

## Chapter 1

### **Utopia: Perhaps a Better Life is Possible but is it Even Remotely Likely? John Gray's Critique of Utopian Thought**

#### I

In a recent somewhat lengthy sojourn in a hospital, I took two philosophical books with me. One I expected largely to agree with, though as is par for the course in philosophy, hardly in some of its details. I heard a bit of what was coming in the author's Pasadena lecture and when I read his lengthy book my expectations were not disappointed. The book I refer to is Brian Barry's *Why Social Justice Matters* (Barry 2005). The other book was John Gray's intentionally provocative *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (Gray 2007), which I found both troubling and challenging and, I shall argue, importantly mistaken in certain key respects. But I think it cannot be dismissed as merely sensationalistic or as just utopia-phobic. Both books reinforce a tendency in me to be deeply and bitterly pessimistic about the prospect of the betterment both of our collective lives and of the awfulness in which we live. Our personal lives may be fine if we, like most professionals after we get settled, are situated reasonably comfortably. We may have good relations with the people we live with (people who are close to us) and with at least most of our day-to-day contacts, including our colleagues. These relations may not be unpleasant or stressful and we may be lucky enough to have interesting and satisfying work. (I do not mean to give a Panglesian picture of such lives. There is *The Long Day's Journey into Night* side of it too. But that is not the usual situation, though probably it is more frequent than most of us like to believe.)

However, when we take note of the lives of most of our fellow citizens and many people living in the other rich capitalist nations, we cannot, if we would be non-evasive, help but be distressed by the tension-filled drudgery and insecurity—and, at the worst, the abuse and horror—of much of their work and their lives.<sup>1</sup> Most people do not work because they want to—academics and many other professionals are rather exceptional here—but in order to survive and escape an even worse fate: a meager welfare dependency in the North and the even more meager welfare dependency in richer states of the South or starvation in other parts of the South and even for some in the richer parts of the South.<sup>2</sup> If we know anything about the lives of most people in the South, we cannot but be appalled by the conditions in which they live. Moreover, for all of us, rich or poor, when we face the harsh realities of life, e.g., global warming, the dangerous plundering of our planet, we cannot but be appalled by the social conditions of our own lives. We would do better to leave oil from the tar sands of Alberta in the ground and help in that way to cut down drastically, as quickly as possible, our production of fossil fuels and the extensive pollution of our environment. This is true of many other places and different situations as well. We should as quickly as we can learn how to effectively use alternative renewable resources (e.g., the sun, the wind, and the tides) and rapidly put this use into practice, even when in certain ways it will be punishing. We must recognize that there is no comfort-free fix. We also need to realize that we cannot sustain the world population that we are coming to have (i.e., nearly 10 billion people by the mid 21st century). We, the peoples of the world, also need to learn to cooperate and to share and not engage in geopolitical struggles or relentlessly seek competitive advantage that may well lead to terrible wars, devastation, and perhaps even to our own annihilation where no one will come out a winner. But none of these things are attended to and most of us live in a state of denial or, where reality confronts us, of procrastination. It is not a wild paranoid conception to fear that by the 22<sup>nd</sup> century we may well have put ourselves ‘out of business’. There may be no one left to record it. *In that way, history, human history, may have an end, i.e. a terminus.*

Yet we on the Left continue to chant ‘a better world is possible’. It is hard to keep up that belief or even to keep up the hope that a better world is possible. (Of course, it is logically or conceptually possible, but that is not significant.) It looks like our realistic options are between various forms of barbarism—some worse than others. As Brian Barry repeatedly asserts, things go a little better in Continental Europe than in the United States or the United Kingdom, though (I would add) France now (2008) is taking a turn in an unfortunate direction (Hazan 2007). When we face the world in which we live and when we look at it globally, as we must if we would be non-evasive, we have globally not much of anything moving in the direction of a better world. Neo-liberalism everywhere rides high (Anderson 2007). That is, we have neither the feasibility of anything like a worldwide Sweden (social democracy) or anything like a worldwide Venezuela (the coming to be of socialism).

Gray, acutely aware of the maladies of our world, seeks to reinforce and deepen our pessimism while Barry, after portraying the horrors of our global situation and the grim prospects for us in a capitalist world order (or for that matter in any productivist or growth order), seeks to point to some light at the end of the tunnel. But it is all too easy to be skeptical, even cynically so, about that, even if, as I do, we share Barry’s hopes and even some of his social democratic/socialist strategies for struggle. However, before I turn to an examination of Barry’s importantly substantial claims in the next chapter, I shall start in the next section of this chapter by setting out some of the core elements of Gray’s position, for the force of his pessimism and skepticism needs both understanding and non-evasive facing. I will then make three central criticisms of Gray’s account. Without discounting his historical insights, I will argue that neither contemporary enlightenment thought, including secular humanism, some socialisms, social democracy, or analytical Marxism, rest on myths or go on a quest for certainty or are scientific. This is contrary to what Gray says about these movements. All these views may be inadequate in certain ways, but that is another matter. They are neither, in their more adequate articulations, mythological nor teleological conceptions of

history nor scientific. I will then argue in the next chapter that Barry (1) makes, in a good fallibilistic, analytical and empirically responsible manner, a powerful case for socialism/social democracy; (2) makes a modest non-teleologically articulated case for progress; and (3) gives a reasonable articulation of global justice and of cosmopolitan enlightenment thought that is not at all a political religion or teleologically oriented. (I will also draw on Hilary Putnam here.) I will, finally, in the light of my examination of Barry, develop my ambivalent skepticism concerning whether there is much hope for Barry's well-articulated and well-argued case for the reasonable possibility—particularly given his portrayal of our global and increasingly globalized and increasingly environmentally devastated world order—that our world will become a humane and decent place where social justice reigns and in which we could live without disgust or despair. That there will actually be progress here seems to me, as it does to Gray, very problematic. It can be plausibly thought to be an illusion. There is, of course, as there certainly should be, room for struggle. But we should not bet our ranches on its success. Still, we must—morally 'must'—go on struggling. We can reasonably hope, and seek to do our bit here, that the world will not repeatedly return to being a slaughter house without believing for a minute that we will get perfection—a radically new order where human perfection will be obtained.

## II

I turn now to Gray. I shall begin by extensively quoting Gray from his very first chapter where he sets out his core claims in clear and striking terms. I will then make some elucidatory remarks concerning where I think his clarity is surface clarity only. It is useful to do this if we are to dig deeper and feel the full force of his position. (In many ways, he is too easy to dismiss.) Setting these surface clarities aside, we should come to see just where he cuts deep. My aim is to set out as in as strongly a light as possible the part of his case which I think is most significant and very much should have our attention.

In the very first paragraph of his opening chapter, “The Death of Utopia,” Gray provocatively remarks:

Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion. The greatest of the revolutionary upheavals that have shaped so much of the history of the past two centuries were episodes in the history of faith—moments in the long dissolution of Christianity and the rise of modern political religion. The world in which we find ourselves at the start of the new millennium is littered with the debris of utopian projects, which though they were framed in secular terms that denied the truth of religion were in fact vehicles for religious myths (Gray 2007, 1).<sup>3</sup>

He then goes on to further remark:

Communism and Nazism claimed to be based on science—in the case of communism the cod-science of historical materialism, in Nazism the farrago of ‘scientific racism’. These claims were fraudulent but the use of pseudo-science did not stop with the collapse of totalitarianism that culminated with the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. It continued in neo-conservative theories that claimed the world is converging on a single type of government and economic system—universal democracy, or a global free market. Despite the fact that it was presented in the trappings of social science, this belief that humanity was on the brink of a new era was only the most recent version of apocalyptic beliefs that go back to the most ancient times (Gray 2007, 1).

A little later, in his third paragraph, he adds:

[T]he French Jacobins and the Russian Bolsheviks detested traditional religion, but their conviction that the crimes and follies of the past could be left behind in an all-encompassing transformation of human life was a secular reincarnation of early Christian beliefs. These modern revolutionaries were radical exponents of Enlightenment thinking, which aimed to replace religion with a scientific view of the world. Yet the radical Enlightenment belief that there can be a sudden break in history, after which the flaws of human society will be forever abolished, is a by-product of Christianity (Gray 2007, 2).

Radical revolutionaries of the Left and of the Right (Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Anarchists, Nazis, Maoists, and neo-conservatives) substituted for the apocalyptic Christian message of a new world order

created by God a secular message that “utopia could be achieved by human action . . . clothed in science” (more accurately, scientific beliefs) (Gray 2007, 3). Early Christian myths of the Apocalypse gave way in time, Gray contends, to a new kind of ostensibly secular faith-based apocalyptic order rooted in violence. He regards this as the coming into being of *secular political religions*.

Things like this have been repeatedly said, though perhaps not so starkly. Gray is well aware of this, but he adds two claims, both of which seem to me problematic. The first one is the at least putatively problematic claim that it is not only revolutionaries who hold to secular versions of religious beliefs but liberal secular humanists as well. Presumably, he has in mind secular humanists such as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, and perhaps neo-pragmatists such as Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty that followed after them. They stressed piecemeal change rather than revolutionary transformation and they were not believers in a New Age or a New Man. Why bunch them with the French Jacobins or the Russian Bolsheviks? For Gray, it is because these secular humanists believed (believe) in *progress* (Gray 2004, 41-49, 76-77). But it was (is) not the teleological sort with a view of the end of history, assigning a purpose to history itself where human beings were to be perfected in a New Age. Rather, it was fallibilistic, problem-oriented and piecemeal. By using our intelligence and knowledge of the world we can articulate an adequate view of things that we started out with, though it is not what has been called incoherently history’s purpose. But this modest view that we will come to have will yield for us a better view of things: a coherent cluster of ends-in-view in the continuing struggle to make sense of our lives. But this is something that is only for a time. It is not something which claims to be eternal or absolute truth, as if we understand what that is.

Many of these beliefs and convictions are neither scientific hypotheses nor myths, but a trying to get our beliefs and convictions into what John Rawls called ‘reflective equilibrium’. There is, and rightly, no conception of some kind of final equilibrium that would remain unchanging. As time goes on, there will be many reflective equilibria, hopefully (but not assuredly) some getting better that

others. But there will be no final equilibrium—not even a coherent conception of one—where everything will forever be set right. To hope we can gain something like that—a something, we know not what—is just fantasy. There is nothing teleological or otherwise metaphysical about secular humanists’ belief in progress. Their belief in progress is neither a religious dogma nor a scientific claiming that all genuine knowledge must be scientific. There is no thought among these thinkers of achieving some Aristotelian or Hegelian *telos* or a Comteian ‘scientific’ worldview.

The second claim of Gray’s that I shall criticize is his claim that the neo-conservatives who are now ruling—better, misruling—the U.S. are caught up in primitive versions of Christianity or Judaism that are replacing a secular faith that has been lost. Indeed, something like this is true of George W. Bush but he is so Neanderthal that he is capable of believing practically anything. It is fair enough, and probably true, to say of him what Gray says: “Apocalyptic religion shapes the policies of the American president, George W. Bush, and his antagonist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in Iran” (Gray, 3). But it is something else again to say that of some of the more knowledgeable and better educated people of the Bush team, e.g., Condoleezza Rice. Perhaps it is so? But it would be more plausible to say that people like Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, and Wolfowitz were propagandistically using these religious beliefs to keep or gain the loyalty of the fundamentalist religious right. But *perhaps* I am wrong about this for some well-educated people can hold some nutty and very dangerous beliefs (Goebbels’s name comes trippingly on the tongue). But there are neo-conservatives, and very distinguished ones (e.g., Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman), who are as secular as you can be.

However, be that as it may, Gray is certainly right in remarking “that religion is once again a power in its own right. With the death of Utopia, apocalyptic religion has re-emerged, naked and unadorned, as a force in world politics” (Gray 2007, 3). But it is not plausible to count among the zealots all neo-conservatives of the Bush Administration, and particularly not their intellectual mentors Milton Friedman, Frederick Hayek or Leo Strauss, or of the Kristols, Irving and William (father and son), Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, or Gertrude Himmelfarb. All of these neo-

conservative intellectuals have had an important influence, directly or indirectly, on the Bush Administration, an administration spearheaded by Dick Cheney. But these mentors and their pupils are too well educated and too taken up with what they believe to be hard-nosed *realpolitik* for it to be plausible that they—or at least for most of them—could be fundamentalist Christians or Jews.

### III

Gray, I believe, is not just celebrating the death of utopia. He also realizes that something is lost with the death of the best of these hopes. But he thinks it is absolutely necessary to face the music and to become resolutely anti-utopian. Even with the best of them, their harms, even if unintended, outweigh the good things that could be said about them. I am, and always have been, modestly utopian; I argue for what John Rawls calls a realistic utopia or, rather, the (I shall say hopefully approximately achievable) ideal of that. I remain, perhaps pigheadedly, unaltered by Gray's critique. I want to begin my critical probing of Gray by asking what he takes to be utopian and why he rejects it.

He begins by remarking that he takes a utopian project or ideal to be *unrealizable*. He then asks how a utopia is to be recognized and how we know when a project is unrealizable. Since it is obviously an empirical unrealizability that he is talking about, it must be something that admits of degrees. There are some unrealizabilities that are not logically impossible, but that in a plain empirical way could not possibly happen, e.g., sprinting from Montreal to Ottawa in fifteen minutes. There are other things that could possibly happen but are very unlikely to happen, e.g., being mentally active at 140 years of age. And there are some things that could likely happen but probably won't, e.g., that action on climate change will occur soon enough to avoid a very considerable catastrophe or that private cars will not exist in 2012. We have a continuum here. The lower end of the continuum of utopian projects could turn out to be unrealizable but still (sometimes very much so) to be worth the try, for desirable as they are, they very well might be realizable and importantly so; and even if



they are not fully realizable, they might be reasonable ideals that we can approximate. Total ending of unemployment even in the rich North may be impossible to achieve but efforts towards its extensive reduction are still (*pace* Friedman) arguably worthwhile. Sweden's plan to achieve it in the 1970s was not unrealistically utopian at that time, but with globalization and a near global neo-liberalism coming into force, Sweden's effort failed. When the campaign against slavery started in the early nineteenth century, it was widely opposed on the grounds that slavery has always been with us and always will be. It is impossible, it was widely thought, to eradicate it. Almost all whites in the slave owning states of the American South could see nothing wrong with it. But opposition to it started, indeed fitfully as a minority position, but, with struggle, the opposition grew and after a continued intense struggle, finally it succeeded. It eventually came to be widely thought that slavery was a barbarous practice that must be ended. Now all, or at least almost all, whites (even some who are in some sense racist) in the American South believe that. But this disconfirms the claim that abolition was just a utopian ideal. There have always been some societies that were not slave societies, so we know, and even could have known when slavery was a reality among us, that ending slavery was not an unrealizable ideal. Slavery has returned in muted forms. Yet knowing that there are and have been without slavery leads us to see that abolishing slavery was and is not unrealizable because for there not to be slaves is not 'contrary to human nature'.

However, some reforms are unrealizable in a strong sense. All those connected with 'the perfectability of man', to take a prominent example, are unrealizable. We cannot (*pace* the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks) make a 'New Man' or a 'New World'. But, *pace* Gray, that does not mean that to make things a lot better than they are now is impossibly utopian: something totally unrealizable. Still, when we look at the world globally, we are *inclined* to despair. The realistic possibility of changing things looks terribly bleak.

These last two considerations fit well with Gray's claim. It seems to me to be reasonable to say, notwithstanding its vagueness, that "a project is utopian if there are no circumstances under

which it can be realized” (Gray 2007, 20). (But we should not have too short-sighted a view of what can be realized.) Gray, however, remarks, the above notwithstanding, that:

All the dreams of a society from which coercion and power have been for ever 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 contradictions of human needs (Gray 2007, 28).<sup>4</sup>

To move to a different but related point, we will never get a conception of the good life on which all people will agree. Both Gray and John Rawls, as different as they are, agree on that. Moreover, and here a little bit more surprisingly, it is hardly even desirable that we should; our various needs will sometimes conflict, both between people and within ourselves, and will be given different priorities and urgencies. Indeed, some societies may be more conflictual than others, but some kinds of differences—perhaps we shouldn’t call them conflicts—are desirable. They keep us from falling into a dull uniformity. Something we probably would not do anyway. But the important point is that with these persistent and sometimes conflictual differences we will not get utopia, at least as Gray has not unreasonably characterized it. Moreover, as he extensively argues, experiments in living that have tried to achieve it—tried for the perfectability of social life—have all failed. The Jacobins, Anarchists, Nazis, Bolsheviks, Maoists, Pol Pot, the Baader-Meinhof group, the Red Guards, Islamic Fundamentalists, and the Neo-Cons, all “mesmerized by fantasies of creative destruction”, have all unleashed, in one way or another, “violence and horror on the world”—some, of course, more massively than others.<sup>5</sup> If this is what it is to be a utopian, the death of utopia is to be welcomed. These revolutionaries, with their conception that human life and society could be transformed by determined human acts of the will, thought violence could and should be used to liberate humanity. Some coercion and utilization of power will go with any state (perhaps by definition) and, in a way, violence in the form of coercion is unavoidable. But to use it, particularly in its strong forms, to try to achieve the ‘perfectability of man’ is evil as well as irrational. It is evil not because it won’t work

but because it is wrong to try to mold human beings so violently and destroy those you can't. Moreover, it will fail for human beings can't be changed like that; but even if it could succeed, it is wrong because it is just plain evil. If there is an enlightenment project (or, less pompously, a way or ways of enlightenment thinking and acting), it should not be that of trying to remake society on such ideal models. We should give up ideals of 'the perfectability of man' and particularly the idea that you can and should do that by being violent, e.g., the liberal use of the guillotine. We should, instead, Gray has it, view "government as a means of coping with human imperfection rather than as an instrument of re-creating society" (Gray 2007, 33).<sup>6</sup> The latter in all of its various forms—Nazi, Bolshevik, Christian, Jewish or Islamic fundamentalist, neo-conservative—are society's most dangerous myths. Gray remarks, later in his book, "the dream of Utopia ends in squalid horror" (Gray 2007, 145). The utopian mindset, exemplified, to take our current example, in the Bush Jr. Administration, shows itself at its most deluded in its "willingness to use intolerable means to achieve impossible ends" (Gray 2007, 160).

Gray delineates the great upheavals of history—great revolutionary movements—clearly and argues that they are all in the utopian mode and, consciously or not, are an apocalyptic way of viewing things. They all, from the Jacobins to the Bush Administration Neo-Cons, from revolutionaries on the Left to the Right, were giving us, Gray claims, political religions committed to bringing into being a 'new man' for a 'radically new time'. He well describes these movements and shows what brutalitarianisms they turned into, causing mass destruction and death and terrible degrading labor and living conditions. They all thought that history had an end both in the sense of a terminus and a goal. They also thought, teleologically, that history was on their side: that they were riding with the tide of history. Confident that they had grasped 'the plot of history', they also thought that with that grasp and the theoretical and political understanding they had thereby gained that they, as a vanguard, could remold humans and society to bring about human emancipation of society and, indeed, eventually of the world.

All these social experiments failed, or are failing, in tragic dimensions. Such utopian hopes—our dreams of truly decent social order—have, Gray argues, been dashed. No utopia is possible; no emancipatory social science or other social transformation is possible. We must, if we would be non-evasive, put all such dreams of progress aside. They all, where there were attempts to put them into practice, turned into nightmares replete with violence. (Are we—whatever criticisms we might make of Cuba—justified in saying that about Cuba? Is this the way things are turning out in Venezuela? It is premature, to put it mildly, to say ‘Yes’.)

Gray tells this story grippingly and, on the whole, convincingly, but—the parts about the Neo-Cons and the liberal humanists aside—it is by now reasonably familiar. But it is, as I have said, put together in a striking way. It makes a good read, though a depressing one, for those of us who are on the Left. I belong to the last generation of Left intellectuals that was (though for me always ambivalently) once taken with the Bolshevik utopia—something that none of us at that time, either Left or Right or liberal middle, called it and Bolsheviks would firmly reject such an appellation. For the generation before me—people old enough to be my teachers—it was common to passionately believe in and struggle for a socialist, even a communist, world that would finally end oppression and exploitation and set in motion an egalitarian social order where autonomy was respected and where conditions of abundance would finally be brought into being for all. We would finally have ‘a truly human society’, yielding a universal emancipation.

As knowledge of the facts rolled in, it became increasingly difficult to believe anything like that. First I, and indeed many others, dismissed much of what was said as capitalist propaganda and disinformation. A social order with such emancipatory aims couldn’t do the things it was accused of. And, of course, there was intense capitalist propaganda and disinformation as there is now against Left or Leftish regimes (e.g., against Venezuela now (2008), against Cuba with the gleeful hype at Castro’s stepping down, and against Chile during Allende’s time culminating in his murder and in the destruction of a democratically elected mildly socialist government). Yet, as time went on, it became

impossible to believe that the actual Bolshevik order was what it claimed to be. Under Stalin and through Brezhnev, it was an authoritarian, statist, non-capitalist order, but not a socialist one. It was giving us something that was mythological and actually destructive. Under 'dear old Uncle Joe', it became, though it was hard for some of us to believe it, a horror. That there was no socialist and emancipatory order there finally became glaringly evident. That was hard for us to take.

Some of us came to believe, or at least to worry, that even if the aims of some of its leaders and intellectuals were to achieve a genuine socialist order, they could not and often took horrible means in a vain endeavor to do so. Such a statist and authoritarian order with its command method of allocation could not yield what it sought (if indeed, as things evolved after Lenin, socialist aims had been abandoned in all but name).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, on a more theoretical level, we came to the conclusion (some of us ambivalently) that there was not, and indeed could not be, 'a science of society', a 'scientific socialism', something that was claimed by these revolutionary orders. The world could not be ordered as they thought, and even if it could be, it should not be with the means they were prepared to utilize. And all that aside, it was not a scientific project. There could not be, and even if there could be then should not be, *such* a 'communist' or even a 'socialist' order. As Samir Amin has said somewhere, either socialism will be democratic or it will not be. We had been, many came to believe, beguiled by a myth—indeed, if you want to talk that way, by a 'God that failed'. But all that to the contrary notwithstanding, I retained, and continue to retain, my belief in and commitment to socialism. I now see, as many socialists do, the Bolshevik historical narrative and much of the machinery of 'scientific socialism' as a myth to be resolutely set aside along with all grand utopias: grand narratives, or, as Jean-Francois Lyotard misleadingly called them, 'grand meta-narratives'. But I do not think the death of utopia (so defined) means that a better world is not possible, that the awfulness we have now cannot be eradicated or at least extensively reduced and that the idea of socialism understood more contextually, pragmatically and non-scientistically, *pace* Gray, is a coherent and appealing idea. But it would be a socialism without a grand narrative (a meta-narrative,

if you will) of history's inevitable path, to say nothing of speaking about its goal (something that is nonsense anyway). (For a compelling socialist compass, see Erik Olin Wright, 2006.) But then I must face what no doubt would be Gray's repost, that I am sneaking in discredited utopian thinking by the back door. My need for faith, he would say, is so great that I can't face what plainly is the music.

#### IV

I shall argue against that and against certain other of Gray's main claims. I shall first argue that socialism, though on *some* accounts it has been scientific or pseudo-scientific, need not and should not be either scientific or pseudo-scientific. Socialism is not unscientific or anti-scientific, but, on some understandings, it is non-scientific without being utopian in Marx's and Engels's sense and (arguably at least) none the worse for that. But as Andrew Levine claims, it *perhaps* can and should make a claim to scientificity (which is not the same as being scientific) (Levine 2003).<sup>8</sup> There is indeed something to Marx and Engels's arguments against utopian socialism. Be that as it may, it is false that, as scientific thinkers claim, that what science cannot tell us, humankind cannot know. We know that boiling babies is sadistically evil, that being untrustworthy is wrong, that being unkind or cruel is wrong and that if there is something rightly called 'the foundations of kindness' that we should be for it. These are non-scientific beliefs though not anti-scientific or even unscientific beliefs. We know these moral things unequivocally and yet science does not tell us or confirm (or disconfirm) that they are true or justified.<sup>9</sup> Where we live in places where there is a winter and summer we know, once we are beyond infancy, that it gets colder in the winter than in the summer. We know this even if we are utterly scientifically or geographically untutored. We, that is, know this if we live there before we have any scientific knowledge or much of an understanding of how to confirm it. (Note, however, that *if* there was any point in denying it, it is scientifically confirmable.) That something is not scientific does not make it mythical, ideological, nonsensical, false or *unscientific*. In fact, a

sensible socialist or Enlightenment thinker could heartily agree with Gray, with one important exception, and also accept what I have said above, when Gray perceptively writes:

In secular thought science has come to be viewed as a vehicle of revelation, a repository of truth rather than a system of symbols that serves the human need to understand and control. Post-modern philosophies that view science as just one belief-system among many are too silly to be worth refuting at length—the utility of scientific knowledge is a brute fact that is shown in the increase of human power. Science is an instrument for forming reliable beliefs about the world (Gray 2007, 207).

The exception is that we socialists and children of the Enlightenment would insist that instead of ‘*In* secular thought’ we should say ‘*Often* in secular thought’. It would also need to be said, though this is something which is compatible with what I have just quoted Gray as saying, that while science is an instrument—and indeed a vital one—for forming reliable beliefs about the world, it is not only scientific beliefs which are reliable beliefs about the world. ‘Repeated lying tends to undermine communication’ is a reliable belief but it is not a scientific one. A socialist or other Enlightenment thinker could believe such things without being a utopian in Gray’s sense or denying that socialism had a scientific component, e.g., historical materialism, taken in a non-teleological form as a theory of epochal social change (Cohen 1978, 1988; Levine, *et al.* 1992, 13-60; Nielsen 1993).

So much for the claim that socialism is scientistic and indeed must be. It is one thing to claim, as Levine does and as does Erik Olin Wright as well, that Marxism is a social science and it is another thing to say that it is *only* a social science, let alone that socialism is. If Marxism is on track, socialism is crucially backed up by Marxist emancipatory social science. But socialism is more than a coherent set of scientific beliefs. When someone, thinking of her own experience of life, says ‘Workers are dominated under capitalism and would not be under a genuine socialism’ for there they would own and control (collectively and democratically) their own means of production, she (perhaps rather untutored in social science) speaks principally from her own experience and of what she is committing herself to in committing herself to socialism. She is not making a scientific statement or

necessarily even appealing to a scientific theory. But the statement, nonetheless, has a scientific component (as well as a definitional one) and is warrantably assertable though she may not be able to warrantably assert it. Yet it is important to recognize that certain key claims in socialism have a certain scientificity without socialism being scientific or even being a science. Socialists rightly claim there are gross injustices under a global capitalist social order. That claim is resoundingly true or justified (or perhaps both) but I do not think it should be regarded as a scientific hypothesis or any other kind of scientific claim or at least to do so would be very problematic.

Socialism, and particularly Marxism, Gray has it, is inescapably teleological. It articulates an historical narrative of emancipation, a universal history. Gray rightly says, following Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, that there is no end of history either as a *goal* of history or as a *terminus*. There would be an terminus of *human* history if humankind would, as it will someday, become extinct, but there would be no terminus of history. There would still be the geological changes with their history such as we humans have the record of such changes that went on before we existed. Speaking here of the goal of history or of its terminus is to talk nonsense. Classical Marxist thought, indebted as it is to Hegel, was caught up in teleological thinking and *so construed* it is mythical and something to be set aside. We still may dig into it for its gold nuggets but the theory taken as a whole *just as they stated* it has a crucial mythical component that should be set aside. But some analytical Marxists who are firm socialists, such as G. A. Cohen, Joshua Cohen, Elliot Sober, Andrew Levine, Erik Olin Wright, and David Schweickart, have given careful accounts of historical materialism as a theory of epochal social change which are utterly non-teleological and are empirically confirmable or infirmable (G. A. Cohen 1978, 1988; Joshua Cohen 1993; Levine, *et al.* 1992, 2002; Schweickart 2007). (Indeed, it may have been disconfirmed or rendered empirically implausible but that does not mean that it is not a coherent empirical claim about epochal social change. It couldn't be infirmed if it were not.) Socialism can be and has been stated in a non-teleological way where it is not at all committed to speaking of the meaning of history or articulating a myth. Maybe what it claims is false and



disconfirmed, but that is another matter. That doesn't make it a teleological dogma or a historical myth.

I now want to provide an extended quotation from Gray where he both says something that socialist and Enlightenment thinkers—I speak of our time—should take on board and that it is also (as I shall show later) something that they should reject or importantly modify. Gray says:

Rather than tending towards a secular monoculture, the late modern period is unalterably hybrid and plural. There is no prospect of a morally homogeneous society, still less a homogenized world. In the future, as in the past, there will be authoritarian states and liberal republics, theocratic democracies and secular tyrannies, empires, city-states and many mixed regimes. No one type of government or economy will be accepted everywhere, nor will any single version of civilization be embraced by all of humanity.

It is time the diversity of religions was accepted and the attempt to build a secular monolith abandoned. Accepting that we have moved into a post-secular era does not mean religions can be freed of the restraints that are necessary for civilized coexistence. A central task of government is to work out and enforce a framework whereby they can live together. A framework of this kind cannot be the same for every one society, or fixed for ever. It embodies a type of toleration whose goal is not truth but peace. When the goal of tolerance is truth it is a strategy that aims for harmony. It would be better to accept that harmony will never be reached. Better yet, give up the demand for harmony and welcome the varieties of human experience. The *modus vivendi* between religions that has flourished intermittently in the past might then be renewed (Gray 2007, 208-09).

Indeed, there is no prospect of or, when we examine the matter closely, no desirability, everything considered, of a morally homogeneous society or homogenized world. Differences in moral ideals and differences in ways of life are to be prized as a source of richness in human life and where they do not harm or fail to respect other forms of life they should be tolerated. Moreover, “the attempt to build a secular monolith” (or any kind of monolith) should be abandoned. The diversity of religions as well as non-religions should be accepted. No church should claim to be the ‘Universal Church’ with a key to ‘The Truth’ (as if we could know what that is). No such claim should ever be accepted by the body politic. Still, we should not shut down such religions, e.g., the Roman Catholic

Church, which make such extravagant claims even if we could.<sup>10</sup> But we should prohibit any faith or group from trying to shut down other religions or secular orientations. This is where what Gray calls ‘civilized coexistence’ comes in. And indeed socialists and Enlightenment thinkers can and should endorse Gray’s idea that a central task of government is to work out and enforce a framework whereby they (the religions) can live together and that indeed a goal of tolerance should be peace. I say ‘a goal’ rather than ‘the goal’ because I think a more important goal is the attainment of equal respect, political equality, and reciprocity. We should also realize, abandoning the quest for utopia as Gray characterizes it, that such a harmony will never be reached. It is not even clear that it is desirable that it be reached. We may for *a time*, with luck (extensive luck), get a global *reflective equilibrium*, but that is all. There will be no final global harmony: a final discovery of how things ought to be. Moreover, it is unlikely that any reflective equilibrium will be a global one. And as good pluralists—a socialist pluralist is not a contradiction—we should recognize and welcome and indeed prize the varieties of human experience and human conceptions. (That does not mean, of course, that we should prize *all* experiences or all conceptions though we might tolerate, as we are not wont to do now, more of them than we do.)

A socialist will welcome all this while hoping that we will get democracy across the world and a worldwide socialist economy to go with it. She will strive for this and not just hope that it will come to be. It is indeed her conviction that we cannot get socialism without it. We may move in that direction without it (as Cuba and Venezuela are moving) but we cannot realize a socialism vision without it. We socialists will welcome a plurality of ways of life. But we socialists will hope and strive to make it the case that the existence of the diversity of bodies politic mentioned in the second sentence of the above quotation will be narrowed to only the democratic ones, though this still will admit a considerable variety (*pace* Fuhuyama). Though we will not try violently to shut any of them down (however much we might disapprove of them) if they do not extensively violate human rights. A genuine socialism will be democratic and that involves a preference for democratic regimes and

being in solidaristic support of them. But still we will not force (or try to force) people to be democratic, though we will be sharply critical of countries that are not and particularly when they violate human rights. And we will support resistance groups with a democratic orientation within such countries that fight against these countries or in other ways resist them.

Where I would demur from what Gray said above is that I believe we should not be so quick, as he is, to say and to applaud that we “have moved into a post-secular era.” Indeed, it is not the case that we have even been in a secular era, a necessary condition to being in a post-secular one. But I think there is a growing number (typically but not universally) of educated people who feel no need for religion to give sense to their lives or to sustain them. They, for the most part, are not anti-religious. They are just a-religious or non-religious. Religion just does not play a part in their lives and they are not the worse for that or find their societies to be the worse for that. This usually grows with wealth, increased education, and a secure political life. Northern Europe, most particularly Scandinavia, is a crucial example. To the extent that those conditions spread around the world, as with very considerable good fortune they might, is it so unreasonable to expect that this non-religiosity will grow?<sup>11</sup> (I’m inclined to think that only with socialism would there be much of a chance of getting such extensively and relatively equal global wealth and security. But I don’t argue for that here. But only to say that both considerable social wealth—not to live, that is, as many do now—and security is necessary for that to happen.) Among the nations of the north, the U.S. is the ‘odd culture out’ here. But look at the strata from which the most extensive and intense religiosity emanates there. It is from the poor and uneducated strata. It is hardly from the professional and well-educated strata and where it does come (as it does) from some of the members of that strata it is *usually* the kind of religiosity that Tocqueville noted in America in the early nineteenth century. It has little in common with the fundamentalism that, hardly surprising, has captured the people who have most lost out in U.S. society. George W. Bush is very much the exception. Imagine someone who went to Yale and Harvard believing what he does! Bush, however, is very much an odd person out

among people who have some reasonable opportunities to be extensively educated and are secure. Moreover, the U.S. aside, think how little of Christian fundamentalism and concern with religion more generally has migrated to Europe. (Islam is another matter, but bear in mind that many Muslims are not fundamentalist and many are very much appalled by fundamentalism.)

I don't say that religion is dying out. It seems to be in some form a common cultural trait. Anthropologists have not discovered a culture without a religion, though religions are from culture to culture and sometimes even within cultures often incredibly various. And more generally speaking there are religions of salvation (e.g., Christianity) and religions of inner enlightenment (e.g., Buddhism). Moreover, in claiming cross-cultural universality, we must not treat a belief in magic as necessarily counting as a religious belief or conflate magic and religion. Drawing this distinction makes it less obvious that religion is culturally universal. And just as a belief in magic has died out in large parts of the world, so religion may similarly come to die out. But that religion—in some form—is now culturally ubiquitous counts against (though not decisively) its likely disappearance.

However, there is, nonetheless, the increasing de-mystification of the world. There is some re-mystification but that it is yielding a world that is becoming 'post-secular' is not so evident. (All of this forgets that the modern world was never secular so it can hardly become *post-secular*.) We must not confuse a religiosity with evangelical atheism (or even atheism, period). Many of Dostoevsky's characters, unlike some of Turgenev's, found it impossible to believe but desperately wanted to believe. They thought that without religion—strong religious belief—life was meaningless. For many people today—as for some of Turgenev's characters—religious belief is (was) just not a live option. And not having faith for them is (was) not something they mourn. This is true for many people today. We must not conflate what Gray calls the need for *meaning* with the need for religious faith. Many robust secular people, unlike Ingmar Bergman, have a robust and secure sense of the meaning of life (Nielsen 1964).

## V

The Enlightenment, to shift gears, was many things but all Enlightenment thinkers shared a belief in progress, though it was construed by those thinkers in somewhat different ways. The Enlightenment thinkers that Gray takes to be paradigmatic and to have led us, he has it, into disaster thought we should understand history teleologically as a series of changes in the development of reason (whatever that may mean). This was taken to be a progressive development in which human beings would attain a universal point of view which would be deeply emancipatory. The Jacobins as well as the Bolsheviks and, in their own strange way, the Nazis, thought they could hurry this modernizing process along by drastic human action. We could by willed action help history along by the party elite starting to produce a ‘new man for a new age’ on the road to a final emancipation. This final goal to achieve a perfect human life required violence in the minds of such party elite; such rationalistic and committed Enlightenment activists and theoreticians alike (most of them were both) used to defend the use of violence—sometimes extreme violence. Indeed, that was an integral goal of their totalitarianisms (Gray 2007, 38). It is marked off from other repressive regimes by the extent and intensity of state control of the whole society. This, Gray has it, “is a by-product of the attempt to remake human life” (Gray 2007, 39). This is a core Enlightenment conception which sees history as the process in which humanity gains control of itself and of the world and then seeks to transform it (Gray 2007, 40).

Bolsheviks articulated a radical form of the Enlightenment in an attempt to try to alter human life irrevocably (Gray 2007, 42). Russia’s misfortune, Gray has it, *pace* some other of the understandings of Russia, was not in failing to absorb the Enlightenment but in absorbing it in one of its virulent forms, namely, Jacobinism—a paradigmatic form of the Enlightenment. (For details of

the horror unleashed by this utopian Enlightenment project, something replicated by the Bolsheviks, particularly Stalin, and later by Mao, see Gray 2007, 42-51.)

With Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Anarchists, Nazis, and Maoists the idea, going way back to the apocalyptic religions, was that human action—fervent human action—can initiate a radical shift in history. It became an integral part of human life in such revolutionary societies. This for the apocalyptic Christians could only be done with the help of God. But for them it also required religious fervor. The secular revolutionaries required militancy and doctrinal loyalty from the militants trying to forge a new society. We must know what the correct line of action is now and, beyond that, how to transform society. Knowing that, the thing to do was to bring it about and sustain it. (They could not have Turgenev's for his time left liberal vacillating or, later, Boris Pasternak's.)

These revolutionaries were all Enlightenment figures and their conception of the Enlightenment involved a rigid *teleological* conception of progress.<sup>12</sup> However, the Enlightenment, in all its forms, even liberal democrat, secular humanist and pragmatist, had a belief in progress. Even the milder forms (as just mentioned) had, according to Gray, millenarian beliefs. It just, Gray has it, goes with the Enlightenment in all its forms. The related views of secular humanism, liberal democracy and pragmatism saw history as a progressive process. "In this view [as Gray characterizes it], human knowledge advances in cumulative fashion, and so do improvements in ethics and politics: progress in science will be matched by progress in society, and history is a march to a better world" (Gray 2007, 25). But surely to have such a belief need not be to have an apocalyptic view of history or to believe we are going to or even can create a radically new world and a 'new man'. Things, if we apply our intelligence, can perhaps be made somewhat better, but that is a different dream. And our actions can sometimes make a historical difference; certain changes we humans make will not, except in dire circumstances, be reversed. We will not go back to the hand plow. But it is what we do or can do, given when we have done, that makes for historical change. History does not lead us around by the nose.

This is a later Enlightenment view exemplified most forcefully by John Dewey and philosophers deeply influenced by him such as Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel. It is what Hilary Putnam has dubbed ‘The Third Enlightenment’: the enlightenment of pragmatism with its paradigm thinker being John Dewey (Putnam 2004). The Enlightenment that Gray is concerned with is that of the traditional Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which I have, largely following Gray, briefly described. Putnam calls this “The Second Enlightenment”. For Putnam, “The First Enlightenment” is the Socratic Enlightenment of the Ancient Greeks. Like Gray, though without characterizing its political and social catastrophes, Putnam rightly characterized this “Second Enlightenment” as a misguided rationalistic fantasy (Putnam 2004, 100). But the pragmatic enlightenment, Putnam rightly maintains, rejected metaphysical and apocalyptic millenarian thinking (even as de-mythologized). It is contextualistic, thoroughly devoid of metaphysical claims or other rationalistic notions; some (Rorty) would say it is historicist without being skeptical. This was true of Dewey and people thinking in his wake. But, unlike Rorty, they claimed that what they took to be the scientific method should have a central role in fixing our beliefs not only about science but in ethics, politics and concerning how society is to be ordered (Rorty 1991, 63-77).

Gray would object to this third enlightenment—I deliberately use a lower-case e—by pointing out that it (1) retains, though on a more modest scale, a belief in progress; (2) claims “that morally decent communities should be democratically organized” (Putnam 2004, 204); and (3) retains a much emphasized appeal to the primacy of the scientific method. This Gray takes to be scientific.

Let us first turn to progress. Putnam makes the following remark: “I am an unreconstructed believer in progress, though not, indeed, progress in the stupid sense of a belief that advance in ethics or in social harmony is inevitable. ‘Progress’ in that sense is just a secular version of eschatology. But what I do believe in is the possibility of progress” (Putnam 2004, 108). Putnam rejects, and Dewey, Hook and Nagel with him, any teleological view of history with a linked view of progress.

History does not have an end either in the sense of a terminus or of a goal. It is no kind of narrative either of emancipation, maturation or of horror. We may indeed interpret historical events in a narrative form, still there is no grasping the plot of history. There is no such plot. All such talk is incoherent.

Still, the pragmatists defended a de-mythologized conception of progress. We big-brained animals have been using that brain of ours to cope with problems as long as we have been in business. Perhaps from around the time of Socrates, but at any rate as we have bumped along through life, we humans have developed—you might call this the origin of philosophy—what Putnam calls “a reflective transcendence, that is, the ability to stand back from conventional opinion, on the one hand, and the authority of revelation (i.e., of literally and uncritically accepted religious texts or myths) on the other, and ask ‘Why?’” (Putnam 2004, 92).<sup>13</sup> With this capacity “there comes a *learning process* in history, and there can be further learning in the future” (Putnam 2004, 107 and 110). In natural science at least—and this is something that Gray does not deny—there has been progress in the sense that there has been a cumulative gain in knowledge and technological sophistication, e.g., think of surgery now and surgery in the eighteenth century or even dentistry now and dentistry fifty years ago.

However, the classical enlightenment thinkers (Putnam’s second enlightenment) as well as the third had a considerable confidence “in the process of the new sciences, powers which it hoped to apply to thinking about social and moral problems...” (Putnam 2004, 109). This was powerfully expressed by Condorcet and later by Comte. But here the Enlightenment has been less successful. Have we cumulative knowledge over times or cultures concerning how to live our lives, what a good life and a flourishing society would be, or even of what is morally required of us?

Even something as basic as slavery and the treatment of women has not gained universal cross-cultural acceptance. Consider slavery. Fortunately, it was never pan-cultural. At least chattel slavery in its most straightforward form was abolished in the nineteenth century, though not without



a fight. That certainly was moral progress. Human beings, it came to be thought, are not to be treated as tradeable commodities anymore. The slave market became a thing of the past. *Almost* every white person in the U.S. South, until sometime after the U.S. Civil War, thought there was nothing wrong with slavery, including child slavery. Now at least almost every white person in the same area as well as in the North everywhere thinks it wrong, indeed deeply evil. Yet with trafficking in women and children, something *like* chattel slavery has come back. Still, it is not legally sanctioned as it was during the times of the slave trade or plantation slavery in the Southeast of the United States and in the Caribbean. As Gray puts it himself, there were anti-slavery acts (Britain in 1833, Russia (serfdom) in 1861, and the United States in 1865). With these acts in these countries we had the removal of “a barbarous practice and expanded human freedom” (Gray 2007, 20). Doesn’t this show there can be, and sometimes is, in some places for a time at least, progress in morality as well as in natural science? Granted that it isn’t the full-blown progress that the classical figures of the Enlightenment sought (Putnam’s second enlightenment), it is plainly progress. But before we get so confident about this, keep in mind Gray’s following remark:

[T]he condition of servitude was not abolished. During the twentieth century slave labour was used on a vast scale in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and Maoist China. Humans were not the tradable commodities they had been in chattel slavery; but they were resources that could be used at will, and exploited until they died. Slavery was reinvented in new forms, as horrible as any in the past. At the start of the twenty-first century, a form of chattel slavery has re-emerged in the form of human trafficking (Gray 2007, 20).

Similar things—though *perhaps* not quite such extreme things—can and should be said about the treatment of women. If we do not see this we are culturally or psychologically blinkered.

However, Putnam does not claim the *actuality* of progress but only the *possibility* of it. And in speaking of the ‘possibility’ of progress he is speaking of ‘the empirical possibility of progress’—a progress that is non-teleological and non-metaphysical, quite unlike the metaphysical and incoherent conceptions that Gray criticizes as embedded in both secular and orthodox religious utopian myths.

The demonstration of the incoherence of them marks the death of utopia for Gray, but not for Putnam or me. However, Gray could still counter that while this third enlightenment belief in progress is perfectly intelligible, there is in actuality, or even as a reasonable prospect, no such progress or passingly little. Such a belief in progress is non-metaphysical and coherent, but, Gray in effect claims, false—indeed fanciful. We perhaps will very likely get such progress in some, maybe all, areas of natural and biological science but not—or at least not much and very insecurely—over social, political, moral or religious conceptions or practices. *And with this we see dashed the great pragmatist hope: the hope that pervaded John Dewey's life.* It was for him the most central thing he struggled to make more than a hope. For him it was crucial to ascertain how to apply what he regarded as the scientific method to social, moral and political domains. He did not claim that many political and moral claims were actually scientific hypotheses or beliefs, but that we could use the scientific method to resolve disputes about them and attain more reasonable such beliefs. He sought, that is, to apply what he regarded as the scientific method to these social domains of our lives: to claims which sometimes were plainly moral claims. If what I have argued above is so, that great pragmatist hope is dashed.

Even if we give up what *may* be a residual scientific belief, to wit that the only way of gaining reliable beliefs is through the scientific method, we are still left—a few truisms aside, e.g., ‘boiling babies is evil’ or ‘torture is never morally acceptable’—with no *adequate grounds for belief in moral or political progress*.<sup>14</sup> Moral progress is indeed possible (conceptually possible) but its *actuality* is belied by the historical record, including what is going on now. But that that is so is not some kind of inevitability—some kind of ‘hard cosmological or ontological truth’—but it is grounded (warranted, if indeed it is warranted) in a tough-minded political realism with its attention to what are the empirical facts: what is going on on the ground. Moreover, it very much looks like it is so grounded. There is discernible progress in natural and biological sciences and their technology but at least

seemingly not in social, moral and political domains. This, if it is true, and it seems to be, would be (as I have remarked) a dashing of Dewey's most cherish hopes and expectations.

A better world is possible but, given humanity's track record, it is hardly likely. Political realists are right in thinking that. (Here we should remember Gray's praise of political realism. He remarks "even in their time the realist theorists [he speaks here of *political* realists] of recent generations were seriously flawed. Yet it is from realism more than any other school that we can learn how to think about current conflicts" (Gray 2007, 193). But we must remember we are agents in the world with our intentions, hopes, desires, and commitments—with what Dewey called our ends-in-view. We are not just neutral observers of what has happened and is happening and merely predictors of what is most likely to transpire. Putnam's goals are goals shared generally by pragmatists. Moreover, unlike Comte and the logical positivists, pragmatists, and even more clearly neo-pragmatists, are not caught up in scientism. (See here Richard Rorty on Sidney Hook. Rorty 1991, 63-77.) Moreover, as I have repeatedly drawn attention to, neither the classical pragmatists nor the neo-pragmatists have a teleological and narrative conception where *history* has a plot and a goal to be achieved. *History* doesn't have such a plot—that makes no sense at all—but *we* story-telling animals have plots. Pragmatists, social democrats, and socialists such as Brian Barry and myself have certain goals, what Dewey called ends-in-view, and we see progress generally as a gradual process where our ends-in-view, embedded in the tales we tell ourselves, give us our ideas of progress. When we realize them and achieve wide reflective equilibrium about them, progress has been made. When we have such a consensus about our plots of progress (if you will, plots of putative progress), we have some further progress, not to the 'final truth'—there is no such thing—but progress nonetheless.

Our ends-in-view are not something 'dictated by history' or set for us 'from reading the plot of history'. All that is metaphysical moonshine, incoherent talk. Rather, there is progress when our emerging and chosen plans or goals are being achieved and are seen by us to make a coherent and

attractive package, and indeed actually are making one, yielding what people on reflection want and need. We do not expect perfect harmony or for our social world to be without conflict, but there is progress where some reflectively achieved and sustained consensus here occurs. (Rawlsians would say were our views are then in wide reflective equilibrium.) Nothing is written in stone here and *consensi* are never forever. Contingency and fallibilism are inescapable. But perhaps for some limited but not unimportant matters we can gain some reflective and informed agreement concerning what will make the world, for a time, a little better. Parts of it can be evidence grounded and warrantably assertable and on other matters it is something that we on careful reflection would endorse, though without making or invoking scientific claims.

However, I am probably being too whiggish here and Gray's hard-nosed political realist picture is more creditable concerning our very grim world with deep and often intractable conflicts of geo-political interests between states and blocs of states with the threat of wars—fearfully escalating wars—as interests clash and as the environment continues to deteriorate: huge swaths of once productive land reduced to desert, other places (for example, Bangladesh) repeatedly flooded and much of its formerly arable land salinated. We will have increasingly virulent storms, a world of increasing scarcity (of wheat, water, corn), depleting fish stocks, and increasing pollution. Here we have the stuff for more clashing interests and indeed for horrors. The political realist—I'm inclined to say any reasonably informed observer of the actual—could go on and on piling horror on horror. There is the likelihood as the century progresses for there to be radically increasing conflicts, perhaps even devastating wars of desperation and not just the asymmetrical warfare we have now, as horrible as it is.

Conflict, not cooperation, let alone harmony or a better life for all, is more likely to be our common fate. Gray sees this very clearly. These are our realities and most probably our prospects. And on a more conceptual level we should also note that while we have our goals, reflective equilibria, ends-in-view and reflective transcendence, so did the Nazis have all those things. We had our George

Kennan; they had their Carl Schmidt. That grim reminder reminds us, to our horror, that there is—or at least seems to be—no accessible perch and all we have left to do is fight. That things go like that, that this is our condition, is not an iron law of history—there is no such thing—or some kind of inevitability or metaphysical or apocalyptic necessity. These ills, or at least some of them, that I have just characterized are as a matter of fact very likely to become our fate, but not necessarily or inevitably so. That's the rationalistic myth of the "Second Enlightenment", to adopt Putnam's way of speaking. But empirically speaking, they are, unfortunately, strong likelihoods.

Gray is not himself giving us a narrative of destruction or a tough-minded narrative of maturation. He is not—at least not intentionally—giving us any kind of narrative, but recounting in an empirical way what is happening and what is likely to happen.<sup>15</sup> He is trying to tell it like it is. Isn't he succeeding? Maybe *some* of this horror—this awfulness—can be reversed, but if crucial elements are to be reversed, it will require immediate and drastic action. That does not seem at least to be in the offing. It looks like our petroleum and transport industries are in a state of psychological denial. And our political leaders either suffer from scientific illiteracy or are also in a state of psychological denial. These things are not a matter of conceptual analysis but a matter of empirical fact. Or I would say, if you want to be unrealistically skeptical, of putative fact. Maybe, hopefully, there will be the requisite action. But it seems to me very unlikely. We will rather see a lot of denial, self-deception, procrastination (both, if you will, first order and second order), and a grasping at straws. This does not show that progress, pragmatically conceived (say in Putnam's terms) and a better life for humans is not possible, but it is to give to understand that it is very, very unlikely. The existence of Putin's youth gangs carefully orchestrated by the Kremlin and Bush's fundamentalist fanatics or Ahmadinejad's revolutionary guards is not encouraging.

## VI

Gray thinks he has refuted all notions of progress. I have tried to show that a modest, thoroughly fallibilistic notion of progress is still intact and in some areas actually occurring and in other areas could be but is not. But this progress I have been speaking of is not a notion of the perfectability of human beings or of a special destiny of humanity or the making of a 'New World' or a 'New Humanity'. If we think we can have a coherent idea of anything like that we better think twice and adopt Gray's anti-utopianism. Neither secular humanists nor standard religions (or any kind of religion) will yield anything like that: conflict and various horrors have always been and perhaps always will be with us. It is understandable that many of us will, given that, either live by myths or turn utterly cynical.<sup>16</sup> Speaking now in a resolutely normative voice this turning to myth, to despair or to becoming utterly cynical is something we must resist. (But take note: I am *moralizing* here and saying, with only a normative voice, that this is something that must—morally must—be done. It is not the 'must' of logic or pure reason or even pure practical reason (assuming there are such things), but saying that is not to say or imply that it is unreasonable.)

Gray powerfully draws our attention to how secular conceptions of progress, as a capacity to bring about a better world, which gained strength in the twentieth century, and have gone on, though rather shakily to the twenty-first, have been accompanied by unprecedented levels of mass murder, much of which came from secularists with the avowed project of creating a better world. So a modest form of progress, the one favored by secular humanists, is a possibility, but the likelihood of its reality in our contemporary world is very unlikely. Is there so little hope? Utopian thinking of the sort Gray criticizes is through and through mythological. These myths, whether religious or secular, unlike scientific claims, can be neither true nor false; rather, they help us cope (either well or badly) with life. Still myths, as Gray recognizes as do I, can be more or less truthful in their rendition of human experience. (But keep in mind truth is one thing, truthfulness is another. Truthfulness has to do with

integrity or trustworthiness.)<sup>17</sup> But Gray maintains that humanist beliefs in progress—actual progress—are as irrational as any of the myths of traditional religion. Indeed they are even more so, Gray contends, since in fact religious myths are closer to enduring realities than secular myths. Religious myths, Gray claims, are truer than humanist ones. Gray is billed as—and in some way is—a great skeptic like his mentor and friend Isaiah Berlin. But he says, “The most necessary task of the present is to accept the irreducible reality of religion” (Gray 2007, 207). Why should this be so? Or is it so? Is this something that Berlin would say or think?

If we say, as Gray does, that “religions are not claims to knowledge but ways of living with what cannot be known” then *perhaps* it is a necessary task of the present time to accept the irreducible reality of religion, properly understood. Religions, of one sort or another, will probably always be with us as ways of living, of giving significance to our lives, helping us to make sense of our lives and to cope with life. We have here myths in narrative forms which meet the demand for *meaning*—for not just seeing our lives as just one damn thing after another until we die and are cremated, but as something “in which each individual life is part of an all-encompassing story” (Gray, 204). This is the irreducible reality of religion, something that no secular myth can match, or so Gray claims.<sup>18</sup>

Gray is against utopias, against overarching human narratives, against seeing history as a narrative and a process which has a goal, especially “as a human narrative of catastrophe and redemption”. The various religions are different ways in seeing our lives as part of an all-encompassing story. But that is what he thinks we are witnessing as coming to an end—and with good riddance, he has it—with the death of utopia. But *then* how can it be on his own account such a necessary task, or even an important task, to accept the irreducible reality of religion? Indeed with the death of utopia (something he regards as desirable but still something, he has it, that is intractably linked with religion) how then can religion be an irreducible reality and how can he also say it is something that will always be with us and indeed something we should have?

I think a key to what might be a possible plausible response on Gray's part would come by reflecting on his remarks that "myths are not true or false in the way scientific theories are true or false, but they can be more or less truthful in reflecting the enduring realities of human life" (Gray 2007, 206). They—at least religion at its best—have to accept "what cannot be remedied and find meaning in the chances of life" (Gray 2007, 208). There are human needs, he tells us, "that no change in society can remove" (Gray 2007, 208). "Human beings," he adds, "will no more cease to be religious than they will stop being sexual, playful or violent" (Gray 2007, 208). He adds in the very last page of his *Black Mass* "at its best religion has been an attempt to deal with mystery rather than the hope that mystery will be unveiled" (Gray 2007, 210).

So after all not all myths with their all-encompassing narratives are bad and yield a utopia which needs to be ended and in reality is dead. Gray here at least seems to be unsaying what he has been stressing. However, I think this is all to the good. Religion is not going to disappear any more than (*pace* Marx) the state, though both the state's and religion's primary functions may change, indeed radically change. Vis-à-vis religion, it is particularly evident that *if 'religion' is given the definition that Gray gives it*, that it is an enduring reality, without being a claim to knowledge: religions, he claims, "are not claims to knowledge but ways of living with what cannot be known" (Gray 2007, 207). Then we may have something that may for we humans become an inescapable reality. But this is only by virtue of a *persuasive* definition of 'religion'. It is also what some have called (as well) a *low redefinition* (as when a medical doctor is defined as someone who can take your blood pressure).<sup>19</sup>

Religions are ways of living and importantly so, but the historic faiths—all the historical faiths—with their doctrines are also making claims conceiving what they take to be knowledge. (I believe these doctrines in their early phases are false and later become, with the development of these religions, incoherent.) However, these doctrines are doctrines that their theologians and their religious leaders take to be a central part of their religions and this belief is shared by the mass of the



faithful of the religions in question. Christianity and Islam stress this more than Judaism or Buddhism. But all the historic religions have doctrines and make claims to knowledge: typically very esoteric knowledge claims. I believe that religious people should abandon these claims, and become what Gray says they actually are, namely people in search of some meaning in life. *But this is to look at religion in the way a secularist would.* And that is exactly what Gray does without acknowledging it and while suggesting something else. He remarked in a book launch for *Black Magic* that he is as atheistic as can be but what he opposes is evangelical atheism. What he finds significant in religion is what a reflective non-*scientific* atheism, unhaunted by metaphysics, would find significant.

We should also return to Gray's claim that there are good and bad myths. Some "can be more or less truthful in reflecting the enduring realities of human life" (Gray 2007, 206). And these myths, good and bad, will have their narratives. So not all narratives are mistaken or pointless either. We have a need to tell ourselves stories. It is not just "fashionable to view narrative as a basic human need" (Gray 2007, 204). We are storytelling, narrative-making animals. We need them to make sense of our lives. Moreover, some narratives have verisimilitude. Religions are (on Gray's own showing) tied to myths and narratives so if religion has an irreducible reality so do at least some myths and narratives. What in reality Gray has done, though he would deny this, is to give us a narrative of *maturation* and a powerful one at that? He has shown what hardly needed showing, namely, that the ancient Christian millenarian myths were destructive and irrational. The classic modern secular myths—what he calls secular religions—in certain ways ape them and have something of the same presuppositions and assumptions and were even more destructive and thoroughly irrational. He has, as we have seen, in mind Jacobinism, Bolshevism, Maoism, Nazism, anarchism, and neo-conservatism. These myths are all utopian and have been thoroughly discredited. The very project, he claims, of a world-transforming political life is incoherent, irrational and extremely dangerous. It turns political life into a battleground. "The secular religions of the last two centuries, which imagined that the cycle of anarchy and tyranny could be ended, succeeded only in making it more violent" (Gray 2007, 210).

Gray tells this story very powerfully. His narrative of maturation—or so I call it—is distant from such utopias. But it certainly is a narrative and would count, on his reading, as a myth and as a secular religion and one to be taken very seriously. His narrative (as any good narrative) is not without its verifiable empirical claims set (for the most part) in a coherent framework. It is a hard, non-evasive political realist vision with, given his comments about the effects of global warming and the like, as he puts it himself, may be something that very well gives us “too much reality for most people to bear” (Gray 2007, 209). His view of the world is bleak and grim though it is not nihilistic. He sees it, as I have noted, as a “central task of government . . . to work out and enforce a framework whereby they [the different religions and ways of life] can live together” (Gray 2007, 208). Or, as he puts it:

At its best, politics is not a vehicle for universal projects but the art of responding to the flux of circumstances. This requires no grand vision of human advance, only the courage to cope with recurring evils (Gray 2007, 210).

Given what we have just noted Gray saying about myth and narrative and keeping in mind my contention that *Black Mass* itself is an astute and penetrating narrative of maturation, why should we find a pragmatist, a social democratic or a socialist account to be just another flawed utopia, to be set aside as impossible utopian thinking when we factor in its modest empirically-based non-teleological conception of progress along with its claim that a better world is possible and some indications as to how that can perhaps be achieved? Such a better world is a long shot, perhaps, but still a reasonable possibility. I shall argue in the next chapter that we should not set such thinking aside and in that important respect we should not go Gray’s way.<sup>20</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It has been said to me that what I am saying applies principally about work in urban life. People who work on family farms work together as a family. They feel very differently about their work on a farm and that is typically so. But family farms are rapidly disappearing and wage labor on farms, typically in agribusinesses, feel quite differently about their work. (Think here of migrant workers but not only them.) Their work is at least as alienating and as full of drudgery as that is that of urban laborers.

<sup>2</sup> When I speak of ‘the North’ I mean to refer to the rich countries (now exclusively capitalist) of the world, whether they are located geographically in the north or not, and when I refer to ‘the South’ I refer to poor or middling poor countries of the rest of the world.

<sup>3</sup> See also here Gray’s *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (Gray 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Here it is clear that he has been influenced by his mentor, Isaiah Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> Naomi Klein (2007) has massively and convincingly shown how the Neo-Cons brutally and intentionally have unleashed this on the world. They have, as a deliberate policy of destruction, aimed to establish the conditions for a neo-liberal economic order. They have resorted to overthrowing governments by military force where necessary. They have made mass arrests, frequently engaged in torture, brought on mass unemployment with its resulting poverty, extensive misery and rising inequality both in the North and the South and within nations (including the U.S.) as well as between nations in an attempt to achieve a neo-conservative global control of things and make a neo-liberal economic order of a Hayekian-Friedmanist sort. This is the dominant form of capitalism in our world today, replacing earlier different capitalisms, as we found them in Japan, Germany and Sweden, for example. This, as she shows, as has Noam Chomsky, has been intensified by the Neo-Cons but it has been a policy of the U.S. since the emergence of the American Empire at the end of World War II. David Harvey, in a more abstract and theoretical manner, has shown adroitly the striking extent to which capitalism works by accumulation and by dispossession. See Harvey 2003, 137-82.

<sup>6</sup> There is no reason why we can’t try to do both. We do the minimal thing of trying to cope with human imperfection and cautiously, intelligently, experimentally, after the fashion of John Dewey or John Rawls, seek to bring about a better world—what Rawls called a ‘realistic utopia’—that will require some remaking of society. Gray’s genuine objection is to doing it in the violent and fanatical way that the Jacobins did and Neo-Cons are now doing and, as well, by trying to make human beings anew. The assorted movements he describes in between did the same thing. He would have to show, to make his case, that the *only* way to bring about a better world is by such destructive means. And that he has not shown. We should also beware of false dichotomies here.

<sup>7</sup> John Roemer rightly points out that one “of the errors of the postmortems of communism has been the identification of central planning with command/administrative allocation systems. These terms are not coextensive; it is only the latter that have been shown not to function.” The market should be used for allocation of goods, e.g., how many shoes to make and what kind, how many computers to make and what kind. But both in capitalist societies and in socialist societies planning goes on as well, e.g., where to build factories and of what kind, what kind of health care system or education system to develop, what kind of transportation system to develop and where, and with what monies we should do such things. There will be planning in capitalist systems and in socialist systems. Even with the neo-conservative politics and neo-liberal economic systems supposedly working in the Bush Jr. Administration, there is plenty of planning. They do not leave it to the market to decide on how much money is spent on the military and how much on education or health and on what kind of military and what kind of education and health care systems to have. But in a capitalist system the underlying rationale in planning—the bottom line—is the maximizing of secure profits for capitalists. A capitalist economy must be a *growth* economy while in a socialist system the underlying rationale for planning is to equitably meet human needs. This need not be a growth economy. There is no imperative ‘grow or die’.

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<sup>8</sup> Scientism tells us that only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge; what science cannot tell us, humankind cannot know. Someone, as does Levine, in claiming scientificity for socialism, including importantly Marxist socialism in particular, need not, and should not, claim that, but claim there is in Marx, and that there should be, as for example with historical materialism, a genuine social science yielding scientific claims that can be confirmed or infirmed. It need not, and should not—see the above text—absurdly claim that all knowledge is and must be scientific, but only that there are important elements in Marxism that are scientific and that this for socialism is important. Craig refers to ‘historical materialism’ as ‘\_\_\_\_-science’ but this misreads the core articulation by Marx of historical materialism and ignores the careful utterly non-teleological articulations of it by G. A. Cohen, Shaw, Levine, and others.

<sup>9</sup> I am not saying that all of these things are absolutely evil and could not in any circumstances be what, all things considered, we must do. Brecht reminds us, with sadness, that we who would build the foundations of kindness could not always afford to be kind. But he asks, in his poem, future generations to forgive him, knowing that in sometimes being unkind—being harsh—he was doing something that philosophers would say is *prima facie* wrong. But things which are *prima facie* wrong are not always, everything considered, wrong. *Sometimes* harsh things must be done. That is a chilling thought. And if we would keep our moral compass, it must remain for us chilling (Nielsen 1996, 273-90).

<sup>10</sup> We should not take Lenin’s way with religion, understandable thought it is, particularly at his time and place (Nielsen 2007).

<sup>11</sup> We should be cautious in drawing the conclusion I draw here. We should reflect on the phenomenon of the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, a well-educated, sensitive, reflective intellectual. Bergman was a person who could not have any religious belief at all, yet portrayed in various ways how many educated and reflective people suffered acutely from their unbelief and how some longed to believe and in some sense *needed* religious belief. (See Bergman’s powerful *Winter’s Light*.) If there are many such persons in Scandinavia, my thesis surely is up for question. If there are a great many and their number persists and even grows, what I am claiming will have been disconfirmed. I am moved by Bergman’s films, yet I feel no such lack, as I suspect Brecht, Marx, Freud and maybe even Shakespeare did not (remember George Santayana on Shakespeare here).

<sup>12</sup> It was usually thought, at least until G. A. Cohen’s writing, that Marx had such a teleological conception of history. Cohen vigorously and carefully contested this. Jon Elster, another distinguished analytical Marxist (I should say *former* analytical Marxist), agrees with Cohen that teleological conceptions are mistaken, but argues in his *Making Sense of Marx* (1985) that Marx was firmly committed to the use, Hegelian style, of teleological conceptions, including ones for history. Andrew Levine, in his review of Elster’s *How to Make Sense of Marx*, carefully contests that concerning Marx and argues for a non-teleological conception of historical progress, a conception he carefully elaborated later (Levine 1986 for the review and 1992, 89-100 and 2002, 223-36 for his elaboration.)

<sup>13</sup> It might be said that I have a too narrow view of revelation, that I link revelation and religious authority together too closely. Many of us have had ‘revelations’ in our lives that have turned us around. We have, at crucial times in our lives, had ‘revelations’ of experiential, psychological reality. But Church figures who speak of ‘revelation’ do not mean something that can be divorced from religious authority. What counts as a religious revelation must finally be sanctioned by religious authority.

<sup>14</sup> Yet even torture is still practiced widely over much of the world, including a state (the U.S.) which claims to be a liberal democracy though at the same time tortures and, with obvious subterfuge, denies what they are doing is really torture while practicing it extensively.

<sup>15</sup> But isn’t that itself a narrative or at least a kind of narrative? One is tempted to say it is a narrative of maturation. We must be careful of performative contradictions here.

<sup>16</sup> Is Gray so cynical? I think, if we consider some of his other writings and paradigmatically his *Endgame*, that the answer is no. (Gray 1997)

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<sup>17</sup> See Richard Rorty (2002) and Bernard Williams (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Isn't he here endorsing an appeal to narratives and myth—something he has spent much time in rejecting as irrational?

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Edwards (1995).

<sup>20</sup> I would like to thank John Kerkhovan for his careful and thorough comments on this chapter.