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# Global utopias and clashing civilizations: misunderstanding the present

JOHN GRAY

Those who have gone before me in giving the Martin Wight Memorial Lecture have been persons of great distinction; I am ill prepared to follow the example they have set. Among them Herbert Butterfield and Michael Howard sought to give us an account of the relations of states with one another, and of governments with their subjects, in which the claims of morality and of practical necessity are in some degree balanced. Each believed that, though ethics and the context of power in which sovereign states must live make demands on government that will never be fully compatible, serious thought and wise policy must nevertheless strive to reconcile them. In that conviction I follow my predecessors. I cannot hope to match the eloquence with which they defended their conviction that a pure philosophy of right and a philosophy in which expediency is everything are equally, and necessarily, incomplete. My hope can be only to add a modest rider to their reasonings.

Let me state summarily my conclusions, before I try to present the thoughts that have led me to them. It is commonly supposed that there is at present only one legitimate type of government: at the close of the twentieth century liberal democracy is the only political regime that passes ethical muster. Other regimes may be justified as stages on the way to liberal democratic institutions, or as unavoidably imperfect approximations to them; but liberal democracy alone can be fully legitimate. As Francis Fukuyama put it in a hyperbolic statement of this now orthodox view, liberal democracy is 'the final form of human government'.<sup>1</sup>

I will not dispute the great virtues of democratic institutions; but I wish to suggest that democracy is justified by the human needs that it serves, and that these are complex, have varying degrees of importance in different circumstances and are sometimes conflicting. Governments are legitimate in so far as they meet the needs of their citizens. Those that fail in this will be judged by

<sup>1</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history', *National Interest*, summer 1989, and *The end of history and the last man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). For a more recent statement of Fukuyama's views, see *The end of order* (London: Social Market Foundation, 1997).

their citizens to be illegitimate whether or not they are democracies. People everywhere demand from governments security against the worst evils: war and civil disorder, criminal violence, and lack of the means of decent subsistence. How a state performs this protective role is the core test of its legitimacy. Unless it is discharged competently no other criterion can come into play. Thus it is not whether a state is a liberal democracy that most fundamentally determines its legitimacy; it is how well it secures its citizens against the worst evils. This is a universal requirement, rooted in human needs that are universal; but how it is best met depends on many and varying circumstances. No one regime is always and everywhere the best.

Against Fukuyama, I will argue that what he calls 'democratic capitalism' has no prospect of becoming universal. A world consisting only of liberal democratic regimes is not an inevitability: it is a utopia, a state of affairs made unrealizable by some of the most powerful forces of the age.

Moreover, even though it cannot be achieved, Fukuyama's utopia of global democratic capitalism is far from being an innocuous ideal. On the contrary, its hold on our thinking risks rendering more difficult the task of addressing the central issues that face international relations in the post-Cold War period. In any future that can be foreseen a diversity of regimes is both inevitable and desirable. Devising terms of productive coexistence for regimes that will remain deeply different from one another is the issue set to dominate the international system in the coming century.

The international system will continue to contain different regimes, partly because it will harbour different cultures. Late modern societies are not all alike. Nineteenth-century theories of progress held that as countries throughout the world adopted modern technologies and techniques of production they would assimilate the values of the European societies that first achieved modernity. History does not support that Enlightenment faith.

Here I agree with one of Fukuyama's critics, Samuel Huntington: modernization and westernization are not one and the same.<sup>2</sup> The late modern world is not treading a road that leads inevitably to a universal civilization. Instead, as ever more countries enter into late modernity, enduring differences between cultures are acquiring a greater practical importance. Huntington argues that foreign policies which depend for their efficacy on a universal consensus on values are dangerous. He is right in stating that, contrary to some claims about the universal authority of current conceptions of human rights, there is no such consensus in the offing. But Huntington's cure for the liberal illusion of universally accepted values is worse in its effects than the disease it aims to treat.

In our time international conflict does not come from 'clashes of civilizations'. As it has done in every age, it arises from the conflicting interests and

<sup>2</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

policies of states. To represent the contemporary international system as 'the West versus the rest',<sup>3</sup> as Huntington has done, risks making these manageable conflicts intractable.

Differing cultural traditions are surely among the sources of international conflict today; by themselves, however, they rarely lead to major conflicts between states. It is their interactions with scarcities of resources, rival claims on territory, conflicting agendas on trade and historic memories of ethnic or religious enmity that make cultural differences a source of war. Thinking of international conflicts as clashes of civilizations involves a grand and dangerous simplification of these complicated and often obscure interactions.

### **The return to history**

When Francis Fukuyama claimed that history had ended, he advanced an interpretation of our current circumstances that was at once less and more remote from reality than the view which is normally attributed to him. He did not contend that war was about to wither away, that every state in the world was on the brink of becoming a liberal democracy, or that no new dictatorships would ever arise. He maintained merely that only one kind of state could henceforth claim legitimacy. The Cold War had ended with the triumph of 'democratic capitalism'. The rivalry between centrally planned economies and the world's market economies had closed with a complete victory for the latter. As a consequence, what Fukuyama called 'the Western idea' had become universal: Western-style liberal democratic institutions provided the norm for states everywhere.

This interpretation of recent historical events distorts our understanding of the present. Both Fukuyama and most of his critics accept that his account of the triumph of the Western idea applies most unambiguously to the Soviet collapse of 1989–91. Yet even in that limited context it is short-sighted. The system of ideas that vanished when the Soviet state imploded was not an alien intrusion into Western civilization. It embodied the central ambitions of the European Enlightenment. Like other Enlightenment ideologies, classical Marxism can be traced back to the most ancient traditions of Western thought. It was a synthesis of many disparate ideas, such as the economics of Smith and Ricardo and the philosophies of Hegel, Feuerbach and Lucretius. These are not thinkers on the margins of Western civilization: their doctrines were conceived and propagated from within its heartlands.

In retrospect there is a hint of absurdity in describing the Cold War as a conflict between East and West. No doubt Soviet Marxism could not help absorbing some of its flavour from distinctively Russian traditions and circumstances; but its role in Russia was that of a westernizing ideology. When the Soviet state

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Huntington, 'The West v. the rest', *Guardian*, 23 Nov. 1996.

collapsed, one of this century's most ambitious experiments in westernization suffered a major setback. Russia returned to many of its historic ambivalences in its relations with Europe. The Soviet collapse was not a victory for 'the Western idea'. It was a defeat for a prototypically *Western* project of modernization.

Though Fukuyama never subscribed to the view that the end of the Cold War would usher in an era of perpetual global peace, he did maintain—and, so far as I know, still does—that large-scale wars will not occur when ideological conflicts have disappeared. Perhaps he is right; but it is hard to see what it is that justifies his confidence. The end of ideological conflicts does not mean the triumph of a single ideology—the 'Western idea' of liberal democracy. It means the political irrelevance of ideologies, and a return to the classical sources of conflict among (and within) states. The Soviet collapse encompassed more than the ruin of one variety of Marxism. It marked the end of the rivalry between central planning and the market economy. To that extent Fukuyama cannot be faulted. But the fall of communism surely meant a good deal more than the end of a Western debate about the merits of different economic systems. It meant the close of an era in which political conflicts were animated by secular ideologies.

During the two centuries between the French Revolution and the Soviet collapse many international and political conflicts were understood—both by the protagonists and by those who sought to explain the conflicts—as collisions between ideologies. No doubt this was never more than partly true. Even at the height of the Cold War, more traditional geostrategic imperatives were undoubtedly at work. Yet the greatest conflicts of our own century cannot be fully understood if, in a spirit of *realpolitik*, their ideological dimensions are viewed as insignificant. The period from 1789 to 1989 was one in which war and competition among states involved, sometimes as a central factor, rival ideologies of government. What distinguished that period was that conflicts often arose among regimes professing rival *secular* faiths. To be sure, enmities were fought out and partitions imposed—in Armenia, Ireland, India, Cyprus—that had little to do with any Enlightenment world-view. Yet by the 1930s a pattern had been established of conflict between regimes and parties embodying opposed secular faiths. The Second World War was a conflict between an alliance of states dedicated to different Enlightenment ideals and a counter-Enlightenment regime of a peculiarly radical and terrible kind. The defeat of Nazism gave another lease of life to Enlightenment universalism that is only now running out.

Fukuyama's model for international conflict is the Cold War. To expect that the passing of that singular era could remove any of the major sources of war or civil division betrays a remarkable narrowness of historical perspective. A struggle between contending Enlightenment ideologies, the Cold War exemplifies only one aspect of twentieth-century experience. It is natural to expect that, in the future, as in the past, there will be territorial disputes arising from the destruction and creation of states, struggles among religious communities for political power, and wars for control of scarce resources. That is the classical terrain of conflict among states, harsh but familiar, to which the world has in

fact returned. In any historical perspective longer than that of the Cold War it is clear that such conflicts are rarely problems that can be wholly solved.

Fukuyama's blindness to the intractabilities of history has a practical implication. In the post-historical future which he projects, the economic burdens of national defence will become progressively lighter. On any longer view, the end of the Cold War augurs no general or enduring peace dividend. Fukuyama's view is historically myopic in another way. In retrospect, the ideological conflicts of the Cold War look like episodes in the history of secularization of a few European countries. To argue that the end of ideology brings history to an end is to treat the development of that handful of cultures as a guide to the future of the entire species. Yet there is little reason to suppose that, as they become more modern, countries whose central religious traditions are Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim or Orthodox Christian will follow the Protestant and Catholic countries of western Europe in becoming more secular. Fukuyama assumes that as societies modernize, religious affiliations will be relegated to the sphere of voluntary association. In this he voices the Enlightenment faith, held in common by Whigs, positivists and Marxists, that modernity and secularism are inseparably intertwined. The trouble with this view of history is that its predictive value has proved to be zero.

If one starts with the premise that modernization and secularization are everywhere interconnected, it is hard to begin to understand the challenges now facing the world's oldest and most successful modernist regime, that of Atatürkist Turkey. It is difficult to account for the growing strength of Hindu nationalist parties. It is not easy to comprehend the deep religiosity of American society, which functions as the exemplar of a 'post-historical' society throughout Fukuyama's argument. Fukuyama cannot convincingly explain why economic modernization and religious fundamentalism should in practice so often go together. In truth, the Enlightenment assumption that modernity and secularism are one, which he uncritically reproduces in his account of the end of history, is contradicted by many of the most powerful trends in the world today.

There is yet another way in which Fukuyama's account fails to take the measure of the present. As a consequence of the Soviet collapse, there is now no alternative to capitalism. But in creating a global market for the first time since before the First World War, the Soviet collapse did not make the reach of the Anglo-Saxon free market universal. It triggered a new rivalry among capitalisms. In Russia, an indigenous capitalism is emerging that has some affinities with that which existed in late tsarist times; in China, market reform has enabled the reappearance of an indigenously Chinese capitalism similar in many ways to that found throughout the world in the Chinese diaspora; Europe's social market economies are faced with a new competitive environment arising from German and European unification and the industrialization of East Asia and will have to reform themselves deeply if they are to survive; the American economic regime is itself mutating, with the levels of economic

inequality it generates bringing it closer to those of the 1920s or even the 1890s than to the liberal capitalist civilization established by the New Deal. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of the present to think of this new rivalry of capitalisms as one that any of the established models of a market economy can win. All are mutating in the anarchic and volatile environment of the world market.

What applies in economic life applies no less in politics. It is far from being the case that the removal of their Cold War rival has the overall effect of strengthening Western liberal democracies. On the contrary, it has removed one of the principal props that had kept them stable during the postwar period. Political settlements established at that time are unravelling in several countries, notably those (such as Italy and Japan) in which the links between the political structure and the strategic environment of the Cold War were clearest. In many countries opening up to global markets has evoked a new politics of economic insecurity. Even in the United States, populist politicians such as Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan have set the terms of political debate and affected the outcome of national elections.

Loose talk of 'democratic capitalism' conceals the contradictory forces at work in liberal democracies that have opted for free markets. Democratic institutions and free markets are not, in any broad historical perspective, natural allies. The imperatives of democratic politics work to curb the risks that accompany deregulated markets. True, it is harder for national governments to act effectively to moderate economic risk for their citizens than it was in the past. To note that fact, however, is to mark a problem for democracy. For if democratic governments leave citizens to their own devices in responding to the risks imposed on them by global markets we may be sure that, as in the 1930s, anti-liberal movements will arise which challenge democratic government. Yet, undemocratic regimes have no greater competence than democracies in managing economic risk for their citizens. The twentieth century is littered with dictatorships that have damaged or destroyed their economies. Those who ditch a weak democracy for dictatorship often find they have made a bad bargain. What this tells us is not that liberal democracies are always more legitimate than any other regime, but that states that are consistently competent in controlling economic risk have legitimacy whether or not they are democracies. This is an inexorable consequence of the decline of political ideologies. No government can today claim legitimacy without deriving that legitimacy from meeting its citizens' economic needs. Even fundamentalist movements claim to meet needs for welfare that secular regimes have neglected. In post-ideological times governments are like business enterprises: they are judged by results.

Contrary to Fukuyama, there are no post-historical societies; and there never will be. But there are novel historical circumstances, some of them having considerable importance for international relations, that Fukuyama neglects. Of these, the new weakness of states may be the most significant. Failed or collapsed states are only the simplest exemplars of this phenomenon. Much of the world today lacks effective government of any kind. Countries such as Albania,

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Georgia and Colombia may not literally be anarchies—they have armies, police forces, and tax authorities—but the writ of their governments does not in practice run very far. For many practical purposes, much of Africa, post-communist Russia and southern Asia consists of stateless zones. In these regions of the world, states cannot perform adequately even their core protective function, which is the control of criminal violence.

A monopoly of organized violence is commonly thought to be the acid test of sovereign statehood in the modern world. Yet many late modern states have found themselves unable to maintain such a monopoly. As a result war has in some measure slipped from the control of governments. Today wars are often not fought by agents of sovereign states but waged by political organizations, irregular armies, ethnic or tribal militias and other bodies that may owe allegiance to no sovereign state. For that reason today's wars are not easily ended by the governments of sovereign states. Old-fashioned, Clausewitzian wars still occur—we think at once of the Gulf war—and some kinds of military expenditure and activity are beyond the reach of all but a few states. Yet the condition of much of former Yugoslavia illustrates a real metamorphosis in the institution of war, in which the control of governments over organized violence has plainly dwindled.

The increased visibility of organized crime, and its enhanced political leverage in some countries, may be a parallel development. Both the declining control of war by states and the increased power of organized crime are developments aided by an increasingly globalized economy. Worldwide mobility of capital and production has been elevated to the status of an ethical imperative by those who are committed to the project of constructing a single global free market. They have not paused to consider all the consequences of the unfettered freedom they prize so dearly. Among them are the globalization of organized crime and an unregulated world market in the technologies of war. Each takes further the weakening of state institutions which is a notable feature of our time. We have inherited from the totalitarian era a reflex of suspicion of government. Yet no political doctrine could be less suited to the needs of our time than that which is embodied in the cult of the minimum state.

It is true that national governments cannot now manage economic risk as they did during the 30 years after the Second World War. Their freedom of action has been restricted irrevocably by global competition. Nor are government institutions always the most competent agencies in helping citizens cope with economic risks. Intermediary institutions, supervised but not operated by the state, are often better placed to perform this role. But none of this means that governments can safely shed responsibility for the economic security of their citizens. If they tried to do so, political life could easily take an ugly turn. When parties of the centre cease to address issues of economic security these issues do not disappear from politics: they return in the politics of extremist movements.

Implicit in the thesis of the end of history is the expectation that politics too is coming to an end, its fragile and messy compromises having become unnecessary in a world in which prosperity and security are assured. A judicious mixture of free markets and well-designed laws will give humankind the release from costly political conflict that has hitherto eluded it. This utopian belief passes over the fact that free markets and democratic constitutions cannot obviate the universal necessities of politics. To imagine that laws and markets can make the unending labours of politics unnecessary is to fail to understand that laws and markets have the benign results hoped from them only when they embody a political settlement. They presuppose a legitimate and effective state.

A rehabilitation of the state is a precondition of stable liberal democracy. Clausewitzian war may be a necessary condition of lasting peace; that means an unremitting effort to regain political control of the institution of war. Further, political acceptance that moderating economic risk is among the state's core protective functions is essential if liberal democracies are not to be at risk of losing the allegiance of their citizens. The risks of war and dictatorship are not confined to any particular phase of historical development. Though they may come in novel and unfamiliar forms, they are permanent and intractable. They can be contained, but never entirely removed.

### **Why wars are not conflicts among civilizations**

Samuel Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations is a necessary corrective to a powerful recent trend in thinking about the international system. American foreign policy has long affirmed that the pursuit of peace is linked with the projection of human rights and support for democratic institutions. More recently, a similar view has been adopted by several other Western governments. Never more than one strand in the foreign policy of any country, it is often marginalized by other, more practically immediate considerations. But as an influence on thinking about international relations it is probably stronger today than at any other time.

Huntington makes some acute criticisms of this view. He is right to note that the individualist values embodied in Western understandings of liberal democracy do not command universal assent. They express the ethical life of a few Western societies. They are not authoritative for all cultures. Foreign policies which presuppose an eventual global consensus on liberal values will be ineffectual. This is an incisive criticism of Fukuyama's neo-Wilsonian certainty that Western values are universal; but in arguing that fault-lines between civilizations are the source of war Huntington misunderstands the present as grievously as Fukuyama does. As a result he gives a mistaken diagnosis of both the potential for tragedy and the opportunities for cooperation that our present circumstances contain.

Now, as in the past, wars are commonly waged between (and within) nationalities and ethnicities, not between different civilizations. Whether or not they

are waged by the agents of sovereign states, the old, familiar logic of territories and alliances often impels members of the same 'civilization' into enmity and members of different 'civilizations' into making common cause. In the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Iran threw in its lot with Christian Armenia, not with Islamic Azerbaijan. The kaleidoscope of shifting alliances in the Balkans tells a similar story. Again, some of this century's decisive conflicts have been 'intra-civilizational'. The Iran–Iraq war and the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus occurred within what Huntington understands as single civilizations. The First World War is commonly, and not inaptly, described as a European civil war. The Korean war and the Vietnam war were conflicts among states all of which justified their claims by reference to 'Western' ideologies. Huntington's typology of civilizations does not map on to the history of twentieth-century conflict. Moreover, it is an imprecise, even arbitrary taxonomy. What is it that justifies the honorific appellation of 'civilization'? Huntington seems to believe that the world today contains somewhere between six and nine civilizations—Sinic (Chinese), Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Latin American, Buddhist, Orthodox, African, and, of course, Western. Yet he is not altogether confident in this enumeration. He exhibits some doubt as to where Latin America should be placed; after some hesitation he includes the Jews in a sort of appendix to 'Western civilization', while concluding that Greece is no part of it. If one seeks for the criterion Huntington tacitly invokes for identifying a civilization, one soon discovers that it is an artefact of American multiculturalism: for Huntington, a community or a culture qualifies as a civilization if it has established itself as an American minority. Otherwise it does not.

The narrowly domestic perspective that informs much of Huntington's analysis gives a clue as to its historical provenance. It is an attempt to give a theoretical framework to American thinking about foreign policy in a context in which the sustaining ideological enmities of the Cold War have vanished. Unfortunately, Huntington's vision tells us more about contemporary American anxieties than it does about the late modern world. Huntington's watchword, 'Western civilization', is a familiar refrain in curricular debates in American universities. It has few points of contact with the world beyond American shores, in which 'Western' supremacy, and indeed the very idea of 'the West', are becoming anachronisms.

'The peoples of the West,' Huntington has warned, 'must hang together, or most assuredly they will hang separately.' This clarion call presupposes that Western civilization—'the peoples of the West'—can be identified easily and unproblematically. Yet the old and familiar polarities of East and West never had a fixed or simple meaning. During the Cold War, 'the East' meant the Soviet bloc, which was animated by an unequivocally 'Western' ideology; in the Cold War's immediate aftermath, in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, it came to refer to an older division between Eastern and Western Christianity; now it is being invoked, by Huntington and others, to capture America's relations with China and sections of the Arab world. When Huntington refers to 'Western civiliza-

tion', he does not invoke an extended family of cultural traditions that has endured for centuries or millennia. He invokes a construction of the Cold War, with few points of leverage on the world that is taking shape around us.

Huntington is right to reject the view of the world, propagated by Fukuyama, in which modernization and westernization are one and the same. In many parts of the world, where countries are becoming modern by absorbing new technologies into their indigenous cultures, they are instead divergent developments. For some countries today, westernization of their economies and cultures would mean a step back from the late modern world: not modernization but a retreat from modernity.

The project of a global free market that is at present being advanced by many transnational organizations envisages reshaping economic life in every society so that it accords with the practices of a single type of capitalism—the Anglo-Saxon free market. But different kinds of capitalism reflect different cultures. There is no reason to think they will ever converge. Both the critics of capitalism and its supporters in Western countries have taken for granted that capitalist economies everywhere produce, or express, individualist values. This assumption was reasonable so long as developed market economies were confined to parts of western Europe, North America and the Antipodes. But the link it postulated was an historical accident, not a universal law. The capitalisms of East Asia are not the products of individualist cultures, and there is no reason to think that they will ever engender such cultures. Different patterns of family relations and different religious traditions are not facets of private life, like tastes in ethnic cuisines, without consequences for economic behaviour. They produce radically different market economies.

As global markets grow, the world is not being unified by a single economic civilization. It is becoming more plural. The increasing intensity of global competition is often noted; less often perceived is the fact that as competition between different cultures increases the comparative economic advantages of their family structures and religious traditions become more important. It is rather unlikely that the advantage in this competition lies always with highly individualist cultures. What are the economic costs of individualist patterns of family life, in which marriage is valued as a vehicle of self-realization? How does the cultural understanding of childhood as a phase of life exempt from obligations, which is strong in some Western countries, affect educational achievement? In the economic rivalries of the coming century such cultural differences will be central. Contrary to Huntington, however, this does not mean that the world can be divided up into well-defined, static civilizations. The emergence of genuine world markets in many areas of economic life makes continuing interaction among cultures an irreversible global condition.

What is new in our current circumstances is the worldwide spread of industrial production and its concomitant, the end of the global hegemony of any Western state. What is not new is conflict over territory, religion and commercial advantage between sovereign states. We must hope that wise policy can

avert a rerun of the Great Game in which the world's powers struggled for geostrategic advantage in Central Asia and the Caucasus. But it is great power rivalries for control of oil, not cultural differences among the peoples that inhabit the eight nations of that region, that are likely to pose the most enduring risk to peace for its peoples.

Neither economic rivalries nor military conflicts can be understood when viewed through the distorting lens of civilizational conflict. Talk of clashing civilizations is supremely unsuited to a time when cultures—not least the extended family of peoples that Huntington loosely terms 'the West'—are in flux. In so far as such talk shapes the thinking of policy-makers it risks *making* cultural differences what they have been only rarely in the past—causes of war.

### **International relations and conflicts within morality**

Cultural differences can make international conflicts harder to resolve. They may make liberal democratic institutions of the kinds we are familiar with in Western countries unachievable, or even undesirable. That is one reason why I share Huntington's scepticism about foreign policies that aim to make liberal values universal. But the greatest obstacle to such foreign policies does not come from the evident fact of cultural variety. It comes from the awkward truth that even humanly universal values can be rivals in practice.

I put aside here the suggestion that all human values are entirely cultural constructions. This once fashionable doctrine of cultural relativism seems to me not worth extended consideration. It may well be true that some goods that are centrally important in Western societies are not universally valuable. That does not mean that all human goods and evils are culturally variable.

Personal autonomy, the authorship of one's life by one's own choices, is an urgent and pervasive demand in late modern Western cultures. At the same time, I am unpersuaded that it is a necessary feature of the good life for humans. Most human beings who have ever lived good lives did so without having much of it. Even where having a wide domain of personal options is one of the necessary ingredients of individual well-being, it is never the only ingredient. The worth of the options available matters as well. Nor am I convinced that as societies become more modern, personal autonomy is generally accorded a higher value. This seems to be true in the case of Britain, but it is a mistake to take ourselves as a model for modernization everywhere. Perhaps, as economic and other risks multiply in late modern societies, people will be more willing to trade off portions of their autonomy if they can thereby achieve greater security.

To be sure, such trade-offs will sometimes enhance the 'on-balance' value that autonomous choice has for people. In other cases there will be a real conflict of values in which some autonomy is given up for the sake of another good. Compulsory saving for pensions may enhance the worth of personal autonomy on balance over a lifetime; but those who propose restricting freedom of

divorce, say, because the stability of family life might thereby be promoted, must recognize that the personal autonomy of marriage partners is being curtailed for the sake of the well-being of children. Every human value has its price in other values with which it can conflict. Those who think, as I do, that the good for humans is not singular but plural, that human values are many not one, will find it hard to be convinced that this conflict should always be resolved in favour of autonomy. Liberal political philosophies that treat personal autonomy as a universal and overriding value are, or should be, controversial. The value of personal autonomy may well be a cultural construction, not something that is grounded in our common human nature. But, precisely because there is a common human nature, it cannot be true of all our values that they are cultural constructions.

Consider the chief evils to which human beings are vulnerable. Violent death is everywhere an evil. So is untimely death through malnutrition. Slavery, torture and genocide inflict injuries on their victims that block their chance of living any kind of worthwhile human life. The damage to human well-being wrought by these evils does not vary culturally to any significant extent. One of the central problems of ethical theory, in so far as it applies to international relations, is to determine which values are truly universal and which belong only to particular ways of life. Liberal values derive their hold on contemporary opinion partly from the fact that some of their injunctions—those forbidding torture, slavery and genocide, for example—are plausible components of a universal morality. Nonetheless, to identify the universal content of morality with the injunctions of recent Western liberal thought is a dangerous delusion. The difficult question is what is universal and what local in the morality of liberal regimes. This cannot be profitably discussed in the shop-soiled jargon of an incoherent debate about ‘relativism’.

Cultural variations in political values do not generate the most serious of the ethical dilemmas that arise in international relations. The hardest question in the ethics of international relations is how to resolve conflicts among goods and bads that are indisputably universal. This is an issue that has been unduly neglected, partly owing to the revival of neo-Wilsonian ideas that attempt to deny its practical importance. Those who maintain that the foreign policies of liberal states should give a high priority to fostering democratic institutions throughout the world not only claim that liberal democracy has universal authority; they claim also that advancing democratic government promotes international stability. We are often reminded that liberal democracies rarely go to war with one another. As a natural, if tenuous inference from that fact, we are encouraged to believe that a world consisting only of liberal democratic regimes will be a world of perpetual peace. In this perspective promoting democracy can never conflict, save perhaps in the shortest term, with the pursuit of peace.

I do not think I have caricatured this conventional view. It marks a real correlation when it notes that wars sometimes arise from the domestic needs of

tyrannies. Its cardinal defect is that the links that it affirms between peace and democracy are very far from being invariant. In the real world these two values are sometimes rivals. Nor are these conflicts so rare, or so trifling in their consequences, that they serve only to illustrate a limiting case. Consider a state in which populations of disparate nationalities and religious ancestries are held together in a dictatorial regime. Imagine that, for whatever combination of reasons, that regime begins to weaken, and demands for democratic institutions become politically irresistible. If the populations of such a dictatorial regime are territorially concentrated it is reasonable to expect the advance of democratic institutions to go in tandem with the fragmentation of the state.

We need not delve deeply into the literature of political science for an explanation. Functioning democracy requires high levels of trust. When populations are divided by memories of historical enmity trust is not easy to establish. When democratic deliberation concerns issues of life and death it is hard to begin. Where secession seems a real option it is likely to win support in the populations that most fear being overruled in such issues. If such fears predominate, the goal of secessionist movements will be to constitute a state sufficiently homogenous for trust—and thereby democracy—to be feasible.

I do not present this abstract scenario as a historical account of the break-up of any state that has ever actually existed. There is nothing inevitable in the process I have outlined, and in any actual historical context a multitude of accidents will play a large, often a decisive part. Yet without a reasonable level of trust democratic institutions cannot be sustained. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why tyrannies can endure: they are able to economize on trust in ways that democracies cannot. When tyrannous states that have in the past been able to economize on trust begin to move towards popular participation in government they tend—if they contain peoples that are geographically concentrated—to become fissiparous. In fortunate circumstances these tendencies may work themselves out peacefully. In many, perhaps most, contexts they incur a risk of war.

This is only one illustration of a truth of some practical importance. Even if liberal political morality is universal, applying its principles involves confronting fundamental conflicts of values. Some such conflicts are tragic in that wrong will be done however they are resolved. Advancing democracy does not always foster political stability. Preserving peace does not always coincide with the promotion of human rights. These are not transitory difficulties which we can expect someday to leave behind. They are permanent ethical dilemmas, deeply rooted in conflicts that states will always confront, which will never be fully resolved.

Liberal values cannot give definitive guidance in such cases. These are not conflicts between morality and expediency but *within morality itself*. It is a mistake to think that the most serious ethical conflicts in international relations are conflicts in which the demands of morality collide with considerations of expediency. Such conflicts are doubtless recurring and familiar. But the hardest

dilemmas for sovereign states are not conflicts between observing moral principles to which they have committed themselves and promoting the economic interests of their citizens. They are conflicts among the moral principles to which they consider themselves committed. In confronting these inescapable ethical conflicts sovereign states are no different from any other moral agent.

Liberal political morality contains few solutions to the conflicts it generates. The goods that liberal principles protect are not always compatible. Promoting one often involves sacrificing others. We all know that the best foreign policies can have consequences that include significant collateral damage. I suggest that collateral damage is sometimes only another name for moral conflicts that are not wholly soluble. Consider the following examples. There is nothing in freedom of political association that is incompatible with strong government. Some states are fortunate enough to enjoy both. At the same time they are goods that do not always complement one another. Punctilious observation of the terms of its ultra-liberal constitution may have been one of the reasons why the Weimar Republic was short-lived. In that case, a weak democratic state was replaced by a genocidal totalitarian regime. Or consider a case from the world today. China has a long history of recurrent state disintegration. The evils flowing from anarchy are not hypothetical; they are a matter of common experience for hundreds of millions of Chinese now living. Memories of the inter-war period and, even more, of the Cultural Revolution are widespread and vivid. Any regime which staves off the threat of anarchy in China has a potent source of political legitimacy in that achievement alone. Western opinion-formers who demand swift progress towards liberal democracy in China have not considered with sufficient seriousness the risks to freedom and security posed to ordinary Chinese by state disintegration. Yet preventing those evils of anarchy is a central feature of the liberal political morality that demands universal democracy. This is an ethical conflict that has no complete solution.

## **Conclusion**

The Enlightenment thinkers who inspire contemporary liberal thought believed that the ethical conflicts that arise from the incompatibility of universal goods could be overcome: at some future point in human progress the species would be rid of the burden of such tragic dilemmas. That Enlightenment belief is an illusion with disabling effects on thought and policy today. Conflicts among the universal goods and evils recognized by liberal morality are not symptoms of backwardness we can hope someday to have transcended. They are perennial and universal.

Viewing the world today through the lens of apocalyptic beliefs about the end of history and 'the West versus the rest' conceals these universal and perennial conflicts. It encourages the hope that the difficult choices and unpleasant trade-offs that have always been necessary in the relations of states will someday be redundant. For that hope there is no rational warrant.

A more reasonable aspiration is that by understanding that some conflicts of values are intractable we will be better able to cope with them. There is much that is new in our present circumstances. What they do not contain is relief from the task of thinking our way through difficulties—conflicts of interests and ideals, incompatibilities among the values we hold most dear—that have always beset relations among states. For some, perhaps, this will seem a rather depressing result. Certainly there is nothing in it that is especially novel, or original; and it contains little that will gratify the commendable need for moral hope. But perhaps these are not quite the defects we commonly imagine them to be. The greatest liberal thinker of our time<sup>4</sup> was fond of quoting an observation by the American philosopher, C.I. Lewis: ‘There is no *a priori* reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered, will necessarily prove interesting’. Nor, I would add, for thinking that it will be particularly comforting.

<sup>4</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, *The crooked timber of humanity: chapters in the history of ideas* (London: John Murray, 1990), p.19.