

*Liberalism.* By John Gray. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. 1986.

Given its brevity—93 pages of text—John Gray's *Liberalism* is remarkable for its scope and for the amount of supporting argumentation it manages to include in its exposition of "the political theory [whose] postulates are the most distinctive features of modern life." Thanks to its clarity of presentation the book is an excellent introduction to its subject, while at the same time the handling of issues will offer rewards to many political philosophers.

The presentation is in two parts, the first historical and the second philosophical. In both cases the focal point is the "classical liberalism" that had its ancient anticipations in Greek Sophism, Roman jurisprudence, and Christian individualism and universalism, and its modern precursors in Hobbes and Spinoza. Gray finds its foundational formulation in Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, and its first comprehensive and systematic expression in the social philosophers and political economists of the Scottish Enlightenment. It was transformed into "revisionist" liberalism in the pivotal figure of J. S. Mill, but is today undergoing revival in classical form at the hands most notably of F. A. Hayek, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Ludwig von Mises, and, more equivocally, John Rawls and Robert Nozick.

Gray's overarching thesis is that throughout these changes, "liberalism" since Locke remains a unified tradition whose central elements are individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meliorism (understood as belief in the "improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements"). In the political domain it is identified with constitutionalism and the principle of limited government, but only contingently related to popular democracy, and on guard against "totalitarian democracy." In the economic domain, classical liberalism endorses private property and the free market, and Gray offers an extended argument against "revisionist" liberalism where it compromises these principles.

The immediate problem with the thesis is the bedfellows it makes of intractable opponents: Berlin and Bosanquet, Hayek and Mill, Nozick and Mill, Hayek and Max Weber, Rawls and Bentham, Lock and Kant. By casting so wide a net, Gray appears to have hauled in a welter of contradictions, undermining his "unified tradition" thesis. A few examples will serve to illustrate the point.

Gray includes T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet as revisionist liberals, but as we have just indicated, one of the four hallmarks of liberalism according to Gray is individualism, and Green and Bosanquet were not individualists in anything resembling the liberal meaning of the term, but anti-individualists. True, both Green and Bosanquet regarded themselves as individualists, and both use the term "the individual" normatively. But ac-

ording to both the one true individual is the Absolute, which is everything that is, brought to fulfillment in an undifferentiated One. Persons as distinctive individuals among others of their kind are mere appearances, representing a low level of evolutionary development toward the inevitable final outcome which is the Absolute. Certainly it is the Absolute Idealists that Isaiah Berlin has foremost in mind when he finds totalitarian implications in the concept of "positive" freedom. What is decisively anti-liberal in Absolute Idealism is the metaphysical doctrine that greater reality is possessed by the more inclusive whole. The Absolute, being all-inclusive, is totally real; but beneath it and on the way to it, society is a more inclusive whole than particular persons, therefore (by Absolute Idealist reasoning) it is more real than they, and unconditionally authoritative with respect to them. What this makes of the freedom of persons is most forthrightly put by F. H. Bradley in "My Station and Its Duties." Freedom enables persons to gladly accept the station that society assigns to each.

Perhaps not contradiction, but certainly semantic and conceptual confusion enters Gray's delineation of the liberal tradition by the amplitude he allows to the idea of limited government. At one end it includes "night watchman" minimalists (Humboldt, Herbert Spencer, Robert Nozick), while at the other it "may even encompass something akin to a welfare state." This raises the question whether the "unified tradition" thesis derives its credibility from vagueness in the definition of the tradition's essential characteristics. After all, all governments are "limited" by the logical principle, *omnis determinatio est negatio*; a government is not a porpoise, or a tree, the present government of the United States is not the present government of Mexico, etc. To be sure, liberals are concerned with a certain kind of limitation, namely limitation of a government's authority with respect to the persons who are its subjects; but without narrower specification "liberalism" will include every political view short of unmitigated totalitarianism and anarchism.

To the question, "Is there a distinctively liberal conception of freedom?," Gray offers an interesting and—to me at any rate—compelling answer, but not without serious problems of internal consistency. To begin with he cites as "not altogether mistaken" the familiar identification of classical liberalism with "negative" freedom and revisionist liberalism with "positive" freedom. His response to Berlin's argument that positive freedom is anti-liberal is to contend that Berlin fails to distinguish among very different positive conceptions, only some of which are anti-liberal. In particular Gray points to the positive conception of freedom as autonomy in the sense of individual self-determination, which he says "seems entirely congenial to liberal concerns and to have an assured place within the liberal intellectual tradition." Citing Spinoza, Kant, and Mill as leading advocates, Gray himself defends autonomy as the best candidate for the distinctively liberal conception of freedom.

Gray is correct about the deficiency—a glaring one—in Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty." He correctly notes that it is first of all Hegel against whom Berlin's attack is properly directed. But this makes an anomaly of Gray's inclusion of T. H. Green and Bosanquet among "revisionist liberals," for as fellow Absolute Idealists, their conception of freedom is identical to Hegel's.

As part of his endeavor to establish "autonomy" as liberalism's conception of freedom, Gray takes up an issue between Mill and Hayek on the subject. In Chapter 3 of *On Liberty* ("Of Individuality") and elsewhere, Mill holds that individual autonomy, or self-direction, is irreconcilable with convention-bound thought and conduct, and with the blind perpetuation of received tra-

dition. Hayek responds that Mill has unwittingly attacked perhaps the most important condition of individual freedom, namely perpetuation of the conventions and received tradition of liberalism itself. Gray sides with Hayek, arguing that Mill has misconceived autonomy. "A conception of autonomy that is plausible and defensible need not be infused with the animus towards convention and traditions that pervades some of Mill's writings. The ideal of autonomy, as it figures in social psychology, connotes not the inner-directed man who is unmindful of his social environment, but rather the critical and self-critical man whose allegiance to his society's norms is informed by the best exercise of his rational powers." But Gray here mistakes Hayek's position, for Hayek expressly precludes individuals' exercise of their rational powers on their received (liberal) tradition and conventions in the (I think warranted) belief that this is sure to introduce rupture. Thus in volume one of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Hayek says that a tradition is "likely to be fairly constant ... so long as [the rules at its core] are not articulated in words and therefore also are not discussed or consciously examined." This is a long way from Gray's "critical and self-critical man whose allegiance to society's norms is informed by the best exercise of his rational powers." (Incidentally Gray says "man" throughout the book where he should be saying "person"—or has this convention not yet in his native England received the critical scrutiny that has been directed to it elsewhere?)

On the contrary, I think that Gray's position is in fact that of Mill, who does not argue for (an impossible) traditionless and conventionless life (and certainly did not himself endeavor to live in such a fashion). Mill opposes the mindless perpetuation of received tradition and conventions, and he does so in behalf of chosen tradition and conventions. He perceives that by choosing one's lifestyle one at the same time chooses one's meaningful tradition, made up of the contributions of one's predecessors in that lifestyle. Putting the matter in the narrower terms of vocation for purposes of illustration—Mill knew as well as anyone that to choose (say) to become an engineer is not to re-invent the profession of engineering, but to commit oneself to the tradition of engineering, beginning with the obligation to learn from that tradition. At the same time Mill saw that to unreflectively perpetuate (say) the religious beliefs that one was trained to accept in one's dependent childhood is, in this measure, to live not autonomously but derivatively.

Correlatively Mill recognized that traditions lapse into empty forms and die out when they do not receive perpetual revitalization from successive generations of persons who choose to perpetuate them in full knowledge of alternatives. To be sure, Hayek is correct in his judgment that given the opportunity of choice, not all choosers will commit themselves to the perpetuation of their received tradition. But the path endorsed by Hayek leads to the desuetude of liberalism by precluding the requisite revitalizations.

What Mill sought, I think, was a *tradition* of autonomous individuality within which persons choose their determinate traditions by choosing their lifestyles. This can be conceptualized as a metatradition embracing a panoply of alternative limited traditions. Such an arrangement is depicted by Robert Nozick in Part 3 ("Utopia") of his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

Gray defines the autonomy of the individual as "his ability effectively to implement his life-plans," and recognizes that this ability has necessary conditions. Accordingly he recommends that "basic liberties" (freedom of speech, of association, of movement, etc.) be "conceived as framing the necessary

conditions of autonomous agency." What this does is to transform the freedom of classical liberalism from an intrinsic to an instrumental value, for that freedom *consisted in* the "basic liberties."

Having introduced the idea of necessary conditions of freedom, Gray is bound to grant that coercion may take the form not just of direct obstruction or control, but also of preclusion of necessary conditions. Moreover it remains coercion whatever may be its source, i.e. whether it results from interpersonal action or inaction, or from structural features of society. Gray affirms that property is among the necessary conditions of autonomy, and is therefore consistent in defending property as a basic right. Regarding the distribution of property he argues that "free markets represent the only non-coercive means of coordinating economic activity in a complex industrial society." But he has made this an empirical question. According to the latest governmental study (1983), the top fifth of families in the United States own 80 percent of net family wealth, while the bottom fifth owns 0.2 percent, which is to say that the top fifth has 400 times the wealth of the bottom fifth. I think that if Gray's connection (through "autonomy") of freedom to necessary conditions and thence to property be granted, then these figures belie his claim that "free markets represent the only non-coercive means of coordinating economic activity in a complex industrial society." Granted, the United States is not and never has been a pure free market economy; but if (as I think) the maxim that "wealth begets wealth" is true, then the above disproportion would be much greater if we were a free market society.

When the disproportion is factored into freedom and thence into individuality, as it is by Gray's definition of freedom as autonomy, then it makes a mockery of liberalism's *egalitarianism*, included by Gray among its four definitive characteristics. Classical liberalism maintained equality of persons by defining freedom purely formally (freedom under law by constitutional guarantee), and I think any classical liberal must condemn Gray's identification of freedom with autonomy as opening the floodgates with respect to positive rights. Nevertheless I think that Gray moves in the right—indeed, the obligatory—direction, for where the concept of freedom is totally divorced from questions of enablement, it is, as Anatole France said, but the freedom of rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, in which case those who do not possess it are prudent to seek tangible benefits instead, and the majority of those who possess it are prudent to trade it for tangible benefits.

To sum up on Gray's overarching thesis, I think that his endeavor to show that classical and revisionist liberalism constitute a single unified tradition demonstrates the very opposite, namely that they are disparate and irreconcilable traditions that produce grinding contradictions when combined. But this aside, the book has many virtues, among the foremost of which is Gray's work with freedom as individual autonomy.

In order to reconcile individual autonomy with liberalism Gray recognizes that he must distinguish between "relatively open or closed" conceptions of autonomy. A conception of autonomy is relatively closed when it holds that "autonomous agents are bound to converge on a single form of life or agree on a unified body of truths." Such a conception is illiberal (and indeed self-contradictory) because it pre-determines the choice that must be made by whomever it will regard as possessing "true" freedom. Gray acknowledges that the best-known conceptions of individual autonomy in the history of philosophy—he mentions the Stoics, Spinoza, and Kant, and earlier has included Hegel—are closed conceptions. But he rightly holds out the possibility of an

open conception that does not demand convergence upon a single plan of life, but regards moral progress as the progressive realization of many rational plans of life.

This is a productive line of thought; but Gray shows no sign of recognizing that it saddles him with the very problem that he has earlier termed "decisive" against "any prospect of reviving a natural law ethics." It is "that the various components of human flourishing may often be in intractable conflict with one another." The conflict is of two sorts, interindividual and intraindividual; that is, one person's flourishing may conflict with other persons' flourishing, and also, the requirements for flourishing "may be conflicting or competitive even in a single man."

Gray defines the autonomous individual as "the individual who is not ruled by others, and who rules himself," and it is plainly the case that self-ruling individuals will sometimes be in conflict with one another, and also that the various components of the self (e.g. beliefs, reasons, dispositions, habits, volitions, desires) will sometimes be in internal conflict. Why is this recognition "decisive" against natural law ethics, but not against Gray's own conception of freedom as individual autonomy?

For my part I think that the two kinds of conflict in no way constitute a refutation, either of Gray's "autonomy" or of natural law theory. They constitute, exactly, a problem for both theories, which is to say, a difficulty, but were theories refuted by difficulties, there would be no theory that was not instantly self-refuting. The question is, can the difficulties that arise for a given theory be managed (solving, dissolving, overcoming, coping, are among the forms of management) in a reasonable way without fatally compromising the theory?

What Gray does by taking the difficulties of natural law theory to be decisive refutation of it is to cut himself off from the tradition of profound and constructive thought about the difficulties of conflict that beset his own theory of freedom as individual autonomy. I have in mind the tradition of eudaimonistic thought founded by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. All three are advocates of freedom as individual autonomy, to be sure of the "closed" variety, and it is surprising that Gray does not include at least Aristotle in his list of prominent advocates of "closed" autonomy, since Aristotle figures prominently throughout the book.

I think it is not an exaggeration to say that ninety percent of the extant writings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are devoted directly or indirectly to the problems of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict, in terms on the one hand of analysis, and on the other of proposed resolution. What do they offer? It would not be mistaken to say that the beginning and the end of it is the metaphysical principle of the inherent "congeniality" of the varieties of goodness or human excellence. But to dismiss this as unwarranted and counter-intuitive apriorism, as is routinely done today, is to ignore what goes on *between* the beginning and the end. What the metaphysical principle of the congeniality of excellences is is a functional presupposition. It attests that among actual human excellences as they appear in the world, harmony subsists *in potentia*. This is not to say that harmony is already achieved, nor is it to hold that it will be the inevitable outcome of processes that work independently of human initiative, by some metaphysical "invisible hand."

Briefly on internal (intraindividual) conflict: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle held that it is the given condition of the individual soul (depicted in Plato's image of the soul as chariot, charioteer, and two fractious horses). This is the

basic problem that every person is to him- or herself, upon the solution to which depends all hope of progress with problems of any other sort: human being is problematic being, and therefore the primary virtue is integrity (*eudaimonia*), an internal organization achieved under the governance of reason, through its apprehension of a goal of development, which is the proper or best life for (a) a human being, and (b) the particular human being one is.

With respect to interindividual conflict, the approach to its resolution is laid down by the recognition that self-sustaining harmony in social relations presupposes inner harmony ("integrity") in the persons who interrelate. There is no invisible hand being invoked here. Because conflict exists, while the ideal of conflict-free harmony is largely ideal and only minimally actual, human institutions (the law, the judiciary, customs, mores, patterns of education) must be brought to bear upon the problems of conflict resolution and conflict prevention. Nearly all political theories agree on this. What distinguishes eudaimonistic political theory is its prescription that the methods of conflict, resolution and prevention, and the kinds of institutions brought to bear, be such as are conducive to, and not obstructive of, the moral growth of individuals that eventuates in worthy lives.

A leading example of obstruction to worthy living as eudaimonistically conceived is the Hobbesian premise of intractable egoism in all persons, and the institutions built upon this premise. I think it will be evident on reflection that if Hobbes is right, then classical liberalism's "negative" freedom is the appropriate understanding, and there can be no point in Gray's move to the positive conception of individual autonomy.

Gray cannot himself do all of the philosophical work that his conception of freedom demands, any more than can a person who chooses to become an engineer re-invent engineering. Nor can he get the help he needs from modernity, where the concept of individual autonomy (as Gray's book abundantly attests) sits uncomfortably. But there is real promise, I think, in a revival of classical eudaimonism as revised in the direction of Gray's "open" conception of individual autonomy.

DAVID L. NORTON

*University of Delaware*