*The Silence of Animals* by John Gray

In this sequel to his earlier work, *Straw Dogs*, John Gray continues his derision of modernity and exposing of the “myth of progress”. As the title suggests, he also further develops the idea outlined in *Straw Dogs* that humans are mere animals, to the point now where humans become in fact, *less* than mere animals.

The “Myth of Progress”

Gray reacts very strongly to what he calls the “myth of progress”, which means exactly what it says; the notion that the future can be better than the past is a myth. It is hard to know exactly what to make of such unbridled, post-modernist pessimism. I can sympathise somewhat with what I presume must be a reaction to the uber-optimistic age we now live in, but is progress really a myth? Has *nothing* changed for the better in human history?

One of Gray’s points is that humanity cannot be marching anywhere because there is no such thing as ‘humanity’; the idea of ‘humanity’ is just another fiction we have all bought into. Gray tells us that the only things which exist are individual lives. Well, of course, but no one is claiming that ‘humanity’ is real in the way that individual humans are[[1]](#footnote-1), and more importantly it doesn’t have to be in order for humanity (as composed of real individuals) to make progress in any endeavour. On these grounds there is no such thing as a family either, but is it therefore a myth to say that my family went on vacation?

Gray also plays the evolution card. As we all know, there is no teleology (purpose) in evolution so if the development of society is an evolutionary process, then it is one that Gray claims is going nowhere. The problem with this line of reasoning is that he is comparing the evolution of animals to the evolution of societies. Unfortunately these are not like objects. Biological evolution by natural selection is indeed random and operates without a guiding conscious light but human society evolves in a quite different fashion. Natural selection proceeds from *random* genetic mutations but the ‘mutations’ that human societies select and which therefore get passed onto the next generation are anything but random. In short, there *is* teleology in societal evolution because the driver is not a random physical process but a conscious decision made by an intelligent agent.

Related to this, he also says that modern humanists see “the realisation of human potential as the goal of history, when rational inquiry shows history to have no goal.” Inasmuch as *anyone* says history has a goal, I would agree with Gray that this is nonsense, but is it nonsense to say that the humans involved in making this history can’t set the realisation of their own potential as goals? Is that a myth too? Artists paint, explorers explore, writers write, thinkers think; are they *never* trying to complete goals they set for themselves? Is this not progress?

Gray identifies Socrates and Christianity as the parents of his “myth of progress”. Socrates bequeathed to us faith in reason and Christianity gave us the myth of salvation. I will defer my discussion of religion for the time being and focus on Socrates. Specifically, Gray has a problem with three Socratic “articles of faith” which he claims have been accepted as unchallengeable axioms. (I should point out here that Gray’s use of the word “faith” suggests that the following ideas are all implausible and/or run counter to direct experience):

1. Human evil is a type of error which will diminish with an increase in knowledge – It is a fundamental tenet of Gray’s that knowledge doesn’t make us better in any way, shape, or form. We are beasts and nothing can change that. And yet we have made laws to protect the weak from the strong, to ensure fair treatment in trade or commerce, to end discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, or any other number of superficial differences. We have enacted democracy and placed checks on those in power so that tyrants can no longer rule with impunity. We have social welfare systems in place to help those in need. Now, none of these things may be perfect, but surely they are better than their opposites. Couldn’t Socrates argue that each of the above changes came about because we learned that the alternatives couldn’t be justified, i.e. our knowledge increased? In fact, I would say that *every* change for the better occurs with a corresponding increase in knowledge.
2. The good life must be the examined life – This is such an odd thing for a philosopher to label an article of faith. Just the fact that Gray has taken the time to write his book shows that he has examined, and continues to examine, life. Presumably this means he perceives some value in self-examination. But perhaps he means that it isn’t *necessary* to examine life to live well. Maybe. We can all imagine someone who doesn’t seem to think particularly deeply about anything but nevertheless manages to live a good life. However, we have to ask ourselves what counts as an ‘examination’? Has this person really not examined their life at all? If she was so satisfied with her life, she must have formulated at least *some* basic precepts to live by. She must have an opinion on what makes a good life, after all, she managed to pull one off. I would concede that we don’t have to make philosophical examination the centre of our lives to live well but if that is the point Gray is making it seems a fairly underwhelming one.
3. Reason can enable humans to shape their lives. There is quite a bit to say on this topic so I will defer this discussion to a later section where it can be treated in more depth.

The assertion, in a world where slavery has become unthinkable to a significant number of us and the phrase ‘international humanitarian law’ actually means something, that progress is a myth, just seems so contrary to the facts it is hard to believe anyone could take it seriously. Sure, civilisations rise and fall, not every change is for the better, and there is no guarantee that any positive changes will endure, but can we really look at the world and say progress is a myth?

Although at times Gray definitely does argue for this strong position, there is a weaker sense in which the “myth of progress” can be read; that is, as the notion that humanity *always* moves onwards and upwards or that there is some grand Hegelian purpose human history (or individual humans) is steadily marching towards. Both of these ideas are floating around in our self-actualisation obsessed, be-all-you-can-be and you-can-be-whatever-you-want-to-be world, and fully deserve to be called fictions. If Gray had kept it at that and managed to keep the baby in the bath instead of throwing her out with the bathwater, we would have found much more common ground.

Humanism

As you may have guessed, the ever contrary Gray takes a fairly dim view of humanism. He defines it with reference to three aspects:

1. The idea that there is some unique value in humans. Gray has a huge problem with the idea that there is *anything* special about the human animal. My honest opinion of this thesis is that it’s an over-reaction to any past injustices we may have visited upon our animal cousins. It’s like feeling so bad that women used to be discriminated against that now we deny there are any differences between men and women at all. We can celebrate our gender differences without being discriminatory and likewise, we can acknowledge our differences from other animals without reverting to the idea that they are merely objects for our amusement.

We are *obviously* different from other animals and in a *very* unique way. The great apes come closest to having the reasoning skills we have but let’s be honest, they are still many evolutionary iterations behind us. Denying this is as inane as denying that there are differences between men and women.

1. The idea that the human mind reflects the order of the cosmos. This was certainly a belief central to many Renaissance humanists in the 14th and 15th centuries who were looking to ancient Greeks and Romans for inspiration, but it really requires some kind of religious or spiritual belief to work (like Plato’s theory of the Forms or the Stoic conception of the *Logos*). I don’t think it’s something many people seriously believe these days. This seems to me to be a feature of a fairly dated definition of humanism.
2. History is a story of human advance, with rationality increasing over time. I have treated the idea of progress already and will once more defer my treatment of reason for a little longer.

Human Nature

*The Beast Within*

Gray leaps at any chance to bear witness to instances where humans act like animals and to this end, he digs up a couple of first-hand accounts of the 1944 occupation of Naples in which it is documented that what was left of the population, “were hungry animals, ready to do anything to go on living…” (p.21) He also takes the opportunity to point out that while civilisation is natural for humans, so is barbarism.

So what conclusion are we being led to here? The idea that humans are somehow more than nasty, brutish, solitary, and poor animals is a comforting myth we all indulge in. Our civility, reason, and morals are a thin veneer that allow us to pretend that we are something more than beasts for a brief moment.

Maybe.

But as always, there are two sides to this coin. The first is Gray’s strong story that we are animals and are deceiving ourselves that we are or can be anything else. Ironically, this is almost Christian in its denial that we are anything more than savage beasts at heart. I wholeheartedly reject this claim.

The other side is the weaker (but more reasonable) admission that we *are* animals but we *can* rise above those more primitive instincts of ours. Gray’s hackles would rise at that, but the evidence is all around that, at least most of the time, most of us aren’t that bad and many of us are actually pretty good. Is it all just an act? Are we *pretending*? Well, if we have managed to build the societies we have on the back of a pretence then we don’t need religions for miracles because that’s the most unlikely miracle right there. We just aren’t as savage as Gray wants to paint us out to be. Sure, when the chips are down and survival is on the line we might see humanity in its less than glorious splendour… but is the extreme case the rule, or the exception?

*Freedom*

Freedom. The cry of modernity. We want to be free. We *ought* to be free. We are born to be free. All of these statements have been made by modern philosophers and repeated so often, resonating with something within each of us, that they have become ingrained in the public consciousness. Naturally, Gray disagrees with them. And surprisingly, I tend to agree with him… well, almost.

Certainly the claim that we *ought* to be free, in the sense that we have some kind of *natural* right to freedom, has no legs to stand on.[[2]](#footnote-2) But I also agree that most of us *don’t* actually want to be free, even though we may think we do. We may assert our freedom all the while doing what Heidegger’s *das man* (translated as “the they” – the nameless, faceless *them* we refer to in the third person when we say things like, “they say one should lease, not buy”) tells us to do. We wear what *they* tell us to, eat what *they* recommend, drive cars *they* drive, value things *they* value, and so on. Heidegger and Sartre called it inauthentic living and I think in many ways, it cashes out as refusing to make free choices. (The fact that most of us proclaim our freedom while nevertheless engrossed in living inauthentically only makes us even more inauthentic)

The irony here is that even though people don’t want to be free, they are and can’t be anything but.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even attempting to evade that freedom by choosing not to exercise it (and following “the they”, for example) is still a choice. This is what Sartre meant when he said we are condemned to be free.

So Gray rejects 1) the idea that freedom is nothing like our ‘natural’ birthright, 2) the idea that people want to be free and, and 3) the idea that freedom is a good thing; “what if they can be fulfilled only by a life in which they follow each other? The majority who obey the fashion of the day may be acting on a secret awareness that they lack the potential for a truly individual existence.”

I agree with him on the first point (the whole idea of birthrights doesn’t make any sense to me). I also agree with him on the second point (real freedom and all it entails is not an easy thing to embrace; take a look at all the people willingly giving up their freedom to a God or gods).

Unfortunately, we part company over the third point, primarily because I think it doesn’t make much sense. Whether freedom is good or bad is irrelevant because, as I have already argued, we have no choice in the matter. What we do have a choice (freedom) over is how we react to this freedom. We can try to give it away (by following “the they” or submitting to the will of God, for instance) or we can accept the realities of being human and live our lives authentically. I find Gray’s claim that some people just “lack the potential for a truly individual existence” and should therefore be left to choose ‘unfreedom’ (or ‘inauthenticity’ as I have been calling it) tantamount to saying that some people are just too afraid to face the truth and so they should be left to believe in Santa Claus if it makes them happy. Even if we don’t like it, even if it makes us less happy, I suspect an authentic life in which we embrace our radical freedom is better than a content one in which we live a comforting delusion.

*Controlling our own Fate - Determinism*

Gray is a strict determinist, meaning that he denies we have freewill. Although he never fully examines the consequences of adopting this position, I agree with Gray completely on this point. There is just no room in our physical universe for an uncaused, Cartesian ‘mind’ to be operating behind the scenes and postulating one raises more problems than it solves. I have examined this idea in considerable detail elsewhere so I won’t discuss it anymore here, but just in case you want to take refuge in the idea of some kind of transcendent self I will leave you with a quote from page 86, “They forget that the self that does the choosing has not itself been chosen.”

*The Human Sickness*

I think it would be fair to characterise Gray as saying humans are animals and maintaining that there is no *natural* right or wrong way for animals to live. They just *are*. There is no ideal form of existence, no way animals can choose their own fates, and any notion of progress is a myth; for where could they hope to progress to? Which is why it came as a surprise to me to hear Gray claiming that health is natural in other species but for humans the norm is sickness.

This is a perfect example of where Gray’s misanthropic leanings have driven him to a position that can’t be reconciled with his broader argument. If humans are animals just living out their animalistic urges and yearnings, how can we be sicker than our ‘natural’ animal cousins? The answer is we can’t. Humans *are* different from other animals; *all* other animals. And here, Gray agrees. His point however, is that our difference makes us sick. So, what is this difference?

Gray claims that throughout all of history (and pre-history) there has been something wrong with humans; “To be chronically unwell is part of what it means to be human.” Gray considers the fact that we have always needed ‘mental doctors’ [not Gray’s term], from tribal shamans through to psychologists, evidence of our perennial affliction. What is this ailment that has stricken our species so? The hope of a life without conflict.

Is it just me or is that not one hell of an anti-climax. That ‘sickness’ is precisely what drives humans to invent, explore, discover, and even philosophise. Now, these urges haven’t always yielded positive results but that seems to me a bit like blaming metallurgy for knives that can kill, all while slicing your bread with one. I don’t see Gray (or anyone else as misanthropic as him) spurning the devices that our ‘sickness’ has driven us on to produce. Virtually everything we surround ourselves with is an attempt to make our lives easier; to, in Gray’s parlance, reduce conflict. So, in what sense is this desire a sickness?

The idea Gray is angling at is that conflict in life is inevitable. At other places he calls it tragedy. Every human life will inevitably and unavoidably involve tragedy. Friends will betray you, family will die, bosses/clients/customers will make your life miserable, dreams will be thwarted, hopes dashed, and ultimately everything will be rendered null and void by your own demise. Gray is saying that our hopefulness that we can overcome all of these things is in vain; is… a sickness.

To the extent that people (humanists, in particular, are Gray’s main target) think we can avoid these things I would, and do, wholeheartedly agree with Gray. I have no tolerance at all for the modern, uber-optimistic, predominantly Western attitude of self-entitlement that says not only can you achieve all of your dreams but you are owed them, by life. But to curse the very ability that has made the human animal different in such a special and amazing way is once more to throw out the baby with the bathwater. If you get an infection under your fingernail the solution is not to throw a tantrum, curse fingernails, and chop off the tips of your fingers (the same holds for circumcision by the way, and saying it’s for ‘religious’ reasons doesn’t make it any better!). The solution is to treat the infection. We have *learnt* to be over-optimistic and have been *taught* that we deserve to have our every whim satisfied. We can unlearn these things.

Of course, Gray, in typical pessimistic fashion, sides with Freud in declaring the human sickness to be incurable, although I can’t think of a single reason why this should be the case.

Reason

Gray’s main claim here is that humans are fundamentally irrational. I couldn’t agree more. To support his point Gray cites the psychological findings about how people typically resolve cognitive dissonance (a situation where one’s beliefs are contradicted by new information). Rather than recognising the beliefs as erroneous and simply replacing them, people frequently react by becoming even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs. The classic example of such irrationality can be seen in doomsday cults who foolishly predict an apocalypse expected to occur within their lifetimes. Gray refers to a group of psychologists who infiltrated a cult who believed the world would end (by flood, no less) on December 21, 1954. The cult members abandoned their families, jobs, homes, and possessions, and waited for a flying saucer which would rescue them. When the flood didn’t come, what happened? Did they lynch the Michigan woman who led the cult? Did they renounce their nonsensical beliefs? Sadly not. They concluded that their vigilance and praying throughout the night had successfully prevented the apocalypse.

However, once more Gray takes a valid insight and distorts it out of all proportion. He isn’t content to say we are partially (or even mainly) irrational, but rather “the idea that humans may one day be more rational requires a greater leap of faith than anything in religion.” Rationality can *never* increase.[[4]](#footnote-4) Gray concedes that our knowledge can increase but he affirms that our irrationality always stays the same. Is this right?

Sure, in many areas of our everyday lives most of us remain primarily irrational and this is very much what distinguishes us from computers. But is it right to say that we are just as irrational in all aspects of life as we have always been? Have philosophy, mathematics, science, and other similar disciplines not had the slightest effect on us?

Gray vilifies Socrates as the harbinger of the idea that the human mind is rational and logical. “The secret workings of the mind are ignorant of logic – the id, Freud says, knows nothing of the law that forbids self-contradiction – and are indifferent to right and wrong.” But are we nothing more than the “secret workings” of our minds, by which Gray apparently means the subconscious? Of course not. That *would* make us no different from other animals. In addition to the id, we are also the super-ego, which is *not* ignorant of logic or right and wrong; a faculty that I suspect, in composing his book, Gray happily utilised as much as he could.

Are we *only* rational? Of course not. So, are we *only* irrational? Of course not. It is a curious feature of humans that we seem to want things to be *all* this or *all* that, when there is absolutely no reason why it can’t be *partially* this and *partially* that. And, of course, there is equally no reason why this and/or that can’t increase over time.

As we have already seen, Gray also rejects the idea that reason can enable humans to shape their lives.[[5]](#footnote-5) Like all animals, we are subject to evolution by natural selection and “the human mind has no built-in bias to truth or rationality… [so] will continue to develop according to the imperative of survival.” This whole point turns completely on Gray’s notion that progress is a myth which I have already discussed.

Pick an ‘evil’ in society that we have relegated to the past and demonised in the process (sexism, racism, and any other ism’s you care to consider), and tell me that we did so based on irrational concerns. Try to convince yourself that the scientific revolution came about because society remained as stubbornly irrational as it was when everyone believed in nature spirits and gods who did things like drag the sun across the sky each day. Not only *can* we shape our lives through reason, we already have, and all despite Gray’s stubborn assertion that evolution wouldn’t permit it.

Religion and Atheism

Gray is an atheist but he likes to use religion to batter contemporary atheism and humanism over the head with. His strategy is the same in both cases (and a disappointing recent trend amongst otherwise strong atheists); he claims that neither group has succeeded in freeing itself from religion and as such, both remain trapped in a religious framework they think they have transcended.

I have already discussed both of these ideas in my commentary of *Strawdogs* so I will try to keep this relatively brief.

The word ‘atheism’, correctly used, is nothing more than the absence of a belief in a deity. It is the contention that God does *not* exist. Gray however, explicitly rejects this definition and goes on to define atheism as “giving up belief in language as anything other than a practical convenience” i.e. not rejecting what theists affirm but having no use for the concepts and doctrines of theism.

This is very post-structuralist and all, but how does it help Gray with his point? Gray himself seems excessively preoccupied with language as more than a mere practical convenience – talking as he does about ‘myths of progress’ and ‘humanist delusions.’ And why shouldn’t he? Having no use for the concepts of humanism is not going to result in a meaningful discussion about humanism; in fact, it’s not going to result in any kind of discussion at all! How are we to engage with each other over ideas and concepts in this post-modernist world where language is nothing more than a practical convenience? How far would the women’s liberation movement have gotten if every time something was written condemning discrimination, someone stood up and claimed they should just have no use for the concepts and doctrines of sexism? No. Language *is* a practical convenience but that only makes it all the more important and what’s more, this fact does nothing to diminish its power as an organising and structuring device.

So, it is only Gray’s handy redefinition of atheism (an explicitly linguistic move in itself) that allows him in the first place to make the claim that contemporary atheists are reacting to and/or still mired in a Christian worldview. Surely, there is something suspicious about this.

Secondly, Gray tries to tarnish everything humanist by asserting that here too, the humanists are doing nothing more than pursuing religious goals in secular garb. Knowledge and power are the modern versions of Christian salvation, the uniqueness of humans is obviously of Christian heritage, anybody who believes in freewill must have inherited this from Christianity (specifically the Christian idea that we can ‘earn’ our salvation by believing in God, for example), even the idea of progress itself is Christian because other pre-Christian religions had a circular conception of history rather than a linear one terminating in redemption.

It should be clear from the above that virtually anything we think of can be attributed to religion if we try hard enough to make the necessary connections. Did Judaism really point the way to the discovery of the unconscious mind? Gray approvingly recounts Freud’s myth to that effect when he tells us that with the Judaic ban on images of God, the idea of a mysterious “invisible reality” was born, in turn allowing for a type of introspection that had not been possible before. And of course, from there it was only a hop, skip, and a jump to modern day psychology. No matter how tenuous the link, if one is willing to try hard enough, one can create a ‘just so’ tale about anything. Did no culture before the Jews ever believe in an “invisible reality” beyond the physical realm? This is complete nonsense.

Or let’s take the totalitarian regime in North Korea (and the only marginally less repressive one in China). They have a single, semi-divine (male) ruler at the top of a very steep hierarchy in whom all power is vested. Everyone else in the country is equal (under him). This is virtually identical to the Christian set-up. It must have come from Christianity then… oh, except we know that it didn’t. The Buddha founded a ‘religion’[[6]](#footnote-6) that is fundamentally concerned with examining the mind and the way it influences our perception to, in a very real way, create our reality. Clearly, psychoanalysis owes its existence to the Buddha then. But wait, no it doesn’t.

This is a classic fallacy that people continually fall prey to; *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this). The West first advocated democracy. Oh, it must be because of the Christian doctrine of [insert even half-relevant doctrine here]. The scientific revolution occurred in the West. Of course it did. That’s because of Christian belief in [insert belief here while ignoring any and all evidence to the contrary].

And just in case you aren’t convinced yet, Gray takes another well-defined, explicitly religious word and keeps the language game going by telling us that humanists “announce the arrival of a new deity, uglier than any that has ever before been worshipped, a divinized version of themselves…” Well of course, because everyone knows humanists worship themselves the same way that Christians worship Jesus. I consider this a deliberate misappropriation of language with the sole intention of creating a link where one doesn’t rightfully exist.

Let me leave you with one more analogy which will hopefully put an end to all of this ‘everything came from Christianity’ attitude. Only a couple of sections ago I discussed Gray’s claim that all of us humans are afflicted with an incurable sickness (the hope of a life without conflict). Does this remind you of anything Christian? So, it looks like, by his own standards, Gray himself is still labouring under Christian myths.

Myth

Gray sees the purpose of myth as answering our desperate human need for meaning. It brings a sense of order and purpose to the random chaos that is reality. I completely agree with Gray on this point. That is precisely why religions are so pervasive. They offer a purpose to life, make sense of the apparent chaos, reassure you that someone personal is looking after you, and, at no extra charge, get rid of that bane of human existence, death.

I also agree with Gray that too many people do, in fact, see science and the latest material goods (which they are entitled to because they are a [insert country here] citizen) as providing the same solace that they used to get from religion. It has become something of a cliché now but most people spend a disturbing amount of time tranquillised in front of the television or lurching from one consumer fix to the next, imagining each time that they will finally be happy once they acquire that [insert over-advertised product here] which they have wanted… no, *needed* for so long… at least since last week when they first saw it advertised on the TV. (See, I can rant too!)

The problem is that after spending half of the book attacking modern myths and berating “Christians and their humanist followers” for believing them, Gray then turns around and unapologetically tells us that in the end, our lives are necessarily shaped by fictions because that’s all we have. This immediately allows us to draw two conclusions; 1. Gray’s entire book amounts to no more than a myth he is propagating about other myths, and 2. By his own standards, he has no grounds for criticising the myths of other people just because they happen to be different from his.

But now I think we are in a position to see the bigger picture. Gray’s opening rant against modern “myths” was not against myth, as such; rather he was trying to get us to admit that our modern humanist beliefs/ideals *are* myths. From there, he’s offering to replace them with ones of his own making centred on silence and an innocent, pristine, animal nobility buried in our distant evolutionary past and long since forgotten.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But there’s a tension here. We can’t consciously choose to believe something we know to be false. Yet, Gray maintains, “a life based on fictions cannot be impossible, since we live such a life every day.” Something has to go and Gray decides that that something is ‘belief’ (which, surprise, surprise, is a Western invention going all the way back to Gray’s anti-hero, Socrates). “Fictions are not conscious falsehoods. Creations of the imagination, they are neither true nor false.” He mentions Eastern, religious “systems of ideas” (he is careful not to use the word ‘beliefs’ but I think it’s clearly a synonym – more wordplay), Vedanta, Buddhist, and the Kabbalah, as pointing “to realities that cannot be captured in beliefs”. Now, no matter how many times I read this sentence I just cannot make sense of it. It sounds like nothing more than pseudo-religious, mystical mumbo-jumbo. These ideas that are “creations of the imagination” have somehow become “realities” – but don’t try to believe them because they “cannot be captured in beliefs” – whatever that means?!

Now that he’s started down this path Gray seems to throw caution to the wind, dump reason completely, and boldly declare on the next page that, “A fiction is not something you need to justify. When it comes to you, you accept it freely. As for other people, they can do as they please.” Substitute “Christianity” for “a fiction” in that last sentence and you have a more succinct defence of religion than has ever been made before.

Typically, I would reconstruct an argument and illustrate why I disagree with it, but I can’t do that here because there is nothing to argue with. Gray hasn’t put forward a single coherent thought in what I see as being one of the most important sections in the book (pp. 104-108).

1. All of our ‘facts’ are actually myths.
2. Myths are creations of the imagination.
3. They are also realities.
4. Myths are neither true nor false therefore they can’t be believed.
5. Belief is a negative attachment we ought to divest ourselves of so when you talk of your “system of ideas” you need to replace the word ‘belief’ with other expressions that essentially mean the same thing.

Gray insists on only three restrictions to our “supreme fictions”, courtesy of the poet, Wallace Stevens; they must be abstract, they must change, and they must give pleasure. Gray doesn’t seem to feel the urge to defend any of these claims except to say of the imperative that a myth must give pleasure, “why else should anyone make it a part of their life?” Despite being an atheist (although I’m starting to see why he rejects the accepted definition of this word), this single paragraph gives to religious believers all the ammunition they could ever need.

Gray seems to have realised that he has thrown the doors open a little too wide and tries to curtail any overzealous, would-be myth-makers by saying, “Fictions cannot be created at will. If they could be called into being as we wish, they could also be dismissed whenever we like.” (This, we are told, is the “project of humanism”) Of course, this begs a couple of questions. Exactly how *are* these myths created? And *who* is doing the creating, apparently by accident? Gray answers these questions in time-tested religious fashion… by quoting poetry. According to Steven, they come:

at the end of the mind,

Beyond the last thought…

The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The take home from all of this seems to be that it’s alright (because we have no choice either way) to accept (by which I mean ‘believe in’) myths… except those of the “modern” variety, which are poison.

It’s hard to see how this section doesn’t completely deflate the first eighty-odd pages of *The Silence*, which tear into our society’s “modern myths”. It now seems any humanist has a clear and irrefutable defence for his position; “I don’t have to justify my myths to you.”

Happiness

Gray calls happiness a “fiction you can do without… the pursuit of happiness is a distraction from living. It would be better to aim for something different – a type of life in which you do not need a fantasy of satisfaction in order to find being human an interesting and worthwhile experience.”

Before getting too deep here I think we ought to highlight two different kinds of happiness; a distinction Gray doesn’t make, by the way. The first is the ‘shallow’ kind and has two attributes; it is temporary and it comes from some external source. The second is (for want of a better word) the ‘deep’ kind. This is more enduring and has its source in a relaxed form of contentment that is not dependent on external events.

As far as the shallow (and ultimately unsatisfying) form of happiness (which I assume Gray is talking about) that most people spend inordinate amounts of time chasing goes, I am in complete agreement with Gray. Anybody pursuing this kind of happiness is like a drunken reveller lurching from one moment of pleasure to the next, each high separated (and defined) by the low immediately before and after.

Gray rightly criticises the modern ideal of self-realisation because it suggests we can flourish in only one kind of life, which is not true (like the myth (now he’s got me using the word) that there is one perfect “soulmate” for everyone). It also perpetuates the uber-optimistic, modern myth that we can (and are *entitled* to, no less) fulfil all of our dreams, which is a reckless promise that life seldom sees fit to honour. At this point I’m always reminded of the German word, *weltschmerz*, which literally translates as ‘world-pain’ and encapsulates the feeling that physical reality can never satisfy the demands of the mind. What struck me about this word when I first heard it was not just how appropriately it describes real life, but also the fact that we have no equivalent concept in English. How could we? What a depressing thought! We can be everything we want to be, right? Reach for the stars, don’t settle for second best, the American dream, and all that nonsense…

As for the deeper kind of happiness however, I can’t think of a better goal to pursue in the short, ultimately meaningless and frequently disappointing lives in which we find ourselves thrown. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle concluded that happiness is the only good we desire for itself.[[8]](#footnote-8) Every other good, we pursue for some other reason. Money can’t be the ultimate good because we only desire money for the things we can buy with it, or maybe for the status we get from flashing our platinum card around. Fame is equally empty because we only desire this to get money, or admirers, or approval. But if you follow the chain back you will eventually come up against one final motivating reason that doesn’t point to anything else; happiness (the second, ‘deep’ kind).

For reasons of space, I will reserve a lengthier discussion on happiness for a future independent article. At this point it will suffice to register my agreement with Gray concerning ‘shallow’ happiness but nudge the door open to the idea that a ‘deeper’ form of happiness might just make for a worthwhile goal.

Silence

This idea is discussed in the final section of *The Silence of Animals* and is the culmination of the ideas in the book.

Let me begin with a point over which Gray and I are in agreement; the importance of silence and the fact that it has received a particularly bad rap in modern life. Gray affirms that humans need silence but bemoans the fact that these days we prize restlessness as a virtue and glorify life in the fast lane; the “pursuit of distraction has been embraced as the meaning of life.” Anything so that we don’t actually have to *think* about our lives. Our heroes are no longer those who calmly deal with life’s ups and downs, radiating calm and making us feel better about ourselves just by being around. Instead we revere the richest and most ruthless of us. We idolise the type A workaholic who aggressively fights his way to the top all the while berating, belittling, and undermining those around him. Case in point: Steve Jobs. Unflattering tales abound about the man prepared to “go thermonuclear war” and “destroy Android” over copyright infringement issues, including how he verbally abused employees. Despite this, his death sparked an astonishing outpouring of admiration. If Apple was a religion, Jobs would undoubtedly have been canonised. But he was hardly a model human. And just what did this modern day saint do for the world? Cure cancer? End world hunger? No, he made a truckload of money with a phone that connects to the internet. What does it say about modernity that such a person was venerated to the extent that he was?

But when Gray picks up his ‘animals are more sacred than us’ thread, he and I diverge. He claims that “the human animal looks to silence for relief from being itself while other creatures enjoy silence as their birthright.” To be fair, Gray is very much reacting to those who degrade animals as being inferior to humans, but going too far in the opposite direction only further muddies already muddy waters. We typically think of our capacity for language and ability to use it to “construct a self-image and a story of [our] lives” as a positive thing; but Gray questions this, “Why should breaking silence and then loudly struggling to renew it be such an achievement?”

The problem with this line of thought is that it assumes human silence and animal silence are the same. Animals’ minds are surely less ‘cluttered’ than ours, perhaps arousing our envy at the way they experience life in the moment and take it as it comes without the dysfunction we often seem to be burdened by. But is this really an enviable situation? We know that most animals can’t even recognise themselves in a mirror so even if they are living in perfect ‘flow’ (as it is sometimes described), they are surely not aware of it, which kind of undermines the whole enterprise.

On the other hand though, if a human steps out of the hustle and bustle for a moment and calms her mind, letting go of all those expectations and desires which always seem to clamouring for attention, there is some sense of achievement there, not just because it didn’t come effortlessly, but because she can *know* the silence that she created for herself. In other words, breaking the silence in the first place was a crucial step to being truly aware of silence.

I note that Gray does acknowledge the difference between human and animal silence and yet he refuses to admit that being human is actually something we ought to be pleased about, pleased that we have the faculties we do, pleased that we were born human and not tiger. Although Gray may not like it, the light of consciousness does seem to shine brighter in us than in our animal cousins, and it is this that almost certainly makes our lives far richer than a dog’s. After all, would anyone *really* give up being human to become an animal, even if silence comes so easy to the latter?

And we finally come to the positive message of *The Silence*; contemplation. Gray shuns both science and philosophy and announces that, “If the human mind can ever be released from myth it is… in moments of contemplation.” He is quick to point out that this is not a religious or mystical search for something like a “higher self” – rather it is an “interval in the life of the mind”, a kind of receptivity that “aims not to change the world or to understand it, but simply to let it be.” It is a nullifying of the self, a way of being with “nothing particular in mind.”

Now, Gray might resist analogy to any established tradition but to my ears, Gray’s contemplation sounds an awful lot like Buddhist meditation. Of course, Buddhist meditation typically comes with a goal (for example, to learn more about the illusion of self or achieve enlightenment) and Gray is definitely against anything like that. He is quite clear that this contemplation is not a path leading anywhere, nor will it dissolve inner conflict or escape tragedy. “All it offers is mere being.”

Taking a break from the incessant ramblings of the mind and stealing moments of silence to just *be* is fundamental to a life well-lived. Gray’s ‘contemplation’ (like Buddhist meditation) accomplishes this.

Conclusion

*The Silence of Animals* is a mature exposition of post-modernist sentiments that offer the thoughtful reader plenty of food for thought. I think *The Silence* makes three central points:

1. All of the things we (modern humanists) think are true are in fact myths based on reason (philosophy) and religion (Christianity).
2. Humans are a species with big problems (particularly when compared to other animals).
3. The silence found in contemplation is the only way to free ourselves from our myths.

Despite the fact that I found much to disagree with here, I think Gray and I start from fairly similar positions but diverge from there. I agree with Gray that our modern consumerist, material goods-obsessed, capitalist societies are not actually enriching our lives, no matter how loudly the sexy models on TV tell us they are. However, where I’m ready to challenge these specific values and encourage a more thoughtful approach to our lives that embraces both science and philosophy, Gray has already opened the window and is busily throwing out *all* our values, along with the scientific and philosophical traditions they arose in.

Likewise, I completely sympathise with Gray’s conclusion about the value of silence obtained through contemplation, but we can’t spend our whole lives that way. What are we supposed to do when we aren’t contemplating? In two hundred odd pages, Gray has systematically torn down philosophy, science, reason, progress, even sickly humanity, all in favour of the silence our animal betters enjoy as their birthright. But surely a *de*volved, animal life is not the ideal Gray is pushing for here. Again, I just can’t agree that the way to solve our uniquely human problems is by throwing out everything that makes us human. It’s the baby and the bathwater again.

The merit of post-modernism is that it allows us to survey and critique the heady optimism that swept over us with those pinnacles of rational thought, the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, but we need to be careful that we don’t let a thoughtful critique turn into unbridled criticism.

1. This was a Scholastic dispute that was all the rage in the Middle Ages; realism (universals are real things) vs. nominalism (universals are just names). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I consider that all talk of ‘rights’ must ultimately be cashed out as human convention; which doesn’t make those rights unimportant but is certainly different from the way this kind of talk is usually interpreted; as if birth somehow confers universal and ultimate rights on us. This position requires some kind of transcendent order to the universe which I think is completely unjustified. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is important to note that this is not related to the freewill/determinism debate. We are free in the sense that we each make our own decisions and no one else can make them for us. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This picks up a thread I left hanging on page 3 in the ‘Humanism’ section, specifically number 3 of Gray’s definition of humanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This refers back to the third of the three Socratic “articles of faith” from page two. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I use this term loosely as I don’t think Buddhism is actually a religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. More on this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Aristotle’s happiness (*eudaimonia* in Greek) may not have been exactly what I am calling ‘deep’ happiness here, but the reasoning still holds. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)