

JOHN GRAY, AN APPRECIATION

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John Gray is an English academic now approaching retirement from his current post as Professor of European Thought at the LSE, to which he moved in 1998 after 20 years at Jesus College, Oxford. His academic and scholarly books and articles have been paralleled in recent years by more popular and accessible works written in a style refined by years spent as a sometime newspaper columnist and contributor to magazines and periodicals. His books contain overlapping themes. His *Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern* provides a short overview of a number of his interests and can be considered a minor classic of political and historical analysis.¹

In much of his work Gray has courted controversy. Though once an enthusiast for aspects of Thatcherism, he sees British politics today as scarred by its malign influence; though “green” in outlook, like Lovelock he champions nuclear power and speculates that measures to prevent climate change may now be hopeless; though a liberal, he offers a defence of monarchy, and is sceptical of talk about “human rights”. He rejects the political and economic theory which promotes globalisation, sees more danger in the modern world from the prospect of anarchy than from that of an over-mighty state, offers a re-interpretation of the Enlightenment, and regards population growth as an issue disastrously ignored by modern environmentalists. Gray embraces no religion, but attacks what he sees as the facile humanism of Richard Dawkins. Instead, he champions *naturalism* as a philosophical position from which to subject supposed Darwinists to a Darwinian critique. For one reviewer, his *Straw Dogs* “shows us what it would be like to live without the distraction of consolations”².

In early texts Gray attacks modern political philosophy for its legalism and abstractness – for its unworldly failure to address contemporary issues. By contrast, he was able before the Iraq War to lay bare the historical ignorance, bogus assumptions and intellectual follies which underpinned Anglo-American policy, and to accurately predict their dire consequences. A commentator who can do this deserves our attention.³

Gray aims to puncture contemporary illusions. Central to these is the illusion of *progress*. Is it possible to deny that progress has been made in science and technology? Of course not. Gray is fond of De Quincey’s early 19th century observation that a quarter of human suffering is toothache. Why then try to deny the blessings bestowed by anaesthetic dentistry and other improvements in human well-being? The growth of knowledge is real, Gray affirms, and, barring catastrophe, probably permanent. We are unlikely to unlearn the knowledge gained by science and technology even if we wanted to – indeed, to suppose that we could do so in pursuit of a romantic “back to nature” project is itself a kind of hubris. Even so, he insists, “faith in progress is a superstition”⁴, because while science may enable people to satisfy their perceived needs, it does not change them. People today are as they were in the past, with their preoccupations, follies and pretences intact. Knowledge is one thing; how and by whom it is used is another. Its growth does not guarantee the progress of reason in human affairs. Irrationalities of all kinds survive and are daily invented. Gains have been made in governance, but they can be lost; indeed, Gray claims, history suggests that one day they will be. In a typically “modern” fusion of technology and eschatology, followers of a Californian “cryogenics” cult have themselves frozen on their deaths, in the fond belief that future scientific knowledge will make it possible for them to be resurrected. But even if it could, why should we assume that the laws, institutions, and moral conventions which hold sway now will still

be around in the future? This would require our “taking for granted a degree of economic and political stability that has no precedent”⁵.

The progressive view of history is linear, but for Gray this is just a modern prejudice. The ancients were more inclined to see history in cycles. Perhaps we should think of it in terms of *drift*. It is odd to think of political decisions in the modern world being directed by a philosophy of history, but Gray argues that western leaders in particular remain in the grip of such a philosophy - a secularised version of the Christian view of history which was developed in the Enlightenment. It lay at the heart of not only Liberalism but also doctrines like those of Saint-Simon and Comte which spawned Socialism and Communism. It has resurfaced today in the form of American-style Neo-Conservatism, whose proponents heralded the fall of Communism as the dawn of a globalised, free-market, liberal, democratic world. For Gray, however, “the dozen years between the fall of the Wall and the assault on the Twin Towers will be remembered as an era of delusion”⁶: the delusion that the world could be reconstructed according to the supposed model provided by the USA. This “utopian project” has and will come to nothing, Gray thinks. Instead, history is back on its familiar ground of conflicts waged over territory, religion, ethnicity, and the control of natural resources, sometimes by groups who have escaped the control of governments. Far from the world moving towards a converging globalised utopia of free-trading liberal states, today it contains whole regions littered with failed states - “zones of anarchy” from which rich countries cannot insulate themselves as they struggle to contain asylum seekers, economic migrants, and the ongoing effects of a possibly unwinnable “war on drugs”. Tony Blair told us he felt “the hand of history” on his shoulder. Gray cautions against supposing that it urges us in any particular direction.

Gray’s expertise is in the history of ideas, and in various texts he has teased out different strands which make up the Enlightenment. One of his central themes is the extent to which Enlightenment thought retained Christian preoccupations, albeit often in secularised form. His latest book⁷ explores the millennial, apocalyptic aspect of this and its contemporary resonances. He begins with a flourish which sets the tone of his discussion: “Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion”. It is now commonplace to recognise the extent to which Marxism borrowed from Christianity, and Gray develops this analysis. He goes further, however, by exploring in detail the millenarian nature of early Christian belief and its survival through medieval cults and revolutionary Protestant sects into modern times. Radical Enlightenment thought echoed belief in the “end of times” by propagating utopian revolutionary doctrines in which a “break with history” was to be achieved through violent upheaval. While some Enlightenment liberals embraced an ideal of progressive gradualism, Gray thinks it a mistake to see the Enlightenment only in these terms. Where its thinkers sought to supplant Christianity, they saw that it could only be by satisfying Christian hopes, and this often resulted in a language in which knowledge and ignorance are contrasted in terms of light and darkness, and good and evil. Out of this were born secular creeds like Jacobinism, which Gray, echoing other historians, sees as a prototype of modern “political religion”. Early modern thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza were sceptical about the idea of human transformation. They shared the later judgement of Hume, that “all plans of government which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind are plainly imaginary”.⁸ Robespierre’s policy of state terror instead reflected utopian aspirations and the sort of polarised thinking which survives today in Bush’s “axis of evil”.

Gray sees Bolshevism and Nazism as doctrines in the mainstream, not on the margins, of “western civilisation”. Communist societies around the globe have reflected Lenin’s identification of Communism with the Enlightenment focus on science, and the rational state, but like the Jacobins Marx also accepted the need for systematic revolutionary violence. Though we associate mass executions and concentration camps with Nazism, these were of course features of Soviet Communism, too, right from the start. The Enlightenment also, argues Gray, “played an indispensable role in the development of Nazism”.⁹ Where the Nazis owed anything to Nietzsche, it was to Nietzsche the Enlightenment thinker and admirer of Voltaire, not Nietzsche the Romantic or existentialist. Hitler never doubted that the Third Reich was a “modernising” project. He admired the efficiency and productivity of Henry Ford’s assembly lines.

It is a mistake, then, to think that opponents of liberalism are necessarily enemies of the Enlightenment. The French Positivists were exemplary Enlightenment thinkers, but thoroughgoing anti-liberals. Saint-Simon and Comte both looked forward to a society run by a priestly elite, but one whose authority was based on science and an associated humanist cult of reason rather than religion. Comte was a devotee of Phrenology, as were Galton and Lombroso; their early versions of Psychology and Criminology are but a short step away from Nazi “racial science”. Early liberals like Locke rejected the idea that “natural rights” could be legitimately claimed by indigenous, colonised American Indians, and Kant’s famous lectures on anthropology supposed that Africans were predisposed to slavery, having “by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling”.¹⁰ The “liberal racism” of 19th century figures like JS Mill assumed that the progress of mankind involved its universal adoption of European institutions. Later self-styled “progressives” like HG Wells openly advocated force and even extermination to realise this goal. Hitler’s policies did not spring from nowhere; faux-Darwinian notions of eugenics became common during the early 20th century, and grew in the soil of “enlightened” thought.

Gray shows, too, how Nazism drew on surviving European millenarian ideas in which Jews were demonised as obstructing the radical upheaval which would usher in a new world. He enters more controversial territory in seeing the survival of apocalyptic utopian thinking in more recent intellectual developments. “Modernisation” and “globalisation” have become modern mantras, but Gray invites us to see them as “not scientific hypotheses but theodicies – narratives of providence and redemption – presented in the jargon of social science”.¹¹ During the 1990’s, he argues, a “centrist” version of utopianism was expressed through *neo-liberalism*. For this doctrine it is axiomatic that the most important condition of liberty is the free market. While seeing government as important, it seeks to limit its scope, and make democracy serve market freedoms. It supposes that the global spread of liberal democratic regimes and the end of tyranny will secure not only prosperity but also a reduction in human conflict. Gray sees this as fantasy. His first line of attack is to show how the writings of Milton Friedman, Hayek, and lesser authors are at best parodies of the classical political economy of Adam Smith, who, unlike these authors, appreciated the problems and limitations of capitalism and anticipated Marx’s focus on workers’ alienation. The notion of *providence* underpins Smith’s work and is made explicit in the reforming tracts of 19th century Free Traders like Cobden and Bright. Among neo-liberals this religious account of “the hidden hand” is replaced by pseudo-scientific claims about the self-regulating nature of markets

which Keynes demonstrated were false, and which deny the historical record by supposing that free markets arise spontaneously – they “evolve” - as a result of the aggregation of individual actions. Instead, Gray shows that insofar as they have ever existed at all, free markets are always the deliberate creation of state power, whether by means of enforced enclosures and clearances in 18th century Britain, or through the imposition of “necessary economic reforms” in Pinochet’s Chile and Yeltsin’s Russia.

Neo-conservatism understands the role of the state more clearly, thinks Gray. Thatcherism implicitly embraced this ideology when it recognised that the transformation of Britain in the 1990’s into a society safe for markets needed the concentration of state power and the abandonment of the idea of minimal government. This creed asserts that government must actively promote the social order which markets typically neglect. Unlike more secular neo-liberals, “neo-cons” are also prepared to promote religion as a source of social cohesion, and are less squeamish about the use of military force as an instrument of policy. In this respect they reproduce, once again, the activism of the Jacobins. Gray identifies these features clearly in the New Labour project too. Blair, he claimed, “is an American neo-conservative and has been so throughout most of his political life”¹²

Why “American”? Because the context of this doctrine is essentially “the Americanisation of the Apocalypse”, Gray’s characterisation of US ideology during the last decade. He mines American ideas to show the rich vein of apocalyptic thinking which has run there from the early Puritan settlers to the present day. John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon in which New England is pictured as the “city on a hill” inaugurating a new contract with God and a break with history,¹³ has been recycled rhetorically many times by American politicians. Tom Paine, a radical ideologue of the American Revolution, produced a secularised version of this. While more sceptical and conservative thinkers such as Madison and Hamilton, authors of *The Federalist Papers*, have always been a part of the American intellectual scene too, their influence has repeatedly been eclipsed by notions such as the “Manifest Destiny” of the US as a land of “chosen people”, a “redeemer nation” whose institutions present themselves as a model for adoption by less fortunate lands. This cast of mind provided fertile ground for the “neo-con” doctrine which, decisively, mutated from leftist thought, among Trotskyist-influenced intellectuals like Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. When they and others abandoned their leftist beliefs in the 1970’s, they didn’t turn to traditional conservative thinkers like Burke or Oakeshott for inspiration. Instead, they embraced liberal economics but held firm to a strongly ideological, Leninist political style - a “catastrophic optimism”¹⁴ and ruthlessness - which seeks to justify the export of liberal democracy, by force of arms if necessary, to a grateful world. Fukuyama was a cheerleader for this position, declaring in 1989, “We are witnessing ... the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”.¹⁵

For Gray the first of Fukuyama’s two heady claims functions as myth – as eschatological faith - while the second is demonstrably false. In his view the meaning of “9/11” is that “it shows how history has *resumed*, with its “familiar intractable conflicts, tragic choices and ruined illusions”¹⁶ The fall of Communism, far from ushering in global free markets and liberal democracy, has seen the resumption of conflicts between and within states, sometimes overtly nationalist and religious in form, and over issues such as territory and resources. There is no prospect any time soon that these

will dissolve away; rather, they are being added to by the growth of non-state agents capable of international organisation and action, using weapons and technologies beyond the control of states.

In his *Al Qaeda*, Gray discusses the prospects for a continuing *Pax Americana* and finds them limited. In the decades to come, he argues, the US will lack both the political will and the economic strength to sustain the global reach of its current neo-imperial role. He investigates the “War On Terror” and finds it a shifting and incoherent notion. In a masterly analysis, he explores the historical roots and current nature of Al Qaeda in the context of *modernity*. “No cliché is more stupefying”, he insists, “than that which describes Al Qaeda as a throwback to medieval times”¹⁷. In fact, its ideology borrows heavily from the European tradition of revolutionary anarchism, and its organisational forms owe something to both Bolshevism and contemporary global corporate management. It has a sophisticated grasp of modern technology. It has proven able to conduct asymmetric warfare globally. Its goals are both very specific – the destruction of the Saudi regime – and generalised. Its relations to both “rogue states” and “failed states” are complex. Whatever our response to it, Gray is clear, we must begin by recognising its profound *modernity*.

More generally, the *resumption of history* is shown in the variety of economic and political systems in the world today. Gray sees it as an intellectual error to suppose, for instance, that democracy and liberalism must belong together. An illiberal democracy can easily form where there is a general belief that the common good is self-evident and that dissenting groups are perhaps deluded or corrupted. In such circumstances, personal freedoms and the rights of minorities may not be seen as important. Rousseau theorised this in the idea of “The General Will”, and it is not too fanciful to see Iran today in these terms. Reference has already been made to the relationship between free markets and state power, so “liberal” non-democracies are also feasible. Indeed, history shows us examples of empires where the liberties of minorities were better protected than they were in the nation-states subsequently carved from them. Where empires have been dissolved, ethnic nationalisms spouting various hatreds have often been unleashed. More generally, history shows that building secure and legitimate states has typically been a bloody business everywhere, and we should ponder the fact that multi-national democracies in the world today are mostly monarchies or the relics of empire. For Gray, the sources of political legitimacy and stability are many. The world contains widely differing regimes formed by varied histories. To suppose that they can or will be squeezed into a “one size fits all” shape, especially by a superpower in relative decline, is mistaken.

In his 1998 book *False Dawn*, Gray turned his attention to the detailed workings of the global economy. He concluded that it is unlikely to move towards a single, shared pattern of activity, least of all that of a free market. While socialism lies in ruins, post-Communist societies have developed their own distinctive economies, embracing types of ownership and regulation quite unlike those in America, which remains an economic “outsider” in many respects, and whose interests would, in any case, be as much harmed as those of other countries by a genuinely free market. A feature of modernity to which Gray draws attention is the chronic insecurity created by capitalism’s relentless tendency to destroy settled communities, make traditional skills and career patterns redundant, and undermine family life. The economic policies promoted by the IMF and the World Bank seem to mimic Gresham’s Law; countries are urged to compete in a “race to the bottom” by means of deregulation and the trimming back of welfare. Gray’s conclusion is that this cannot last, and an

outcome as likely as any other is the reappearance of old-fashioned rival trading blocs. In the economic as in the political sphere, what we will need to do in future is achieve a *modus vivendi* between systems and cultures which will continue to remain different.

The idea of *modus vivendi* has a wider significance for Gray, since it lies at the heart of his distinctive view of liberalism. He dismisses what in 1995 he called “The New Liberalism” exemplified by the work of Rawls, Dworkin, and others, which has dominated English-speaking philosophy since the 1970’s. For Gray a dispiriting feature of this liberalism is that it is divorced from political life in the real world. It draws its inspiration from Kant’s concept of *the person* – a theoretical being without history, ethnicity, or human attachments – who is the bearer of *rights*, of *liberties*, which form the supposed foundations of legitimate legal and political systems. Modern academic liberalism’s *rights* discourse is an American preoccupation disparaged by Gray as “Kantianism in one country”. By contrast, he points out that in the real world, when the citizens of the former USSR asserted themselves against their state’s power they did so not as *persons* but as *peoples*. Real individuals, unlike Kantian persons, are disposed to have historically-constituted (if overlapping) identities as members of groups, and liberal thought must begin with this basic truth. Unfortunately, self-styled “communitarian” critics of liberalism are too often inclined to go to the opposite extreme, invoking the virtues of idealised “communities” of a type that, sadly, no one has ever lived in: communities free from internal conflicts. For Gray it is ironic that these rival versions of “the Enlightenment project” remain committed to “its most primitive forms..... wholly untouched by the disillusioned sociological vision of Weber and Durkheim...”¹⁸.

Gray’s liberal mentors are, instead, Isaiah Berlin, Joseph Raz, and Bernard Williams.¹⁹ These thinkers reject the notion that there can be any final, foundational, basis to politics and ethics. They agree that invoking supposedly basic principles such as *justice*, *equality*, *rights*, *utility*, or whatever, runs aground on the reef of “incommensurabilities” among and within values. Berlin’s insight was that no political system can ever simultaneously realise the competing goals of, say, freedom and security, of rights and happiness, of personal autonomy and belonging. These and many other values are held dear to some degree by people everywhere, though they are expressed in varying forms historically and culturally. They conflict with one another, and such conflicts cannot and will not go away. Moreover, such conflicts exist between communities, between the groups which comprise them, and between the individuals within such groups. Indeed, for Raz the crucial point is that they are irresolvable conflicts *within individuals themselves*. To look for some final settlement of them is idle. The best we can hope for is an accommodation – a changing, shifting accommodation – between them. The goal of modern liberalism, says Gray, must be to find such an accommodation - a *modus vivendi*. We must “retheorize liberalism as itself a particular form of common life”²⁰.

Gray calls this alternative approach “agonistic liberalism”. It is grounded in the limits of rational choice and accepts the moral theory of *value pluralism* – the theory that there is an irreducible variety of ultimate values, goods, and options – and it recognises that many practical and moral dilemmas leave us with choices which reason cannot dissolve and which we can always see as wrong – that is, they will always entail the surrender of a cherished value. For this reason Gray thinks that the principle of *toleration* must once again become central to our political discourse, and

the art of compromise recognised again for its true political worth. Unfortunately, these days toleration is an unfashionable virtue, because it places too much emphasis, for modern tastes, on the imperfections of human beings, and because it is unavoidably “judgemental”. It expresses confidence in our ability to distinguish the good from the bad but to be prepared to put up with the bad in order to realise another good – peace. Modern liberalism advocates a political regime which is neutral about moral matters, but Gray sees this as impossible. In practice, it results only in favoured minorities gaining privileges for themselves while unfavoured ones are subject to paternalist control.

An unwelcome feature of modern liberalism, he thinks, is its ill-considered attachment to “multi-culturalism” and to policies of “positive discrimination” and quotas. Ironically, this results in one’s membership of a group, rather than one’s status as an individual, becoming the crucial factor which confers rights, a negation of the classical liberal position. Multi-culturalism fails to see that political communities must to some degree share a “culture in common” if they are to achieve legitimacy and the loyalty of their members. If this complaint sounds like a “conservative” one, Gray resists this label for himself, not least because he sees modern conservatism as having been “undone” by its slavish adherence to neo-liberal orthodoxy. In a further illustration of the “law of irony” – the law of unintended consequences – we have, he argues, seen governments throughout the English-speaking world, often calling themselves “conservative”, introduce policies, in a sort of “Maoism of the Right”²¹, which have rubbished tradition and subverted institutions and professions which mediated the people and the state: the very bodies which the conservative philosopher Hegel called “the pillars of public freedom”. The promotion of unrestrained markets has resulted in the growth of poverty, social dislocation, crime, drug use, and the relentless proletarianising of the “solid middle class” on which traditional Toryism relied. As a result, concludes Gray, modern conservatism “has arrived at a political and intellectual impasse, from which it can neither advance nor retreat”.²² In any case, Gray quarrels with basic elements of Tory philosophy, such as its harking back to an imagined lost cultural unity. Nevertheless, he echoes some of its sentiments in claiming that commitment to a liberal form of life today can only be a matter of historical contingency, involving allegiance to a common culture, rather than something derived from abstract rational principles. A revamped liberalism, (better described perhaps as “post-liberalism”, or “pluralism”), must accept that conflict will remain part of the human condition, and it can make no special claim on history. It certainly cannot present itself as the only legitimate heir of the Enlightenment. It’s time, now, says Gray, to “pass over” the Enlightenment project rather than declare ourselves for it or against it, just as we do when we think about the Renaissance.

Gray hopes that faith in utopia is now spent. This does not mean, however, that a secular era lies before us. Secularists like Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens, who have recently been trumpeting their militant atheism, are objects of pity and scorn for Gray. Their atheism and humanism he sees as mirror images of Christian beliefs, because despite their defending Darwinism, they nevertheless assert the uniqueness of human beings, and humanity’s supposed ability to transcend, to “defy”, natural laws. Dennett has spent much of his career trying to show how scientific materialism can be reconciled with the metaphysical idea of human free will, but this has been a wasteful effort for Gray, who sees this philosophical preoccupation as of little interest to non-western philosophies which do not radically distinguish man and animal in the first place.

We may, of course, never be able to do without a sense of “free will” just as we cannot easily dispense with a sense of “self”. In his most fragmentary and allusive text, *Straw Dogs*, Gray discusses recent findings in cognitive science and neurophysiology in support of Hume’s contention that the “self” is not a unified, substantial thing, but a “virtual” phenomenon, a fiction – in Hume’s words, a “theatre” – a convenient way of describing the unimaginably complex patterns of perception, cognition, and behaviour which make up our interactions with the world. Gray is not alone in seeing striking similarities between modern scientific conclusions and Buddhist texts. Buddhists identify our preoccupation with “self” as a basic human error, but for Gray their notion of “awakening” mistakenly implies that we can somehow shed our illusions and sever our links with our evolutionary past. He sees this as yet another false doctrine of salvation, another attempt to reject our animal nature.

Gray’s espousal of “naturalism” rather than humanism is central to *Straw Dogs*. Humanism is castigated for its faith in *humanity* as a species supposedly capable of mastering its own destiny, a prospect we would never hold out for whales or gorillas. “Humanity does not exist”, he asserts, “there are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement”²³ *Mankind* as a historical agent capable of controlling “its” own evolutionary future he sees as an absurdity, yet is a notion subscribed to, surprisingly, even by prominent Darwinians. Gray feels, instead, that if any attempt is made to scientifically remould aspects of human nature, it will be done haphazardly, in the “murky realm” inhabited by big business, organised crime, and the hidden parts of government, by shifting groups with shifting interests, not by *humanity*. The relevant technologies employed in such a project will experience the usual problems – they will never be fully controlled, since they are a consequence of the diffusion of knowledge – and their effects will be unpredictable. The power of new technologies conferred on “humanity” is likely at some point to be used “to commit atrocious crimes against it”.²⁴ While nominally “green” in attitude, Gray sees “Green Humanists” as subject to the familiar illusion that the world can somehow be moulded by shared, conscious, human purposes.

This is in no sense an attack on science. In fact, Gray is astonished by the ability of some scientists to ignore hard-won truths – including the truths of history - in their espousal of humanism. However, he rails against “scientific fundamentalism” as the claim that science pursues only disinterested truth, somehow standing apart from the needs it serves. Today, unfortunately, science supports “the myth of progress” because the reality of its own daily progress is so palpable. Though it is used to underpin humanist illusions, the scientific worldview is, he thinks, uncomfortable to the human mind. It points to a chaotic universe which we seem able to understand only in part, and it cannot satisfy the human need to find order in the world. Humanists are still in the grip of the Socratic doctrine that the true and the good are the same. We do not need to reject the idea of truth, and of the progress of knowledge, to reject this doctrine. History shows us that science can and will be used for purposes “as shifting and crooked as humans are themselves”.²⁵ The history of science is usually, for Gray, written in an idealised way, as a “fairy tale” involving the gradual struggle of reason against superstition. He prefers the “messy” version offered by Feyerabend to that of Popper.²⁶

Naturalism is friendly to, rather than hostile to, religion, on the ground that religion is evidently as natural to human beings as sex or sport or poetry. Gray finds the attitude of Dawkins and Dennett bizarrely non-Darwinian, and notes that their attacks on religion are usually narrowly focused on right-wing American Protestantism.²⁷ Their “evangelical atheism” results in “a funny kind of humanism that condemns an impulse that is peculiarly human”.²⁸ These writers ignore the parts that scepticism and doubt have played in Christian thought, and fail to appreciate that religion, particularly in its many non-western forms, is often not primarily a matter of belief – of subscribing to specific propositions – at all, but of *practice*: of ritual, observance, and mystery. Their mistaken view of religion as a sort of proto-scientific theorising akin to magic is seen by Gray as little different to the 19th century version of enlightenment positivism popularised by Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Instead, he thinks we should see science and religion as serving quite different human needs – for control, and for meaning, respectively. Naturalism sees a wide variety of religions as normal and to be expected, though its sympathy is likely to be more with ancient pagans than with Christians because they take a more modest view of human prospects. Future religions, he predicts, are likely to be no less politically important than any other human preoccupation, but that doesn’t mean they have to be the basis of dangerous political ideologies.

For Gray, then, attempts to argue down religion fail, and are not rescued by Dawkins’ appeal to the theory of “memes”: “an expression of magical thinking, ...as remote from genuine science as ‘intelligent design’”.²⁹ Memetic theory is best seen as “a classic example of the nonsense that is spawned when Darwinian thinking is applied outside its proper sphere”.³⁰ It attempts to explain cultural change by likening ill-defined *memes* to genes, as though a process of Darwinian competition and selection could then account for their historical success and failure. However, Gray pointedly asks whether this means that, had the Final Solution been carried through to its conclusion, would this have demonstrated “the inferiority of Hebrew memes?”³¹ Dawkins arbitrarily identifies religious memes as “viruses of the mind” which would lose their potency were they no longer to be inculcated via schools and parents. Gray thinks this is as likely as a chaste upbringing banishing all illicit sexual impulses. He prefers a Freudian account: repressing religion is like repressing sex – it results in the “return of the repressed”, but in “grotesque and degraded forms”³²

While attacking the misuse of “humanity” as a concept, Gray endorses the relevance of talking about *human nature* in ethics and politics. Gray is not a *postmodernist* or a *subjectivist*. He does not subscribe to the notion that moral judgements are simply emotional states or that human nature is a mere cultural construction whose content endlessly alters according to shifts of power and discourse. Postmodernists reject all talk of truth and error in ethics. But for Gray, abandoning the idea that there is one single moral truth is not the same as denying the possibility of moral error, as long as we are prepared to accept the fact of human nature. Gray has written enthusiastically, here, in support of Steven Pinker and EO Wilson. This should not be surprising. He notes that the great political experiments of the 20th century have been disastrous in part because they have denied the limitations of human nature and have presumed that human behaviour can somehow be transformed by changes in society. There is no lack of fit here with Berlin’s insistence that human values are incommensurable; the problem is that each one of us has needs, wants, predispositions, given to us by nature but which can never all be satisfied and whose urgency and importance continually

change and are given variable expression. This is not at all the same as claiming that such needs are invented by cultures in the first place, and can somehow be wished away. Competing moralities sometimes seek to replace our natural inclinations with something else, but morality in this sense “is a sickness peculiar to humans... the good life is a refinement of the virtues of animals..... arising from our animal natures...”³³ Though Gray does not specifically acknowledge the fact, his discussion is essentially within the Aristotelian tradition of ethics which has been reasserted within moral philosophy in recent years.

Gray’s views also lead him to commend the “lost tradition of realism”.³⁴ *Realism* in this context is what must replace utopianism. Its roots lie in Machiavelli’s insight that governments “must achieve all of their goals in a world of ceaseless conflict that is never far from a state of war”³⁵ It repudiates faith and is ethically serious. It requires austere discipline rather than psychological comfort and easy conclusions. Its practitioners in recent generations enabled western governments to prevail in conflicts much more dangerous than any faced so far this century. Its unsung heroes, for Gray, were policy makers like George Kennan.³⁶ They saw international relations as problems no more soluble than those of human life in general, sometimes involving radical choices between evils. While realism recognises the need “to deal out death to defeat Hitler”, it stops us short of “wading in blood to democratise the world”³⁷. It sees institutions like the UN as “devices for moderating the rivalry of sovereign powers,” which are bound to rank what they see as their vital interests above more universal considerations. The UN is not an “embryonic form of global governance”³⁸ Realism rejects any teleological view of history and resists the lure of harmony in ethics, while remaining committed to civilised restraints on the use of force. It is historically well-grounded in seeing that political legitimacy can derive from many different sources, and that, while “freedom can be contagious”, so too, sadly, can tyranny. For Gray, competing regimes, like rival versions of the good life, may be neither more nor less legitimate than one another; they may be legitimate for different reasons.

Gray’s intention in retirement is to write more about environmental issues. He shares the concerns of Lovelock and others about the possibility of climate catastrophe, but parts company with other “greens” in advocating the usefulness of nuclear power, GM, and other new technologies where appropriate. He has written about the “delusional faith that sustainable development and renewable energy can save the day”³⁹, when confronted by the worldwide stampede to industrialise and the continued growth in population, discussion of which Gray claims to be “now taboo in environmental debate”.⁴⁰ Realism dictates that adapting to climate change requires political decisions, “but there is no *political solution* to the problems we face”.⁴¹ He is sanguine about our prospects: “Environmental crisis is a fate human beings can temper but not overcome. Its origins are in the power to grow knowledge.....”⁴²

In his turn, Gray has grown our knowledge. He has also challenged our assumptions. May he continue to do so.

¹ John Gray Bibliography Main publications., excluding numerous scholarly articles.

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- 1986 Liberty
- 1989 Liberalisms: an essay in political philosophy
- 1991 Mill on liberty in focus
- 1993 Beyond the New Right
- 1993 Post-liberalism: studies in political thought
- 1994 Post-communist societies in transition
- 1994 The undoing of Conservatism
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² Guardian interview, 7 July 2007

³ See: America's War On Evil; On The Eve Of War; Washington's New Jacobins; The Mirage Of American Empire; Iraq And The Illusions Of Global Governance... in Heresies, 2004.

⁴ Heresies, p.18

⁵ Heresies, p.67

⁶ Heresies, p.82

⁷ Black Mass, p.1

⁸ In, Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy, ed. Henry Aitken, *Macmillan*, 1948, p 374

⁹ Black Mass pp. 55-56

¹⁰ On National Characteristics, quoted in Black Mass, p 61

¹¹ Black Mass, p 84

¹² Black Mass, p 96

¹³ Black Mass, p. 123

¹⁴ Black Mass, p. 24

- ¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, The End Of History? *National Interest Magazine*, Summer 1989
- ¹⁶ Heresies, p.83
- ¹⁷ Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern, p.1
- ¹⁸ Enlightenment's Wake, p. 11
- ¹⁹ Enlightenment's Wake, p. 12
- ²⁰ Enlightenment's Wake, p.99
- ²¹ Enlightenment's Wake, p.132
- ²² Enlightenment's Wake, p.133
- ²³ Straw Dogs, p. 12
- ²⁴ Straw Dogs, p. 14
- ²⁵ Straw Dogs, p. 28
- ²⁶ Paul Feyerabend, Against Method, *New Left Books*, 1975, Farewell To Reason, *Verso*, 1987
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- ³² Guardian Review, 15 March 2008
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- ³⁹ Letting Climate Change Happen, *New Statesman Magazine*, 29 May 2006
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- ⁴² Black Mass, p. 203