do so as openly as Rorty.

More accurately, Rorty is happy to identify himself as a pragmatist, which he understands to be a form of ‘applied humanism’. In his own words:

I think F. C. S. Schiller was on the right track when he said 'Pragmatism . . . is in reality only the application of Humanism to the theory of knowledge.' I take Schiller's point to be that the humanist's claim that human beings have responsibilities only to one another entails giving up representationalism and realism.  

Rorty wants liberalism to remain independent of a particular vision of the good and to keep comprehensive doctrines out of the political domain. Malachowski is right that in this respect, Rorty is closely allied with Rawls. Political liberalism no longer need offer a philosophical account of man., for Rorty, it need only appeal to people in virtue of the commitments they endorse ‘from the inside’, This ‘inside perspective’ has no content independent of one’s socialization into a historically particular social context.

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Rorty may be more candid than most liberals in making this claim, but few procedural liberals would disagree with him. He is not interested in offering his own redescribed theory of human nature but in weaning liberalism from the substantive, rationalist humanism that once gave it sustenance. It is because he champions a form of liberalism that takes historicism seriously that he draws a sharp distinction between the public and private domains, arguing that once we give up the quest to harmonise our private loves and public virtues under a single vision, we can pursue our quests for self-creation in private and further the cause of social justice in public.\(^{20}\) Against Nietzsche and Heidegger, however, he argues that this need not (and should not) culminate in an anti-liberal politics.\(^{21}\) As far as Rorty is concerned, the rejection of substantive truth claims does not necessitate the abandonment of liberal values or the settling for a \textit{modus vivendi}. In other words, procedural liberalism should not forgo its commitment to its pre-political humanist foundation just because it has discarded the rationalist universalism that once grounded its substantive precursor.

The good news, according to Rorty, is that we can continue to promote liberal values despite the contingency of selfhood. Our freedom is not curtailed by contingency, he declares, but is gained by its recognition! The recognition of contingency ‘is the chief virtue of members of a liberal society, and that the culture of that society should aim at curing us of our “deep metaphysical need”.’\(^{22}\) And, although the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism may have been ‘essential to

\(^{20}\) Rorty admits that he had once similarly been under the spell of seeking this single overarching vision. ‘We have to give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural, moral obligations rooted in an unchanging, a-historical human nature’ Richard Rorty, “Relativism: Finding and Making” \textit{Philosophy and Social Hope}, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1999), xvii.

\(^{21}\) In his autobiographical essay argues that though he thinks that the ‘postmoderns’ he speaks about, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, are philosophically right, they are politically silly. Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” \textit{Philosophy and Social Hope}, 18.

\(^{22}\) Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, Solidarity}, 46.
the beginnings of liberal democracy, (it) has become an impediment to the
preservation and progress of democratic societies.\textsuperscript{23} It would now be better to
dispense with it altogether. This explains why Rorty favours Walzer’s account of
justice over both Habermas’ and Rawls’. It is preferable because it shows no such
reticence in severing the lingering allegiance to Kant.\textsuperscript{24}

II.

What is important from Rorty’s point of view is that we peel apart Enlightenment
liberalism from the rationalism and universalism to which it was originally bound.
As far as he is concerned we should discard the latter, at least in its foundationalist
form, but have every reason to hold onto the former.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps this pair can not be
as easily separated as Rorty suggests, but a certain form of humanism - exclusive
humanism - can and does survive the separation from Enlightenment rationalism. It
seems right to concur with Richard Bernstein’s sentiments that although ‘it may
seem strange and ironical to speak about Rorty’s “deep humanism,” because in
\textit{Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity}, he calls into question the very idea that there is
something “deep” and persistent about our selves. Yet… there has been a \textit{deep} and
\textit{persistent} humanism that is characteristic of his life and his thinking.\textsuperscript{26}

Bernstein is correct to describe Rorty as a humanist, but he does not provide
sufficient detail about the kind of humanist he is. Taylor’s term ‘exclusive
humanism’, affords the requisite specificity which allows us to gain a better
purchase on humanism’s relationship to political liberalism.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{24} Richard Rorty, “Justice as a larger loyalty” \textit{Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical
\textsuperscript{25} Rorty, “Justice as a larger loyalty”, 55.
\textsuperscript{26} Richard Bernstein, “Rorty’s Deep Humanism” \textit{New Literary History}, Vol. 39, Number 1,
Rorty’s liberal utopia, one which attempts to shed a foundationalist ontology and accepts the public / private distinction in its most radical form, is not only compatible with a secular humanist worldview but it is even more ‘exclusively’ humanist than its metaphysically robust forerunner. Unpacking the beliefs that make up Rorty’s liberalism should convince us of the fact, that despite purging its former philosophical presuppositions, it is still founded on this worldview.

Anthropocentricism is the first feature of exclusive humanism. It can mean two different things: i) that human beings have supreme moral value (The First Anthropocentric Principle) and ii) that an assessment of value in the world can only be given through a human perspective (The Second Anthropocentric Principle). These are not always the same, one could for example deny that humans have ‘supreme value’ but do so from an entirely human perspective. A humanism which has shed it foundationalist ontology clearly affirms the second of these two principles. The first principle is more complicated. Exclusive humanists are not obliged to affirm that individual human beings are bearers of supreme value. They can assert, for example, that a work of art, a ‘tradition’, or ‘the environment’ has more value than an individual human life. But the value of the object in question must ultimately be explained in terms of the utility or aesthetic pleasure it brings to human beings not its own intrinsic value – otherwise an assessment of value would be admitting a criterion of judgement that went beyond the human perspective.

Rorty is adamant that we only have moral duties to human beings (persons):

Philosophy can never be anything more than a discussion of the utility and compatibility of beliefs – and, more particularly, of the various vocabularies in which those beliefs are formulated. There is no authority outside the convenience
for human purposes that can be appealed to in order to legitimize the use of a vocabulary. We have no duties to anything nonhuman.\(^{27}\)

In this self-made world, human beings only encounter one another as objects of value and as such they no longer need to seek moral standards in terms of Nature, a Creator or anything else.

Regardless of whether humans have supreme value, Rorty believes that an assessment of reality can only be given from a human perspective. He submits that when we adopt a certain vocabulary to describe things such as intentional states (i.e., beliefs and desires), atoms, DNA or genes, the question is never ‘do they really exist’ but simply ‘are they useful for us’.\(^{28}\) Reality is constituted by useful descriptions; that is, by a vocabulary best able to arrange the future. In this sense, Rorty goes even further than Enlightenment versions of anthropocentricism, which were still dependent on the quasi-divine faculty of reason. For Rorty, reason is not an independent standard; our words and action are merely a matter of fulfilling human needs.

Another outcome of anthropocentricism is the commitment to the promotion of human well-being. This pre-political belief is manifested in liberalism as some kind of commitment to uphold and safeguard human life and well-beings. Rorty captures this negatively by arguing that liberals are those who believe that ‘cruelty is the worst thing that we can do’\(^{29}\). He does not allow himself to be goaded into offering a further justification for avoiding cruelty, or even into offering a definition of cruelty. He pre-empts his critics by stating that for liberal ironists there is no non-


\(^{28}\) Ibid., 126-7.

\(^{29}\) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, xv.
circular theoretical foundation for the belief that cruelty is to be avoided. Anyone who believes otherwise is immediately disqualified as a theologian or a metaphysician; someone who believes in a transcendent order which determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities, and such a person is deluded.  

It is worth quoting Judith Shklar, Rorty’s acknowledged source, at some length on this matter since she is more obliging in her definition of cruelty and in specifying the consequences of accepting the primacy of cruelty:

To put cruelty first is to disregard the idea of sin as it is understood by revealed religion. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride - the rejection of God - must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all the others. However, cruelty – the wilful inflicting of pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear – is a wrong done entirely to another creature...It is also a judgement made from within the world that cruelty occurs as part of our normal private life and our daily practices. By putting it unconditionally first, with nothing above us to excuse or forgive acts of cruelty, one closes off any appeal to any order other than that of actuality.  

Shklar’s definition helps to clarify the relationship of Rorty’s liberalism to humanism. The primary concern of humanism, the one which trumps all others, is the elimination of human suffering. Like Rorty, Shklar’s preoccupation with humanism is captured in her definition of liberalism. She casts it in terms of what ought to be avoided - the infliction of cruelty on others - but Rorty extends her definition to prescribe the promotion of human well-being. He argues that the cessation of cruelty to others and the concomitant enlargement of human solidarity require an increase in leisure time and an improvement of the basic material conditions of life.

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30 Ibid., 31 Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 8-9. 32 This may not be compatible with Shklar’s own self-understood contribution which seems to be strictly limiting liberalism to a purely negative version of actions that ought to be avoided.
conditions under which we live.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, in order to avoid cruelty we must live in societies which satisfy our basic human needs – safety, shelter, food – and which at least make minimal provision for education – both intellectual and moral. If satisfying the basic human needs listed above is a condition for the avoidance of cruelty then as a matter of practical policy liberals must set about ensuring that these conditions are met. Otherwise their hatred of cruelty would be insincere or at best, hypothetical. The promotion of material well-being is the positive face of the maxim to avoid cruelty.

Another practical commitment which ensues from exclusive humanism is secularism. Shklar explicitly acknowledges that the conjecture of cruelty as the \textit{summum mallum} entails a rejection of transcendence. She denies that such an acknowledgement necessitates an embrace of atheism - some religious traditions such as Christianity might be compatible with a hatred of cruelty - but, and this is the important qualification, by thinking that cruelty is \textit{the} worst thing we can do we consciously close ourselves off to any appeal which comes from beyond a this-worldly order. ‘To hate cruelty with utmost intensity is perfectly compatible with Biblical religiosity, but it does place one irrevocably outside the sphere of revealed religion’.\textsuperscript{34} On this view it would be impossible to justify an act of cruelty with an appeal to the will of God or the greater good of the community. Therefore any notions of sacred violence or appeasing the natural order through sacrifice would have to be rejected.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} See Rorty, “Justice as a larger loyalty”, 42-3.
\textsuperscript{34} Shklar, \textit{Ordinary Vices}, 9.
Shklar admits with equal candour that there are also no grounds on which to forgive acts of cruelty, for in order to make these kinds of appeals, there would have to be something was worse than cruelty – i.e., disobedience to God or transgression of the natural law. Do humanists have to accept the claim that ‘cruelty is the worst thing’? In theory there may be humanists who think that avoiding cruelty is one among several other, possibly worse, evils. The point is that none of these evils can be explained from outside a human perspective, which means that they forsake the possibility of appealing to divine mercy or expiation through suffering as a means of restoring the natural order. In short, exclusive humanism has no grounds on which to forgive misdeeds.

Rorty does not elaborate upon this notion of a closure to the transcendent embedded within Shklar’s assertion that cruelty is the worst thing we can do. He simply accepts it and is glad to concur with the consequences that follow. Liberal culture, he argues, should be secular in nature:

In its ideal form the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible.\(^{36}\)

Secularization on this account goes beyond the separation of Church and State, the exclusion of religion from the public sphere or even the decline of a personal faith in God. Rorty’s ‘secular culture’ is characterized by a strong constructive component which positively contends that human beings are finite and contingent and that their value is determined self-reflexively rather than by an appeal to the infinite, eternal or necessary. In this sense a secular culture would be one that not only got rid of God, but which was able to rid itself of any surrogate for God. The

\(^{36}\) Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, 45.
truly secular mind, contends Rorty, would get rid of transcendence altogether and in so doing it would be truly anthropocentric. The Enlightenment was secular only in the first of these two senses. Despite its success in overcoming a religious culture it still clung to metaphysical notions like ‘Nature, Reason and Human Nature …which were points of reference outside of history by which history was to be judged’.

The achievement of a total erasure of transcendent horizons is not the ultimate hope of a secular culture. As Rorty understands it, the nurturing of a secular culture is not a teleological endeavour to de-divinize the world and replace it with the constructive task of self-creation. Rather once we come to a full realisation of our contingency and finitude, self-creation is all that remains. It is not so much an aim as a generic feature of all human activity which it would be disingenuous to deny.

That said, Rorty never abandons his antipathy to religion in anything like the conventional sense. He consistently characterizes himself as an ‘old fashioned atheist’, which means, among other things, that he sees no value in ‘God talk’ whatsoever. He wants conventional religion to be kept out of public life as much as possible and not just on the grounds that for the nonbeliever ‘God-talk’ is nonsense but also that religion has tended to do more harm than good in public life. Unlike Shklar, who intimates that the hatred of cruelty is at least compatible with some religious traditions, Rorty’s secularized public realm is conceived as an alternative to conventional religion rather than a complement to it. Indeed there are moments at

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which his notion of a ‘religion of democracy’ ends up sounding very much like Comte’s ‘religion of humanity’.

The pre-political foundation of exclusive humanism therefore imposes two aims on political liberalism; the promotion of human well-being and the encouragement of self-creation. The language in which this worldview is expressed is that of scientific naturalism. Rorty, like other humanists, relies on the trope of Darwinian naturalism. He uses this to distance himself from essentialists humanists like Kant. To be a naturalist for Rorty, means ‘to be the kind of antiessentialist who, like Dewey, sees no breaks in the hierarchy of increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation—the hierarchy which has amoeba adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom…and people fomenting scientific, artistic, and political revolutions at the top.’

This reasoning is evident in his essay “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”; in which he asserts that we are no longer inclined to enquire into the basis of our human nature by trying to find a single, most accurate description. In the past we were stuck in (fruitless) debates about the essential nature of human beings - but since coming to think of ourselves as ‘flexible, protean, (and) self-shaping’ animals we have been released from these pointless enquiries to think instead about what we can make of ourselves. Rorty is right that we are increasingly setting aside the question ‘what is man’ and replacing it with wondering about the sort of world can we prepare for ourselves and our progeny.

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This is evident in the attitude of today’s most avant-garde heirs of the Enlightenment, who advocate the use of biotechnology in pursuit of human enhancement and to escape from our genetic limitations. Rorty would surely agree, though perhaps sans the high-tech, that human nature is a work in progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remould in desirable ways. The reason we are now less inclined to discover the truth about our nature is that;

Darwin argued most intellectuals out of the view that human beings contained a special added ingredient. He convinced most of us that we were exceptionally talented animals, *animals clever enough to change our own evolution.* (Italics added)

It was Darwin’s discovery, according to Rorty, that human beings evolved out of other species though a long process of genetic changes and adaptations to their environment that i) gave us reasons to give up the search for ‘an essential human nature’ and ii) empowered us to take control of our own evolution. That is the Rorty’s claim, at least.

The trouble with Rorty’s use of Darwin is that while the theory of evolution might give us reasons to give up the search for an essential human nature, (though not necessarily) it undermines the idea that we can take control of our own evolution. The theory of evolution does not show that humans are so exceptional that they can actually change their own evolution. On the contrary, it shows the exact opposite; human beings are part of nature like every other living organism. Darwin may have provided an explanation for the development of distinctively human capabilities

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41 See Nick Bostrom, “Human Genetic Enhancement: A Transhumanist Perspective” *Journal of Value Inquiry,* Vol. 37 No.4 (2003): 493. Bostrom argues that although the transhumanist movement encourages human improvement which employs methods going beyond traditional, low-tech ones such as education and the use of medicine and technology in overcoming the most basic biological constraints of our species, it is rooted in secular humanism.

which allows for their exceptionalness but he never implied that it was possible to transcend our nature. Our sense of empowerment is therefore totally misguided. Maritain is correct that we ought to distinguish between two types of evolution – i) the survival of the species and ii) the attainment of happiness. The two are often conflated by naturalists who use the Darwin’s theory in support of the latter, when it only serves to demonstrate the former.

Jean Bethke Elshtain makes a similar point about Rorty’s view of Freud. Rorty’s claim that Freud’s socialization went ‘all the way down’ and that there is nothing which is ‘definatory of the human’ is inconsistent with Freudian theory: ‘for Freud, the human being is a complex psychological entity, driven in ways that are not at all historically contingent…there is a biology, a morphology, a neurophysiology definatory of “the human” and prior to our historical construction.’

In fact the latest findings of evolutionary genetics affirm that human beings are much more determined by their genetic make-up than was previously assumed to be the case. These objections are powerful and they point to a potential misuse of evolutionary biology by political theorists and philosophers, but they do not affect Rorty in the way they might foundationalist or essentialist humanists.

Rorty admits;

It would be inconsistent with my own antiessentialism to try to convince you that the Darwinian way of thinking of language…is objectively true. All I am entitled to say is that it is a useful way, useful for particular purposes. All I can claim to have done here is to offer you a redescription of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe. Like every redescription, this one has to be judged on the basis of its utility for a purpose.

Darwin’s theory of evolution or Freud’s theory of social conditioning are not true in some absolute sense. The only justification for this naturalistic vocabulary is

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pragmatic; it is useful in furthering the projects of liberal democracy. Accordingly, what matters is that the Darwinian vocabulary of human malleability and social construction has afforded us with a basis for optimism about the possibility of changing our own condition for the better and that it is the most helpful in the pursuit of a liberal utopia. What is important, in other words, is that both Freud and Darwin have helped to promote scientific naturalism at the expense of theology and have aided our sense of empowerment over nature. Sooner or later, of course, the adequacy of Rorty’s vocabulary must be addressed. The fact that the language of Darwinian naturalism empowered some people to think of themselves as self-creators which in turn bolstered liberalism does not mean that such a vocabulary is in fact fit for this purpose.

Self-creation is closely related in Rorty’s mind to the contingency of our self-hood; it is made possible because we have been liberated from the belief that we are creatures with a certain well-defined telos. The emancipatory aspect of this position culminates in a renunciation of the need to worship something which lies beyond the visible world. After a few false starts such as the substitution of love of truth for a love of God, a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth and a worshiping of our own deep spiritual or poetic nature, we are now getting to the point, where ‘we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as quasi divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance.’

Rorty’s assumption about contingency must ultimately be examined in light of the counterclaim is that man may in fact always needs to worship something, that he is

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45 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, 22.
essentially a ‘religious being’, not perhaps in some narrow, confessional sense, but, a being whose moral responsibility must find its source in an awareness and respect for something that transcends him. Such an objection is not likely to be taken seriously by Rorty; it presumes the kind of strong realist ontology he rejects. However, whatever the ultimate conclusion, weak ontologists such as Gianni Vattimo and Steven White are correct that a transcendent perspective need not be deterministic, leaving no space for self-creation.46 Returning to the task at hand, however, it can be concluded that Rorty’s version of liberalism is based in and continues to strongly privilege familiar old, humanist values, regardless of whether one thinks that using a naturalist vocabulary to advance the cause of self-creation is appropriate or not.

III.

It is worth pausing over one final feature of Rorty’s liberalism which derives from an exclusive humanist worldview, namely, the belief in moral progress. This belief is the culmination of the other humanist beliefs that have thus far been considered. It is the confluence, of which anthropocentricism, hatred of cruelty, promotion of human well-being, rejection of transcendence and the vocabulary of scientific naturalism are the tributaries. Influenced by the great advances in science and technology that accompanied industrialisation and urbanisation, Enlightenment humanism came to exhibit a great confidence in man’s capabilities to create a better world. Rorty shares this hope for late modern liberal societies, one that is not limited to continued techno-scientific progress but encompasses moral progress in

equal measure.\textsuperscript{47} There may be nothing morally relevant to differentiate humanism from racism or imperialism, only a cultural preference, but Rorty maintains that the liberal human rights culture is still superior to the alternatives. He defends this position not from the point of view of a moral relativist but as an avowed ‘partisan of solidarity’.\textsuperscript{48}

On Rorty’s view an increase in human solidarity does not depend on the recognition of a core human self which in turn necessitates a human rights culture to defend this human essence. It is a question of efficiency: a question about how best to grab hold of history – how best to bring about the utopia sketched by the Enlightenment.

We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories, to the conclusion that there probably is no such nature, or at least nothing in that nature that is morally relevant to our choices.\textsuperscript{49}

In other words, the acknowledgement and protection of ‘human rights’ on the level of practical politics is grounded in a series of pre-political beliefs, but there is no reason to conclude that these beliefs reflect the true nature of things. They have simply come to be accepted by people of our age (in large measure through the telling of sad and sentimental stories) because of their pragmatic value.

It is worth noting that exclusive humanism begins to assume a double function here. It first acts as series of pre-political beliefs that inform and shape first-order practice, but the worldview also seems to describe the practical commitments themselves. The way in which Rorty presents the matter; the commitments to

\textsuperscript{47}‘The view I’m offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity’. Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, Solidarity}, 192.

\textsuperscript{48}‘The pragmatist does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one.’ Rorty, ‘Solidarity or Objectivity’ \textit{Objectivity, Relativism and Truth}, 24.

\textsuperscript{49}Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, 172.
protect against cruelty, to promote material well-being and so on seem to be both the outcomes of exclusive humanist beliefs and the non-foundationalist justifications for those beliefs.

Having said that, there is no inevitability about this human rights culture; it must be actively promoted and ushered in. More precisely, the idea is that solidarity and human rights do not gain traction because of the discovery of objective truths about human nature. It is the extraordinary growth in wealth, literacy and leisure in the West that means people are increasingly willing to substitute hope for knowledge. Rorty makes neither the metaphysical claim that objects in the world contain no intrinsically action-guiding properties, nor the epistemological claim that we lack a faculty of moral sense, nor even the semantic claim that truth is reducible to justification; he merely makes the empirical claim that shared hope helps to improve our material conditions and sense of community more than the search for objectivity.  

Moral progress is not inevitable. As he puts it: ‘the utopian world community envisaged by the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights is no more the destiny of humanity than is an atomic holocaust or the replacement of democratic governments by feuding warlords’. If moral decline were to occur, therefore, it would not be attributable to human irrationality or the failure to fulfil our obligations; it would simply be an unfortunate miscarriage of our chance at happiness; our practical inability to bring happiness successfully to term.

IV.

There are two criteria according to which Rorty’s claim must be evaluated; coherence and usefulness. Rejection of a correspondence theory of truth means Rorty does not have to demonstrate that his liberal beliefs ‘accord with reality’, but he must show that the humanist values he seeks to promote do not depend upon humanism as a favoured comprehensive doctrine; otherwise his acquiescence to an overlapping consensus would be nothing more than a cynical exercise in hypocrisy. The second, and more important, pragmatist justificatory criterion is usefulness. Specifically, Rorty must make it clear that the worldview he proposes would in fact facilitate the cultivation of liberalism in practice; that the pre-political worldview of exclusive humanism does help to promote freedom and solidarity.

Rorty must exonerate himself of Gellner’s charge of ‘pragmatist complacency’. He cannot just take for granted that the benefits of a Western post-Enlightenment world are the result of an exclusive humanist worldview. This world which has never known anything else might be oblivious to the real dangers of moral decline that were evident in post-Enlightenment communist countries, which were similarly founded on such a worldview.\(^{52}\) In order to do this, Rorty must show both that there is at least some correlation between the worldview he favours and the promise of moral progress as he defines it. Otherwise, if the exclusive humanist worldview is just as likely to lead to a decline in human rights culture and liberal values or worse still, if it is practically incapable of ensuring the continuation of free, democratic societies, then by the pragmatist criteria it must be replaced.

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It is worth re-emphasising that Rorty’s humanist worldview is not meant to function as a comprehensive doctrine. Were this the case it would contradict his commitment to state neutrality. To be consistent, exclusive humanism must function in a different way. It must be understood as something which lies beneath the fundamental principles of justice rather than as one of the comprehensive doctrines that make up the overlapping consensus. Only by understanding the humanist beliefs enumerated above as a foundation which precedes the overlapping consensus can Rorty plead not-guilty to the charge of forwarding yet another (albeit disguised) version of substantive liberalism.

Rorty clearly affirms the idea of the overlapping consensus. He believes that public life should be conducted in such a manner that all citizens be free to think and act as they please, not in accordance with any single comprehensive doctrine. The grounds on which he holds this ideal are not metaphysical (he is not a relativist), they are pragmatic. This pragmatism is expressed by the fact that there are limits to what can enter the public consensus. Both Rorty and Rawls are explicit about this. The very fact of these restrictions shows that an operational liberalism - which would just reflect an unprincipled compromise or the outcome of whatever inputs were supplied by the parties in question - is not being promoted. Rorty agrees that procedural liberalism sets limits on which comprehensive doctrines can be included in the overlapping consensus and that by consenting to these limits an individual might have to give them priority over his privately held beliefs. While an operational liberalism simply lives out the compromise for as long as it is in the interest of the different groups to do so, procedural liberalism hopes to replicate itself over generations. Rorty anticipates that the overlapping consensus will have a
didactic role; it will gradually entrench the beliefs of a certain worldview whilst eliminating incompatible views or at least keeping them safely privatised.

Is Rorty’s imposition of principled restrictions on the comprehensive doctrines included in the overlapping consensus and the hope for the steady pursuit of a liberal utopia consistent with the idea that exclusive humanism functions only as a pre-political foundation?

Initially the two seem at odds. Rorty stipulates that ‘when the individual finds in her conscience, beliefs that are relevant to public policy but incapable of defense on the basis of beliefs common to her fellow citizens, she must sacrifice her conscience on the altar of public expediency.’\(^\text{53}\) This suggests that for all his naturalizing redescriptions of truth, he holds to a notion of reality in which public expediency takes priority above all else – including a moral basic that he refers to as conscience. Rorty anticipates this objection. He responds by saying that he is not arguing this from the absolutionist position that every human being possesses a universal faculty of conscience which leads him to expound exclusive humanist beliefs but from a pragmatist position that for us as inhabitants of late modern liberal democracies it makes more sense to set aside questions of ultimate significance (or at least to limit them to our private lives) in order to reap the greater benefits of peace and prosperity.\(^\text{54}\) In other words, exclusive humanism ought to be understood not as a set of practical commitments but as the minimal epistemological position of applied pragmatism – i.e. exclusive humanism expresses beliefs that we (late moderns) can take seriously.


\(^{54}\) Rorty argues that Carter is right to debunk the idea that the appeal to reason is any more valid that religious appeals to revelation in “Religion as Conversation Stopper”, 172.
Comprehensive doctrines in order to be considered reasonable must therefore fall within the boundaries of sanity (i.e. be in accordance with exclusive humanist beliefs). This means, our inability to deal with people like Nietzsche or St. Ignatius of Loyola is not because they are ‘logically incoherent’ or ‘conceptually confused’ but because, to us, these enemies of liberal democracies appear ‘mad’. Nietzsche and St. Ignatius could certainly reply that these the inhabitants of late modernity have adopted the wrong standard of reasonableness. Rorty does not deny that. For the sake of consistency, he must acknowledge his own ethnocentricity and unwillingness to accommodate the desired moral vocabularies of his interlocutors. This contempt for a spirit of accommodation may appear presumptuous, even arrogant, but, it is not inconsistent. In staking out his position, Rorty does not transgress his declared commitment to prioritising democracy over philosophy. It is not the case that political institutions which are founded on the basic principles of justice, presuppose a doctrine of the nature of man (in this case exclusive humanism), but simply that this conception of the self and the world that we have come to adopt comports well with liberal democracy.

The only notion of rationality we need, at least in moral and social philosophy is that of a situation in which people can say …“your own beliefs, the ones which are central to your own moral identity, suggest that you should agree to our proposal.”

As far as Rorty is concerned, we should abandon a metaphysical account of the nature of man, but can continue to think about the world in an exclusively humanist manner nevertheless. He does not suggest we replace metaphysics with metaphysics

55 Ibid., 187-8.
56 Rorty, “Justice as larger loyalty”, 52.

What Rorty means by the beliefs that are central to our moral identity that would lead to the acceptance of exclusive humanism are nicely summarised, I think in the following passage: ‘a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that goal requires, besides peace and wealth the standard ‘bourgeois freedoms’. ’ Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, 84.
light - the same great taste without the cloying ontological calories – he merely wants to offer a pragmatist criterion of justification according to which what is rational or fanatical is relative to the community with which we identify. In this sense, Rorty’s dependence on exclusive humanism as a pre-political foundation is not inconsistent with his rejection of foundationalism.

Although not superficially inconsistent, Habermas calls into question the coherence of Rorty’s position at a deeper level. It is not the case that Rorty rejects metaphysics (or comprehensive doctrines) with one hand and offers them with another, but according to the German philosopher, that he only succeeds in finishing with the old philosophical language game by starting another round. Unlike deconstructionists who want to destroy the old and illusory language (ontology) in order to propose a new trans-valued vision of the good, Rorty avoids seeking this kind of absolute legitimation. His new vocabulary depends on nothing other than expediency, and therefore it does not function as a comprehensive doctrine. However, Habermas rightly points out that Rorty’s avoidance of the absolutising quality of traditional metaphysics and the paradoxical nature of deconstruction can only succeed if in the end, it creates a new metaphysical vocabulary (in the old-fashioned sense).

Liberal irony is coherent only if it can establish a permanently critical stance towards metaphysics, the problem with this ‘critical stance’ can only ever yield an operational sort of liberalism, a *modus vivendi*. If Rorty’s move is to be interpreted, as Habermas thinks it should be, as a transition to a new permanent vocabulary of anti-foundationalism, it does not square well with his enterprise of overcoming

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58 Jürgen Habermas, “Coping with Contingency” *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty and Kolakowski*, 19.
metaphysics. In other words, the pre-political foundation which initially by-passes
comprehensive doctrines and feeds directly into practical political commitments,
then, once these commitments ossify into a permanent culture they become a *de
facto* comprehensive doctrine – in practical terms there is nothing to distinguish the
two.

The real problem, however, lies in Rorty’s inability to satisfy the pragmatist
criterion of usefulness. Habermas makes this observation in his critical remarks on
neo-pragmatism. If we look as Rorty’s ‘new language’, he says, it is neither ‘new’
nor ‘particularly functional’. He points out that Rorty’s definition of functionality
adopts the Darwinian language of ‘coping’, ‘problem solving’ and ‘survival of the
fittest’, but these criteria actually work *against* neo-pragmatism:

Rorty admits that the so-called metaphysical distinctions “have become a part of
Western common sense”. This being a good indicator of the efficient functioning of
that Platonist vocabulary, we lack a good reason for giving it up. The functional fit
of Platonism with present circumstances provides sufficient legimitation for
continuing that language game. 59

This is a more convincing line of attack. Rather than becoming embroiled in lines of
interpretation and the levels of coherence of Rorty’s argument, we need to
determine whether his redescriptions are practically effective in furthering the cause
of liberalism. Does the pre-political foundation of exclusive humanism help to build
solidarity and obstruct cruelty?

V.

How are the practical commitments that issue from the pre-political worldview of
exclusive humanism to be brought about? Recall that these norms and practices do
not come about inevitably. Even if they do not tacitly depend on a metaphysical

59 Ibid., 20.
doctrine unless the beliefs of exclusive humanism can support and cultivate solidarity and the avoidance of cruelty they will be practically useless.

Rorty’s anti-essentialism demands that solidarity not be dependent on the recognition of a ‘core self’, but on the ability to see the traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as increasingly unimportant in comparison with similarities regarding pain and humiliation. Human solidarity on the ironist’s conception is ‘not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one’s world – the little things around which one has woven into one’s final vocabulary – will not be destroyed.’\(^6^0\) It is the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the term ‘us’.

Rorty substitutes a notion of expanding and contracting loyalties for a trans-cultural, trans-historical notion of justice. He imagines that most people start out by treating a narrow range of persons impeccably. This allows him to make the further claim that the task of moral education is to expand our circles of loyalty. This does not occur by appealing to external or transcendent values, only by the art of persuasion. As Habermas rightly remarks, according to Rorty those who are still in the thrall of metaphysics may need to be spoken to using the conventional tools of ‘human rights’ and ‘natural law’, but the ironist who has embraced contingency will understand that these truth-utterances are merely rhetorical devices for influencing people’s beliefs and attitudes.\(^6^1\)

\(^{60}\) Rorty, “Justice as larger loyalty”.
\(^{61}\) Habermas, “Coping with Contingency”, 19.
In order to convince people to hold a ‘standard liberal view about abortion, gay rights and the like’, argues Rorty, ‘all you have to do is convince them that the arguments of the other side appeal to ‘morally irrelevant’ considerations. You do this he says ‘by manipulating their sentiments in such a way that they imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed’. You re-educate people into widening their constricted circles by narrating stories of humiliation and offering them uplifting stories of overcoming in their place. In this way, they will learn to feel solidarity with an ever greater number of persons and minimize the number against whom they can justify actions of cruelty.

Foundationalists like to argue that bad people are deprived of truth or moral knowledge; for Rorty they are deprived of two more concrete things - security and sympathy. Sympathy can be induced through poetry and narrative; security, he will next argue, can be established by increasing material prosperity.

Rorty believes that the more leisured and wealthy we are, the more our loyalties are able to expand. We begin with concern for ourselves and our families then we include our kinsfolk, fellow citizens, co-nationals, eventually the human-species and perhaps even all living beings. Conversely, the more our material prosperity decreases, he argues, the more our circles of loyalty tend to contract. In support of his claim, he offers the following evidence:

Most of us today are half-convinced that the vegetarians have a point, and that animals do have some rights. But suppose that the cows, or the kangaroos, turn out to be carriers of a newly mutated virus, which though harmless to them, is invariably fatal to humans. I suspect we would then shrug off accusations of “speciesism” and participate in the necessary massacre.  

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63 Rorty, “Justice as larger loyalty”, 42.
He realises that the beliefs we have come to hold through sympathetic stories are precarious and that liberal societies must supplement their inclusionary narratives with comfortable material existence for its members.

Rorty’s examples corroborate his theory that we feel the strongest loyalty to those at the epicentre of our circles of sentiment, a loyalty which weakens as it ripples out to the peripheries. But the truth is we feel multiple loyalties which interact and conflict in a variety of ways. Material poverty does not always contract our circles of loyalty – think of dissidents, revolutionaries and resistance fighters. Often it is only an encounter with misery which can ignite our sense of solidarity. Conversely, material wealth often has the opposite effect to the one predicted by Rorty - think of miserly millionaires and increasingly individualistic, selfish Westerners whose good fortune serves only to constrict their sense of solidarity. More importantly, we treat the people who are closest to us, those at the very heart of our rings of loyalty, the worst. The veracity of this statement does not require an extensive pouring over crime statistics (although these too tend to show that more violent crimes are perpetrated by family, intimates and acquaintances than by strangers) we know from personal experience that the people we hurt the most, and are hurt by, are those closest to us, even the ones we claim to love.

Rorty is right in saying that we often treat our enemies as if they were sub-human but he is mistaken about why. It is not the case that we instantly treat those outside our immediate community as worse than ourselves. More often than not we ignore or neglect them. It is only when they start to pose a threat to us that we demonise them in order to justify our immoral actions towards them. It is true that it makes little difference to the moral behaviour of a sexist or an anti-Semite to show him
that women or Jews are good at mathematics or jurisprudence, and so like the rest of us, in possession of rationality. But it is equally farcical to suggest, as Rorty does, that people who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust did so because they thought of them as ‘fellow bocce players’, ‘Jutlanders’ or ‘Union members’.\textsuperscript{64} On the contrary, as the speeches of those declared Righteous amongst the Nations attest, people risked their lives to help save Jews because they saw them as fellow human beings or because they thought it was their moral obligation to protect innocent life. Irena Sendler, the Polish social worker who rescued 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto at grave risk to her own person puts it this way: ‘every child saved with my help is the justification of my existence on this Earth.’\textsuperscript{65} Not a single mention of bocce players there.

We all know that when we are cruel to others, it is not necessarily because we think of them as sub-human or irrational. How could this be the case when we engage in acts of cruelty towards our parents, friends, children, spouses; towards those who are closest to us and even towards ourselves? An even stronger claim might be ventured: it is not just that we often are cruel to and humiliate people who are close to us; it is also that the forms of cruelty and humiliation we practise themselves prey on the distinctive vulnerabilities of our victims. The more we know and care about someone, the more we can hurt them.

It should be clear that if just one of these observations is correct, the re-education of people with stories of sympathy is totally insufficient as a way of ensuring justice and upholding human rights culture. Rorty is correct that the reliance on the

\textsuperscript{64} Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, Solidarity}, 190.
\textsuperscript{65} Harry de Quetteville, “Female Schindler, Irena Sendler” \textit{Times Obituary} May 12\textsuperscript{th} 2005.
‘dictates of reason’ alone exhibits a radical naivety about human moral motivation, but, so too does the reliance on sentiment.

How does this idea of sympathy and imaginative identification track onto the original question about humanism? For Rorty the appeal to sympathy and imaginative identification is a way to circumvent the denial of a foundationalist ‘truth’ about the dignity or sanctity of human life, but to continue with the promotion of a human rights culture regardless. Put differently, no form of exclusive humanism can supply a further ‘meta’ claim about the primacy of human life. It cannot, for example, reach for the Kantian explanation that universal rationality leads us to conclude that I must treat humanity, whether in my own person or that of another, never merely as a means but always as an end. The exclusive humanist worldview limits the cultivation of solidarity and the taming of cruelty to the telling of sympathetic stories. But, if neither cruelty towards others nor solidarity with them is entirely the result of placing them within our circles of sympathy then exclusive humanism fails to describe our behaviour and is practically incapable motivating it.

Sympathy for some may come at the expense of cruelty to others. Human rights may be transgressed in the service of peace. These examples, together with the discussion of sympathy above show that exclusive humanism which imagines an assertive disengaged subject who generates distance from reason, tradition, nature, other subjects, indeed anything that transcends himself is incapable of acting in a manner required of a citizen of the liberal utopia.

What this means in practice is that Western liberalism and its citizens have adopted a series of beliefs, observances and behaviours which are now regarded as
reasonable, but not true and valuable in any objective sense as they did to the predecessors who passed them onto us. The problem is not that this eschews some kind of original foundationalism. One quite legitimate response is to say that we regard them reasonable because we belong to a moral tradition where they have long-standing significance and cultural resonance; they seem reasonable because they are familiar and ‘ours’. There is no need to provide proof of an original foundation that stands apart from all history; perhaps such a proof is not even possible. The problem, to return to Habermas’ point, is that if effectiveness is the only criterion, then what reason is there for giving up the extremely functional language of human dignity – whether acting in solidarity with other human beings is understood as ‘God’s will’ or ‘according to the dictates of reason’?

Rorty argues that what he is proposing is not ‘true’ but it provides us with a worldview better able to satisfy our needs. The reason, he goes on to argue, that Copernicus’s heliocentricism is better than the geocentricism of the medieval Catholic Church, is that the ‘benefits of modern astronomy and of space travel outweigh the advantages of Christian fundamentalism’. Yet as Habermas retorts, from a practical point of view, most would prefer a ‘belief in God the salvator’ than ‘a man on the moon’. In their respective contexts Platonism, Christianity and Kantianism were all well justified, satisfying the needs of the times. They also struck their adherents as reasonable, familiar and ‘theirs’. And as Habermas, following Tom McCarthy concludes, it is hard to see what practical need the overcoming of metaphysics satisfies.

67 Habermas, “Coping with Contingency”, 23.
Of course the response we should expect from Rorty is that it satisfies the need we, late modern citizens have to free ourselves from the restrictions imposed by any kind of transcendent perspective. Indeed one might point to the centuries of bloodletting carried out in the name of transcendent principles to back his point. But this only proves that the cessation of war and violence satisfies the human need for peace. In order to prove that overcoming metaphysics satisfies a practical need, Rorty would have to prove the veracity of the suppressed premise of his argument; which is that transcendent principles alone, always and everywhere are accompanied by violence and bloodshed.

Whether Rorty is able to supply such a proof is dubious, but it is also of secondary concern. The immediate problem is that his redescriptions of solidarity and the avoidance of cruelty do not give us any further insight into how to behave in situations of moral conflict. He says that, from a rhetorical perspective, it would be beneficial to drop the language of rationality and replace it with an instructive story. However, on closer examination, the maxims to avoid cruelty and promote solidarity seldom motivate us to the kind of renunciant actions needed. Unless we think of these maxims as objectively true they can actually encourage the humiliation and intolerance they seek to eradicate.

The first worry is that it can not provide the ‘social glue’ necessary to keep liberal institutions cohesive - as the sources of moral motivation dry up, we may no longer be moved by the right kinds of stories. The second worry is that Rorty’s restrictions on reasonableness not only exclude non-liberals, separated from us by geography.

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68 Rorty, “Justice as larger loyalty”, 44
and time, but also many current members of our societies. The requirement of redescribing private vocabularies not suitable for public debate can itself be cruel.

Rorty may be right that people can find in enough resources in their shared beliefs and desires to allow for coexistence without violence, and, that solidarity has to be constructed rather than found but, this still leaves a practical problem. What resources are required for peaceful coexistence and the construction of solidarity? Why do certain stories move us towards greater solidarity and not others? Why do certain conceptions and theories gain traction and not others? More importantly, on what grounds can we criticise any worldview which satisfies the needs of its time and context?

Habermas asks how we can convince people to implement maxims that diminish human suffering and increase human equality if we can only appeal to the promotion of each person’s individual happiness. Rorty cannot answer this question by falling back on foundationalist truth claims. However without providing any grounds, other than strictly pragmatic ones for handling such matters, it is hard to see how we would ever arrive at the maxims of increasing human solidarity and decreasing cruelty. As every athlete knows, unless his diet and training regimen are kept up, his performance will suffer – getting good results is not just about crossing a threshold once, it’s about maintaining a standard. In the same way, moral progress cannot just be assumed to move in the direction of greater solidarity and less cruelty, because Enlightenment humanism got us over a certain threshold. In order for this moral progress to flourish, its sources of must be constantly kept alive.

69 Habermas, “Coping with Contingencies”, 23.
As for the second worry, Rorty is right to argue that metaphysical appeals to truth and reason can also be humiliating; they can strip people of their final vocabularies. The requirement of redescribing private vocabularies into the public language of liberalism is more than ethnocentric; it is dogmatic and can be cruel. Shklar is not as naïve about this possibility as Rorty seems to be. She admits that ‘to hate cruelty more than any other evils involves a radical rejection of both religion and political convictions. It often dooms one to a life of skepticism, indecision, disgust, and often misanthropy’.70 This surprising assertion is explained by the fact that since cruelty is such a pervasive, seemingly intractable, aspect of human behaviour, when we confront the full horror of man’s propensity to violence and cruelty, we are often led to a hatred of mankind.

The erasure of any transcendent horizon leaves us with no higher grounds on which to believe in the possibility of clemency. If pressed, Rorty would likely answer that the transcendent worldview, holds out the same risk of misanthropy. Indeed Shklar, following Montaigne, thinks that Christianity’s moral failure was revealed in its inability to inhibit cruelty.71

VI.

With this, we arrive at the central question if an exclusive humanist worldview cannot protect against misanthropy can another form of humanism do any better? Do the recognition of cruelty as a universal vice and the resulting views regarding human solidarity serve as a sufficient source of moral responsibility?72 These are not merely philosophical questions, but historical and empirical ones. Can what we

71 Ibid., 11.
have come to believe as ‘heirs of the Enlightenment’ be separated from the living
community of people who made up that tradition, who told and believed those
stories as true.

Rorty’s falling afoul of his own pragmatist criterion of justification does not
discredit exclusive humanism outright. This would only be the case if it were shown
that solidarity, the avoidance of cruelty and other liberal values could only grow out
of a worldview that was transcendent in nature. Rorty is aware of this. In *The
Priority of Democracy to Philosophy* he advises communitarian critics of liberalism
to drop the charge that the social theory of the liberal state rests on false
philosophical presuppositions or that exclusive humanism is incompatible with the
rejection of metaphysics.

He suggests that they focus their attention in one of the following ways, they should
either, i) make the empirical claim that democratic institutions cannot be combined
with the sense of common purpose pre-democratic societies enjoyed or ii) defend
the moral judgement that the products of the liberal state are too high a price to pay
for the elimination of the evils that preceded it.\(^{73}\) Instead of trying to ‘re-enchant’
the world, the critics of exclusive humanism should ‘stick to the question of
whether disenchantment has, on balance done us more harm than good, or created
more dangers than it evaded.’\(^{74}\) Of course, his own answer to this question is so
overwhelmingly affirmative that he does not feel the need to take the alternative
seriously. This is not due to deception or evasion, but an almost child-like optimism
that this is the best way for us to secure future prosperity.

\(^{73}\) Rorty, “Priority of democracy to philosophy”, 194.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
Chapter 2: An Anti-humanist Challenge

As far as John Gray is concerned, the problem is not that contemporary liberal regimes have not fully incorporated or institutionalized a humanist worldview. Humanism is the problem. It is an ideology that both false and pernicious. To Rorty’s question of whether the products of the liberal state are too high a price to pay for the elimination of the evils that preceded it, Gray answers with a resounding ‘yes’. He considers the problems of humanism to be so serious that they can only be addressed effectively by its complete abandonment. This means the adoption of some sort of anti-humanist view, which is almost certainly unworkable as a basis for grounding anything like a liberal politics.

Although he never mentions Rorty, Gray’s identification of the central features of humanism overlap significantly with those of our liberal ironist, which include an avowal of anthropocentricism and the idea that humanity can take charge of its own destiny. In what follows Gray sets out to discredit Rorty’s position about the benefits of modern, secular liberalism. He hopes to prove that the belief in liberal the balance sheet being on the whole affirmative is not only ‘childishly optimistic’ but misguided and dangerous. Before considering his critique of the specific features of humanism it will be helpful to analyse anthropocentricism in further detail.

As has already been mentioned, exclusive humanism’s avowal of anthropocentricism can be subdivided into two further principles. All versions of exclusive humanism assert the Second Anthropocentric Principle, that is what makes them ‘exclusive’, but they need not assert the first. A weak form of exclusive

75 Rorty, “Priority of democracy to philosophy”, 194.
76 John Gray, Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals (London: Granta, 2002), 5. (hereafter cited as Straw Dogs)
humanism would still assert that human life has intrinsic worth, but need not affirm that the value of a single individual life trumps all other possible non-human value. More importantly it need not limit intrinsic value to human life, but could extend it to other non-human entities. It is important to bear in mind that Gray’s critique of humanism is not limited to assert a weak version of anti-humanism, it is all-encompassing. He refuses to accept that reality can only be evaluated from a human perspective. In fact he thinks that a biocentric perspective is more appropriate. Part of Gray’s critique applies only to types of humanism that are based on foundationalist metaphysics to which thinkers like Rorty are immune, but a much of his critique applies to non-foundationalist humanism as well.

I.

Humanism, he says, is a secular worldview which developed out of Christian origins or rather, out of ‘cast–off Christian hopes.’ This embarrassing detail, he maintains, has been erased from the modern humanist consciousness which perceives of itself as an adversary or alternative to religion and faith. However, this feature of the worldview is extremely significant. For Gray, although Christianity’s supreme valuation of human life is deluded it is at least coherent on its own terms. According to Christian theology human beings are the most precious of all created things because, having been made in the image and likeness of God, they alone share the possibility of entering into the divine life. Humanism, at least in its strong form, retains the conclusion that man has an insurmountable dignity but it explicitly rejects the grounds upon which this conclusion was held, without offering an alternative grounding.

77 Gray, Straw Dogs, 3.
78 Ibid., xii-xv.
It is this form of exclusive humanism which functions a comprehensive doctrine that provides the normative underpinning for substantive liberalism, or ‘humanism as a political project’. Gray’s contention is that the peculiar notion that human beings are the source of all that is valuable in the world makes no sense when wrenched from a theological justification. Modern liberalism prides itself on being secular and rational nature, but in reality it is built on a deluded conception of the human condition one which has no rational basis and which is undermined by the very evidence it uses to justify its claims.

The first feature of humanism against which Gray recoils is notion that only persons have intrinsic value. This means, by extension, that the Earth with its vast expanse of life forms and ecosystems is only ever instrumentally valuable. Gray pardons the ‘cult of personhood’ as a feature of Christianity in which ‘everything of value in the world emanates from a divine person, in whose image humans are made’. But, he asks, what the notions of personhood or the modern ideal of personal autonomy might mean once their Christian heritage has been relinquished. All forms of humanism claim that a person is more than just a living entity; he is a being who has certain rational capacities and free will that allow him to author his own life by way of the choices he makes. Personhood is thought to be something which every human being possesses, regardless of contingent factors such as age, gender, ethnicity or intelligence. However personhood is also reserved for members of the human race; it is not shared by animals, mountain ranges, computers or robots.

Gray seeks to undermine these claims by arguing that ‘the value of persons’ is not a truth about nature or human beings but a mere contrivance of 18th century Europe.

79 Ibid., 58.
History seems to corroborate his argument. Many human beings throughout the course of history have not enjoyed full legal protection as persons (i.e., women, children, non-landowners, minorities, slaves, etc.)\textsuperscript{80} Arguably being born a member of the human species became grounds for the basic rights of liberty, freedom from persecution, and humanitarian care only in the eighteenth century.

The decision to extend the status of personhood to all members of the human race was not experienced by those making it as simply a continent decision; it was thought to have a universal justification. All members of the human race share rationality and free will, features which make them autonomous agents capable of authoring their lives and making moral decisions. It is these capabilities that afford them with value and not characteristics such as education, gender, wealth or social status. It is also because of the lack of these capabilities that the status of personhood is denied to other beings. Although some of these beings may possess qualities such as the ability to feel pain (animals) or intelligence (computers) they lack the rationality and agency of free will that are necessary in order to count them amongst agents capable of creativity and moral decision making.

This, broadly speaking, is the Kantian position, which seeks to justify personhood on an explicitly rational basis. The German philosopher argues that ‘So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and they are merely a means to an end. That end is man….our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity’.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} In many countries some human beings (organisms) are still not considered full persons in the legal sense because of their stage of development (i.e. embryos, foetuses), their mental/physical capabilities (i.e. persons in permanently vegetative states) or their behaviour (i.e. criminals on death row).

\textsuperscript{81} Immanuel Kant, \textit{Lecture on Ethics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 239-41.
Gray strips away the illusion that there is a rational basis for the concept of personhood. The historical analysis clearly shows that the personhood of all human beings is far from self-evident, since hundreds of generations have not admitted it as such. In so doing he confirms Rorty’s position on contingency. Unlike Rorty, Gray is unwilling to affirm that humanism is worth defending despite its contingency. The observation that the widespread acceptance of anthropocentrism arose in a particular historical milieu does not necessarily imply that it is not ontologically sound or that the personhood of all human beings is not true. These two claims are separate and unrelated. And the fact that the idea gained credence in the 18th century says nothing about its justifiability on secular grounds.

However the problem for Gray is not just that human personhood has been falsely peddled as self-evident but that belief itself is incoherent and impractical. If the value of persons is reducible to the possession of certain qualities, such as rationality and free will, this leaves the humanist with no grounds on which to defend their human exceptionalism. That is, if the value of persons is located in the possession of attributes such as free will and rationality, it should follow that any being found possessing these attributes should be considered a person (whether human or not) and, a fortiori, any being not found possessing rationality or freedom should not be considered a person (whether a member of the human race or not).82

The problem with humanism therefore is its unwarranted exceptionalism. It ostensibly recognizes value in persons because of certain attributes that they possess but it does not explain why these (and not other attributes) are valuable, nor does it

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82 This is the position that is taken by Peter Singer according to whom members of the human species who not possessing the attributes of rationality or free will or in whom faculties are underdeveloped such as in the unborn and infants, the terminally ill, the severely disabled, the mentally ill should not be considered to be persons. See, Peter Singer, Unsancifying Human Life, ed. Helga Kuhse (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
explain why humans who lack these attributes are still to be thought of as persons. This combination of positions can only be understood in terms of the theological tradition out of which humanism arose.

Gray is correct to assert that the very concept of ‘personhood’ was the result of a theological dispute concerning the question of how God could be one and three at the same time. This theological concept of the person as an entity which has a specific identity and holds the fullness of being was then applied to man. Some theologians even go so far as to say that the concept of personhood is indestructibly bound up with patristic theology and ecclesiology.\(^{83}\) Gray does not act as a Christian apologist nor does he advocate a return to the Christian conception of personhood. He simply wants to unmask the incoherence of a humanism which values personhood, applies it universally to all and only human beings but for which it does not admit a theological rationale.

This incoherence need not, at least prima facie, affect thinkers like Rorty for whom pragmatism can trump coherence. But it does it on a deeper level. If it is correct to assume that practical utility and motivational force rely on the coherence of the belief upon which they are grounded and the derivability of its conclusion from its premises, then incoherence will ultimately mean that the pragmatist justification cannot be met.

Another of humanism’s cardinal errors, according to Gray, is the belief that ‘human beings are radically different from all other animals’.\(^{84}\) This strong anthropocentricism, which Gray again attributes to Christianity, posits an inflated

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ideal of human capabilities by claiming that humanity is separated from the natural world by an impassable gulf.\textsuperscript{85} It imagines that it is possible for humanity to rid itself of the limits that bind all other living beings. Christianity’s anthropocentricism is therefore tempered by the fact that reconciliation with nature can not come about solely through human efforts, it requires divine intervention.

Gray misrepresents the Christian position as a form of human exceptionalism. It is true that Christian doctrine insists upon the inherent dignity of every human being. However, personhood is not limited to human beings. God himself is a person. So are angels. And although on the Christian understanding animals are not considered to be persons, neither are they are to be thought of worthless objects to be used simply as instruments for satisfying human needs. However he is correct to assert that the peculiarity of exclusive humanism is that it rejects the supernatural aspect of this position (unlike Christianity, it maintains that human beings, like animals, are just a part of nature; neither essentially alienated from nor able to transcend it) but continues to extol the attributes of consciousness and self-awareness that human beings alone possess. It considers that these attributes justify affirming both anthropocentric principles; that reality can only be judged from a human perspective and that human beings have supreme value.\textsuperscript{86}

Gray exposes two weaknesses in this position. Firstly, that consciousness and self-awareness are not limited to human beings. Conscious perception is only a very small fraction of what we know through our senses. Most of our mental life and biological process occur at a sub-cognitive or non-cognitive level, and as the latest

\textsuperscript{85} John Gray, \textit{Heresies: against Progress and Other Illusions} (London: Granta, 2004), 7. (hereafter cited as \textit{Heresies})

\textsuperscript{86} Even on the strong version this does not mean that \textit{nothing} else has value, but that none of these can trump the value of persons.
primate research has shown, apes share many of the same mental capacities that we are accustomed to think belongs only to humans. From these data Gray concludes that human beings are not radically different from animals, and more specifically, that consciousness is not a relevant line of demarcation.

These facts alone do not prove that there is no radical difference between humans and animals. As Kateb notes, Gray himself provides a number of examples which differentiate humans from their animal kin. His own catalogue of the distinctively human includes, self-awareness, the possession of an ego, the experience of a conflict between interests and morality, the ability to act irrationally and a language which contains more meaning in it than its users can ever express. Gray oversimplifies. Take for example the well known and oft-cited fact that water is the most common molecule in the human body (~98-99%). Does that mean that human beings are 99% water? This would be true only by presenting a hugely oversimplified picture of our chemical composition. Gray commits the same error. Just because much of human experience and perception occurs at a non-cognitive level does not mean that we cannot have significant cognitive awareness. Nor does the fact that some animal species are highly intelligent preclude the existence of a radical distinction between humans and animals, especially when thinking about human creativity and the ability for moral decision making.

It could further be argued that Gray’s critique so far only applies to a form of exclusive humanism that is foundationalist in nature, one that functions as a comprehensive doctrine. Does he have any arguments against a non-substantive version; an exclusive humanism that functions in the manner presented by Rorty -

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87 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 60.
as a series of pre-political beliefs that did not seek justification in further metaphysical claims?

II.

Firstly Gray emphasizes the particular irony of using scientific naturalism as a non-metaphysical justification for humanism. In reality, he argues, Darwinism serves only to undermine humanist claims. Although humanism rejects the Christian worldview which requires a mediator to save humanity, it becomes a new doctrine of salvation. It desires to control and subjugate nature through a relentless, though utterly misguided belief, in the possibility of humanity’s progress. For Gray, naturalism and humanism are incompatible:

Modern humanists think they are naturalists, who view all forms of life - including the human animal - as a part of the material universe; but a genuinely naturalistic philosophy would not start by assuming that humans have attributes other animals do not.\(^89\)

He is correct; the logical point of departure for those who accept evolutionary laws should be that those laws govern animals and humans alike. The only explanation for the view that humans are radically different from animals is that humanism is a tacit extension of the Christian creed which its proponents are at such pains to reject. The undoing of this militant humanism however comes with the realisation that Darwinism has shown that human beings are no different from the rest of life on earth. In his own words:

The upshot of the theory of natural selection is that the human species is an accidental assemblage of genes, continuously mutating under the impact of changes in the environment. It is no more a collective entity capable of taking decisions about its future than any other animal species.\(^90\)

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Darwin’s theory does not serve to demonstrate the difference between humans and animals, but the continuity between them. *Homo sapiens* like other species, continue to evolve in order to better adapt to its circumstances and environment. This is change but not progress. And this change happens because of the better survival rate of certain genetic attributes and not conscious decision making. Once the prop of Darwinism is removed, there is little grounding for a faith in human progress achieved by mastery over nature. Gray does not debunk humanist beliefs simply by tracing their genealogy back to Christianity (this alone does not prove that they are mistaken). Neither does he falsify the proposition that humans are distinct from other living creatures (self-awareness and consciousness may indeed mean that human beings are exceptional). What he does do is demonstrate that Darwinist naturalism is incompatible with a humanist doctrine of salvation.

Darwin’s own theory of natural selection actually leads to the conclusion that history has no overall direction or predetermined state. There is no perfect type of human being, only one who is able to adapt more or less well to his contingent circumstances, which are themselves ever-changing. Human beings cannot transcend their nature or ‘cheat’ evolution. It is farcical that strict naturalists who admit that humans are ruled by the laws of natural selection profess a form of neo-Cartesian doctrine believing that human beings alone can defy these very laws.\(^{91}\)

But, there is no justification for such a belief, at least not on purely Darwinian grounds. Perhaps humanists like Rorty can try to justify their beliefs on the grounds that unless human beings are able to defy the natural laws that limit their animal

\(^{91}\) ‘We are built as gene machines and cultures as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.’ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 201.
kin, moral nihilism will follow. That is, unless humans are thought to be different from animals, at least in some sense, human actions can not be judged in moral terms. Unless humans are distinctive because of their capacity for rational thought and free choice, objective morality can not exist and no action can be said to be morally preferable to any other.

However, to offer such a response would be to misunderstand Gray’s position. He believes that thinking we are essentially the same as animals does not necessitate moral nihilism. He argues that although the denial of the autonomy of subjects might deal a death blow to traditional morality it also opens up the possibility for different kind of ethics. He thinks of ethics in terms of an interior passivity, ‘non-action’ as the essential condition of perfection. For Gray the ‘good life’ is not teleological, it does not have a particular purpose or way of being achieved but it is to be understood as the natural life lived skilfully.\(^{92}\)

This may seem to bring him closer to a version of Rortyan pragmatism, though it would be more accurate to call it moral inaction or better still, a mystical quietism. Indeed the position elucidated above aligns Gray with Taoism or the religions traditions of the Indian sub-continent which aim at a sort of self-annihilation, a state of indifference in which the soul enjoys an imperturbable tranquillity. Gray characterises this as ‘the perfect freedom of a wild being.’\(^{93}\) More is required in order to adjudicate the merit of Gray’s alternative position and in particular to address the charge that naturalism leads to moral nihilism. For the moment let it simply be noted that he is correct in pointing out that there is no simple way to

\(^{92}\) Gray, \textit{Straw Dogs}, 113.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 115.
reconcile naturalism with the belief that human beings are either radically different from animals or that they can transcend the limits of their own nature.

The final feature of humanism as identified by Gray is the belief that knowledge will make us free, or more accurately, that humanity advances through a growth in knowledge. Gray insists that this Enlightenment idea has become so ingrained in our contemporary way of thinking that, even in a world in which almost nothing is taboo, to question it verges on heresy. 94 Although the increases in scientific and technological knowledge have brought about real progress they have also helped to make cruel and barbaric excesses possible to an unprecedented degree. There can be real progress in knowledge, says Gray, but not in ethics; ‘science enables humans to satisfy their needs, but it does nothing to change them’. 95

The error of the humanist worldview, he continues, is that it identifies knowledge with moral progress but knowledge is merely a tool which can be wielded well or badly. An increase in knowledge can have positive consequences, as the advances in medicine and agriculture exemplify, but it can also have extremely destructive ones, as shown by the invention of the atom bomb, the concentration camp and global terror networks. The potential evil that can be unleashed through an increase in knowledge was well understood by the pre-modern mind. It was captured by the myth of Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods, and by the biblical story of Adam and Eve who eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge and are then expelled from paradise. Gray is adamant that these stories reveal a profound truth about human beings; namely that an increase in knowledge can lead to us wielding power we should not have. It is not knowledge per se that is problematic, but the

94 Gray, Heresies, 6.
95 Gray, Straw Dogs, 155.
arrogation of the right to decide yourself what good and evil mean, actually, to be a self-legislating moral agent. Gray comes close to the Augustinian insistence that sinfulness is essentially a state of the soul. Knowledge, like the body may make certain sorts of evil possible but it does not make them sinful and by the same token sinfulness is not remediable by an increase in knowledge but only by grace and good will.

This helps to bring into sharper focus the darker side of liberalism and reveal the naïveté of Rorty’s belief that the benefits of liberalism outweigh its faults. Gray puts forward two separate exposés of the underbelly of humanism. The first is a critique of the kind of human beings envisioned and cultivated by ‘the Enlightenment project’ – a project which continues today in a relativized version. Gray catalogues the ways in which we have actually regressed both morally and materially. Many human beings in earlier times were much better off than us. He speaks in particular about the terror wrought in the name of the progressive regimes of the 20th century. The whole political spectrum from left to right signed up to the belief that knowledge could set us free and that human nature could be perfected. Hannah Arendt makes a similar claim that some of the worst crimes were done in the service of progressive ideals. She says that although the Nazis viewed themselves as enemies of the Enlightenment they nevertheless attempted to transform humanity by harnessing the power of science, and biology in particular as evidenced in the eugenics movements.96 History has shown that increases in knowledge can go hand in hand with mass repression, endemic corruption and environmental devastation on an unprecedented scale.

One might be tempted to question the relevance of this critique today given the fact that almost nobody would defend the actions of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. The ideologies of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union have been discredited to the point that even defending them in the slightest becomes unimaginable. According to the usual narrative however these ideologies were simply outcompeted by liberalism. In the struggles between the three ideologies the 20th century, liberalism emerged as victor because it was the true standard bearer of secular humanism and Enlightenment thought. Gray protests. Despite its divergent trajectories, he claims that the Enlightenment project underlies all types of utopian ideologies; it animated Marxism and liberalism in all its varieties and it continues to underpin the new ‘metaphysically neutered’ liberalism and its neo-conservative rival.

The core project of the Enlightenment was the displacement of local, customary or traditional moralities, and of all forms of transcendental faith by a critical or rational morality…whether it was conceived in utilitarian or contractarian, rights-based or duty-based terms, this morality would be secular and humanist, and it would set universal standards for the assessment of human institutions.

The point, to tie this back to the issue of knowledge and moral progress, is not that every the Enlightenment project optimistically who affirmed human perfectibility (Hume and Kant for example were inclined to much greater degrees of pessimism), but that it generated persons disengaged from tradition, external nature and other subjects in the name of accelerating mastery over them. Human beings, according to this view, become freed of all limits, and greater knowledge simply allowed them

97 Norman Davies also complicates the usual narrative by describing that what was really at stake in World War II was the competition between three political ideologies for supremacy: Fascism, liberalism and socialism. One of his conclusions is that there is no basis in the belief amongst the Atlantic Community at the time that their unique, secular brand of Western Civilization was the pinnacle of human progress as it was being presented. see Norman Davies, No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-45 (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 2006).

to move unobstructed towards their desires. Gray urges us to recognise that we in trying to redesign nature to fit our wishes, and we run the risk of making it a mirror of our own pathologies. 99 This ‘remoulding’ has been evident – with deleterious consequences – in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and given its common underpinning there is no reason to assume that it will have different consequences in liberalism.

There is however a second more radical critique of humanism and the liberal balance sheet. Worse than the profligate and unobstructed desire for mastery over others, the unlimited nature even of exclusive humanism’s ‘noblest’ desires had disastrous consequences.

Humanism is more than just a series of separate beliefs, for once Gray concurs with Rorty. These beliefs converge into a single, utopian vision, a new doctrine of salvation, which manifests itself in the desire to control and subjugate nature and a relentless belief in the possibility of humanly experienced progress. Unlike Rorty, Gray views this prospect with dismay and dread. In fact his real animus is reserved for the notion that humanity can take charge of its own destiny. It is this doctrine of salvation, the belief in progress it entails and its political implications that provoke his anger.

The problem with a liberalism that is dependent on exclusive humanism is that;

It cannot accept limits on the pursuit of what it regards as the noblest human ambitions. It rejects as misanthropy the observation that, in an overcrowded world, the attempt to alleviate poverty by conferring on all humankind the living standards briefly achieved for many in the industrialized countries risks harm to a fragile environment and to future human generations. The inordinate pursuit of human betterment means, also, certain loss for many other species…In these and many

99 Gray, Heresies, 19.
other respects, the modern idea of progress by which we are still guided reproduces a humanistic culture of hubris at a time when what we need most is an acceptance of limits.\textsuperscript{100}

III.

It has already been made clear that Gray considers humanism to be nothing more than a secularised version of Christianity. It has merely replaced some of the fantastic hopes promised by religion by others of its own design:

Science promises that the most ancient human fantasies will at last be realised. Sickness and aging will be abolished; scarcity and poverty will be no more; the species will be immortal. Like Christianity in the past, the modern cult of science lives on the hope of miracles.\textsuperscript{101}

As convincing as this critique of utopianism is, there is a tension within Gray’s own position. Humanism is presented as a by-product of Christianity which retains some of its most deeply deluded beliefs.\textsuperscript{102} Gray genealogy of utopian ideals begins with apocalyptic religious movements, especially Christianity. As the influence of Christianity wanes, the apocalyptic / utopian hopes it disseminated are taken up in a more radical fashion by secular political movements. He goes so far as to characterize modern politics as ‘a chapter in the history of religion.’\textsuperscript{103} More precisely, he thinks that liberalism, as well as the other defunct utopian projects of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century despite their avowed secularism were all merely vehicles for religious myths. Although the post-Enlightenment utopian projects of the last century have differed significantly in their content, articulation and execution, they have shared key underlying principles. If in fact these are owed to Christianity then the problem is that humanism has not severed its religious roots cleanly enough.

\textsuperscript{101} Gray, \textit{Straw Dogs}, 123.
\textsuperscript{102} Gray, \textit{Black Mass}, 2.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.,1.
The solution, it seems, would be to make this separation final and complete. Gray should advocate a complete renunciation of any kind of religious thinking.

Surprisingly, he does the exact opposite. He maintains that humanism’s utopian tendency within is a direct consequence of its animosity towards religion. A complete renunciation of religious hopes is impossible, he says, because ‘like repressed sexual desire, faith returns, often in grotesque forms, to govern the lives of those who deny it’. Gray believes that if religious experience is repressed, as sex was in the straight-laced era of the Victorians, it comes back in to haunt us in illicit forms. He derides the attempt to condemn religion to irrationality as being as absurd as the inane Victorian practise of covering piano legs in the attempt to exorcise sex from daily life. He further maintains that unlike religious myths, secular ones have often suppressed profound insights into human nature including the danger of possessing knowledge and the notion of original sin.

However in recognising the value of religious myths, Gray exposes himself to a number of challenging questions. If both secular and religious stories about value are illusory, why does he assign value to the latter and not the former? On what grounds ought we judge the superiority of one myth over other? Gray praises myths that reflect the fragility of the human condition. But does this mean that they come closer to the truth? Does this commit Gray to saying that there is a truth about human beings and a meaning to their lives? Is this a tacit form of essentialism? It does seem to suggest that a foundationalist ontology is preferable to a non-foundationalist one because whilst the later not technically incoherent, it may not be warranted to tell us very much at all.

104 Ibid., 190.
105 Gray, Heresies, 7.
Gray builds a convincing case that the humanist worldview would have never arisen had it not been for Christianity, that its beliefs are a composite of Christian heresies and that these beliefs exhibit an even greater intellectual crudity than the view it sought to overcome. However, his own position is not without problems. The issue of a truth about human nature is foremost amongst them; another is his understanding of Christianity.

Gray’s suggests that science and technology promise to save us in ways that religion once did. He admits that the Christian guarantee of an afterlife (and orthodox interpretations of it) is not one of a disembodied consciousness but bodily resurrection. Nevertheless, he thinks the followers of the religion have always disparaged the flesh since they could not reconcile their attachment to the body with hopes of immortality. He is right that these Gnosticism and neo-Platonic tendencies have been present in Christianity from its very inception. However already in the 3rd Century, the apologist Tertullian, who is also the first to formulate the concept of three persons in one substance, declared that “the flesh is the hinge of salvation” meaning that our bodily nature is not something to be disparaged but a condition of our personhood.

Gray also forgets that the promises of religion and science are qualitatively different. There is a sense in which the promise of cryogenics or the hope of a perfect, everlasting political regime are akin to those of immortality and heaven, however, the establishment of the kingdom of God in a Christian sense is a metaphor for a spiritual conversion rather than a political regime, the resurrection of the body is a new form of life after death rather than a means of avoiding death by a
continuation of the life that we know now. Christian and humanist hopes are thus actually the inverse of one another.

At times Gray is cognizant of this. He even admits that it was Christianity which introduced an anti-utopian way of thinking.\(^{106}\) This is why he does not consider the total eradication of religion as the solution to the errors of humanism. After all it was Augustine who made the claim that the cities of God and man were essentially irreconcilable because of man’s maculation by original sin and who emphasised that neither could evil be destroyed nor a new age ushered in by human actions alone.\(^{107}\) Christianity does offer the eschatological hope of eternal bliss, but according to every orthodox interpretation this comes to pass only in the fullness of time and by the grace of God. Therefore whilst human striving, labour and acts of charity are important, they are not sufficient for salvation and must be accompanied by an attitude of hopeful expectation, profound humility and realism about human weakness. It is therefore essentially different from any kind of utopianism which impatiently and ambitiously strives for a progress that depends on human actions.

Gray’s lack of serious analysis on difference between Christian and secular humanist hopes leaves him with a tension is his own account that is otherwise impossible to reconcile. On the one hand he thinks that humanist beliefs are continuations of the erroneous beliefs and hopes of Christianity, on the other, he claims that religious myths reveal some truth about human nature and that we can never nor ought we ever aspire to ‘get beyond’ a religious way of thinking. The superficiality of Gray’s analysis is manifest in his treatment of Gnosticism and


other millenarian movements.\textsuperscript{108} He is correct to say that they are fuelled by two
factors; the utopian instinct to create heaven on earth and the belief that evil can be
overcome purely by human actions. However he is in error to suggest that these
factors were somehow ‘created’ by Christianity. A heresy may reveal some aspect
of the doctrine of which it is a deviation, but the blame for the error cannot be
attributed to the teaching from which it strayed.

To use a strong example, the fact that rape is a horrible perversion of the desire for
physical intimacy does not mean that marriage is to blame for its occurrence. The
former is a crime and a deviation of the later which is something essentially good. It
only shows that good desires can become distorted. In the same way, the existence
of heresy does not prove that the desires it manifests are created by the faith from
which it has strayed, but only that good desires can err and become perverted. If
anything, it simply corroborates the truth captured in the notion of original sin, that,
although man is essentially good he also has an innate propensity towards evil.

This oversight and misrepresentation of Christianity on Gray’s part does not
diminish his critique of humanism but does influence the prescriptive part of his
theory, as will be seen later. The current manifestation of humanism seeks to justify
its anthropocentrism by recourse to evolutionary theory and materialism these
alone do not in fact provide us any with any reasons to think of human life as
having particular importance.

\textsuperscript{108} Gray, \textit{Black Mass}, 68.
IV.

What is the nature of Gray’s anti-humanist alternative? The critical element of his theory maintains that we ought to reject both i) that human life has supreme value and ii) that reality can only be judged from a human perspective. But what is its prescriptive element? If reality is not to be judged from a human perspective what alternative perspective should take its place and what does this new perspective have to say about the value of human life?

It ought to be noted at the outset that Gray distinguishes his form of anti-humanism from earlier Nietzschean or Heideggerian iterations. Nietzsche recoils at the morality of humanist compassion which he sees not as the supreme virtue but a sign of weak vitality:

The *invalids* are the great danger to humanity: not the *evil men*, not the “predatory animals.” Those people who are, from the outset, failures, oppressed, broken — they are the ones, the *weakest*, who most undermine life among human beings, who in the most perilous way poison and question our trust in life, in humanity, in ourselves.109

He believed that, properly understood, life should also affirm death and destruction. Like Gray, Nietzsche disavows the first anthropocentric principle, arguing that there is no reason to consider human life ‘as such’ as having any special value. The affirmation of human life merely for its own sake is unconvincing; in practice we see that it only breeds pusillanimity and infirmity and there is no reason therefore to conform to any ‘conventional’ moral practices. If anything is to be valued in human life it should be particular attributes such as strength and intelligence that are manifested only in some persons but not others. Having said this, Nietzsche does

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not necessarily identify the ‘invalid’ or the ‘weakness’ with someone suffering from physical or mental disability:

There is rarely a degeneration, a truncation, or even a vice or any physical or moral loss without an advantage somewhere else … To this extent, the famous theory of the survival of the fittest does not seem to me to be the only viewpoint from which to explain the progress of strengthening of a man or of a race.\textsuperscript{110}

Despite Nietzsche’s virulent attacks on humanism however, Gray claims that the German philosopher continues to cling to one of its core beliefs which is the idea that human history has meaning. Gray is right that Nietzsche’s thought and movement towards overarching significance and an overcoming of our human condition is incomprehensible without the backdrop of Christianity. So although Nietzsche’s call to overcome humanism, in the sense of overcoming a conventional understanding of morality, might require ‘inhumane’ actions, Gray argues that Nietzsche is not really non-humanist in his thinking. He is merely promoting an exaggerated version of humanism. The very idea of an \textit{übermensch} is itself derived from the humanist belief that human nature can be perfected and its boundaries transcended.\textsuperscript{111}

Heidegger also claimed to reject the man-centred thinking that has prevailed ever since the pre-Socratics. Instead of worrying about the human, philosophers should concern themselves with ‘Being’.\textsuperscript{112} In this sense he rejects the second of the two Anthropocentric Principles; the view that reality can only be judged from a human point of view. In his \textit{Letter on Humanism} Heidegger laments the fact that man (\textit{homo}) has become identical with human or humane (\textit{humanus}), but he only

\textsuperscript{111} Gray, \textit{Black Mass}, 58.
criticises the later in order to save the former.\textsuperscript{113} In other words his disavowal of the second Anthropocentric Principle is carried out in order to uphold the principle that man has a supreme value \textit{vis-à-vis} Being even more strongly.

Gray’s anti-humanism is more comprehensive; it requires the repudiation of both anthropocentric principles. Although both Nietzsche and Heidegger diagnosed nihilism as the defining modern disorder, considered that it had infected both liberal politics and culture and concluded that its overcoming required leaving liberal values behind, Gray’s anti-humanism necessitates something more. He believes that nihilism will only be overcome if we cease to confer human beings with a unique standing in the world. Following Schopenhauer, he argues that we require a total rejection of humanism; that is, getting to a place where we see the world from the standpoint of a selfless contemplation.\textsuperscript{114}

Gray’s critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s anti-humanisms reveal that his own form of anti-humanism not only denies both anthropocentric principles, it also has a strong prescriptive component. Again Gray is not talking about practical commitments but a pre-political foundation that underlies political organisation. Denying that reality can only be judged from a human perspective leaves one of two alternatives. The first is a radical quietism – the belief that reality cannot be judged from any perspective at all, that no value judgements can be made, which leads to a politics of total \textit{laissez-faire}. The second is to adopt a non-human vantage-point for the judging of reality which leads to a political \textit{modus vivendi}. Gray chooses the second of these alternatives.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.,

Gray makes the seemingly anti-naturalistic claim that we cannot give a purely materialistic or rationalistic account of human nature (which is why he considers the attempt to exorcise religion and irrationality from human life futile). However he also argues for naturalism to be taken to its logical extreme in the form of biocentrism. Biocentrism is an ethical point of view which extends inherent value to non-human species, eco-systems and processes in nature; it is the idea that ‘life’ is the source of intrinsic value regardless of how it is manifested.\textsuperscript{115}

This is evidenced in Gray’s embrace of the Gaian perspective which claims that the Earth is a self-regulating system whose behaviour resembles in some way that of an organism. Initially proposed by biologist James Lovelock, it defined ‘Gaia’ as a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; this totality constitutes a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet.\textsuperscript{116} Lovelock and his supporters no longer consider this to be a hypothesis because they believe that it has passed a number of predictive tests, including the so-called ‘Daisyworld’ experiment. The wider implication of this theory is that while there is nothing of particular importance either about individual persons or humanity as a whole, the Earth herself is the central locus of value and the vantage point from which other ethical judgements ought to be made. This claim is supposedly justified by the fact that, unlike human beings or other animals, the Earth is a complete self-regulating entity. Gray continues that Gaia theory embodies the most rigorous scientific naturalism. It takes Darwinism to its logical conclusion instead of feebly trying to channel it


through the waterways of humanist anthropocentrism. Gray’s biocentric vantage point allows him to advocate a form of biophilia, which is a valuation of all living things that goes beyond human beings.\textsuperscript{117} It is also the closest he ever comes to advancing a normative theory but how does this naturalism square with the now seemingly incongruent affirmation of the role of religious intuition and myth?

In his promotion of biophilia Gray self-consciously hearkens back to pagan religions, which for all their differences in cultural expression each advocate a divinisation of nature. Gaia theory is itself named after the Greek Earth-Mother, and as Gray rightly argues, this worship of the earth is observed in other religions. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a culture which did not at one time revere the Earth-Mother, be it the *Eingana* of the Australian Aboriginals, the Slavonic *Matka Ziemia* or the *Pachamama* of the Indigenous peoples of the Andes. Mircea Eliade’s well known work on patterns of religious symbolism corroborates Gray’s point that every religious culture seems to draw from a common fund of symbols.\textsuperscript{118} And Gray attempts to reconcile these religious or spiritual insights with naturalism by pointing out that many ‘archaic’ cultures already rightly articulated a biocentric worldview albeit in a mystical or divinised form of linguistic expression.

At this juncture, Gray’s anti-humanist prompts a large interpretive question. He replaces the anthropocentric vantage-point with a biocentric one, which means that he cannot accept the idea that human life has supreme value, but does this denial mean that *not only* human beings have intrinsic value (i.e. weak anti-humanism) or that human beings *do not* have intrinsic value (i.e. strong anti-humanism)? There is evidence to support both interpretations.

There are instances when Gray seems only to advocate a weak form of anti-humanism; one which still affords value to human life. He expresses tenderness for the human race, for example, in his unflinching condemnation of the genocidal practices of totalitarian regimes and he is careful to acknowledge that a strictly rationalistic materialism does not account adequately for the human condition and that religious myths are necessary for a sober self-understanding of human beings and their place in the universe. Therefore, assuming for the moment that is the right way to interpret Gray’s view, namely, as an anti-utopian, non-anthropocentric, humble and realistic recognition of man’s nature and his position in the cosmos, the obvious question is: what is wrong with that way of thinking? Is Gray’s anti-humanism really just another name for respecting all living things and valuing human life within in their wider context? And if so, is it really a bad thing?

The first point is that a valuation of nature or all living things is not incompatible with every kind of humanism. It does not combine well with the militant, secular, anthropocentric variant that so deeply disturbs Gray, but it is certainly more compatible with the three Abrahamic faiths and any form of ‘humanism’ that flows out of them than Gray seems to allow. Gray argues that the ‘Gaia theory re-establishes the link between humans and the rest of nature which was affirmed in mankind’s primordial religion, animism’\(^{119}\) implying that monotheism severed man’s link with nature and posited him as the only valuable being in all creation. This is an oversight on his part. One need only recall the story of Genesis to see that God deemed His creative work to be ‘good’, both aesthetically and morally, before man ever entered the picture. The transcendent humanism of monotheistic faiths is

therefore not at all incompatible with a valuing of other parts of nature. According to the Christian understanding man does have has a *special* place in the world as its steward but this does not entitle him to exercise his dominion over the natural world in a manner that is destructive or exploitative, it simply means that he has rights and responsibilities that other living beings do not and precludes him from being subordinated to other parts of creation.\(^{120}\)

Brian Barry makes a similar argument. Our treatment of other living beings does have a moral dimension, and a reassessment of our human interests and values which would include animals and the environment would not require a wholesale rejection of humanism. This more broadly construed humanism retains the idea of man as a steward but makes it compatible with Green thinking. Barry rejects Gray’s notion that all Green thought is just a veiled form of anthropocentrism. He therefore thinks that Gray’s ‘post-humanism’ can be viewed more correctly as a critique of ‘the arrogance of humanism’ and rather than humanism *per se*.\(^{121}\) Barry is correct that a weak form of exclusive humanism one which assigns intrinsic value to more than just human beings, is possible and does not require the repudiation of human life.

If the claim were only that human beings are not the only beings with intrinsic value then Gray’s anti-humanism could be reconciled with Green thinking (weak exclusive humanism), and even with theistic thinking (transcendent humanism). The problem with this interpretation is that it ‘defangs’ much of Gray’s argument.

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\(^{120}\) For more on the relationship between environmental biocentrism and human dominion see, Ben Mitchell et al., *Biotechnology and the Human Good* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 51-3.

His anti-humanism is more than a critical posture towards humanism, although it is not wholly dismissive or critical of humanity but its misanthropic bent is undeniable.

Gray simply cannot hide his contempt and disgust towards humanity. This is evinced by the fact that he often speaks in a very callous way about the death and suffering of human beings. He characterises them as a ‘cancer’ and laments their demographic growth to the detriment of other species and the earth’s natural resources. ‘Homo Rapiens’, he argues ‘is gutting the earth of biodiversity. The lush natural environment in which humans evolved is being rapidly transformed into a large prosthetic environment.’\(^{122}\) Most shocking of all is his discussion of curbing population growth. Although Gray is sceptical that the biological impoverishment perpetrated on the earth by human beings can be reversed in any time-span that is humanly relevant, he thinks that the only real solution is a post-Malthusian reduction of the human population.

He admits that the political implausibility of the measures required to achieve such large scale depopulation would be practically impossible to implement; nevertheless he believes that the enforcement of strict contraception policies, mandatory abortion and breeding limitations would be advantageous. Equally sought-after is massive depopulation as a result of genocide, widespread famine or even nuclear war.\(^{123}\) Gray thinks these outcomes are unlikely but extremely desirable nevertheless. This supports a strong interpretation of his position according to which human life not only lacks intrinsic value but ought to be sacrificed for the good of the planet. It

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 40.
appears to be a modern variant of paganism; placating the gods through human sacrifice.

The strong form of anti-humanism runs up against two further questions, ones which Gray must address if his position is to be taken seriously. Firstly, why should the Earth or ‘Gaia’ be assigned supreme value? On what grounds should all other goods be subordinated to her survival and the maintenance of her diversity - especially in cases where her survival comes at a significant cost to human life or well-being? If Gray has dismissed humanism because of its arbitrary locating of value in humans in their capacities of reason or consciousness, on what non-arbitrary grounds is the Earth to be considered of value? Is it because of her self-regulating capacity or because she can support a huge variety of life? Why are these categories relevant? If from the Earth’s perspective human life is no more precious than slime mould it is equally true that from the Universe’s perspective the Earth is no more precious than cosmic dust. Unless Gray can offer some other grounding for defending the primacy of Gaia, then he has succeeded only in winning a Pyrrhic victory; he has triumphed over humanism only by anthropomorphising the Earth. For what is a person if not a self-regulating living entity capable of individuality and entering into relationships with others?

Secondly, Gray bemoans the overpopulation of the earth and the destruction perpetrated on her by human beings. But, does not this strong anti-humanism itself presuppose a radical distinction between human beings and the rest of nature which Gray explicitly disavows? Surely on a purely naturalist understanding it makes as much sense to say that there are too many human beings as it does to say that there are too many grains of sand on the shore, drops of water in the ocean or planets in
the solar system. Consider the following lines from Ehrmann’s famous poem *Desiderata*: ‘You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.’ On a consistently naturalist view man is as much a part of nature, or child of the universe, as the trees, the stars or Gaia herself, and has as much right to be here. Moreover, if Gray is serious about his naturalism and the anti-humanism that follows, the only kind of politics that he could advocates would be one of passivity and total *laissez-faire*. But this is not the case. He advocates a minimal, but no less consequential, theory of value-pluralism that is captured in his notion of *modus vivendi*.

V.

Initially it seems as if Gray can only advocate a total withdrawal from politics. On the strong anti-humanist view there is no such thing as an immoral action. (At least not in a realist sense, for there may be still be non-realist explanations for ‘morality’ such as those captured by expressivist theories). Does Gray’s anti-humanism therefore lead to an essentially nihilistic politics? This does not comport with his own self-understanding. He admits to a certain moral pessimism but is adamant that ‘in truth it is humanism that is nihilistic’. Is this convincing? Is Gray innocent of the charge of nihilism?

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125 For this interpretation of Gray’s work see George Kateb’s “Is John Gray a Nihilist?”, 305-322 and Glen Newey’s “Gray’s Blues: Pessimism as a Political Project”, *The Political Theory of John Gray*, 164.

On the strong anti-humanist interpretation, human life has no intrinsic meaning or value.\textsuperscript{127} If taken seriously, this statement has important practical consequences. Firstly, it allows Gray to promote his form of neo-pagan divinisation of nature in which valorises inanimate objects. We ought to recall however, that for almost all pagan religions which took this view, human sacrifice was a common practice and even where it was not, human lives were not considered to have particular importance and were subordinated (often in cruel and painful ways) to the actual or presumed desires of the community, gods, nature, elements or cosmic order. Part of this may be salutary. It may be thought to restore a proper perspective after the hubris of anthropocentrism and the excesses of rationalism. For example, it promotes the notion that we should not consider animals and nature as mere instruments for our use. But Gray’s anti-humanist alternative also leaves us with a serious problem. It gives us no grounds on which to criticise genocide or other barbaric crimes against human beings.

However, even if Gray’s anti-humanism is interpreted according to the strongest variant this still does not make it equivalent to nihilism. He is not silent about inhumane practices that result in human death and suffering; he excoriates the genocidal policies of the Nazis, the Soviet communists and even the decisions of Bush and Blair to engage in a war that has cost thousands of lives in Iraq.\textsuperscript{128} On what grounds can he say that this kind of behaviour is morally reprehensible? Surely, a strong form of anti-humanism can have nothing to say to who deem the taking of human life as necessary for the achievement of greater goods? He may criticise them on the grounds that their progressivism is misguided because human

\textsuperscript{127} Gray, \textit{Straw Dogs}, 33.
life is little more than a speck of dust from the perspective of the universe, but, if we are to understand his strong anti-humanism literally and not just as a rhetorical counter-balance to the unthinking acceptance of humanism, he should remain silent about the merits and shortcomings of every kind of human behaviour.

Perhaps his seriousness about these political prescriptions betrays that on his most considered view he would only endorse the weaker version of anti-humanism. What is more important than determining Gray’s most considered position however is that even on a strong anti-humanist reading he is not a nihilist. This best evidenced by his ‘divinization’ of nature. Whether or not we find his reasoning convincing, he at least identifies something of positive value in the world. As for his pessimism, Gray puts it best himself when he says that ‘there is nothing nihilistic in an insistence on the limits of politics’, and his insistence on the limits of politics also contains a number of positive affirmations.

The first of these is a declaration about human life being a search for meaning. Unlike enlightenment thinkers, Gray does not believe that there is any reason to think that human history has an overall meaning or that philosophical contemplation is a path to truth. Seeking meaning or truth through contemplation is always doomed to failure. However, this does not lead him to a wholly nihilistic conclusion. Rather, as Newey rightly shows, Gray offers a dual recommendation: we ought to abandon the illusion that we are different from other animals and we ought also to admit to those necessary illusions without which we cannot live. In Gray’s own words:

131 Newey, “Gray’s Blues: Pessimism as a Political Project”, 166.
Perhaps we should set ourselves a different aim: to discover which illusions we can give up, and which we will never shake off. We will still be seekers after the truth, more so than in the past; but we will renounce the hope of a life without illusion. Henceforth our aim will be to identify our invincible illusions. Which untruths might we get rid of, and which can we not do without?\textsuperscript{132}

This passage might sound jarringly out of tune from much of the rest of his work and it does nothing to ease the tension with the claim that there is nothing distinct about human beings, but, if sincere, it certainly assuages the charge of nihilism. Gray further argues that one of the illusions that we cannot do without is that of having a purpose in life. He asks whether we cannot understand that purpose as simply one of just existing, just being. But even if our aim is simply ‘to be’, that in itself gives human life a meaning that goes beyond the existence of other creatures. As Newey argues, although Gray denies the belief in human distinctness, wishing to expose it for the illusion that it is, if this is a one of the distinctive human illusions that we cannot do without, then even realising this via contemplation will not disabuse us of it. And having these so-called necessary illusions does distinguish us from other creatures.

For all Gray’s scepticism, his anti-humanism contains a commitment to truth, albeit veiled. For if man has no access to truth then on what grounds can he decide which illusions are necessary and of which he can be disabused? More importantly, saying that some illusions are ‘necessary’ seems to be just another way of saying that they are grounded in reality and nature. And is this not just another way of saying that they are true?

Newey rightly stresses that despite Gray’s emphasis on the futility of politics, he is engaged in public life like few other political philosophers. Gray not only expresses

\textsuperscript{132} Gray, \textit{Straw Dogs}, 83.
his views in the media, think-tanks and makes public appearances but also addresses recent political developments such as the collapse of Soviet communism, post-colonialism and radical Islamic terrorism.\textsuperscript{133}

In his discussion of failed regimes, Gray identifies the problem of utopian thinking, (although it might sometimes appear as if every failed regime is utopian) he specifies that ‘a project is utopian if there are no circumstances under which it can be realized. All the dreams of a society from which coercion and power have ever been removed - Marxist or anarchist, liberal or technocratic - are utopian in the strong sense that they can never be achieved because they break down on the enduring conditions of human needs’.\textsuperscript{134} What is required to avoid the familiar mix of crime and farce is a greater realism, a deeper insight into human nature. The problem with the utopian and humanist mind is that it is lacks a sense of reality. It considers the defects of every society to be the marks of universal repression (that will be soon ended) or that history is a nightmare from which we must awake (and when we do, we will realise that human possibilities are limitless). Never does it occur to people who think like this that the defects are in fact signs of flaws in human nature.

In his earlier work Gray advanced the proposal of a ‘universal minimum morality’. It was this universal minimum morality that served as the basis of his critique of moral relativism, but it was nevertheless compatible with value-pluralism, the ethical viewpoint which justifies a \textit{modus vivendi}. In his recent work however, he has retracted this commitment. Before considering the consequences of this

\textsuperscript{133} Newey, “Gray’s Blues: Pessimism as a Political Project”, 156.
\textsuperscript{134} Gray, \textit{Black Mass}, 20.
retraction, let me offer a word about concepts of moral relativism, value-pluralism and *modus vivendi* in Gray’s work.

Moral relativism is an ethical theory which claims that values are merely socio-cultural constructs; they are indefinitely malleable and cannot be judged by appealing to a universal or trans-cultural standard. Value-pluralism by contrast is not a complete theory of value but a variant of moral realism. It is a thesis in moral anthropology which supposes that human beings can flourish in diversity of ways. Like his mentor Berlin, Gray is both a critic of moral relativism and a proponent of value-pluralism. He believes that there are some generic (human) goods and evils but that these values do not amount to a universal morality. Indeed the main thrust of his critique of liberalism is directed against its inability to incorporate value-pluralism and non-relativism.

Liberalism seems to require of its adherents a renunciation of self-interest narrowly understood. This is evident in a whole range of stated policy prescriptions from social welfare to global justice. However, Gray argues that the humanist values which underlie this liberalism do not lead to the cultivation of these human goods but serve only to promote a self-interested rapaciousness, which is devastating to humans and non-humans alike. Moreover, these values are not so much informed by earlier, broader pre-political beliefs, allowing for a deep plurality of goods on a first order level, but they are fixed from the start. Liberalism promotes a single way

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135 For Gray’s own summary of these terms as he understands them see Gray’s “Reply to Critics”, 213-225.
of life and thinks human flourishing can only be attained though the achievement of its ideals.\textsuperscript{136}

Gray’s position which attempts to combine value-pluralism with non-relativism is difficult for some of his interpreters to accept. This reveals an impoverished imagination on their part because admitting of universal human goods or evils does not necessarily contradict pluralism. Gray puts this best when he says that while there can be no comprehensive list of the conditions that engender a worthwhile human life, we can fairly accurately identify evils which do nothing to contribute to human flourishing, such as torture, separation from one’s home and loved ones, subjection to humiliation, persecution, poverty or avoidable ill-health.\textsuperscript{137} This leads him to make the following two-part conclusion: i) some goods and evils of human life can be indentified but ii) these are minimal enough in nature that they leave a huge scope for divergent ways of life and forms of human flourishing. This is not contradictory; it is like saying that there are some universal criteria according to which we can judge food to be good (i.e. fresh, edible, and digestible by humans) or bad (i.e., rotten, poisonous or indigestible). Admitting the existence of minimal standards does not amount to anything like a comprehensive characterization of what constitutes ‘good food’. It leaves open the possibility of hugely diverse culinary styles, each of which will have its own particular, limited rules. Value-pluralism does not necessitate wholesale moral relativism however.

But how minimal ought the list of universal criteria be? Can’t we say more than just ‘food which is poisonous and inedible is not good? Can’t we say that certain taste

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\textsuperscript{136} ‘Instead of thinking of progress as a movement towards a single, ideal way of life, we could think of it in terms of different ways of life developing in their own ways.’ Gray, \textit{Heresies}, 63.

combinations are better than others? The further and more important question is whether Gray’s *modus vivendi* which eschews comprehensive moral commitments in order to preserve a deep pluralism tells us anything interesting at all. Is it so minimal as to be practically worthless, like as a chef whose only culinary advice is to tell us that we should avoid food that is poisonous, rotten or inedible?

Gray’s *modus vivendi* may be a good starting point. It tells us that a pre-political foundation like exclusive humanism is far too narrow to support a truly plural form of politics but he suggests instead that we have a broader, and yet more minimal foundation which simply states that death, disease, destruction are universal evils. The desire to avoid these leads us to enter into a *modus vivendi*. But if taken seriously this leaves unanswered the questions that concern us most. Gray does not propose a principled commitment to peace and tolerance made by all parties but only the political equivalent of a non-contact sport. Communities (or individuals) agree to keep out each other’s affairs in order to preserve their own way of life and to avoid any injury that might otherwise result from interaction. Gray is right that this is not because of a universally agreed upon commitment to peace which trumps all other possible desires, but out of a pragmatic interest that can be explained in naturalistic terms. In other words, he draws on the Hobbesian insight that man’s strongest motivation is fear of death or harm. It is this biological desire for survival which motivates us to be tolerant and non-confrontational when faced with someone who does not share our set of values or way of life.

But what if peace alone is not enough? What if one of the ‘necessary illusions’ of human nature or one of its deepest desires is to live in a community that has common values and a common understanding of life’s meaning? Gray himself
realises that this naturalism is more complicated than it first appears. This is evident in his discussion of Hobbes’ shortcomings:

Liberal thinkers still see the unchecked power of the state as the chief danger to human freedom. Hobbes knew better: freedom’s worst enemy is anarchy, which is at its most destructive when it is a battleground of rival faiths…yet his view of human beings too was too simplistic, and overly rationalistic. Assuming that humans dread violent death more than anything, he left out the most intractable sources of conflict. It is not always because human beings act irrationally that they fail to achieve peace. Sometimes it is because they do not want peace…nothing is more human than the readiness to kill and die in order to secure a meaning in life.\footnote{Gray, \textit{Black Mass}, 186.}

Taking this reasoning a step further, it could be asked whether value-pluralism is narrower than Gray seems to allow and ‘minimal’ universal morality, less minimal than he suggests. Were this the case naturalism would also try to account for the uniqueness of human beings.

The ultimate shortcoming of Gray’s anti-humanism and the political prescriptions it offers is that it runs up against these questions but shies away from answering them. As Noël O’ Sullivan rightly notices Gray appears to give two potentially conflicting answers to how the reasonable compromise of a \textit{modus vivendi} is to be set up. On the one hand he seems to say that ‘human needs’ are the ultimate reference point. On the other, he is non-instrumental and ethical, invoking values rather than needs.\footnote{Noël O’Sullivan, “Liberalism, Nihilism, Modernity in the Political Thought of John Gray” \textit{The Political Theory of John Gray}, 187.} This tension is compounded by his pessimistic analysis of ecological destruction wrought by human beings which suggests that neither human desires nor values ought to be relevant from the point of view of the universe.
VI.

The question is whether Gray’s biocentricism is compatible with a *modus vivendi*, and, anticipating a negative answer, another follows: if biocentricism is not compatible even with a *modus vivendi* where does this leave us? What does the critique of humanism entail for political liberalism? Gray’s first option is to resist the full embrace of biocentricism and to be satisfied with a chastened humanism, one which cannot endorse procedural liberalism but which can support a *modus vivendi*. The second option is to stick with the strongest form of biocentricism but give up the hope of a *modus vivendi*. The first is the more defensible and palatable option, but the second does greater justice to Gray’s most recent work.

Resolving this tension within Gray’s work need not detain us from answering what his critique entails for political liberalism. Regardless of the positive thesis he submits – whether biocentricism trumps a *modus vivendi* or vice versa - the most important lesson to be drawn from his anti-humanist critique is the call for a politics of modesty. Even in its weakest variant Gray successfully undermines the untroubled story about the reasonableness of the pre-political foundation of exclusive humanism.

This, of course has repercussions for how we view nature in terms of the environment, plants and animals, but it also has ramifications for how we view human nature, in the sense that not all are cultural identities and differences can be considered as inessential, epiphenomenal choices, ‘a passing stage in the history of species’.140

Chapter 3: A Transcendent Perspective

Taylor shares some of the concerns already articulated but he believes that anti-humanism is not the only alternative. His charge against exclusive humanism is that it cannot continue to think of human life as having primary value unless it admits a non-anthropocentric reason into its justification. The problem as he understands it is not that there is no reason to hold human life in high regard, but that a practical regard for human dignity is incompatible with a denial of transcendent values. He wants to understand how it came to be that the outlook of exclusive humanism, despite its internal contradictions, has come to be accepted by so many individuals and entire societies. Ultimately, he will make the claim that the ‘turn inward’ only makes sense when it is understood as a prelude to a turn upward, a turn towards the transcendent.

Taylor accepts that openness to transcendence is itself fraught with peril but thinks that this does not relieve us from the duty to seek a humanism which goes beyond a mere code of practise. The real question is what he means by a transcendent perspective? Is it the search for an external justificatory principle or does it require a full-throated confession of religious faith? More importantly, what practical differences for liberal political regimes would issue from this shift in framework from exclusive to transcendent humanism?

Let us recall Rorty’s challenge: critics of liberalism should not be in the business of trying to re-enchant the world; they must prove the empirical claim that democratic institutions cannot be combined with the sense of common purpose pre-democratic societies enjoyed. In Taylor’s idiom, they must prove that our shared cultural
intuitions have been woven over time with reference to goods that exist beyond the self, and unless these are sustained our intuitions will also unravel.

To make his case, Taylor realises he must uncover how exclusive humanism arose and took hold of people’s imaginations. He must identify its claims in the context of their development. The present aim is not to review the entire body of evidence Taylor presents in answering that question, partly because of the immensity of such a task, partly because there is a larger issue at hand. The question that must ultimately be answered is how Taylor’s new, more complex account of secularity, even if it is conceded as largely accurate, undermines the veracity of exclusive humanism. For it may be agreed that secularity and the immanent framework would never have taken hold if it had not been for the rise of exclusive humanism, even that exclusive humanism emerged out of earlier Christian beliefs and would not have materialized without them, but this alone does not show that exclusive human is false. If anything, it might give us better reasons for thinking it is justified because it re-articulates some of the reasons for which the earlier deistic worldview was displaced.

I.

Exclusive humanism manifests itself in the affirmation of ordinary life (production and reproduction),\(^\text{141}\) giving rise to a widespread ethic of benevolence, the view that individuals should be entitled to a life with minimal unnecessary pain and a deeper imputation of dignity and respect to the human person. This constitutes what has been referred to as the practical element of exclusive humanism. There is however a

\(^{141}\) Kerr argues that the affirmation of the ordinary is most noticeable in the new emphasis on the value of marriage and family. ‘Marriage is recognised as being the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity’. Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings* (London: SPCK, 1997), 144.
‘meta’ element to this worldview, which must be understood in the context of the development of modern freedom; that is of the ongoing conflict between modern culture and rejection of the transcendent.

Individuals, argues Taylor, no longer view themselves as ensconced in or defined by a larger cosmic order. There may be, of course, some who continue to suppose that a meaningful cosmic order exists but this belief no longer underpins a shared, public overarching framework of meaning, at least in not Western democracies.¹⁴²

Taylor considers this withdrawal from external meaning to be one of real loss. He draws attention to the fact that this new form of inwardness, the notion that the only moral source that we have to connect with is to be found within us, supplanted earlier moral views which considered God or the idea of the Good to be sources of morality and the path to attaining a fullness of being. The ‘turn inward’, as he calls it, however also presents the modern self with some new, positive opportunities. In a sense he sees this process as one inaugurated by St. Augustine, who understood the road to God as first passing through a reflexive awareness of the self.

For Taylor, exclusive humanism is not just an analytic term, a place-holder for a series of beliefs, but a worldview that has developed over time, both as set of a positive affirmations and a series of critical responses. As far as he is concerned it does not function as a comprehensive doctrine but as a pre-political foundation. The task ahead then is to show how ‘western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly-constructed self-understandings and related

¹⁴² For a fuller discussion see Ruth Abbey, Charles Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81.
practices’. These were not simply produced, as Rorty would have it, by a disenchanting of the world. They came about because a substitute for the moral ordering of the world (previously provided by a transcendent framework) was made available. In other words, secularity and the immanent framework under which modern Western societies function were made possible only because of the concomitant ascent of exclusive humanism. Taylor’s critical assessment of exclusive humanism must therefore be embedded in a detailed narrative of the genesis and development of this worldview.

The ‘traditional’ accounts of secularism, the so-called ‘subtraction stories’ assert that scientific inquiry has revealed to us that the world can and ought to be understood naturalistically. As the world becomes increasingly disenchanted, so religious belief is destined to disappear or at least to retreat into practical insignificance. (It might also be added parenthetically that subtraction stories suggest that where religion continues to exert an influence in our age, it is because fearful and / or ignorant people wish to console themselves with talk of transcendence and / or because religious authorities cling to their residual power and hinder the triumph of a completely naturalistic account of the world). Taylor parts company from the proponents of such accounts, because of their inability to explain our current condition. It is simply not the case that one day (around the year 1600) the scales miraculously (although we don’t believe in miracles) fell from our eyes and we began to see our own nature and that of the world around us in the cold, hard light of day.

For humanism to flourish in a modern context the ability to reject the illusory nature of the gods was not sufficient, it required the creation of a new moral order. Modern humanism therefore ‘had to include the active capacity to shape and fashion our world, natural and social; and it had to be actuated by some drive to human beneficence…in addition to being activist and interventionist (it) had to produce some substitute for agape.’

Taylor begins his own story of the rise of exclusive humanism by identifying the different sources which animated it. Exclusive humanism was first set in motion by forces of reform from within Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic) and not by external critiques or rejections of it. Secularism and the humanism with which it is profoundly linked would have never come into being without the advent of Christianity, (especially in terms of social justice) and, he seems to imply, its existence still continues to depend upon it in a modified but substantial way. Next Providential Deism introduced three central notions which would later become the cornerstones of the edifice of exclusive humanism: first that the universe was designed by God according to a total, providential plan, second that there was on impersonal order with the emphasis on natural reason and third, that man’s desire for happiness, religion and morality are really just different names for the same thing.

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144 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.
145 The central features of this reform included the disenchantment of a pagan world filled with spirits, demons, magic and superstition, an encouragement of activism expressed through individual acts of charity and the development of what might today be termed social initiatives – education, healthcare, welfare for the poor and marginalised and an intense focus on the person of Jesus as an important first step towards the primacy of the individual which in some sense is the definitive attribute of Western culture.
On the devout religious view ‘our nature is really quite depraved (so) the hope of finding this élan within us can be a snare and delusion, a figment of our own pride.’\textsuperscript{146} When this drops out, so does the notion that God can have purposes for us beyond this world. Since we no longer consider ourselves in need of saving, the idea of a saviour is also abandoned. Norman correctly comments that:

Business and family life were no longer seen as second best to the renunciant vocations, but as arenas of moral struggle and reward in their own right sacred. Stringent discipline was imposed across the board; pagan residues such as carnival and the "feast of fools" were abolished. And this suited the new mercantilist state very well, since it required well-drilled subjects to tax and to conscript. Christianity became an instrument of social order.\textsuperscript{147}

Once the new moral disciplines had been internalised, their religious source became superfluous. It became possible to conceive of society as a self-sustaining mechanism, held together only by natural sympathy and enlightened self-interest.

This viable alternative to the Christianity, which began as a single comprehensive worldview was then ruptured and followed by a dizzying process of fracturing and re-adhesion. The result was a kaleidoscopic twisting where every turn produced an ever-greater variety of moral and spiritual options. By the nineteenth century, arguments were put forward as to why exclusive humanism should not only be considered as an alternative to Christianity but even as its moral superior. This claim was made the grounds that, whereas Christianity offered extrinsic rewards for altruism in the hereafter, humanism made benevolence its own reward and whereas religion excluded heretics and unbelievers, humanism alone could be thought of as truly universal. Much of the appeal of scientific materialism came not from the cogency of its detailed findings as its (alleged) epistemological inclusiveness. In

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 227.

addition it was seen as adopting a stance of maturity, of courage, and manliness, over and against childish fears and sentimentality.\textsuperscript{148}

The final phase of the argument explains another subtraction story; how the option of exclusive humanism, which was only available to the elites in the late eighteenth century, became a mass phenomenon. It depended upon a reconfiguring of our social imaginary and a change in our collective thinking. Belief was so interwoven with social life and our communities that as these began to be unravelled and reupholstered with new forms of social imagination, such as the social contract, exclusive humanism became an option for the masses. As political systems moved away from aristocracy towards democracy so there grew the widespread sense that faith in God was no longer central to the enjoyment of an ordered and successful life or to the stability of the regime.

Many of the details of Taylor’s account have, of necessity, been overlooked in this brief reconstruction and there are doubtlessly those who will want to quarrel with its details.\textsuperscript{149} However it would be hard to deny Taylor’s success in undermining the deterministic theory of secularism which stipulates that the march of history necessarily brings about a convergence around individualism, tolerance, equality and so on. Tracing the genesis of exclusive humanism not only debunks the idea that the worldview is composed of self-evident, necessary beliefs, it pinpoints areas where erroneous arguments took hold of the social consciousness. It also isolates spaces of inner contradiction, badly grounded arguments and dilemmas, thus making possible the repair of the faulty self-understandings on which our current

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 368.

\textsuperscript{149} For this critique see Charles Larmore, “How Much More Can We Stand?” The New Republic (April 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2009).
cultural and political intuitions rely. The unravelling of the subtraction stories must be understood as a prelude to Taylor’s criticism of exclusive humanism; which is a criticism further embedded in a claim about humanism’s inherent instability and the threat its undoing poses for contemporary liberalism.

Before attending to that claim, the following problem must be noted. Taylor’s critique of the ‘discovery’ of truths about human nature is something of a double-edged sword. If he is successful in proving that there is no such thing as ‘bare nature’ only differing degrees of social construction, what purpose does an appeal to the transcendent serve? If no universal truths about human nature can be discovered – or at least if we do not have access to them – what is there to stop us from choosing whatever social imaginary we find most appealing or satisfying in a given historical context? To use Rorty’s terminology, what is to prevent us from using whatever is most pragmatic for our time and circumstance?

Taylor must show, that is, that while human nature is not narrowly determinative of human behaviour (i.e., there is a huge variance of belief and practice both over time and across cultures), it is not infinitely malleable. There is a truth about human nature and a standard or criterion by which we can judge what is true and false. It is important to note that unless Taylor can give a satisfactory response to this question, he will not be able to ground a humanist position of the kind that he seems already to be intimating.

II.

The beginning of the answer to ‘how does telling the story of the rise of exclusive humanism show that the worldview is false or at least call it into question?’ can be
given by pausing to consider Taylor’s methodology. It is further worth noting that is
a question that he never poses directly.

The debunking of subtraction stories should be understood as a prelude to Taylor’s
critique of exclusive humanism. If procedural liberalism continues to seek its
normative resources in exclusive humanism, Taylor argues, it will not be able to
fulfil its own promise but will turn against its nobler aspirations and praiseworthy
achievements. This is not to imply that the shoring up of liberalism is Taylor’s
ultimate desideratum, it could, for example be discarded in favour of some
alternative, were it deemed necessary. Some elements of liberal culture would
almost certainly have to be discarded. Rather the argument is addressed to liberals
who do desire to defend this claim. If you want to fulfil the aspirations you say you
do, advises Taylor, you must have the requisite resources to do so, otherwise your
claims will be naïve or insincere.

According to Taylor, the humanist foundations of liberalism have rotted out from
underneath themselves and, as such, they are unable to support the liberal edifice.
The crux of his argument is that the ‘meta’ justification of exclusive humanism,
rather, the ‘anthropocentricism-as-an-ultimate-cause-substitute-for-a-metaphysical-
justification’ is too weak to sustain the practical commitments to safeguarding
human dignity and promoting human flourishing. It is not difficult to see why
exclusive humanism and a certain type of contemporary liberalism make such
happy bedfellows since the later provides the former with a set of normative values
which themselves make no appeal to sources outside the human.
Taylor is right however that the liberalism which depends on exclusive humanism for its values is in a precarious position, since exclusive humanism can not provide the necessary support for liberalism to survive. It has only been able to support liberalism for so long, according to Taylor, because it has been receiving its real nutrition from ‘hidden channels’ which are not openly admitted into the system. The trouble is that exclusive humanism is deracinating the sources of value that sustain it.\footnote{In Sources of the Self Taylor makes moral naturalism the target of his attack, arguing that it is fundamentally parasitic on religion. And it thus could not survive the demise of the religion it strives to abolish. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 517.}

It might be helpful to make a distinction between two separate, albeit related, claims. The first is that exclusive humanism provides an unstable foundation for procedural liberalism. The second is that if this instability continues, although liberalism might persist for a time, it will be incapable of fulfilling its true promise. To explain and elaborate further, it will be helpful to separate exclusive humanism into its functions as a) a pre-political foundation and b) a series of practical commitments. As a pre-political foundation exclusive humanism espouses a belief in the value and dignity of human persons and considers the human self to be disengaged from transcendent sources.\footnote{As Stephen White puts it ‘(a) disengaged self who generates distance from its background (tradition, embodiment) and foreground (external nature, other subjects)’ “Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection”, 503.} As a series of practical commitments it endorses the furthering of human well-being, for example by the provision of social welfare, the defence of individual freedom and the promotion of global solidarity.

The idea is that a) is the normative underpinning of procedural liberalism which gives it reasons for directing resources towards b). So far, this is not problematic.

The trouble arises because the normative underpinning, the pre-political exclusive
humanist beliefs, seek to justify themselves without any recourse to transcendent sources. Again, in itself this need not be problematic or lead to instability. Procedural liberals such as Rawls, make the eminently sensible claim that although our metaphysical or confessional sources can continue to inform our beliefs about human dignity, it is best to keep these reasons out of our political discourse in order to avert potentially violent conflicts over truth.¹⁵² What is important from a practical point of view is that we share a belief about human dignity, not how we arrive at that conclusion. Indeed Rawls’ solution of the overlapping consensus may be the right one when facing the challenge of having different comprehensive doctrines support the same political conception of justice. But this concern is subtly different from Taylor’s.

Recall that the exclusive humanism under discussion is not a comprehensive doctrine but as a series of beliefs that can underlie a variety of different comprehensive doctrines; Kantianism, utilitarianism even certain theological traditions. Exclusive humanism is co-extensive with a basic framework used to understand and construct both ourselves and the world. Taylor hopes to provide pragmatic reasons for not excluding metaphysical or confessional claims from the underpinning that precede our practical commitments. To understand his argument requires a further sub-division of liberalism’s pre-political foundation into:

i) Its articulated sources (our ‘shared background culture’ or ‘what we late moderns have come to believe’ etc) and

ii) Its unarticulated sources (the philosophical / religious arguments which have created our common culture and shared reason).

The idea is that the articulated sources (a.i) or ‘beliefs about human dignity justified without transcendent claims’ are not robust enough to support the practical commitments and demands it makes on liberalism, (b).

Taylor’s argument is persuasive for both theoretical and empirical reasons. In the final chapter of Sources of the Self he draws attention to the fact that high standards need strong sources.¹⁵³ Today’s liberal culture, he argues, makes exacting demands both on individuals and even entire societies. It issues us with normative imperatives such as the promotion of justice, benevolence, solidarity, freedom and the alleviation of suffering, all with near universal application.¹⁵⁴ It justifies these demands by explaining that human beings have a special dignity and, as self-authoring moral agents, they alone have the potential for goodness. Moreover, because human potential is great, even unbounded, we are not only given the courage to act for reform but we also receive a validation of our own self-worth when we do so.¹⁵⁵ We may encounter practical difficulties in striving to promote human well-being on a global scale but still the strong universalising element of exclusive humanism is keenly felt and yet is not justified by recourse to anything beyond human well-being.

Taylor fears that the practical commitments of contemporary liberalism such as toleration, egalitarianism and benevolence will begin to erode when individuals are faced with the deep and all too common short-comings of humanity. Liberals justify the commitment to promote human well-being by highlighting that the dignity of the human person surpasses all non-human goods. But this untroubled view of

¹⁵³ Taylor, Sources of the Self, 516.
¹⁵⁴ Taylor, A Secular Age, 696.
humanity has a tendency to romanticise the human condition. As we know men are not angels, or in Kant’s words, of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.

This is where the great bulk of the immanent critique against humanism, the critique from within unbelief, is directed. Gray has already made the argument that man is a highly aggressive and destructive creature. As Luc Ferry summarises, anti-humanist thought is based on a line of argumentation ‘according to which the humanism of modern philosophy, although apparently the liberator and defender of human dignity, actually succeeded only in becoming its opposite: the accomplice, if not the cause of oppression.’ Anti-humanists further argue that the default human attitude is a will to power and domination over others, not the preservation of life or the avoidance of suffering and conflict. In fact, many will agree - some with trepidation and others with glad abandon - that the commitment to the upholding of human rights even within today’s liberal democracies is extremely precarious. What keeps us away from the barbarity and lust of a lynch mob is not the secure bulwark of several centuries of enlightened thought but a gossamer veil of prosperity and security that could tear at any moment.

These critiques prompt the obvious question: why should the impulse to reform degenerate human material be checked? Why should certain means of carrying out this reform such as violence, repression or intolerance be excluded? Why does the dignity of human person, every person without exception, trump every other kind of good that can be achieved? Unless there is something ‘beyond mere life’ which can ground human dignity, we will cease to find reasons for its affirmation and the

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threat of misanthropy will become a reality. In other words, arguments for and against particular practices will be compelling only if they have some transcendental basis.

How compelling is this argument? Surely for most inhabitants of Western liberal democracies even if we often fail to meet the moral demands placed on us, it does appear as if they the appeals of humanism are correct. They might not be self-evident; there needs to be some minimal moral education in order to inculcate people in this way of thinking but once it has caught on we can all see this is a better way to live.

Can Taylor supply any evidence to the contrary? He might first point to the fact that non-Western cultures do not share the same moral or political intuitions. Taylor does argue in *The Politics of Recognition* that:

Liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with others. Moreover, as many Muslims are aware, Western liberalism is not so much the expression of secular, post-religious intellectuals as a more organic outgrowth of Christianity – at least as seen from the alternative vantage point of Islam.\(^{157}\)

One might try to dismiss this evidence, by arguing that such differences in outlook and beliefs are due to the continued oppression / repression on the part of the ruling element of, say, Islamic societies but this is not at least how non-Western societies understand themselves. More robust evidence is afforded by the fact that divergent beliefs that have been held throughout history. We need not look as far back as ancient civilizations but merely to the atrocities of 20\(^{th}\) century Europe to realise that a practical commitment to protecting all human life is not a self-evident belief

shared by all. This is part of the purpose of Taylor’s genealogical approach; to show that the rise of humanism depended on the values taken from within Christianity.

Several rejoinders present themselves at this juncture. The first concedes the possibility of slipping into anti-humanism but maintains that as long as liberal societies remain committed to the practical primacy of human life, which they currently do, there is no reason to overly scrutinise the notion of exclusive humanism. The 20th century may have been convulsed by a series of utopian political projects which displayed a shocking disregard for human life but virtually every one of these experiments has failed or been discredited. Notions of justice and human nature have been shaped according to historical and cultural norms which perhaps may not be considered as absolute or self-evident, but surely the increasingly common worldwide appreciation of liberal democracy is a testament to the fact that, unlike other regimes, it posits a series of basic human goods such as those of life, liberty and individual property all people can agree to even if they do not derive them from the same set of beliefs. There will always be some degenerate individuals and unjust social structures that threaten the moral order but liberalism is engaged in the struggle to root out these wrongdoers and social evils, and given time, it will prevail.

A different response to Taylor’s forewarning of misanthropy also presents itself. There are those who will want to argue that the crisis Taylor predicts is already upon us. Millions of people across the globe live in conditions of radical poverty. Vast amounts of money are spent on atomic weapons production despite the fact that the total present nuclear arsenal is able to destroy the world several times
Hundreds of thousands of children die each day because of hunger or preventable diseases, millions of refugees and displaced persons are being deprived of their homelands while others are sold into the new form of slavery via trafficking. Thousands of political prisoners are detained without trial, tortured and forbidden to practice their religion or express their beliefs and this is before we say anything about the particularly modern ailments of state-sponsored terrorism, widespread abortion, the plague of substance abuse and massive environmental devastation. Can this really be called an age of peace and prosperity in which humanist commitments are upheld? Given the fact that our current epoch has made incomparable advances in the fields of science, technology, medicine, education, communication and agriculture, can there be any explanation for these facts other than that exclusive humanism has given way to barbarity?

The radically divergent nature of the interpretations of our current situation appears to leave the argument in a state of intractability. One group submits one body of evidence to bolster its claim of progress; another submits quite different evidence in support of its prediction of catastrophe. The issue will not be resolved by even the most careful balancing of the two sets of evidence and seeing which holds more weight. Many will agree with the threat of instability and the situation of crisis but unlike those who make the argument above they give a different theoretical explanation for the phenomena. What is needed, they will say, is not more

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158 According to World Bank figures over 80% of the world’s population lives below the poverty line that is on less than $10 a day www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats
159 9.2 million children die before the age of 5, the vast majority in developing countries from preventable diseases or malnutrition Unicef: www.childinfo.org/mortality.html
160 Current UNHCR figures show the current figures to be at 42million www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4d6.html
161 An estimated 12-40million people are being trafficked, see www.polarisproject.org/
162 For more detailed information on the latest figures provided by Amnesty International www.amnesty.org/
transcendence but less. To replace exclusive humanism with a controversial
metaphysical claim or set of claims is no solution to the practical problem of our
failure to uphold a commitment to the protection of human life and dignity. The
religious wars of 16th and 17th century Europe, the crusades, the Spanish inquisition
as well as the new threat of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, they will argue, are
testimony enough to the fact that an ‘openness to the transcendent’ does not secure
a commitment to the valuing of all human life. The problem, as numerous liberals
correctly point out is that religious and philosophical ideas have all too often been
the causes of violent conflict, repression, and the devaluing of human life.163

Taylor grants part of both the aforementioned responses, though he ultimately
dismisses them both. No one can argue with the fact that humanity finds itself in
difficult circumstances. However, the argument that ‘the denial of transcendence is
bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual breakdown of all moral standards’ is too
‘quick and slick’ but Taylor adds that the response of ‘a pox on all your
transcendence!’ does not help either.164

Taylor is also conscious of the fact that openness to the transcendent does not
equate to peace:

This doesn’t mean that religion and violence are simply alternatives. To the
contrary, it has meant that most historical religion has been deeply associated with
violence… What this might mean however is that the only way to fully escape the
draw towards violence lies somewhere in the turn towards transcendence that is,
through the full-hearted love of some good beyond life.165

But, and here is his main contribution, the issue of suffering, sacrifice and violence
is not one that only faces Christianity. Taylor is eager to explore these issues with
the complexity they deserve without the usual mudslinging polemic. His insight is

163 See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice
164 Taylor, A Secular Age, 630-8.
165 Taylor, A Catholic Modernity, 28.
that neither side of the debate can afford to be smug because both are faced by the same set of dilemmas. In order to move into a deeper evaluation of Taylor’s critique of exclusive humanism and his articulation of an alternative pre-political foundation it will be necessary to explore these dilemmas in greater detail, for the superior worldview will be the one that can meet the maximal demand they set. In other words, Taylor argues that the pre-political foundation of liberalism and the practical demands it issues results in a series of tensions or dilemmas, ones which the worldview of exclusive humanism is unable to meet as well as a form of humanism that is open to the transcendent.

III.

The first of these dilemmas centres on the relationship between human flourishing and transcendence. It is made up of two seemingly opposing charges. The first accuses the invitation to ‘transcend humanity’ of leading us to despise and neglect ordinary human fulfilment. It is often used in humanist attacks against religion, according to which religion demeans the body by making it a source of sin, where ‘modern culture affirms the essential goodness, innocence of our original, spontaneous aspirations. Evil…is seen as exogenous, as brought on by society, history, patriarchy, capitalism, the ‘system’ in one form or another.’ However, exclusive humanism faces its own problem in this regard, what was formerly understood as sinful is now seen as sickness and this, argues Taylor, has a paradoxical effect. Rather than enhancing human dignity, it can end up abasing it: ‘so the difference is that evil has the dignity of an option for an apparent good;

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166 Taylor, A Secular Age, 618.
sickness has not’. The irony of the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ is that it has not liberated us from the fruits of sin but has cultivated them even more.

Exclusive humanism appears unable to give an adequate treatment of suffering, sacrifice and violence. What happens, for example, when the promotion of human well-being itself requires real, painful sacrifice with no hope of recognition or reward? This raises the contentious issue of moral motivation. Why should I strive to promote the well-being of others, especially when the recipients of my actions are not my immediate friends and family? Why should I do so when it would require loving human beings who are utterly abject? What reason can there be to act in a way that would undermine my own immediate flourishing? If individual well-being is understood in narrowly material terms then what reasons can be given in a way that would undermine them?

The second charge is that religion whitewashes human imperfections. It conceives of us as created in the image of God and thus privy to special rights when in fact we are the products of evolution: aggressive, conflictual and lascivious. Taylor concedes that certain forms of Christianity present an untroubled harmony between human self-interest and the good, but this is tempered whenever the doctrine of original sin is introduced. Augustine and Calvin could hardly have been accused of not taking the dark side of human nature seriously. Without the perspective that the void of human sinfulness is a space for God’s saving grace nothing can prevent the championing of ‘contempt and a certain ruthlessness in shaping refractory human material’. It further appears that the bitterest disappointment and most vitriolic

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167 Ibid., 620.
loathing of mankind is reserved for those who once held the loftiest but most weakly rooted ideal of its potential.

Taylor concludes that these two seemingly opposed criticisms can actually be formulated under a single dilemma. In Christianity there is an internal struggle of interpretations which seeks to avoid the charge of mutilation, but falls more directly under the charge of bowdlerizing, and others that do the reverse. He adds that both these charges can be set against exclusive humanism as well; both Christianity and exclusive humanism are in the position of trying to meet the maximal demand, which is: ‘(to) define the highest spiritual or moral aspirations for humans, while showing a path to transformation involved which does not crush, mutilate, or deny what is essential to our humanity’.  

A series of glib responses to this demand is available to both the believer and the exclusive humanist. The believer might say that, ordinary human flourishing is not important and there is nothing to be done about human sinfulness, only the predestined will be saved. The exclusive humanist could argue that transcendence is not important and human violence can be ignored, educated or medicated away. Versions of these positions have been held throughout the ages and continue to find their advocates today. The intellectually honest however will realise that the dilemmas can not be so easily dismissed, because each of them resonates with a part of our experience. The question is what resources does exclusive humanism have to deal substantively to these dilemmas?

Nussbaum warns against the temptation to go beyond our humanity, preferring a rehabilitation of the satisfactions of everyday life. In doing so she especially

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repudiates Christianity for having defamed sexual desire by preaching love which is free from carnal attachments. She says that the aspiration to transcend our ordinary humanity does manifest itself in our lives, but what is needed is transcendence ‘of an internal and human sort.’\textsuperscript{170} No doubt Nussbaum is correct in her assessment that much evil has been wrought on humanity in the name of the illusory ideal of self-immolation, but she misunderstands Christianity and Taylor does not do enough to clear up her misrepresentation.

Kerr’s discussion of Nussbaum’s position in his Immortal Longings is much better at showing that it she has conflated Christianity with neo-Platonism.\textsuperscript{171} She does not take into consideration that the message of seeking holiness in ordinary life is echoed by many modern saints. Already in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians there is the admonition that acts of renunciation and sacrifice should never be considered as ends in themselves. If abstinence and renunciation are inspired not by love but by pride, they are worthless, even wicked.\textsuperscript{172} Her critique is directed at a love which is wholly detached from the human and from the carnal. But on an orthodox Christian view, the erotic cannot simply be discarded but it should be properly understood as that which can move us towards agape.\textsuperscript{173} The notion of internal transcendence also leaves exclusive humanists with a particular problem one that is not resolved by Nussbaum; this is the problem of moral motivation. She struggles to provide a satisfactory account of how reason alone can motivate us when our desires urge us in the opposite direction. If benevolence is ultimately

\textsuperscript{171} For a good discussion of Nussbaum’s position and its shortcomings see Kerr, Immortal Longings, Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{172} “if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing” Corinthians 1;1-3.
\textsuperscript{173} For a fuller articulation of the Catholic position on the relationship between Eros and Agape see Pope Benedict XVI Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).
conceived of as a duty that we owe ourselves, required by our dignity as rational, emancipated moderns how can we be expected to carry out this duty towards recipients who are wholly unworthy of it?\textsuperscript{174}

Taylor’s final answer is that selfless love is impossible without a transcendent perspective. Nothing else can inspire to a level of altruism that would lead us to forego or renounce our personal well-being. In fact the notion of internal transcendence harbours within it an even greater threat of delusion about the benevolence of actions, when they are really motivated by self-interest and pride. Actions that appear to serve justice or be performed out of charity can in fact be inspired by an indignation against what they view as oppressive and obscurantist.\textsuperscript{175}

What about the second part of the dilemma, the matter of human violence, aggression and vice? How does exclusive humanism explain this fact whilst continuing to posit the supreme value and dignity of all human beings? The first option is to ignore or downplay the negative aspects of the human condition - perhaps the original Enlightenment affirmation was over-confident, based on a highly idealised, immediately post-providential vision of nature, but this affirmation can no longer be sustained.\textsuperscript{176} Human shortcomings are too obvious to be comprehensively denied, so instead they are soft-peddled, attributed to poor education or blamed on pathologies. The option of reform, re-education and therapy, proceeds from the assumption that human shortcomings are not an essential part of the human condition but are contingent upon ignorance or sickness, and can therefore – at least potentially - be reformed through instruction or medication.

\textsuperscript{174} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 517.
\textsuperscript{175} Taylor, \textit{A Catholic Modernity}, 34.
\textsuperscript{176} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 517.
We have come, I think, to a period, when progress, even of a political kind, is coming to a halt, by reason of the low intellectual & moral state of all classes: of the rich as much as of the poorer classes. Great improvements in Education (among the first of which I reckon, dissevering it from bad religion) are the only thing to which I should look for permanent good… I am sorry to see in your Circular the ignorant & immoral doctrine that the “separation” enforced in the workhouse is among the sources of “degradation” & diminished “self-respect” for the pauper. I consider it an essential part of the moral training.  

In this letter to Edward Herford of India House J.S. Mill aptly summarises that reform, even of the kind that might be deemed to diminish or degrade people’s self-respect, should be implemented because only the right kind of moral education has the ability to overcome the shortcomings of individuals. If few now share his certainty that the moral education, whether of children or miscreants, can fully eradicate the propensity for violence and licentiousness, many continue to agree that human shortcomings are merely contingent. The shifting focus for the reform of human shortcomings has been from education towards medication. Similarly, Fukuyama has drawn attention to the some contemporary manifestations of this belief. These include the explosion of psychotropic drugs used to combat depression. The struggle for recognition previously thought to be an essential human trait, he argues, can now be medicated away.  

Taylor astutely observes that these kinds of perspective leave no room for a spiritual dimension of wrong-doing and thus no possibility of healing through conversion, a growth in wisdom, or a new higher way of seeing the world. Of course medication and spiritual reflection need not be mutually exclusive, but their coexistence is not possible on a worldview which by definition does not make room for a spiritual dimension.

This clears the way for two further consequences, both of which are extremely negative. The first is that this reductive view of human shortcomings can slide into a utopianism which attempts to expunge persons who ‘refuse to conform’; the second is that all human behaviour which lies outside the shrunken circle of exclusive humanist values is deemed pathological. This is the fear expressed by anti-humanists; man, they say, will be rendered so bloodless and anodyne through the ‘civilizing’ processes of education and medication he will lose all possibility of achieving true excellence.

The anti-humanist alternative is not an option for Taylor. In discussing the moral ontology of the self, Kerr rightly emphasises that Taylor’s critique not only captures the liberal individual but extends to both the postmodern de-centred self as well. ‘He accepts the case against the modern-liberal-existentialist self. But unlike Lacan, Foucault, Derrida he refuses to celebrate the de-centred subject’. 180 Taylor wants to avoid any hierarchical / organistic versions of selfhood. The de-centred self does not offer a real alternative to the exclusive humanist self, because those who flaunt the most radical denials and repudiations of selective facts of the modern identity generally go on living by variants of what they deny. Those who say that:

the public consequences of disengaged reason…can only be faced by tackling the problems of democracy and ecology as technical questions and searching for the best solutions through the application of the relevant sciences, social and natural, exhibit a massive blindness to the goods which underlie the negative charges. 181

A normal understanding of self-realization presupposes that some things are important beyond the self whereas a total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend only towards emptiness.

181 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 503.
The second dilemma faced by exclusive humanism is a crisis of meaning. To illustrate, we must first imagine that the aims of exclusive humanism are realised: individuals enjoy a comfortable material situation, a satisfying job with a decent wage and a happy family life; it is peacetime, there are no real conflicts amongst people and nations and our lifestyles are environmentally sustainable. Taylor does not say that such a vision is overly idealistic or unattainable but asks us to consider whether even if we attained all this, we would be satisfied. His question is directed at the ultimate significance of all these particular meanings. It might be answered that living a peaceful, prosperous, materially comfortable, healthy, fulfilled, happy life surrounded by friends and family and with the knowledge that others are living a similar kind of existence is all there is. The collection of all these particular meanings makes up an overall flourishing. It might be added that pesky questions about ‘ultimate significance’ are just the kind of metaphysical nonsense that confuse things, make us unable to focus on bringing about the world of our dreams, and render us incapable of appreciating the ordinary but very real joys of life.\(^\text{182}\)

The question about ultimate significance can be marginalised or overlooked, as it is by thinkers such as Rorty, but it cannot be ignored altogether. It is quite true that the question of meaning tends to arise when one is in a state of despair, but seems not to matter so much when one is at peace with oneself and one’s circumstances. On this view it might be argued that the quest for meaning is not basic but an anxiety which arises on account of a lack of well-being. The wonderful banquet of life described above may therefore seem no worse for its lack of ‘ultimate’ meaning. But given human shortcomings and finitude what life has ever been like this? Even

assuming the most serendipitous of circumstances it is always spoilt by one uninvited, unrelenting guest. It is the inescapable reality of death, the realisation that our happiness, health, prosperity, friendships, relationships, will all come to an end, the awareness of our own mortality that sets in motion the search for meaning.

Exclusive humanism cannot offer the perspective of eternity from which we might see and understand the drama of which we are a part. Instead it must take its cues from stoicism; train us against the desire for eternity, to be content with the here and now. Death, it says, is not something to be feared or experienced as a loss. Or we can give naturalistic explanations for why humans, as highly rational beings experience this fear of death because it cuts against our hard-wiring to safeguard the survival of the species. The problem is that it’s all easier said than done. Once the question of meaning arises, it will not be satisfied by the injunction to set it aside.183

Also returning to ‘the beatific vision’ of an ideally humanist world, it might be said that for the majority of people in Western developed countries such a life already is the case or at least it is a quite achievable possibility and yet the ‘crisis of meaning’, the question ‘what is this all for?’ is more pressing than ever. Insisting that happiness does not require a transcendent perspective does not pay sufficient attention to our psychology or experience of life.

Although Taylor does not exclude the possibility that exclusive humanism can provide better responses to these dilemmas, his ‘hunch’ is that the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater.184 But is a hunch enough to satisfy those not already predisposed to agree with him? Quentin Skinner complains that Taylor does not enough to turn his intuitions in an explicit and satisfactory

183 Ibid., 677.
184 Ibid., 518.
manner, at least not in Sources of the Self. However the resources for such a justification are there in Taylor’s moral theory, at least in part. But before attending to that issue, it is important to determine what Taylor means by transcendence, in particular a form of humanism that is open to the transcendent, and what transcendence does not mean.

IV.

Taylor’s transcendent humanism is one that can support reason and freedom without accepting what he considers to be an invalid anthropology. He does not however advocate a simplistic ‘return to theism’. We cannot just ‘undo’ the anthropocentric turn, returning to the form of Christianity that preceded Providential Deism. This is partly because of the ‘bloody forcing of conscience’, that was completely contrary to the Gospels, and partly because Christian theology operated too much within a juridical-penal framework according to which we deserve punishment because of our sins. We cannot go back, says Taylor, because when understood properly the anthropocentric turn it is not only compatible with the Gospels, but demanded by it.

Transcendence is not equivalent to theism but, according to Taylor, it has three dimensions. First that there is something higher than human flourishing, second that the good can only make sense for us in the context of belief in a higher power and

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186 Taylor, A Secular Age, 651.  
187 Taylor, A Catholic Modernity, 18.  
188 Taylor’s argument echoes the Catholic position as expressed in the Encyclical Redemptor Hominis: ‘Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being—in the sphere of his own family, in the sphere of society and very diverse contexts, in the sphere of his own nation or people…and in the sphere of the whole of mankind — this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church’ John Paul II, Redemptor Hominis, Part 14.
third, that the transformation by *agape* requires we have a horizon of eternity - one that goes beyond death.\textsuperscript{189}

Taylor’s idea can be better understood by thinking of the self as relational, not static. It is only through a dialogical process of affirmation, negation and reconciliation that the authentic self can flourish.\textsuperscript{190} What is required to attain flourishing is an attitude of renunciation – presumably a resignation from one’s own self-interest - which at first takes you away from flourishing but then returns you to it on a different order. Such an attitude is described by Taylor as a manifestation of *agape* in the Christian tradition or *karuna* (compassion) on a Buddhist understanding.

This claim can be better grasped by making a distinction between two orders of flourishing: the order of justice and the order of love.\textsuperscript{191} The order of justice demands that we give to the other what is his or what is due to him by reason of his being or acting. On this order, an individual can attain flourishing by pursuing his or her own self interest in a way that does not transgress the demands of justice. The order of love however, goes beyond justice; it prompts the individual to give to the other what is rightly his. It is the order of gift, and on its highest level it is the gift of self. Of course, the order of justice is primary, because I can not ‘give to the other what is mine’ whilst holding back from him what is rightfully his. On this second order however one can only attain flourishing by going beyond justice and in some sense going against his own self-interest.

\textsuperscript{189}Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.
\textsuperscript{191}See Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, Part 6.
It could therefore be said that the order of love requires renunciation and ‘goes against’ the order of justice. But this is to misunderstand the relationship between the two. Justice is inseparable from charity, its necessary minimum, but it is not the order which provides the fullest expression of flourishing. Therefore if I freely give to another what is mine, whether this is expressed in a relational, social, or political context I fulfil the demand of justice, but am not limited by it. I can realise a higher order of good and I open the possibility for the recipient of my gift to respond in a similar way, although I do not constrain him to do so.

Stated more concretely this mutual gift-giving is the starting point for friendship, relationships, social solidarity and every other expression of love. This gives a better sense of what Taylor means when he speaks of the dialogical process through which the authentic self can flourish and when he says that what is required of (a higher order) flourishing is renunciation, a taking away in order to receive back. Taylor’s form of humanism calls for openness to the transcendent, but in doing so it is not narrowly theistic. It is compatible with a belief in God but does not necessitate it. It necessitates is an attitude of openness, a willingness to leave a space for the possibility of God, for the possibility of a sense to life beyond the mundane. In other words it necessitates accepting that man is by nature a being who has spiritual dimensions that drive him on a quest for meaning and truth. Of course there exists the possibility that man will err with respect to understanding transcendence, in fact it is almost impossible for him not to get it wrong. And there can be no denying that distorted visions of transcendence or ‘bad religion’ have been and continue to be a source of violence and debasement of the human person. But the performing of a preventative ‘spiritual lobotomy’ solves nothing, but only compounds the problem.
Taylor’s template for thinking about human beings is not homogenizing but pluralistic. He does not think that practical commitments must be based on identical theoretical justifications. A variety of paths can lead to the same destination. In this he agrees with Rawls’ notion of the overlapping consensus, which he sees as a sensible expression of pluralism - as long as the outcome of the consensus is not fixed from the start. The logic of the proof - the path taken - matters. Otherwise it does not really articulate the reasoning behind the answer. Moreover, allowing a range of proofs for the same answer does not mean that the range of proofs is limitless.

Taylor’s humanism understands integral human development in opposition to radical autonomy. He strives to articulate the fullest kind of human flourishing which, returning to the previous distinction occurs on the order of love. It calls forth the recognition of the needs of the other and it seeks the good of the other even at personal cost to the self. The ‘accidental justice’ proposed by Rawlsian liberalism, which comes about because of a perfected mechanism, is not sufficient. It must be freely chosen by both individuals and the society at large; institutions are not enough, because integral human development requires the conscious choice of solidarity and justice. Taylor’s vision is not limited to liberalism but addresses the sweep of modernity of which liberalism is merely a strand. As Mulhall and Swift rightly comment:

Taylor is not inclined to reject liberalism per se; on the contrary, he thinks that some of its central claims are worthy of very serious consideration, but only if they are detached from various erroneous or incoherent ways of elucidating or defending them.  

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These central claims surely include the inviolability of the individual and his right to freely pursue happiness. Taylor does not wish to undermine them. On the contrary he hopes to strengthen them by explaining how greater detachment from the world and from the self can result in greater harmony between them. However, there is a tension at the heart of Taylor’s position; the familiar tension between flourishing and transcendence. How to go beyond mere existence without mutilating ordinary life? How to reconcile suffering with happiness? How to offer a theory of ultimate significance without totalizing?

Taylor’s resolution of the first dilemma leans heavily upon the distinction between life and abundant life (or living life to the full). His aim is to show that the achievement of abundant life sometimes requires the negation of mere life. He begins by calling into question the story that we can (all) find fulfilment by living authentically, however ordinary the life being lived. In actual fact modern people can not really find a sense of wholeness or fulfilment in ordinary life – job, marriage etc; despite their material well-being and contentment in their personal lives, there is an increasing sense that something is missing. That something is meaning. Flourishing, in the sense of well-being is not the ultimate goal but this does not mean that ordinary life is denigrated. On the contrary Christianity makes its own affirmation of ordinary life, showing that the critique of renunciation has been misguided.\textsuperscript{194} Meaning is to be found not only in flourishing but in the eschatological perspective of the restoration of integrity.

\textsuperscript{194} Taylor draws a contrast between Stoicism and Christianity: ‘for the Stoic, what is renounced is, if rightly renounced, \textit{ipso facto} not a part of the good. For the Christian, is thereby affirmed as a good-both in the sense that the renunciation would lose its meaning if the thing were indifferent and in the sense that the renunciation is in furtherance of God’s will, which precisely affirms the goodness of the kinds of things renounced: health, freedom, life. Paradoxically Christian renunciation is an affirmation of the goodness that is renounced.’ Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 219.
As for the second dilemma or the problem of suffering and sinfulness, at the end of a significant passage in *Sources of the Self* Taylor implores us to rid ourselves of the delusion that the Good is equivalent to well-being. ‘It emerges that the highest spiritual ideal and aspirations also threaten to lay the most crushing burdens on mankind’, sounding almost Nietzschean, he exposes ‘the cardinal mistake of believing that a good is invalid if it leads to suffering or destruction.’\(^{195}\) We would do well to remind ourselves that Taylor is in good company when he makes this claim. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant similarly argued that the Highest Good for humanity is the combination of complete moral virtue with complete happiness, the former being a condition of the latter. But he added that ‘virtue does not insure well-being and may even conflict with it’.\(^{196}\)

The idea we will be spared difficult moral choices is based on a selective blindness. Suffering, though antithetical to well-being, may well be a constitutive part of goodness or virtue, and full flourishing (in the sense of moral virtue together with well-being) is not achievable without suffering or without a perspective that goes beyond the self.

Some accuse Taylor of not doing more to defend the coherence of religious belief and its ability of overcome the dilemmas. This is not evasion but is an honest response to the serious difficulty of making truth claims about a comprehensive doctrine in the wake of post-modernism. Taylor does not need to ‘prove transcendence’ (whatever that might mean) in order to show that having that a transcendent perspective solves the problems that exclusive humanism fails to

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 519.

overcome. But has he shown this? Does the adoption of transcendent perspectives solve the problems to which he points?

Taylor does not offer a direct response to this question or an explicit political program; that is certainly a shortcoming. However his moral theory has the resources to justify the advantages of a form of humanism that is open to the transcendent. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that the strength of his alternative to exclusive humanism stands or falls on the plausibility of his theory of falsifiable moral realism.

Using White's category of weak ontologies both exclusive humanism and the transcendent humanism imagined by Taylor could be described in this manner - although White concedes that ‘weak ontologies’ makes them sound exclusively cognitive. Then he clarifies, weak ontologies, ‘are not merely instruments of knowledge but structures of meaning that promise one an enhanced capacity to cope with late modern life in a broad aesthetic-affective sense; in short, to attend better to its pressures in ways that make living seem less frustrating and distressing.’

Understood in this way, Taylor’s form of humanism does not reflect a ‘crystalline truth about the world’ which entices us with ‘an overwhelming power to convert’, rather its validity must be measured by its correspondence with reality but also by ‘its appropriateness to ‘some reading (itself contestable) of present historical circumstances’.

197 White, “Weak Ontologies and Liberal Political Reflection”, 506.
198 Ibid.
Taylor’s moral theory begins with a rejection of the ‘basic reason’ view of ethics; that is, the prevailing tendency in modern moral philosophy to answer the question ‘what makes a given action right’ with a basic reason. He advocates a view of ethics which entails a vision of the good – which can speak of an overall framework that combines different goods in a single life – but which does not offer a basic reason in the sense of rules like ‘maximize utility’ or ‘do your duty’. He introduces the notion of a moral framework, a series of beliefs that gives overall shape and direction to our values and moral outlooks. A framework orients people in their moral space and though it can be changed by being enlarged or shrunk it cannot be dispensed with entirely. It is inescapable. Within these frameworks there exist different orders of desires, goals, aspirations, some are qualitatively superior to others and can be distinguished by a method of strong evaluation.

He further describes two levels of moral outlook: the first covers life-goods such as freedom, reason, authenticity, courage, benevolence; the second applies to constitutive goods. Articulation of the sources of moral motivation requires the identification of the constitutive good - something that one is capable of loving, of being moved or inspired by. Examples of a constitutive good include ‘God’, ‘the idea of the good’ and ‘an autonomous human agent capable of acting out of respect for the moral law’. All these examples (even the non-theistic ones) propose the existence of a moral source that transcends human life. Taylor claims that all moral frameworks or outlooks have a constitutive good. Some moral frameworks also include hypergoods (a supreme good among strongly valued goods which provides

\[199\] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 76.
a way of rank-ordering the other less strongly valued goods in an individual’s moral framework). Another way of saying this is a life-purpose.

Hypergoods are the cornerstones of strong evaluation. They are also generally a source of conflict (i.e. the principle of universal justice causes a trans-valuation of previously held values).200 Faced with the charge that all valuation is the projection of our subjective reactions onto a neutral world, we have recourse to our moral phenomenology (how we experience morality) and also the fact of the inescapable features of our moral language, our emotions, feelings etc. Hypergoods might be wrong, Taylor admits, but so far nothing better fits the best account principle - a wonderful formulation of the standard against which a comparative claim can be checked. The key to showing whether a claim is well-formed is to show that the move from A to B constitutes an epistemic gain and is error-reducing. ‘Practical reasoning is reasoning in transitions. It aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely but rather that some position is superior to some other.’201

This reasoning in transitions, Taylor further argues, means that our evaluation of moral claims has to take place historically. What is under consideration is whether the new claim is error-reducing and epistemically richer than its predecessor, not whether it is true in some absolute sense. Thus genealogy goes to the heart of the logic of practical reasoning and a hypergood can only be defended through a certain reading of its genesis. Hypergoods can turn out to be hyperbads; what we have to go on is, if they could be transformed, that is, if I could transition out of my present belief by an error reducing move. In other words, the most reliable moral view is not one that is grounded quite outside our intuitions but in our strongest intuitions,

200 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 65-70.
201 Ibid., 72.
where these have successfully met the challenge of proposed transitions away from them.

This relates to the issue of humanism in the following way. Taylor does not claim, indeed according to his methodology it would be impossible to claim, that a humanism which is open to the transcendent is absolutely true. He simply wants to show that as the debate stands now in this modern, post-enlightenment, secular world of ours, it is a more persuasive worldview than that of exclusive humanism. It explains more about the reality of our lived experience and although it is not dilemma-free it can give a better response to these dilemmas than its closest rival.

It is worth revisiting an earlier question: if Taylor’s proposal that there is no such thing as ‘bare nature’ but only differing degrees of social construction is true, is there is anything to stop us from choosing whatever social imaginary we find most appealing? To prevent such a conclusion being drawn, Taylor must demonstrate which social constructions distort a defensible stance toward the human condition. He must provide a criterion for making moral judgements and, in order to remain pluralistic, he must do this in a way that does not stipulate moral absolutes. Again, White’s analysis is instructive. He calls Taylor a ‘border runner’ between strong and weak ontologies, by which he means that Taylor’s moral frameworks are neither discovered nor invented, but cultivated.\footnote{White, “Weak Ontologies and Liberal Political Reflection”, 506.}

The term is an accurate one. When cultivating a plant, the gardener begins with objects or conditions not created by him – the seed, the soil, the climate – his labour combined with these organic materials can radically affect their growth and
development but only ever within certain natural limits. Discovery, in other words, is interwoven with invention.\textsuperscript{203}

Taylor claims that the most plausible explanation of moral reasoning is one that takes seriously the independence of the goods. This alone makes it superior to all forms of projectivism, which reduce morality to a human imposition of meaning on a morally neutral world. He further submits that human beings experience the goods that demand their respect in a non-anthropocentric way; that is as not deriving solely from human will or choice or depending on the fact of individual affirmation for their value. This is the heart of falsifiable realism. And unless or until a moral theory emerges that can explain why humans respond to goods as if they had an independent existence unconnected to reality, realism is the most persuasive approach. He does of course concede that such a theory is possible which is why his realism is falsifiable rather than strong.\textsuperscript{204}

In the same way Taylor allows that exclusive humanism can come up with responses to the dilemmas that better explain human experience: our desires, vices and flourishing consists in for us, but until then an alternative humanism, one with a transcendent perspective offers the more persuasive approach. This speaks to Rorty’s pragmatism that was elaborated earlier. The idea is not to offer a new dogmatism, but to show that what is true is falsifiable, eminently practical and phenomenologically sound; that is, it accords with our experience of the world.

\textsuperscript{203} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 18.

\textsuperscript{204} A good summary and explanation of this position is provided by Ruth Abbey: ‘(Falsifiable realism) takes this fact about human moral experiences seriously and imputes ontological significance to it…so falsifiable realists accord the ordinary experience of moral life more significance than do weak realists or strong realists; from thus standpoint, people’s perceptions of their moral life cannot be so easily dismissed as illusory. Abbey, \textit{Charles Taylor}, 30.
If Taylor is right, the single most important consequence to result will be showing that a constitutive good functions in even in the most immanantist theories such as exclusive humanism. Such theories simply replace the transcendent with a functional equivalent, in many cases, silence. The danger is that this silence cannot uphold our moral reasoning and is filled, discreetly and under the veneer of neutrality with an absolute stipulation that human flourishing in this life is all that can be achieved and that attempting to go beyond well-being ends up mutilating us. But as Taylor rightly and forcefully reminds us, words empower and have tremendous moral force: “There are good reasons to keep silent. But they cannot be valid across the board. Without any articulation at all, we would lose all contact with the good, however concerned. We would cease to be human.” 205

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205 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 96.
Chapter 4: Politics beyond Exclusive Humanism

There is simply no going back to an unproblematic view of truth. The traditional sources of liberal principles such as freedom, equality and tolerance, have been discredited. Some have attempted to soften these absolute defences while still holding onto their outcomes, others, to ground them on the deliberations of individuals unburdened by power dynamics. Both attempts however have been criticised as unfeasible. Others still, have come to believe that such defences are wholly unnecessary for the continuation of liberal democracy. According to this last view, the political institutions founded on the basic principles of justice do not have to suppose the truth of a certain worldview (in this case exclusive humanism), but simply to accept that it comports well with liberal democracy.

The critiques thus far considered have called into question the untroubled nature of this relationship. The central problem with a restrictive, exclusive or anthropocentric form of humanism is that it ignores the deep-seated human yearning for transcendence, for the sacred, for a set of unconditionally valid principles capable of ordering our moral choices and motivating us to act upon them, and it also leads us to treat the natural world in a destructive manner. Gray draws attention to our destructive attitude towards the natural world; Taylor deflates the triumphalism of exclusive humanism by showing that it faces the same dilemmas as its non-exclusive variants. Each suggests a way in which a non-exclusive form of humanism could meet these dilemmas in a more satisfactory and coherent manner. What their accounts lack is a detailed discussion of the alternative

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to exclusive humanism and a delimitation of the political consequences that would follow from it.

It is worth noting by way of methodological aside that any solution to the problem of exclusive humanism in the current historical circumstances cannot seek to provide an absolute proof of the superiority of a non-exclusive form of humanism, it can only offer an error-reducing and epistemically-enriching account. Given the postmodern position vis-à-vis truth - that the only acceptable criteria of justification is praxis - any ‘proof’ of the superiority of a non-exclusive form of humanism must be given in terms of its ability to meet the aforementioned problems.

I.

Havel and Patočka have an important contribution to make to this discussion in this regard. The road these Czech thinkers have travelled to liberal democracy puts them in a privileged position vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. They share the common experiences of Antiquity, Christianity and the Enlightenment but are able to offer a fresh perspective on the struggle for freedom having encountered totalitarianism first-hand. Havel notes:

Many years of living under communism gave us certain experiences that the non-communist West fortunately did not have to live through. We came to understand (or to be precise, some of us did) that the only genuine values are those for which one is capable, if necessary, of sacrificing something...the traditional values of Western civilization such as democracy, respect for human rights and for the order of nature, the freedom of the individual and the inviolability of his property, the feeling of co-responsibility for the world...all of these things became values with moral, and therefore metaphysical, underpinnings.207

The idea that there are values for which one is prepared to sacrifice - not just superficial goods but liberty and in extremis even life – requires accepting that

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values must be ordered in accordance with a transcendent good. By admitting that forms of meaningful sacrifice exist and that we can willingly engage in them, we testify to that fact that the goods of life, such as peace and well-being are not the highest goods. Havel confesses he does not know of a single case in which ‘there is genuine acceptance of some bitter, personal fate, or in which courage is undertaken without regard for any immediate possibility of success, that can be explained by anything other than humankind’s sense of something that transcends earthly gratification – a belief that such as a fate, or such an apparently hopeless act of courage, whose significance is not easily understood, is recorded in some way and adds to the memory of Being.’

Having experienced the dehumanization of totalitarian regimes, he is only too aware of the fact that liberty and justice require more than restraint from cruelty; they can call upon us to make renunciations of the highest order.

There are unique insights to be gleaned from the dissident experience. It has equipped others who have endured it, with an ability to conceptualize truth beyond the confines of prevailing opinion, it has taught them the virtue of patience and gradualism in politics and served as a refiner’s fire separating the hopeful man from the mere optimist.

Lom has argued that Havel’s thought, like that of his mentor Patočka, is centred on ‘(an) insistence on living in truth, on philosophic reflection as care of the soul and recognition of humility, a humility that there is something greater than man in the universe toward which human beings must show reverence and respect’. Havel consistently speaks of transcendence indirectly - a call spoken to us, an encounter

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meeting us, a hand reaching down to us – never about what it is; only the responses it solicits. In so doing, he echoes Patočka’s reading of Heidegger for whom Dasein alone has the possibility of being open and responsive to Being. Patočka insists that only a humanism open to the transcendent is capable of securing a just political system and well-ordered moral lives. But, he clarifies, this ‘openness’ can never uncover an objective, direct and ‘scientific’ knowledge of Being, only one that is deeply historical, dependent on human activities that gather, develop and are transmitted through tradition. Havel concurs that the transcendent does not bowdlerise man but calls to him into cooperation with it.

Patočka offers a more holistic diagnosis of the problem that has thus far been considered, one which sets the issue of exclusive humanism in its widest context. The major problem with contemporary political and moral life, as far as the Czech philosopher is concerned, is the crisis of meaning, which has been prompted by the abandonment of metaphysics. He thinks that metaphysics has been replaced in the realm of politics with one of two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. The first is the attempt to replace lost meaning with a messianic philosophical system or political movement which promises to substitute, on the level of the secular, for a lost sense of metaphysical certainty. (Marxism would fall under this description). The second is the attempt to evade the question of meaning altogether. (Political liberalism is an example of this).

It is easy for westerners to read Patočka and Havel as mere critics of the repressive Soviet totalitarianism under which they lived, but they are equally critics of liberal democracy. Not in order to destroy but to rescue it from its own worst tendencies.

Commenting on Patočka, Findlay argues ‘Liberalism needs reform in order to set individualism back on its proper foundation. The goal is a political theory that responds to the individual as a responsible human being, not an indifferent atom’\textsuperscript{211}. The problem with both the aforementioned attempts to deal with the loss of meaning is that they end up setting up regimes in which justice and injustice both result as the default of the system rather than the personal choices of citizens.

Neither Havel nor Patočka use the Taylorian term ‘exclusive humanism’, preferring ‘modern anthropocentric humanism’ instead, but it is clear that they have the same target in mind. According to the Czech playwright and his mentor, both messianic political utopias and metaphysically-cleansed ones are examples of this exclusive humanist worldview, or ideology.

Havel is cognizant of the danger of which Taylor speaks, that talk of transcendence can lead to a dogmatic rejection of human creativity or technological power; it can foist improvable doctrines upon us that stifle our spirit and capacities. But he is equally aware of the opposing danger, which, to use William Schweiker’s term, is the ‘overhumanization’ of the world. This, Schweiker clarifies, ‘does not mean a rejection of human creativity or technological power, but, rather, an ideology and social condition in which maximizing power becomes a good in itself’.\textsuperscript{212} It is worth invoking Havel’s critique of ideology to make sense of this term. The following passage from the essay “Power to the Powerless” is primarily addressed to those living under a communist system, but it is equally relevant for this discussion:

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{211} Edward F. Findlay, \textit{Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the Thought of Jan Patočka}, (Albany: SUNY Press), 129. (hereafter \textit{Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age})
\item \textsuperscript{212} William Schweiker, ‘Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism’ \textit{Journal of Religion}, (Vol. 83, No.4, 2003), 543.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them. As the repository of something suprapersonal and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious *modus vivendi*, both from the world and from themselves.\(^{213}\)

It would be a gross exaggeration to say that liberalism was a form of authoritarian totalitarianism in the manner of communism or fascism, but the characteristics of ideology identified by these dissident thinkers are nevertheless apparent. According to Findlay, Patočka lays bare that ‘the rule of ideology is not limited to authoritarian or totalitarian systems, but is present in any movement in which the goal of peace and mere life are given eschatological significance’\(^{214}\). (Italics added) So although the current form of liberalism does not lead to violent wars or repression on its behalf in the way totalitarianism did, it can, through primarily peaceful means, reduce the individual to the status of a mere cog, or instrument. The ‘overhumanization’ of the world therefore means giving the illusion of identity, dignity and morality, while serving only to undermine them. The effect is to reduce the individual moral’s responsibility in the world and curtail his freedom. It transforms good and evil, justice and injustice from wholly personal categories with unambiguous content to impersonal and pragmatic categories secured by correct procedures - i.e., justice as the result of a system rather than personal responsibility.

This Panglossian solution loses its lustre however, upon the realization that ‘as soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and


\(^{214}\) Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, 138.
man began to lose control of it. The falsity of this kind of humanism lies in its elevation of mundane goods to the status of transcendent ones. Ironically, this inversion of values leads to dehumanisation; the desire to eradicate cruelty becomes counterproductive to reaching that end.

Unlike their antihumanist counterparts however, Patočka and Havel believe the loss of a human dimension in the world can only be remedied by a renewal of humanism. It is not a question of whether we should embrace humanism, but what kind. If exclusive humanism does not serve as a sufficient source of moral responsibility can a humanism that is open to the transcendent be more effective?

II.

There is increasing awareness says Havel that ‘people today know that they can be saved only by a new type of global responsibility just one small detail is missing: that responsibility actually has to be undertaken!’ His call for transcendence in a postmodern world ultimately seeks to inspire a new form of humanism, one which complicates, concretises and sets in political context our earlier reflections. The task ahead requires the identification and isolation of key features of his and Patočka’s work and its reformulation into a new model of humanism. The aim is not to ‘recreate’ or ‘systematise’, as much as it is to treat their thought as a resource for the formulation of a non-exclusive form of humanism.

Although Havel is modest in claiming no direct knowledge of the transcendent he does not hesitate in invoking it as the only basis for hope and human responsibility. Deneen rightly observes that despite Havel’s superficial similarities with Rorty such

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as the replacement of inevitability with political gradualism and the distrust for culminating historical narratives, their positions are substantially and irreconcilably different.\textsuperscript{217} Following Dewey, Rorty asks that groundless hope be substituted for truth, and that we abandon attempts to discover transcendent truths which seek to illuminate the human condition. By contrast, ‘Havel’s doubt arises from a different source: not…the complete absence of any transcendent objective Truth, but rather the human inability to wholly comprehend the transcendent’.\textsuperscript{218} Havel’s lack of certainty about the inner-workings of transcendence should not be confused for hesitancy about its importance or an inability to articulate his beliefs. On the contrary, his ‘holding-back’ is purposeful and intimately related to the humility which he believes results from the encounter with transcendence.

The need for a humanism which is open to transcendence begins with a keen perception of the frailty of being and it acts as a corrective to human hubris. The humility of which Havel speaks is first and foremost the result of awe at something not of our own creation. Whatever particular form it may take, it impresses itself upon us and calls us into relationship with it. The humility which accompanies the recognition of our fragility and interdependence, guards against the error of striving for self-sufficiency.

Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of this phenomenon is in our responses to nature. For Havel, humility towards nature stands in direct opposition to the destructive form of anthropocentricism to which even modern forms of environmentalism are not immune:

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid.,
I am increasingly inclined to believe that even the term “environment”...is in its own way misguided, because it is unwittingly the product of the very anthropocentricism that has caused extensive devastation of our earth. The word ‘environment’ tacitly implies that whatever is not human merely envelops us and is therefore inferior to us, something we need care for only if it is in our interest to do so. I do not believe this to be the case.²¹⁹

The world is not divisible into separable parts - the human and that which merely surrounds it. Being ought to be conceived of as an infinitely complex and mysterious meta-organism of which we are all part. In this sense Havel, like Gray, rejects the First Anthropocentric Principle that only human beings have value, though this does not lead him to embrace an anti-humanist position. Environmental concerns, as they are sometimes called, are misnamed. It is man’s attitude toward the world, not the environment that must be radically changed.

Havel signals that an important message is coming to the human race in its eleventh hour; we are in danger of self-annihilation. Global warming, pollution, the depletion of the biosphere and mineral / plant resources, only serve to prove his point. Yet the call to avert ecological crisis continues to go unheeded. Modern man clings to the deluded belief that a solution to ecological problems can be found through an increase in technology, as if all that was needed were new scientific recipes, new technologies and the overcoming of nature’s ‘design flaws’. In his address to the World Economic Forum in 1992, Havel implored his listeners to forsake this mechanistic view of the universe and ‘to abandon the arrogant belief that the world merely a puzzle to be solved.’²²⁰ A technical trick will not save us, but, he adds with characteristic hope, ‘those who believe in modesty, in the mysterious power of their

²¹⁹ Havel, “University of California, Los Angeles” The Art of the Impossible, 79.
own human Being, and the mysterious power of the world’s Being, have no reason
despair at all’. 221

In a famous passage from Politics and Conscience, he describes his disgust upon
witnessing smoke-emitting chimney stacks polluting the otherwise pristine
Bohemian countryside. There is something primordial about his repugnance, a
revulsion which is not reducible to ‘regrettable technological negligence’ or
remediable by the installation of a smoke filter. What this scene signified to him
was the denial of the ‘binding importance of personal experience - including the
experience of mystery and of the absolute’. 222

Humility is to be the authentic response to the natural world, while the refusal to act
in accordance with it that which has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster.

As he puts it,

The natural world in very virtue of its being bears within it the presupposition of the
absolute which grounds, delimits, animates and directs it…Any attempt to spurn it,
master it or replace it with something else, appears, within the framework of the
natural world, as an expression of hubris for which humans must pay a heavy
price. 223

This prediction is familiar to us from Gray; the hubristic and domineering attitude
towards the natural world will bring about man’s downfall. But, while Gray
denounces hubris, using the wisdom of ancient myths to make his case, he considers
these wisdoms to be ‘invincible illusions’ not truths. Given his cynical position
regarding human beings he also holds out little hope for the human capacity to ever
overcome hubris. By contrast, Havel believes that a humility which comes out of a
quiet respect for the universe is the first and most genuine instinct of human beings.

221 Ibid., 94.
and Faber, 1989), 138.
223 Ibid., 137-8.
There is something quite Rousseauian about his belief in man’s innate goodness, the correctness of his instincts and the sense of his limitations in regard to nature. He appropriates Patočka’s insight on the matter which is that the natural world begins unfamiliarly to us, something which must be discovered and analysed, and yet our response to it cannot be reduced to the scientific study of how things work, but must take account of its phenomenal nature – how it presents itself to us. In the case of the smoke-spewing stacks, how else is the natural world presenting itself to us than as something that is being suffocated?

But Havel is not blind to humanity’s ‘fatal incorrigibility’ or ‘unbelievable short sightedness’ when it decides to play God. Humility is not to be confused with docility or naïveté, remaining humble before that which transcends us and with regard to our own limitations is a task to be achieved. In particular, it is a task that requires the repudiation of all utopian tendencies.

In another point of disambiguation with Rorty, Havel warns against succumbing to the siren calls of so-called ‘utopian intellectuals’, an admonition that resounds ever more forcefully because proclaimed by one intimately familiar with the dangerous allure of such songs. Utopian thinkers (intellectual or otherwise) have several distinguishing features. The most prominent is their tendency to generalize, totalize and belittle the finer details of human life. The holistic social engineering carried out by the Marxists and Nazi’s (and it ought to be added, progressive American movements) was in large measure due to ‘an impatience of mind and a propensity toward mental shortcuts’ on the part of intellectuals. They acquiesced to the

\[224\] For more on this see Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. 
delusion that there was a universal solution for human woes, and with disastrous consequences.

The other propensity of utopian thinking is optimism about moral and material progress. Havel is a man of profound hope, but he is not an optimist. He has witnessed the dark underbelly of human nature too closely for that. The difference between hope and optimism, he notes, is that optimism is drawn from the object that inspires it whereas hope enlivens its object. Optimism therefore requires an external indication that the desired course of action will turn out accordingly, whereas hope inspires a course of action even if the external indicators suggest the contrary will occur. The reduction of cruelty is a good example. For Rorty and other liberals who adopt an exclusive humanist worldview, the mitigation of human cruelty is at the top of their agenda, and it is inspired by a confidence in progress. It holds to the perfectionist ideal that recalcitrant human nature can be shaped and reformed by expanding circles of empathy. Education, therapy and the telling of sympathy-inducing stories are all ways in which human cruelty can be mitigated. Havel is not so confident. At least part of his emphasis on humility must be understood as an invitation to heed the Delphic adage to ‘know thyself’. Knowing our human nature means accepting that cruelty and evil are as much a part of the human condition as compassion and kindness. As such they can never be fully eradicated.

However this belief does not lead him, as it does Gray, to despair over the human condition. On the contrary he thinks it is ultimately liberating, freeing us from any self-deceptions. As Deneen suggests, Havel’s ‘hope without optimism’ represents a fundamental distrust in the human ability to resolve moral and political problems, at
the same time, by appealing to transcendence, it serves as a guiding standard in moral and political action that is both cautious and confident.\textsuperscript{225} The anti-utopianism borne of humility can cultivate patience in politics, and oppose the drive for success within a short well-defined time – whether in a communist five year plan or a single democratic election cycle. Impatience is a symptom of a lack of humility. Havel insists that both politicians and citizens need to learn to wait, to respect the inner order of things as they come to be revealed to us, and to accept that that revelation will always retain something of a mysterious character.

The second attitude inspired by transcendence is that of solidarity - solidarity with nature and the cosmos, but, in a singular way, solidarity with other human beings. For Rorty, solidarity between human beings was to be cultivated through the telling of stories. Havel agrees that solidarity must be fostered through particulars: particular people, particular events and, yes, particular stories which touch and move us. This is the only cure to the universalising abstractions of which utopianism is so fond. But, and herein lies the major difference, the only reason that these particular stories or encounters can stir us is that they draw out a sentiment buried deep within our shared core morality. The belief in a minimal common moral vocabulary lies at the heart of Havel’s conception of solidarity.

He is convinced that despite diverging cultural, religious, linguistic expressions, there are deep and fundamental experiences common to all peoples. These experiences are captured by the myths, legends and stories that have been passed down over the generations, but are themselves not ‘invented’. The fact that we find common sentiments in our legends, the fact that we can understand and be moved

by each others stories itself indicates the existence of truths which transcend cultural difference. They indicate that we do in fact share core morality which, though minimal in its scope, can teach us to understand and care for one another.226

More importantly, Havel is convinced that this moral minimum is not secular in nature but located in our deepest religious sentiments:

Don’t we find somewhere in the foundations of most religions and cultures…such common elements as respect for what transcends us, whether we mean the mystery of Being or a moral order that stands above us; certain imperatives that come to us from heaven, or from nature, or from our own hearts; a belief that our deeds will live after us; respect for our neighbours, for our families, for certain natural authorities; respect for human dignity in general and for nature; a sense of solidarity and benevolence towards guests who come with good intentions?227

The importance of identifying the characteristics and source of this minimal moral code is not just an academic endeavour for Havel. It is not enough to content ourselves with the so called ‘overlapping consensus’ proposed by liberalism, that we simply acquiesce to the idea of human rights and the principles of freedom, equality and toleration. What this ‘overlapping consensus’ model ignores and the reason it cannot provide the basis for global solidarity, Havel maintains, is that it only draws upon the limited experiences of Anglo-culture or at best the experiences of the West. It ignores the rest of human civilization.

It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that a globalising, multi-cultural world requires a different kind of consensus if a peaceful co-existence between peoples is to be secured. This is the question that haunted the later Rawls, one to which he was never able to respond satisfactorily. Perhaps this was because he never fully appreciated that the political events of the second half of the twentieth

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226 Jeremy Rifkin has recently advanced the argument that the new view of human nature emerging from cognitive neuro-science and child development studies is that human beings are in fact a fundamentally an empathetic species and not an aggressive, materialistic and self-interested one. See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathetic Civilization*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 2009).

century – the dismantling of colonialism and the fall of Soviet communism – created an unprecedented civilizational shift bringing various cultures, peoples, races and religions within a single interconnected whole. Perhaps it was because he never fully appreciated that this new situation requires a rethinking of the pre-political foundation able to animate justice and enliven solidarity.  

Havel is less naïve. He realises that the classically modern ideals which secured the foundations of liberalism cannot safeguard a peaceful co-existence between peoples in a globalised world. The ideals of democracy, human rights, civil society and the free market have been the bedrock of a civilization which has guaranteed the greatest degree of freedom, justice and prosperity. But these ideals once upheld by transcendent sources have seen their grounding erode over time. The erosion argument is familiar to us from Taylor; as transcendent horizons are wiped away, liberal values dissolve. Havel would certainly concur that if liberal democracy is to survive in the West it must rediscover and renew its own transcendental origins. But he draws attention to an even more pressing problem. Not only does exclusive humanism fail to sustain the established values within Western liberal democracies, it is incapable of assuaging the growing conflict of between liberal and non-liberal cultures.

Upon reading the list of objections non-Westerners have to liberal democracy - the denial of any kind of spirituality, moral relativism, an arrogant ethno-centricism, an expansionist mentality, the proud disdain for everything suprapersonal and a contempt for anything (or anyone) who resists this standardization - one cannot help

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228 For more on this and the shortcomings of Rawls’ *The Law of Peoples* see Martha Nussbaum’s *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

229 For a more detailed discussion on this see Havel “The Jackson H. Ralston Prize Address” *The Art of the Impossible*, 173-182.
but imagine they could all apply directly to Rorty.\textsuperscript{230} Havel is right that people in many parts of the world are conflicted; they long for the prosperity and opportunities offered by the liberal democracies but they resist the values and lifestyles that go along with it. And his insight is even more penetrating than Taylor’s; even if an exclusive humanist worldview could survive a separation from transcendence to ground a free, just and prosperous political regime, it has no hope of gaining legitimacy in non-Western contexts. It will always been seen as an imposition of external domination. Rorty’s pseudo-pragmatic answer that ‘they’ will learn to accept this ethno-centric worldview in return for material prosperity (and some of the other desirable aspects of Western life) is simply not corroborated by the evidence but predicated on a narrow, rational-choice model of human behaviour which is precisely what so many find objectionable.

But where to look for the source of a shared moral minimum? What could serve as a framework for the tolerant coexistence of different cultures within a single civilization? Havel concludes that no unbiased person has any difficulty in answering this question:

It is scarcely possible to find a culture that does not derive from the conviction that a higher, mysterious order of the world exists beyond our reach, a higher intention that is the source of all things, a higher memory recording everything, a higher authority to which we are all accountable in one way or another… as our respect for the mysteries of the world wanes, we can see for ourselves again and again that a lack of such respect leads to ruin. All of this clearly suggests where we should look for what unites us: in an awareness of the transcendental.\textsuperscript{231}

Like the non-Westerners he mentions, Havel distrusts the kind of liberalism being exported to the rest of the world. To be clear, he is not opposed to democracy, freedom or a respect for human dignity. On the contrary, he is someone who risked

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{231} Havel, “National Press Club” \textit{The Art of the Impossible}, 196.
his life so that these values might be admitted as part of the world order. The co-
existence of a multicultural, multi-polar civilization will only be possible if we all
accept a basic moral code which must take the form of common minimum that can
be respected by all. This does not necessitate an acceptance of Kantian universal
reason but it does require that respect for our political ideals be rooted in
transcendent values. Only a transcendent grounding has the potential to establish
solidarity between peoples because only a political and moral code rooted in
people’s deepest beliefs is capable of motivating action. It cannot, concludes Havel,
‘be the product of merely a few who then proceed to force it upon the rest’ but
‘must be the authentic will of everyone, growing out of the genuine spiritual roots
hidden beneath the skin of our common, global civilization’.

It is Havel’s profound hope that the attitudes of humility and solidarity which
emerge out of an encounter with transcendence will give rise to greater human
responsibility. Responsibility is not understood as a limit on our freedom: on the
contrary it is freedom’s highest expression. Responsibility is the manner in which
we actualize our unique capacity as persons to love; it is what happens when we are
able to put aside our own narrow self-interest and see our own good manifested in
that of the other. Responsibility is our way of entering into a relationship with
others and with Being itself. As far as Havel is concerned, the paradox of an ‘over-
humanized’ world is that ordinary human beings, with personal consciences, and
personally answering for something to somebody are receding further and further
from the realm of politics.

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It is not the case that proponents of exclusive humanism desire to absolve us of responsibility in the political realm. Lom is correct to observe that Rorty’s intentions are quite the contrary; he wishes ‘to imbue human beings with greater responsibility to each other through the recognition of cruelty as the universal vice.’

The problem is that the recognition of cruelty as a universal wrong is not a sufficient as a source of responsibility; it fails to say anything about the relationship human beings ought to have towards nature, and it ignores the fact that sacrifice, suffering, conflict and oppression can have eschatological significance.

Despite attempts to ‘automatize’ justice, that is to make justice the result of a well-oiled system, there is a limit to how much of political proceduralism can achieve. For this reason Patočka, like Havel, entreats us to reconsider the importance of transcendence. He is not naïve to the political dangers of intolerance and dogmatism that seem always to attend transcendent aspirations, but, their banishment in favor of sober secular humanism does not solve the problem either. And as Elshtain adds in her commentary on the matter: ‘How odd it is [that it is the] contemporary anti-foundationists in the academy [who] remain wedded to a teleology of progress, a nearly unbounded faith in the possibility of enlightenment in that glorious epiphany once the debris and clutter of metaphysical clutter is swept away once and for all.’

It is anti-foundationalism that makes a ‘blurred, all-purpose, grandiose, and limitless leap into universal dogma that promotes a vapid because unbounded pseudepistotal responsibility everywhere’.

234 For a more detailed discussion on this point see Findlay, Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age, 136-149.
235 Jean Bethke-Elshtain, “Politics without Cliché” Social Research, Vol.60, No. 3 (Fall 1993), 437.
236 Ibid.,
III.

Humility, solidarity and responsibility; these three dispositions are required to secure a just political order. But is openness to the transcendent necessary to bring them into being? As Lom puts it, if the recognition of cruelty as a universal wrong is not a sufficient source of moral responsibility, how is openness to transcendence more effective?²³⁷ This is not a question about whether or how to return to a pre-modern conception of reality. Rorty has already shown that ‘re-enchanting nature’ or adopting a ‘pre-problematic view of the world’, to use Patočka’s term, is impossible. What is needed is a way of being open to transcendence which takes into account the historical circumstances of the world we inhabit: that is, a disenchanted world with a problematised existence. Herein lies the importance of Havel and Patočka, neither of whom want or believe it possible to prove the evidence of a transcendent reality in an absolute manner, nor who identify transcendence directly with religion, but both of whom hope to show that the positing of a transcendent reality is required for the creation of a stable liberal democracy.

Transcendent humanism rejects the Second Anthropocentric Principle (that reality can only be judged from a human perspective) it also rejects the strong version of the First Anthropocentric Principle (that only human beings have intrinsic worth). Like anti-humanism it concedes that non-human beings or things can have intrinsic worth, but unlike anti-humanism or a religious transcendentalism it does not repudiate the value of human life. The superiority of transcendent humanism, Havel and Patočka, argue can be demonstrated pragmatically rather than dogmatically. It

can be done, in other words, by showing that transcendent humanism can better respond to the dilemmas than its closet rival.\footnote{238}{See appendix.}

Recalling Taylor, the first of these dilemmas is how to define the highest spiritual moral aspiration of human beings in a manner that is transformative but does not crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity. Havel and Patočka do not whitewash the dark side of human nature, nor do they call for the imposition of draconian measures to perfect it. Unlike Rorty and other advocates of exclusive humanism, Havel recognizes that man’s innate goodness goes hand in hand with an inescapable tendency towards the inauthentic and inhumane:

The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity’s rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence. Yet, at the same time, each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life.\footnote{239}{Havel, “Power of the Powerless” \textit{Open Letters}, 145.} (Italics added)

The question of man’s dual nature and how to motivate him to act against his worst tendencies is more than a theoretical puzzle; it is a dilemma with profound political significance. All sides agree that the cultivation of responsibility and solidarity is required to safeguard a just and stable society. It is Havel’s conviction however that only openness to the transcendent is practically capable of nurturing these dispositions. Because at its most basic, behaving responsibly demands putting aside one’s own immediate self-interest and acting with the good of another in mind.

It is worth pausing to consider the thought of another critic of communism here, a man whose personalistic vision and dependence on the phenomenological method has much in common with Havel and Patočka, but who lays bare more clearly the
connection between responsibility and an openness to transcendence. I refer to Karol Wojtyła, later of course, Pope John Paul II. In his book *Love and Responsibility*, which is primarily a meditation on human sexuality, love and marriage, he reformulates Kant’s categorical imperative into the so-called ‘personalist norm’ which states that a ‘person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such the means to an end’, or formulated positively, that ‘the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.’ Wojtyła explains that the command to love persons is not derived from a utilitarian value system which prioritizes pleasure over love for the person, or which on a political level prioritizes their social or economic function. The personalistic norm defines and recommends a certain way of relating to God, nature and other people, which accords with what a person is. This way of relating, he argues, is not only fair but just. For to be just always means giving others what is rightly due to them, and a person’s rightful due is to be treated as an object of love, not an object for use.

In a sense it could be said that love is a requirement of justice, for using a person as a means to an end would conflict with justice. However it also shows that the essence of love is simply different from the essence of justice, transcending it. Justice is concerned with the relation of goods (both material and moral ones) to persons; love is concerned with persons directly and immediately. Wojtyła’s central claim, one that resonates with Havel and Patočka, is that only love is capable of creating a real and enduring community of persons, one in which the individual takes moral responsibility for himself and others. This holds on the intimate level of

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familial affections, the social level of solidarity between individuals and groups, and the even more general level of concern for the natural world. Exclusive humanism is incapable of cultivating this kind of moral responsibility because it ultimately promotes the opposite of love, egoism.

In dissecting the anatomy of hatred, Havel develops the insight that hatred though a tragic inversion of love, still holds onto ‘the self-transcending aspect of love, the fixation on others, the dependence on them… the delegation of a piece of one’s own identity to them’.\(^{241}\) In so doing, hatred is not love’s direct opposite, but egoism. Egoism by it very nature is incapable of transcending itself. The egoist is so wrapped up in self-concern she is incapable of seeking another’s good. Egoism begets indifference for anything which transcends the self and is therefore incapable of motivating love or sustaining it.

This explains with more clarity why Rorty’s proposal of expanding circles of empathy as a way of fostering solidarity and responsibility is ineffective. Since we often hurt those who are closest to us, cruelty cannot be explained simply as the failure to recognize our own likeness in those we cause to suffer. The failure to love is sometimes due to hate, but more often than not it is the result of egoism. We may sometimes need to better appreciate the likeness of other individuals and groups to our own, but more often we must conquer our own self-love. The question is how is this overcoming of self-love possible if as exclusive humanism has it there is no further horizon beyond self-interest and immanent gratification.

In practice both love and responsibility demand sacrifice and the overcoming of self. Such a requirement is irreconcilable with any form of humanism which does

not provide good reasons to undergo suffering or sacrifice one’s own self-interest, which can only gives reasons to avoid suffering and not impose it on others. This goes largely unnoticed by Western scholars because in the currently prevailing circumstances of affluent liberal democracies the two appear to overlap entirely. Westerners are not called, as Havel was, to suffer imprisonment for speaking out against the injustices of the regime, or like Patočka to undergo interrogations that ultimately led to a premature death, or following Solzhenitsyn’s example, to be exiled from their homelands for denouncing the horrors of the Gulag. The supposed advantage of liberal democracy is that not imposing suffering on others suffices (i.e. the non-cruelty stipulation). Justice does not call for sacrifice or suffering on the part of its citizens or require the crafting of their souls; it only requires minimal moral restraint.

However, to reiterate an earlier point, it is important to avoid the pitfall of pragmatist complacency. If liberal democracy truly has universal aspirations, as its proponents claim, it cannot take for granted the benefits of a Western post-Enlightenment world or be oblivious to the dangers experienced in other parts of the world.²⁴² It cannot assume that by refraining from cruelty and the imposition of suffering on others we will be relieved us from the duty to make real sacrifices at the cost of our own well-being. If nothing else the present discussion has shown that our age increasingly demands acts of solidarity and self-renunciation. The developing world seeks to have an fair share in the distribution of goods and opportunities, unborn generations demand to inherit a planet capable of sustaining them, and the earth itself cries out not to be mutilated and destroyed. A social contract way of thinking is simply not enough.

²⁴² Ernest Gellner, Debating the State of Philosophy Habermas, Rorty and Kolakowski, 83.
For all the surface similarities, the kinds of responsibility advocated by Rorty and Patočka and Havel could not be more divergent. As Findlay notes, ‘the notion of sacrifice implies an understanding that cannot exist in a purely rational or technological view of the world. It demands a recognition that some things are higher or of a different order than others.’

Patočka champions the counterintuitive idea that man can gain by voluntary loss. What does he gain? Certainly nothing that would figure in an economic or rationalistic calculus. But man is able to gain through self-giving or self-surrender on the presupposition of a transcendent vision of values. To be precise, through reciprocal self-giving man can fully actualise his capacity to love. As Wojtyła affirms ‘Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own.’

The gain to be achieved through the overcoming of one’s ego therefore is love, without which human life is meaningless.

This brings us directly to the second dilemma; the question of meaning. How can the ordinary values of life – including love - can have significance given the fact of death? Which kind of humanism gives a more satisfactory response to this problem?

Echoing another Taylorian motif, Havel emphasises that human beings appear to be the only creatures fully aware of their mortality. The instinct for self-preservation is shared by all forms of life, from the lowliest blade of grass to the most majestic oak tree, but it appears that only man is conscious of his attempts to evade death. Man

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243 Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, 149.
also knows that his attempts to escape life’s transience, like those to escape the taxman, are futile. Why then do we go on living, wonders Havel? Why do we strive for good health, wealth, material security or a just society when we know that these goods are ultimately fleeting? What is the meaning of it all? Pascal’s conjecture that these things are simply distractions which allow us to set aside the awareness of death, may partly answer the question, but the fact that we do strive for happiness despite the finitude of existence reveals that humankind senses there is something which transcends earthly gratification. It betrays the radical hope we have that our actions have significance in the order of Being.

This knowledge of death actually gives human beings an extraordinary dimension: ‘(it) gives us a chance to overcome it - not by refusing to recognize its existence, but through our ability to look beyond it, or to defy it by purposeful action.’ Havel is not at all concerned with why men commit evil, but he is supremely interested in the question of why men do good deeds – especially when they have nothing to gain from it, when no one will ever know about it and if they neglect to act why they feel guilt and shame. The only reason for this occurrence, he concludes, is that responsibility provides the key to human identity – it gives human life meaning.

Again, both sides agree that the loss of meaning in a postmodern world is a symptom of the rejection of metaphysics, which would have previously afforded us with certainty. According to Patočka there are two responses to the loss of meaning. The first is the acceptance of an all-encompassing doubt and adoption of an endless

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245 Pascal has spoken in the most articulate manner about the fact that we distract ourselves through diversions in order to forget about death or having to think about life’s meaning. See Blaise Pascal, *Penseés* (London: Penguin Books 1995), §132-143,37-43.

scepticism. Patočka refers to this as nihilism, but we can more accurately think of it in Rortyan terms as an embrace of contingency. Patočka rejects the Nietzschean solution of responding to the death of absolute with a creative will to power that can acquire relative meaning. At the same time he rejects the Rortyan attempt to rest the meaningfulness of life on relative meaning, since, as he says, ‘no relative meaning can ever render the meaningless meaningful but, rather, is always itself dragged into meaningless by it’.

Another possible response to the loss of meaning in a postmetaphysical age, says Patočka, is humanism - again it would be more accurate to qualify his description to exclusive or anthropocentric humanism. He argues that ‘as humans solve many of the great mysteries of humanity by scientific means, we see a transference of faith from superhuman sources of rationality to mundane sources. Faith is placed in humans themselves and in their ability to continually progress toward a better and more knowledgeable future’. The problem with this form of humanism is that it ends up imitating the dogmatic metaphysics it claims to be casting off. It attempts to devise a rational system which believes in a scientific conquest of nature, and which thinks it can respond to all contingencies, illuminate all mysteries, thus provide us with the meaning we so desire. Patočka argues that like nihilism this form of humanism is futile because the meaning it proffers is always restricted to what can be grasped though reason and systematic scientific methodologies; it therefore falls silent when it encounters doubt, suffering and death, and must somehow discourage or distract us from concerning ourselves with these details.

248 Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, 155.
A humanism that has transcendent horizons deals much better with these phenomena. I illustrate with the example so beloved by Patočka concerning Socrates. The Athenian philosopher, Patočka claims, is a man who stands solidly at the risk of his own life, maintaining the belief that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it. He repudiates knowing what the good is, thus eschewing a commitment to a foundational metaphysical theory, but he acts on the basis of an authentic examination of reality which leads him to posit the existence of values transcending the mere preservation of life. Socrates’ death is not the only example of such an action, indeed, many have commented on the parallel nature of Patočka’s own demise following his signing of Charter 77. The point rather is that exclusive humanism has no way to explain this kind of behaviour, at least not if it is to be taken at face value. It can only make sense of Socrates’ action by reducing or redescribing his motivations to mundane ones which do not accord with his own experience of reality, or indeed, with our own experience of it. As an avowed phenomenologist, Patočka never tires of arguing that our actions and experience must be described on their own terms or within their own planes of reference.

This example does not prove that objective moral values such as truth and goodness exist. Such action could be subterfuge on the part of those who sacrifice, whether gullible or cynical. Just because they think their sacrifice is a response to the demands of goodness or that the recognition of a different, higher order of being, does not mean that it such an order exists. They could simply be deluded. But, recall that neither Havel nor Patočka ever claim to prove the existence of transcendent values, nor do they think such a proof possible. They merely allege

\footnote{249 Jan Patočka, \textit{Plato and Europe} (Stanford: Stanford University), 71.} 

\footnote{250 Patočka died of apoplexy after an 11 hour investigation by the Czech Secret Police on his involvement in Charter 77.}
that willingness to suffer and sacrifice is the only guarantor of love and responsibility, whose actualization is the only thing that can make human life meaningful. Their claim is that a love capable of suffering cannot survive on a purely rational or utilitarian calculus of the world but requires a transcendent horizon. The recognition of transcendent values is not therefore an attempt to discern what must exist necessarily rather it is an attempt to create the possibility for a new kind of morality and new kind of political life.

The openness to transcendence envisioned by Patočka does not entail metaphysical certainty or the adoption of dogmatic absolutes; it is both modest and sceptical but adamant that personal responsibility cannot be replaced with structures. Equally, immorality and irresponsibility cannot be blamed on institutional or systemic forces. However even if it is correct that openness to the transcendent is more effective way of cultivating humility, solidarity, and responsibility (the requisite dispositions of a just society) than exclusive humanism, a final practical question remains. Is openness to transcendence sufficient for their cultivation? If these are the authentic, correct and only responses to transcendence, why is it the case that we can act arrogantly, irresponsibly and cruelly? Is it not the case that exclusive humanists are in fact quite virtuous people and by the same token is it not obvious that many people who claim to have experienced transcendence are not virtuous as all?

To be clear, neither Havel nor Patočka believe that an attitude of openness to the transcendent is enough to bring about the dispositions needed to uphold liberal values. Man is free to respond to what transcends him in a variety of ways. Our status as moral beings means that our responses are not instinctual but freely
chosen. Indeed this explains both men’s stance of hope-without-optimism, their anti-utopianism, their cautiousness and lack of dogmatism. Although humility, solidarity and responsibility are prompted by an encounter with transcendence they are certainly not necessitated by it. Openness to transcendence does not mean that people will necessarily love in a way that is ready to sacrifice. The claim is only that a sacrificial love requires this kind of perspective. It also requires much more; namely, the right kind of education, training, knowledge and finally a free choice on the part of the individual to respond to this invitation.

It ought to be further clarified that neither Havel nor Patočka expressly identify openness to the transcendent with religion. They do not advocate for a return to metaphysical fundamentalism, which Patočka especially sees as also foreclosing the possibility of genuine responsibility and in particular the possibility of a genuine politics. Havel and Patočka’s lack of determinism opens up the possibility of a genuine politics and gives our individual responsibility its moral weight. It is our freely chosen responses to transcendence that will ultimately determine how reality is shaped and that will ultimately bind us to something unconditional, sacred and inviolable.

IV.

There are a variety of non-human perspectives from which reality can be judged – Gray’s biocentricism is one example, a totalizing theocentricism is another. Not all of these responses or perspectives will be equally sound. To be acceptable they must be true which means they must be both logically coherent and useful. While neither Havel nor Patočka offer a systematic blueprint which can be followed to respond to transcendence, they do offer a series of recommendations for how to
translate the dispositions of humility, solidarity and responsibility into practical measures. In other words they offer advice on the ways in which experience of the transcendent ought to be institutionalised.

First is the attitude of humility. The major practical consequence to ensue from a disposition of humility is heightened respect for nature and the cosmos and the adoption of a cautious attitude towards the natural ecology of life. Technology cannot be made into a functional substitute for morality; we must have a political conception that will help us bring things back under control:

Technology…is out of humanity’s control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our destruction...Traditional western democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of a technological civilisation. In fact it is more hidden from them and they are just dragged along with it, steadily being released from any personal responsibility. 251

Havel does not offer a list of policy proposals as a result of this recommendation, but it has obvious applications across a range of areas from sustainable development to biotechnology. The implications for a greener, more eco-friendly way of living are fairly self-evident. The biotechnology example is perhaps worth pausing over. Take for instance germ-line engineering, which refers to a set of technologies that currently or in the near future will allow parents to influence the genetic constitutions of their offspring by altering genes in the first cells of the blastocyst or even by engineering human artificial chromosomes. On the one hand, these technologies promise their recipients a lengthening of their lifespan, curing of diseases and even an increase in desirable capacities like IQ or strength; on the other, they do nothing to respond to the principal human need, which Havel says, is not just to live but to live authentically.

Michael Sandel follows the same line of reasoning. Such procedures, he argues, would give some children radically increased capabilities but would do so at the expense of something even more valuable; their sense of being unconditionally loved by their parents. Parents who engage in this practice would certainly insist that they were acting in a loving way, the problem is that they would have mistaken what the good for their child is; they would privilege superficial goods such as height or hair colour over giving the child the sense that they were accepted for who they were. This is especially true of procedures such as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis in which embryos are selected or rejected on the basis of attributes deemed desirable by parents. Even less controversial biotechnological procedures which only involved self-enhancement (either genetically or through the administration of psychotropic drugs) would be problematic given Havel’s critique, because they aim only at acquiring certain goods needed for life (better fitness, intelligence, etc.) but none that aim at living authentically (i.e., overcoming egoism and actualizing our ability for love and compassion).

Havel’s reasoning could also be extended to embrace another position with which it is substantially in agreement. In Dependent Rational Animals Alasdair MacIntyre directs us to the obvious but radically overlooked truth that human vulnerability and affliction are ineluctable parts of our nature, and that we owe both our survival and our flourishing to others. As a result we need to acknowledge our dependence on one another and cultivate the set of virtues associated with that recognition. The attitude of humility towards nature of which Havel speaks can easily be widened to

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252 Michael Sandel, The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). This practice has caused particular concern amongst disabled communities. If an embryo is rejected because it has a defect or disability what does this say about our valuation of persons born with that disability? 253 Alasdair MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 1-5.

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encompass an acceptance of our human limitations because, as MacIntyre rightly emphasises, our biological nature as animals is not something that is external and contingent; it is constitutive of who we are.

One practical consequence of such an admission would be that the achievement of a certain measure of individual independence, so prized in modern liberal culture, ought not to occur at the expense of acknowledging our constant and continued dependence both on each another and on nature. The realisation that we begin our lives in a state of indebtedness - to our parents, caregivers, educators, all those that came before us - ought to give rise to a sense of responsibility for the adequate care and education of the next generation, dispel the illusion of self-sufficiency, and liberate from any sense of unworthiness at being the recipient of such goods and benefits from others.

This has clear political implications both nationally and internationally. MacIntyre has argued that it means that disadvantaged groups – the poor, elderly, children and disabled - should be awarded benefits according to their needs, however imperfectly this might occur in practice due to limited resources. Would the outcomes of this distribution be any different from those envisioned by Rawls? There are at least two important differences. The first concerns our responses to disadvantaged countries. Havel is adamant that the West ought to assume a sense of responsibility for countries that find themselves in desperate need - not grudgingly or in the hope of some economic return on its investment but out of recognition of its own indebtedness. What MacIntyre has said about the vulnerability and dependence of individuals can easily be transposed to peoples and nations, thus corresponding to Havel’s position.
The fact that Central and Eastern Europe bore such a heavy burden after World War II, one that the West was spared, ought to inspire a sense of responsibility. Not according to some law of obligation, (because the Allies sold us out to Stalin at Yalta), nor following a logic of retribution (the perpetrators of Communism owe us financial or other forms of compensation) but simply because no nation, like no individual, should succumb to the fantasy of self-sufficiency. This takes on a particular poignancy when thinking about the appropriate response to a Rwanda, Darfur or Kosovo, even towards immigration. How would our responses change were we to honestly admit that we could easily find ourselves in the position of the disadvantaged?

The second concerns the creation of political structures in which the disadvantaged are given a voice in communal deliberation. MacIntyre envisions a form of political society which takes account of the fact that disability and disadvantage are not ‘a special interest of a particular group’ but something experienced by us all and consequently it is in all of our interests to have these needs adequately voiced.254 Again Havel transposes this insight onto the level of international politics. He uses the thoughtless seating plan at an international gala dinner as an opportunity to denounce the continued concert-of-Vienna-mentality in which the Great Powers seal the fate of lesser countries, usually over Russian caviar.255 This vignette reveals the gap that still exists between the responsibility and the hubris of the advantaged, one that can only be overcome by humbly accepting that we may all one day find ourselves in the role of the disadvantaged. This goes beyond the adoption of the veil of ignorance, which is something of an insurance policy against the contingencies

254 MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals, 130.
of life; it is a call for the creation of a real community in which all concerned parties have an effective voice, not a presumption made on their behalf.

This, in fact, is one of the ways in which true solidarity can be fostered. On a related point, Havel insists that we encourage ‘experiences of the living word’. Cultural and dramatic experiences were successfully employed to foster solidarity in the struggle against communism, as the New School sociologist Elżbieta Matynia has recently catalogued. It was these initiatives that facilitated the non-violent transformation of an autocratic environment in Poland into a democratic one, she argues, examples of which included the experimental student theatre, the engaged political thinking of dissidents like Adam Michnik, the drama of the Round Table Talks and even the post-1989 efforts of feminist groups and women artists to defend the recently won right of free public discourse.256 Similar examples could be cited from Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia and more recently, China.

Efforts to cultivate these kinds of activities ought to be reinforced in contemporary liberal regimes, rather than allowing governments to engage in linguistic manipulation or the deliberate reimplantation of real or imagined past grievances. Or the censorship imposed by ‘political correctness’. This is not to say that Havel is opposed to the use of irony and cynicism in public life; on the contrary he thinks that such tools should be utilised to demask and debunk. However, he cannot accept the stance of the liberal ironist. For him irony must serve to disclose hidden truths and not act as a permanently critical condition. Havel’s irony is like sea salt on caramel, it brings out the flavour; Rorty’s is like kitchen salt on a slug, it corrodes.

In particular, Havel believes that solidarity within and between nations can only come about if we cease stifling the moral intuitions that come out of the deepest cultural and religious experiences of those people. Nor can we stipulate the translation of these intuitions into a secular or neutral idiom, for in practise this means that only a single set of voices – neither neutral nor particularly representative – is heard. Habermas has made a similar appeal. He has described the liberal conception of democratic citizenship as one which is built on a tradition which envisions that the constitution of the State relies only on arguments to which all persons have equal access. The assumption is that ‘common human reason is the epistemic base for the justification of a secular state which no longer depends on religious legitimation.’ This exclusion of religion is only tempered by a commitment to freedom and tolerance, so liberalism does in fact allow for a public use of non-public reasons, albeit conditionally.

However, Habermas takes exception to this argument on two counts: its asymmetry of burden and its motivational limits. By ‘asymmetry of burden’ he means that the stipulation that religious arguments be translated into secular ones places an unfair burden on religious members of the community, or non-liberal countries. Liberalism has a reversion point which unfairly favours non-religious citizens and secular states. Many persons may incapable of making an artificial division in their own minds between the religious and the secular; perhaps they will be not just unwilling but unable to feel any motivational pull from non-religious reasons. The

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257 Jürgen Habermas, Religion in the Public Sphere, Lecture presented at the Holburg Prize Seminar, (Nov 29th, 2005), 5.

258 ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.’ John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 224.
second claim is that there is nothing in reason alone that could motivate secular, post-metaphysical individuals to participate in politics to the point of sacrificing something of themselves for the sake of the common good. Habermas concedes that reason can help to justify ends but that it is not sufficient as a motivating force.

The point is not, as Habermas seems to imply, that those who ‘believe in transcendence’ do not have enough space in the public sphere to express their views, it is rather that only a minimum moral code rooted in our most deeply held convictions can provide a new model of global coexistence. Again this is not to say that transcendence ought to be identified strictly with institutionalised religion. Commenting on this lack of strict identification between religion and transcendence Heinrich Böll cites the following passage from Havel:

‘What I am lacking is that extremely important ‘last drop’ in the form of mystical experience of the enigmatic address and revelation. There is no doubt that I could substitute ‘God’ for my ‘something’ or for ‘the absolute horizon’, and yet this does not seem to me to be a very serious approach.’

The idea is that the search for a language drained of all its cultural and religious particularity in favour of the language of economics and rational choice must be abandoned. It must be replaced instead by a multiplicity of languages, which need not, however, bottom out into vapid relativism or unexamined syncretism. Even though there is no definitive way for one tradition, language, or response to transcendence to vanquish and exclude another, different views can still call one another into question by various means including issues of internal coherence, imaginative reconstruction of dilemmas, epistemic crisis, and fruitfulness. Foreign cultures (within or between states) can still engage one another rationally - most especially via a form of a critique which makes use of empathetic imagination to

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put rivals into ‘epistemic crisis’ but also by solving shared or analogous problems and dilemmas which remain insoluble for another language or culture.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution Patočka and Havel make in institutionalizing the experience of transcendence, is in suggesting how to revivify a sense of responsibility. Havel rightly highlights the difficulty of the task of convincing people to conduct themselves as if they were to live on this earth forever or as if they would be held answerable for its conditions one day. Surprisingly, he says that this is a task for politicians: ‘even in the most democratic conditions, politicians have immense influence, perhaps more than they actually realise. This influence does not reside in their actual mandates, which are in any case considerably limited. It resides elsewhere: in the spontaneous impact their charisma has on the public.’\(^{260}\) (Italics added) The words and example of those engaged in politics, whether as elected officials or leaders of public life, is significantly greater in the context of a liberal democracy than in other types of regime.

This may come as a shock to those of us used to thinking of politicians as mere functionaries, Havel’s point is that they must become inspirational figures. They must actualise the responsibility so badly needed in today’s politics; they must think of politics as morality in practice. He continues;

their responsibility is to think ahead boldly, not to fear the disfavor of the crowd; to imbue their actions with a spiritual dimension (which of course is not the same thing as ostentatious attendance at religious services); to explain again and again…that politics must do far more than reflect the interests of particular groups or lobbies.\(^{261}\)

\(^{260}\) Havel, “Harvard University Address” The Art of the Impossible, 223.

\(^{261}\) Ibid.
If politicians and leaders are not able to summon us to virtue, then what are their preachments on dignity, equality, freedom good for? If the integrity of speech is lost and the accord between word and deed severed then a political order in which these values are defended becomes impossible.

If Havel’s frank appeal for politicians to believe in their pronouncements sounds naïve, it is only because we find ourselves caught in the snare of the chic sceptics, Rorty’s liberal ironists, who lurk like medieval gargoyles ready to mock our moralizing and earnest foolishness. In fact, it is they who have lost their nerve, who have disdainfully withdrawn from politics in pursuit of private perfection, who continue to pronounce values as techniques of manipulation and power, they who should be the subject of ridicule. They fail to realise that private perfection is impossible in a world which does not fight against ideology, violence and cruelty; they fail to apprehend that they may one day find themselves in the position of the vulnerable when they will need someone to act with love and solidarity towards them; and they fail to appreciate the schizophrenic mentality that can arise when we say one thing and think another.

Above all Havel places the onus on intellectuals to awaken a sense of responsibility in people. Patočka too argues that it is ultimately impossible to separate philosophy from society ‘The true person, the philosophical man, cannot be a philosopher only for himself rather he must exist in society.’ The inevitable conflict between the philosopher and the city resides in the fact that the philosopher declares the non-evident nature of reality which society does not appreciate and which those in power fight against. The institutionalization of transcendence is only possible

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262 Patočka, Plato and Europe, 269.
through personal involvement of the intellectual, the philosopher, the spiritual person; it is only possible if courageous men and women dedicate their lives to the service of seeking out and responding to transcendent values. Only their example is able to awaken a sense of responsibility in citizens.

Findlay is correct to clarify that this concept of ‘a spiritual person’ is not restricted to academic philosophers, an intellectual elite or even political leaders who would concentrate power in a single political party or, we might add, religious persons.²⁶³ The term applies to anyone who understands the human situation and is willing to live a life of moral heroism and challenge others to do likewise. That is why, as Ketels puts it, intellectuals should be called ‘to account for vacuous verbal games that erode faith in human communication, for complicity in subversive linguistic manipulation and for ethical indifference’²⁶⁴. The duty of intellectuals is to write words that have a basis in lived experience. This is the most direct consequence of an encounter with transcendence, namely an ‘unembarrassed embrace of virtue’.²⁶⁵

VI.

In this sense Havel and Patočka’s call for openness to the transcendent or a non-exclusive form of humanism must be understood as something which is not narrowly political. It would be quite mistaken to think of it as an appeal for people who ‘believe in transcendence’ to have a privileged position or status in public life; it would be even more mistaken to identify people who believe in transcendence with ‘people who are religiously observant’. To do so would be to shoehorn their argument into the debate over the role of religion in public life, to which liberal

²⁶³ Findlay, Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age, 146.
²⁶⁵ Ibid.,69.
apologists would quite rightly respond: there is already plenty of space in liberal societies for people who believe in higher powers to hold and act on those beliefs.

The claim here is more profound and more radical. It is not a call for giving transcendence more of a role in public life. It is a call for philosophic reflection to be open to transcendence. It echoes Eliade’s conclusion that every culture draws from a common fund of symbolic currency. Rather than symbolizing social projections, the creation of symbolic systems are the imaginative responses of man to the presence of the sacred in the world. Every human being therefore has the innate capacity to apprehend the revelatory presence of the sacred. In that broader sense there ought to be no distinction between religious and non-religious citizens, ones who ‘believe in transcendence’ and ones who don’t.

The function of narratives is to link various symbols into a constellation or ‘logic’ expressive of a coherent worldview responsive to the experience of transcendence. Again the responses to transcendence are varied in their style and content; and they must be evaluated for their coherence, usefulness and compatibility with lived experience but they ought not to be ignored on the pain of disastrous civilizational consequences. Finally, the burden of this evaluatory project ought to be taken up by intellectuals - academics, artists, journalists, politicians – all those who seek to build public culture and who seek to encourage others to do likewise.

Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, xiii-iv.
Conclusion

The question posed at the start of this investigation was what, if anything, did the contemporary critiques of humanism entail for liberal theory and liberal culture. Having examined the critiques of exclusive humanism forwarded by Gray, Taylor Havel and Patočka we are in a position to conclude that each of them would concur with the general claim that whatever form the pre-political foundations of contemporary political life may take ‘they must include a sense of awe or wonder toward being as well as a sense of humility engendered by a greater awareness of the fragility of our own projects’. There are, of course, a multiplicity if ways in which this can happen which accounts for the great differences between a non-exclusive form of humanism entails or what it should entail for political liberalism.

The aim of this investigation has not been to present the views of the aforementioned thinkers; but it has been, albeit in a modest way, to suggest its own answer to this question on the basis of the views investigated. Its answer is not we should privilege a certain philosophy in public life; namely transcendent humanism. If anything the achievement of procedural liberalism has been to show that we do not have to agree to a single public philosophy in order to live together with a degree of peace, stability and justice. Instead it submits that we should not think of procedural liberalism as self-standing, as not requiring a pre-political foundation to animate and frame it. The plea with which this investigation concludes therefore is not to return to a metaphysical liberalism, but to open the pre-political insights that serve as a moral framework for procedural liberalism to transcendent sources.

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Perhaps the best way to make sense of this conclusion is to pose the following question; what are the limitations of this conclusion and what would it take to falsify its central claim?

**Pre-Political Foundations**

The present discussion has made much use of the idea that exclusive humanism functions as a pre-political foundation; that is, not as a complete conception of the good, but as something which precedes it in a more basic and primary fashion. In this sense the thesis would be radically undermined if it could be shown that the humanist worldview did not constitute the pre-political foundation of procedural liberalism. This would not undermine the veracity of the critiques of humanism *per se*, but it would call into question their relevance for liberal theory. Much time has not been spent during the course of this investigation in justifying this claim – it has been taken as a given. Part of the reason for this assumption, and for selecting Rorty as a spokesperson for procedural liberalism is the lack of explicit thematization of the pre-political foundations by contemporary liberals. Again, this absence is itself partly warranted by the lack of demand for such a thematization, but it must at least partially be understood as a measure of procedural liberalism’s unwarranted self-confidence in this regard.

The identification of exclusive humanism as the pre-political foundation of the vast majority of forms political liberalism has not been definitely proven during the course of this investigation. The onus however, for those who wish to cavil over this identification, is to supply and describe explicitly the views which do make up this pre-political foundation (which, they are adamant is the distinguishing factor between procedural and operational liberalism). They must show that these
foundations do not overlap significantly with exclusive humanism. The current investigation does not preclude such an option, but given what has been said, it would be difficult to defend this counter-claim convincingly.

The Persuasiveness of the Critiques

The second alternative would be to dismiss the relevance or persuasiveness of the critiques of exclusive humanism that have been considered. It could be said, for example, that it has been implied throughout the investigation that exclusive humanism is incapable of yielding or supporting the prized moral qualities necessary for the continuation of political liberalism. But does that state things in far too unqualified a manner? Is it not obvious, it might be claimed, that many exclusive humanists are in fact quite virtuous people and many of those who espouse a transcendent form of humanism quite the opposite?

It must be conceded that while much of the argument against exclusive humanism has been based on certain empirical claims, such as the destructive attitude towards the natural world it engenders and its inability to provide a motivational framework for renunciant and altruistic actions, the relevant evidence seems much more complex than any simple generalisation will accommodate. Gray’s call for the total renunciation of all forms of humanism is indeed too ‘quick and slick’. Even Taylor and Havel’s more nuanced critiques may be called into question. A fuller examination of the inadequacies of exclusive humanism would have to do more than provide anecdotal evidence or describe certain behavioural tendencies, it would have to carry out a penetrating and extensive analysis of human moral behaviour.
Despite this concession however, two conclusions can be drawn at this preliminary stage. The first is that there is enough in the critiques considered that is at least initially persuasive. Again this shifts the intellectual burden onto those who think otherwise to provide an explicit defence of their position. The second, is that the critique of exclusive humanism as a pre-political foundation is not a critique of exclusive humanism as a comprehensive doctrine. In other words, it is not a critique of people who ‘don’t believe in transcendence’ and by the same token it is not a validation of people who do. A form of humanism that is open to the transcendent does not preclude those who wish to expound secular humanism as a comprehensive doctrine from doing so. In this sense it is prior to more robust comprehensive doctrines which exist in the public sphere and is fully compatible with a procedural liberalism which does not advocate a favoured metaphysical view as its public philosophy.

**The Validity of Transcendence**

The final option is to dismiss the validity of transcendence, or rather to deny the superiority of a pre-political foundation based on a humanism open to the transcendent, the alternative to exclusive humanism which has been deemed the most persuasive by this investigation. Again there is much more work to be done in order to fully adjudicate which of the two worldviews – exclusive or non-exclusive humanism - meet Taylor’s dilemmas in the maximal way. However this ought not to prevent the drawing of the following conclusions.

One benefit of the non-exclusive form of humanism is that it can view competing doctrines not as a problem in need of solution but as valuable contributors to practical political decisions and perhaps more importantly as contributors to the
growth and development of the background culture itself. It is only the results of the
dialogue between comprehensive doctrines that can give content to questions like
‘what is man’ and ‘how should we pursue the good’ and which can in turn develop
the background culture of a society. The form of ‘openness to the transcendent’ that
has been discussed by Taylor as well as Havel and Patočka is necessarily vague.
This is because it must be able to support a plurality of comprehensive doctrines
and because it is cognizant of the late modern condition of contingency and
indeterminacy. The second advantage over exclusive humanism is that it can better
support a plurality of comprehensive doctrines and better articulate a conception of
the human subject and its relationship with nature and others.

It bears repeating that the sense of openness to the transcendent under consideration
has been presented as an alternative to exclusive humanism but it could equally be
seen as an alternative to anti-humanism, quietism, or even religious
transcendentalism. In this broad sense transcendence does not always means the
same thing but can take on multiple forms. One can, for example, imagine
recognizing human dependence on conditions beyond ourselves without defining it
in a narrowly religious sense. However, this recognition must always accompanied
by a notion of reverence and the sense of being ensconced in a larger reality that
communicates with us. Setting aside the details, the central thesis of this
investigation is that openness to transcendent principles is necessary for the
cultivation of the kind of pre-political foundation that is required by liberalism.
These transcendent principles, to paraphrase Maritain, identify a spirit superior to
man and, to paraphrase Taylor, build a moral life on a framework that incorporates
the notion of higher goods.
But openness to transcendence is only a preliminary step: the task of responding to transcendence is the challenge that needs to be met. How to cultivate the responses to transcendence, how to translate the dispositions of humility, solidarity and responsibility that it prompts into the practical needs of a given society, how to ‘institutionalise’ the experiences of transcendence are all tasks to be undertaken – especially by those who engage in political theorising.

The Limits of Political Proceduralism

This leads us to the final conclusion of the present investigation, one which has run parallel to the discussion of exclusive humanism. That conclusion points to the limits of political proceduralism. In his essay on the *End of Leninism* Rorty wrote the following words in praise of Havel:

A few years ago, Havel and the other signers of Charta 77 supplied us with a new example of social poetry, of the poetry of social hope. That example makes clear that such hope can exist, and sometimes be fulfilled, without backup from a philosophy of history and without being placed in the context of an epic or tragedy whose hero is Humanity.\(^{268}\)

Rorty identified in Havel an exemplar of his own mission which is to continue the liberal project without the traditional apparatus of ‘Truth’, ‘Reason’ or ‘Humanity’. He was right to recognise in Havel someone who believed in the liberal values of freedom and human dignity without an absolutising foundationalism, but he was mistaken to think of that Czech dissident as one who did not ground this belief in a deeper foundation. In the end the difference between the two men comes down to one simple fact: as far as Havel is concerned you cannot give your life ironically.

This difference helps to isolate one of the limits of procedural liberalism more generally. Many critiques of procedural liberalism have attempted to show that it is

\(^{268}\) Rorty, “The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope” *Truth and Progress*, 243.
wrong or incoherent, but that is not the problem as I understand it. The problem is in thinking that political proceduralism is sufficient to meet the demands of life in political community. If nothing else, this investigation has shown that the pre-political foundations that inform and frame our political life can no longer be taken for granted. They need to be re-visited, rearticulated and, where necessary, revised and the foremost amongst these is our conception of the human subject and its place in the world.
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