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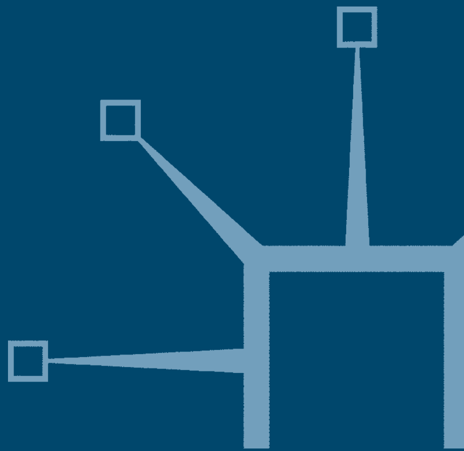
Towards a Post-Modern Understanding of the Political

From Genealogy to Hermeneutics

Andrius Bielskis



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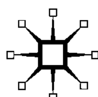

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements ix

1 Introduction: Moving Beyond Liberalism **1**
Modernity and humanism 1
Liberalism and modernity 8
Utilitarianism: redemption of deontological liberalism 15
Why Marxism can not be an alternative to modernity and liberalism 20
Introduction to the argument: genealogy *versus* hermeneutics 25

2 A Genealogical Approach to the Political **30**
Nietzsche's genealogy 30
Foucault on genealogy and power 42
Characterising kitsch 58
The genealogy of kitsch 65
Kitsch and the political: the case of consumer democracy 85

3 A Hermeneutic Approach to the Political **95**
Two conflicting accounts of hermeneutics: Ricoeur *versus* Gadamer 95
MacIntyre's contribution to hermeneutics 107
The case of Enlightenment: MacIntyre against Kant 116
Conflicts between traditions 121
MacIntyre's Thomism: the politics of common good 133
Hermeneutic politics: *Ekklesia* as the locus of post-modern politics 145

4 Hermeneutics Beyond Genealogy **163**
Genealogy *versus* hermeneutics: power over meaning against meaning over power 163
Why genealogy cannot form a basis for another tradition 171
Hermeneutics, metaphysics, and the political 178

Notes 185

Bibliography 207

Index 214

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Preface and Acknowledgements

There are two ways of writing philosophy books. The first is through making sure that everything you wanted to argue and say is argued and said. The argument is well worked through, all the counter-arguments are explored, all the philosophical points are supported with meticulous scholarship. Such (rare) books constitute fully finished philosophical positions and nothing needs to be changed or added. They are like beautiful fully matured wine. The second way is through developing one's philosophical position without being able to provide a fully worked out argument with all its pros and cons. These books pose more questions than answers, questions indeed to the authors themselves. They are as much statements as arguments, statements that have yet to be fully argued for. This book is of the second type. It presents a philosophical position rather than a fully articulated philosophical argument. It is a statement that has, I hope, the potential to become a mature philosophical argument, in part through being tested in the fires of public debate.

This book is the result of my doctoral research at the University of Warwick. I am greatly indebted to a number of people. Without their support this book would not have been possible. I am first of all grateful to Martin Warner and his help throughout five years of my research at Warwick. I am particularly indebted to his enthusiasm in the difficult task of improving my English. I am indebted to Peter Poellner who has taught me a great deal about Nietzsche. I am also grateful to Kelvin Knight and his critical comments on my reading of MacIntyre, Aristotle and Marx. I want to thank Arne Rasmusson for agreeing to read a section on the theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas, and for his friendly encouragement. I am infinitely grateful to my wife Jolanta and my daughter Severija whose care, support, encouragement and understanding have made my work possible. I am also indebted to my friends Robert and Elizabeth Garlicks, Christopher Brown and Mehran Mehrabanpour. I thank Andrius Smalinskas and my daughter Severija for agreeing to design the cover of the book. Finally, I want to thank my parents and my brother for having faith in me and my ability to accomplish this task.

1
Introduction: Moving Beyond Liberalism

> Liberalism is the political theory of modernity. Its postulates are the most distinctive part of modern life – the autonomous individual with his concern for liberty and privacy, the growth of wealth and the steady stream of invention and innovation, the machinery of government which is at once indispensable to civil life and the standing threat to it – and its intellectual outlook is one that could have originated in its fullness only in the post-traditional society of Europe after the dissolution of medieval Christendom.
>
> John Gray (*Liberalism*, p. 82)

> What I have attempted to do is to generalize and carry to a higher order of abstraction the traditional theory of the social contract as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.
>
> John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 11)

Modernity and humanism

It has often been argued that the conceptual beginning of modernity lies in the notion of man's self-determination and what Charles Taylor famously called 'the disenchantment of the world'.[1] It will be one of the tasks of this introductory chapter to suggest that the idea of modern humanism should be understood in relation to the loss of the traditional ontological order of the world. This will enable us to provide a contextual background for our discussion of two alternative approaches to the political, approaches attempting to go beyond modern humanism. Thus I shall argue that the modern conception of humanism, the idea of self-determining reason, the Enlightenment attempts to formulate rationally justified autonomous morality which,

as it was believed, would serve as the cornerstone for universal civilisation, together with instrumental reason giving the impetus for the establishment of modern science – all of these have to be understood together and in relation to the decline of the traditional ontological world-view. Such a conception of modern humanism contrasts with Martin Heidegger's and more recently John Gray's understanding, since this notion of humanism will be exclusively linked to modernity. It will be claimed that only in modernity and due to modernity has humanism become the all pervasive ideology and *Weltanschauung* of the contemporary world.

John Gray, following Heidegger's and to a certain extent Nietzsche's reading of the tradition of Western thought, has argued that modern humanism is closely linked to and has been fostered by the 'Baconian instrumentalist' conception of science which sees nature as an object for purely human purposes.[2] However, despite the fact that such a conception of science culminated and has been fully developed only in modern times, and hence is essentially a modern phenomenon, it is the result of a much broader intellectual tradition which started long before modern times. Thus John Gray claims that the self-refuting and self-undermining character of the Enlightenment, its humanism, and especially modern science and technology, which have together resulted in the nihilism of contemporary culture, were the continuation of classical and medieval 'foundationalist universalism' and 'representationlist rationality'. That is why Gray can oppose Alasdair MacIntyre and his philosophical attempt to restore Aristotelianism. Gray believes that there is no such way to return to a pre-modern tradition of thought

> if only because the Enlightenment was itself an authentic development of a central Western tradition going back to Socrates, and indeed beyond, to the pre-Socratics, such as Parmenides and Heraclitus, in whose fragments the fundamental commitments of Greek logocentrism – which I understand as the conception in which human reason mirrors the structure of the world – are affirmed.[3]

The central claim of Gray's argument is not only that it is impossible to restore a pre-modern mode of philosophical thought. He also claims that inability to accept the disenchantment of the world, produced by the Enlightenment, whose self-undermining failure has led us to nihilism and the loss of a coherent world-view, will result in the rise of fundamentalism and violent attempts to overthrow modern liberal institutions. All we can do is to accept the disenchantment as an

inevitable fate of the post-modern West, learning to live with it without, however, being overtaken by its nihilism. In this sense John Gray's position within the context of contemporary political philosophy is somewhat unusual. He proclaims that we have to learn to live with the modern disenchantment of the world. Yet at the same time Gray believes that since liberalism and liberal institutions together with its policies are the continuation of the self-undermining project of Enlightenment, we have to accept that liberalism, precisely because its identity is closely linked to the Enlightenment and its progressive historical philosophy of human emancipation, as theory, institutional order, and way of life, has no universal validity and should not have any exceptional authority among the peoples of the world, hence has to be transformed as well. Such transformation of liberalism should result in the acceptance of radical pluralism. The latter would promote a peaceful coexistence of different cultures, thus getting rid of the remnant Enlightenment belief that liberalism and its way of life should be exported to the rest of the world. It would also prompt us to accept that those peoples or communities that do not want to have anything to do with the modern economic and political order should be freely allowed to do so.

Against this two objections may be raised. First of all, it is true that it is impossible to undo the modern disenchantment of the world. It is also indeed true that we cannot return to the pre-modern mode of philosophical thinking, nor is it desirable if such relapse is understood as a mere repetition of a once powerful pre-modern way of thinking as it was embodied, for example, in the Aristotelian thought of Thomas Aquinas. What is questionable, however, is his reading of Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy as an attempt to return to such a pre-modern way of thinking. And this is so not only because neither MacIntyre himself nor his philosophy can be seen as advocating such an attempt to return to a pre-modern mode of philosophical thinking embodied within the wider ontological hierarchical order of the world. Yet what is at stake is far more than Gray's reading of MacIntyre's thought, because it touches a much deeper philosophical problem of hermeneutic thinking. The fact that it is impossible uncritically to return to a pre-modern way of philosophical thinking does not preclude us from a hermeneutic attempt, an attempt which is itself paradigmatically modern (or rather post-modern), to *redevelop* a tradition of philosophical thought going back to the pre-modern age *within* the contemporary situation of late-modernity. Indeed, my own discussion of an alternative hermeneutic approach to the political will be understood

precisely as such a 'futuristic' (i.e. open to the future) hermeneutic attempt to re-develop the Aristotelian conception of the political within the context of the contemporary world. Secondly, it is highly questionable whether the prevailing humanism of our post-Enlightenment culture enabled by modern science can be traced back and conceptually linked to pre-modern thought as it was embodied in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and especially their medieval re-articulations by thinkers such as Albertus and Thomas Aquinas. It is equally questionable whether modern humanism is the further continuation of Socratic philosophy and then Christian theism. Furthermore, I doubt whether in order to go beyond the nihilism of contemporary humanist culture we need to renounce not only the Enlightenment but also Christianity and the entire European tradition. Such a reading of humanism is no doubt influenced by Heidegger's reading of the Western tradition of thought. In his post-*Being and Time* writings Heidegger argued that the entire tradition of Western philosophy has led to forgetfulness of *Dasein* and that the traditional Christian metaphysics was inherited by and transformed into modern science and technology. It is this extremely influential reading of Western metaphysics and modern science as that which, as Gianni Vattimo commenting on Heidegger has recently claimed, 'has brought the premises of Greek metaphysics to their logical conclusion',[4] which needs to be questioned. However, my task here will not be critically to engage with Heidegger and his interpretation of metaphysics and modern science, but rather to sketch an alternative philosophical narrative suggesting that traditional metaphysics and Christian theism have very little to do with modern conceptions of science and humanism.

On this account a truly humanist culture could start only in modernity and humanism should be understood through the paradigmatically modern notion of self-determination.[5] Many accounts of man's self-determination have been developed from the time of the Italian Renaissance. Probably one of the best known and most often cited is Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. What we find here is the formulation of an essentially modern idea of human freedom. In Pico's Platonic re-interpretation of the Biblical story of creation we read that God creates and places man in the middle of the world, where 'all things have been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders', and tells him that:

> Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar have we given thee, Adam, to the end that accord-

> ing to thy longing and according to thy judgement thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what function thou thy-self shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of the nature. We have set thee at the world's centre that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in this world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.[6]

What is important is that God places man in 'the middle' deliberately and that he, being neither of 'the lower' nor 'the higher' order, can at the same time become either if he wants to. Thus the free will to choose to be 'brutish' or 'divine' is not the consequence of man's sinful fall in the sight of God, as it is in, say, Augustine's philosophy when the notion of free will is linked to the original sin, but the deliberate act of God. Pico's language to emphasise the notion of free will then is strikingly modern: man, as opposed to 'all other beings' whose nature is 'limited and constrained within the bounds of laws', has no fixed in advance given nature but can determine himself according to his wishes and talents and hence become the nature he himself creates. And although, as Charles Taylor indicates, it is possible to find a similar conception of man as God's helper who is called to finish God's unfinished creation in the thought of some of the Church fathers, such as St Ambrose and Origen,[7] it nonetheless signifies and anticipates the revolt against the traditional conception of a cosmic order, the revolt which would later become so paradigmatic to modernity.

Another example of the notion of man's emancipation through a self-determining act can be found a century later in Descartes's philosophy. Whilst looking for the first principles of philosophy and the rules of scientific reasoning, Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* comes to the conclusion that nothing in the world (neither his body nor external reality nor even God) is certain, except the fact that he thinks. Thus he concludes that *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) is 'the first principle of philosophy I was seeking'.[8] It is not difficult to see

its novelty within the intellectual context of the early 17th century which, despite the confessional controversy and religious wars, was still shaped through Christian doctrine and traditional world-views. On Cartesian principles the thinking disengaged *ego* is the *only* certainty and therefore is antecedent to the omnipotent God and his creation. It is only through the postulation of the *ego*'s existence that Descartes is able to derive God and then external reality. What is important is not so much the formulation of inwardness which was apparent in and so important to Augustine. Augustine taught that finding the greatness and the infinite beauty of God was possible only through the inward reflection of one's soul, a lesson which arguably was much more important to Pascal than to Descartes. What interested Descartes was not the 'existentialist' inwardness *per se* but the establishment of the first principles from which one could construct the unshakable system of knowledge. It was believed that the latter would enable us to grasp the very laws of nature and the world. The novelty of Descartes, as Charles Taylor has argued, lies in the fact that the character of such knowledge is possible only if it is achieved through the act of disengagement from our 'ordinary and embodied way of experience' due to which the objectification of both our bodies, with their desires, and the external world could be achieved.[9] Thus Descartes's philosophy not only postulates the disengaged *ego* as the first certainty but also maintains that reality can be objectively approached only through a strictly defined objective method. What is significant is that such a conception of scientific enquiry prompted the gradual establishment of the mechanistic conception of the world. If for pre-modern thinkers, from Plato to Thomas Aquinas, rational reflection on the world was impossible without such teleological categories as that of a final end, in the thought of Descartes, Bacon and Hobbes the teleological conception of the universe becomes transformed into a mechanical conception. Furthermore, from a Platonic point of view the aim of philosophical reflection on the world was to arrive at the conception of the Good which was seen as being embodied in the general cosmic order of the world. Thus the aim of philosophical reflection was to discern the overall order of the universe which was also the order of the Good. It was precisely such an understanding of the world as a harmonious and perfective *Cosmos* that was gradually rejected by the mechanistic conception of the world of Descartes, Bacon, and Hobbes. The primary aim of the modern conception of science was not a mere reflection of the cosmic order and the Good embodied in it, but to achieve, as Francis Bacon claimed in his *New Atlantis*, 'the knowledge

of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible'.[10] For Plato, Aristotle and Augustine philosophical reflection was directed towards the ability to understand the harmonious cosmic order. Reflection then was meaningful in itself precisely because the self engaged in such activity not only exercised intellectual powers essential to humans but also through such contemplation itself became more divine[11] – through discerning the cosmic order and the Good the contemplating self would become a part of that harmonious cosmic order.[12] That is one of the reasons why neither for Plato and Aristotle nor for Augustine and Thomas was philosophical knowledge directed towards *praxis*,[13] as in scientific knowledge after the epistemological shift in the modern age. Philosophical contemplation was 'useful' as long as its reflection of the harmonious cosmic order helped to situate the human self within the perfective universe and in doing so give meaning to the self's existence. The self was always part of the wider structure of cosmic order and the 'practical' importance of philosophical contemplation was to embody that cosmic order within the sphere of human life. Hence the human self was always subordinated to this order not *vice versa*. This was not the case within the epistemological paradigm of Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes and their 19th and 20th century successors. They saw the meaning of scientific enquiry in its practical usefulness as the ability to reshape the human environment and nature through an active *intervention* made possible by technological innovation and instrumental rationality in general. And it was possible due to the modern scientific innovation to apply formal knowledge based on calculative/mathematical methods to the world conceived as matter without any qualitative differences.[14] Thus the Cartesian disengagement from the world through the act of the self-determining thinking *ego* not only symbolises the modern shift from the classical and medieval conception of the world as hierarchical cosmic order. It also contributes to the renouncing of this order, the order which was gradually changed into a mechanistic conception of the world.

This revolt against the traditional cosmic order through the gradual establishment of a mechanistic, anti-teleological conception of the world is clearly associated with the modern notion of self-determination. The emancipation of the individual goes hand in hand with the paradigmatically modern conception of science and technology as the instruments to reshape the world in accordance with human wishes and desires. But if this is so, then the truly humanist culture – the culture where everything is subordinated to the fulfilment of human freedom

and desires – could have started only in modernity and only due to the gradual decline of the traditional teleological cosmic order. Thus if this interpretation is correct, then John Gray is wrong in his claim that 'the pre-modern Western view of the world' was 'inherently supportive of human values',[15] by which he means that human values were projected onto the world. And this is so because it was not human values which were projected onto the world thus determining the pre-modern *Weltanschauung*. Rather human values were deduced/ derived from the teleological cosmic order. Human beings were part of the wider cosmic ontological order and hence their values and rational standards were subordinated to that order. It is only after Descartes that 'the disposition of things' ceased to be 'the measure of rationality' and 'the ultimate criteria of rationality' ceased to conform to 'this order itself'.[16] It is only in modernity, which appears in its paradigmatic guise of the affirmation of human emancipation, that it becomes fully possible to project human values and desires on the world through scientific instrumental rationality, enabling the active intervention into and exploitation of nature. It is in this sense that we can claim that the modern notion of self-determination was the emancipation *from* and the revolt *against* the traditional teleological cosmic order. The emancipation of man and individual which, as Ernst Cassirer argued, started from and was so essential to the Renaissance,[17] became fully possible only due to the decline of the hierarchico-teleological order of the world. Accordingly, truly humanist culture could have happened neither in Ancient Greece nor in Medieval Europe without such a cosmological and epistemological shift. It was this shift which enabled humanity's liberation from the heavy cosmic order of being to which pre-modern man was subordinated. Hence the disenchantment of the world, for the first time so distinctively embodied in the Cartesian disengaged *ego*, was a necessary condition for the establishment of, and arrival at, the truly humanist culture in which we live today.

Liberalism and modernity

So far we have been discussing the nature of modern humanism suggesting that it is only in modernity, due to the development of modern science and instrumental rationality being closely linked to the modern notion of human freedom as self-determination, that a truly humanist culture has become possible. Thus understood 'humanism' is based not only on the idea, as Heidegger claimed, that 'man becomes the relational centre of that which is as such'.[18] It is also based on the belief

that all moral sources of human activity are within humanity itself (whether in autonomous reason or in human sentiments and desires). Man becomes the law-giver in the broadest sense: he is the self-determining being who can freely reshape not only his immediate natural environment but also freely choose and determine even his own nature. The ultimate horizon of such a culture is the expansion of humanism to the extent that nature itself – something which traditionally was beyond human control and was seen as lying under the providence of God – becomes humanised and tamed, first through modern sciences and later through such late-modern scientific technologies as genetic engineering and modification, reproductive cloning, and various surgical techniques of sex changing. The Fichtean distinction between nature and culture ceases to make sense in late-modernity precisely because nature shrinks to the extent that everything becomes culture. Today we have approached a new era in human history when our biology, our natural environment, and the biology of non-human species will be determined not by Nature or God, but by the fashions of our culture, ever more sophisticated scientific technologies, the economic relations of the free-market, and the flow of global capital. However, any picture of modern humanist culture will be radically impoverished without discussion of the development of the predominant political ideas and institutions of modernity. Here my primary concerns will be the following. Firstly, I shall attempt to show the conceptual continuity between the ideas of early modern or/and Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and their late-modern successors such as John Rawls. Secondly, I shall note how understanding of the political from the late 16th century onwards has been primarily linked to the modern conception of the state. My interpretation of liberalism is thus in line with Alasdair MacIntyre's and John Gray's claim that liberalism is *the* political theory, ideology, and institutional practice/order of modernity and that it is in liberalism that the Enlightenment project is 'now most powerfully, and certainly most pervasively, embodied'.[19]

Since the beginning of the modern age in the 17th century the distinctive feature of political philosophy has lain not so much in the changing conception of the legitimacy of political authority (i.e. the legitimacy of political authority comes not from God, as was argued by the proponents of the divine right of kings, but is the result of people's consent through social contract)[20] as in the gradual consolidation of individualism. The theory of natural rights and the conception of social contract were widespread long before Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

However, what was different between the Hobbesian and Lockean, on the one hand, and, for example, the 16th century's theories of social contract, on the other, was that there still was a strong theological motive within the latter (i.e. social contract is first of all the pact between God and the political body together with the magistrate and then between people and the civic magistrate).[21] Furthermore and more importantly, the 16th century's contract theory (as it was embodied in Johannes Althusius's thought, for example) was 'corporativistic' in the sense that the main social contract was the result of a pact not between individuals *as such* but between different corporations and guilds, on the one hand, and the magistrate, on the other. Thus the idea that the main social contract could result from agreement between free and equal individuals as such was absent in pre-17th century political theory. It was precisely such individualism that became essential to the political theories of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and even Rousseau. We can link such 17th century individualism with our above claim that the notion of self-determination is paradigmatic for modernity. That is to say, the moral/political equivalents to the self-determining disengaged *ego* of Cartesian epistemology are the Kantian autonomous self, being able to act according to self-determining autonomous reason, and Lockean free and equal individuals, who come together to establish political community in order to safeguard their 'natural' and equal rights. In all of these cases the emancipation of the modern individual is already in place. However, despite the significant differences between these theories, it is important to note their common premises. We shall see that contemporary liberalism largely accepts and continues them.

First of all, as is already clear from what was said above, one of the most fundamental features of these theories was, what may be called, the ontological primacy of the individual. Individuals from the very beginning and by 'nature' are free and equal and thus have ontological primacy over the political community.[22] Such ontological primacy of the individual was a characteristic feature not only of the theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Kant but also of Rousseau, despite the fact that neither Hobbes nor Rousseau can be seen as founders of classical liberalism.[23] At the heart of this notion is the distinctively modern idea that the main normative principles constituting the establishment of political community are the result of the rational consent of ontologically primary free and equal individuals. What is important is that such a conception of political community as derived from the ontological freedom of individuals is a fundamental premise not only in the theories of Hobbes, Locke and Kant but also of contemporary liberalism as it is embodied

in such thinkers as John Rawls, Robert Nozick and Ronald Dworkin.[24] All of these and other philosophers start to construct their moral and political theories precisely from this paradigmatically modern notion of the ontological primacy and freedom of the individual.

Secondly, 17th century contract theory lays the foundation for the development of, what can provisionally be called, the 'minimal' conception of the political community.[25] That is to say, if the state and/or political community are the result of autonomous individuals' rational consent, and if its primary aim is to secure peace and 'life, liberty, and estate' (as it is in Locke's case), then political community and the political are secondary with respect to individual (i.e. personal/subjective) conceptions of the good and the individual's attempts to realise them. The fundamental premise of such an approach is that individuals are self-sufficient in their pursuits and understanding of the good, and thus political community is important to the extent and in as much as individuals cannot solve by themselves the conflicts which are inevitable in their pursuit of happiness and in defence of their rights.

Thirdly, such 'minimal' conception of political community was partly related to the gradual decline of the teleological mode of thinking, which from the 17th century has been gradually excluded from moral and political contexts as well as from the wider philosophical/scientific tradition.[26] The scientific and philosophical achievements of Newton, Bacon, Pascal and Descartes, as already noted above, contributed to the establishment of a mechanistic conception of the world which not only gradually detached itself from theology. It also adopted the view that only through objective mathematical methods was it possible to describe the mechanical laws of the world. Previously essential concepts of end/purpose and meaning were gradually excluded from the modern epistemological paradigm. A political reason for this shift relates to the radical divide of Christendom. The 16th century's religious wars encouraged detachment from the at that time still dominant Christian world view which, despite differences between Aristotelian realism and Ockhamist nominalism, was formed through scholastic teleology. This division and religious warfare posed not only the fundamental political question of how to restore civil order and peace within the highly divided European societies. It also rendered pressing the related theological question of how the Christian faith is possible once the inevitable fact that there are different readings of the Bible and different communities of worship is accepted. An influential answer to the latter question was provided by John Locke in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. The only way to preserve and foster the

Christian faith, so Locke argued, is to accept that the competence of the civil magistrate is strictly separated from religious matters and that there is no way that the magistrate (or any other external authority), using its legitimate means of 'fire and the sword', can foster the 'true religion', for the 'controversy of these churches about the truth of their doctrines, and the purity of their worship, is on both sides equal'. Accordingly the best any civil government can do is to be neutral towards these 'free and voluntary societies'.[27] Such an approach was closely linked to and provided the conceptual resources for engaging with the problem of civil disorder. That is to say, the way to restore political order and peace is through accepting the idea that the state has to limit itself to securing order and preserving 'life, liberty, and estate' only. In this sense Locke's political philosophy anticipates modern liberalism in a twofold way. First of all, the civil government has to be neutral towards competing voluntary communities of faith not only because its coercive means are essentially foreign to religion and its practices. It is also because there is no, and cannot be any, external arbiter who could objectively judge as to which doctrine approximates more closely to the truth. Secondly, the competence of the political authority has to derive from and be limited by free and equal individuals' consent and should see its role only in securing civil order and peace.

It is here that the conceptual link between classical and contemporary liberalism, as arguably most famously embodied in John Rawls's thought, can be seen. It is possible to characterize John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* as an attempt to rearticulate and continue classical contract theory within the contemporary context of a multicultural society.[28] One of the fundamental questions which Rawls seeks to answer is how justice is possible within a society in which there is a variety of different and often incompatible conceptions of the good and where the conflict between different moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines is an ineliminable feature of the contemporary world.[29] The answer that he provides is his theory of justice. Fundamental to this theory is the famous notion of the 'original position', which he links to the pre-civic state of the classical contract theory. This is so not in the sense that the social contract that follows from it institutes a concrete civil society; rather, it is the hypothetical condition from which the fundamental principles of justice can derive. The essential feature of the original position is that all its individuals, who hypothetically come to deliberate and establish the fundamental principles of justice, should suspend their knowledge not

only about their conceptions of the good (which Rawls later called 'comprehensive doctrines'), but also their moral and psychological inclinations, talents, wealth, and status in society. This necessary condition of the original position – the veil of ignorance – is needed in order to guarantee that each individual will be impartial and fair. This, according to Rawls, will enable everyone to agree on the fundamental principles of justice. If this condition is fulfilled, then the principles of justice derived from the original position will be approved by all rational individuals. Having established this, Rawls gives an account of what these principles are. The first is the principle of equal liberty, according to which each individual should have 'the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the similar liberty of the others'. The second is the principle of difference according to which social and economic differences should be so arranged that they would benefit the worst off and that the positions of social and economic importance would be open to all.[30]

Such a conception of justice as fairness, which Rawls sees as essential to liberal democratic institutions providing their citizens with 'universal rights', requires neutrality towards different conceptions of the good. Thus, in a similar manner to Locke, it implies that the space of the political, in as much as it is linked to the formulation and embodiment of fundamental normative principles, should be separated from deliberation as to which of these different conceptions of the good are true or better. Rawls is explicit about this when he says that political liberalism is not concerned with whether the moral judgments, which derive from these conceptions, are true or not.[31] This in principle Lockean idea – that substantial dialectical deliberation about the validity of different conceptions of the good should be separated from the political authority – again presupposes that the space of the political is 'minimal'. That is to say, the sphere of aims and meaning is left to the individuals themselves, while the political domain should remain impartial towards the varying aims and individual conceptions of the good life.

Rawls himself provides a historical narrative within which he situates his conceptions of justice and political liberalism.[32] He rightly claims that since the Reformation division and irreconcilable conflict have become part of European culture, maintaining that acceptance of reasonable pluralism is inevitable. It is also true that the nature of modern pluralism is closely linked to religious pluralism which has a specific transcendental element making compromise particularly difficult.[33] Furthermore, it is equally true that the nature of Christianity, as the