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’.

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. 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 ‘representationalist 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 logoscentrism – which I understand as the conception in which human reason mirrors the structure of the world – are affirmed.

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