*Straw Dogs* by John Gray

Humanism and Progress

Gray defines humanism as a belief in progress; specifically, the belief that science can and will free us from the limits that bind other animals.

*Humanism – a modern religion*

Gray makes many allusions to the idea that, far from being secular, humanism is actually a modern religion. He likens the Christian ideas of salvation and providence to the humanist goal of universal human emancipation and the humanist ideal of progress. This is a refrain that is as disturbingly popular these days as it is completely wrongheaded. We can make comparisons between humanism and Christianity until the cows come home (Terry Eagleton has gone so far as to call sports a modern substitute for religion; athletes are the new Messiahs, huddling around the TV is our modern version of ritual, etc.) but humanism is a religion only in the very weakest sense of the word, a sense in which all the meaningful content has been generalised so much that with the watered-down remnant, virtually anything qualifies as ‘religion’. Any religious believer should be offended to learn that Gray considers their religion to be in the same category as a secular idea that eschews any kind of supernaturalism, rejects all notions of an afterlife, spurns any form of deity, and denies the existence of any non-physical realm (all important elements in any religion worthy of the name).

Gray carries the idea further with a reference to Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor – who sees Christianity as providing the three things that can satisfy people and keep them happy; miracle, mystery, and authority – suggesting that science fulfils these three requirements in the modern world. Religion does indeed offer miracles (events only explainable by reference to some higher power), mystery (an inscrutable deity who “moves in mysterious ways” and a love, bordering on a fetish, with paradox), and authority (God is to be obeyed first and foremost), but I maintain that science does no trade in these goods. Perhaps Gray imagines something like the following; scientific ‘miracles’ come in the form of amazing products that do things we never imagined they could, scientific ‘mystery’ means that technology operates on principles few of us understand, and scientific ‘authority’ comes from the scientists themselves who tell us how reality is. The problem is that all of these connections are weak at best. Scientific miracles aren’t really miracles in the sense of Jesus healing the sick or raising the dead, rather the products that it spawns are ‘miraculous’ (there is a considerable difference between a genuine ‘miracle’ and something ‘miraculous’); scientific mystery is not mystery in the sense of being divine and therefore inscrutable by the mortal mind, rather science is mysterious because we are still in the process of understanding the laws that our universe operates on (a process we may never complete but is still very much grounded in this world); and scientific ‘authority’ is not the kind of authority that we have to embrace on faith because an epileptic fell off his horse and had a ‘vision’ or someone wrote something a long time ago that ended up in a religious text, rather the authority of scientists comes from years of study, research, and the reasoned testing of hypotheses.

*Modern ‘progressive’ movements*

Gray attempts to paint two modern genocidal campaigns (Nazism and Soviet mass exterminations) as ‘progressive’ and therefore as heirs to Enlightenment values. As in the previous section, this is only possible through the generation of spurious connections between common ideals while ignoring others. Hitler wanted to enhance humanity and saw a way to bring this ideal to fruition through eugenics and the slaughter of an entire culture (funnily enough the same culture Christians had been persecuting for centuries prior). Gray bizarrely considers this goal to have some kind of affinity with Enlightenment values. Well, in the sense that Enlightenment thinkers sought to better the lot of humankind in this life (as opposed to an afterlife) it does, but is the slaughter of an entire culture and the murder of thousands of others so one individual can satisfy his mad cravings for power and rule over all of them like a god really something that can be considered a consequence of the Enlightenment, a movement that first and foremost glorified reason? Further, as Gray himself admits, Hitler explicitly rejected other key Enlightenment values, such as scepticism and toleration… so how progressive was he really? Not much. In fact, he was as progressive and as much a model Enlightenment thinker as someone who rejected 80% of what the movement stood for and twisted the remaining 20% to suit his own warped delusions of grandeur.

Accordingly, Gray condemns the pursuit of progress as an endeavour which ended in mass murder. Again, is this fair? In the last five thousand years there has probably been about a week, maybe two, in which war was not being waged somewhere on the planet. Whether over religion, land, power, revenge, or just good old fashioned pride, human beings have never been at a loss for reasons to kill each other. In fact, it wouldn’t be very far off the mark to coin the general maxim; “The pursuit of X has ended in mass murder”, where X can stand for just about any ideal any human has ever dared aspire to. Can we so easily write Hitler and Stalin off as the outcomes of a progressive mind-set when people had been murdering each other for centuries prior? If the pursuit of progress really leads to mass murder, and the pursuit of progress is a modern blight, what was it that motivated all the other countless wars throughout human history?

But we can ask Gray seriously, has the pursuit of progress really *ended* in mass murder? Is that all progress has amounted to? Of course not. We might fairly observe that our forward march with progress as our guiding light wasn’t all rainbows and smiles and there were some fairly significant bumps we had to collectively navigate, but we would be remiss to treat those bumps as the pinnacles of modernity and doubly so to ignore all that we have built for ourselves afterwards. Don’t most of us in progressive countries now live reasonably full and meaningful lives, or at least have the chance to? Aren’t most of us much, much better today than we have been at any time in the past? Gray is just too negative and narrow in scope with his blanket condemnations of modernity and the drive for progress in a way that not only fails to acknowledge the other side of the coin but inflates and distends the one side he does favour.

*Genuine critique of humanism*

Having said all of that, Gray is quite right to point out that there are some defects in humanism defined as the belief in progress. First, the ‘modern’ human moves through life at breakneck speed continuously lurching from one breakthrough product to the next, permanently connected to the net with never a moment to spare. Gray correctly observes that progress has no time for idleness. The concept of downtime, as something valuable in and of itself, has been lost. Even when we do take time for ourselves, it is primarily with a view to maintaining our forward momentum the next day. If we’re not moving forward, updating, upgrading, or logging off so we can move forward tomorrow, it is seen as a waste of time. Likewise, silence has lost all meaning for the modern mind obsessed with progress. So much so that we are even afraid of silence, we need constant stimulation, permanent mental preoccupation, anything to distract us from ourselves.

Second, progress is never ending. We never reach our goals because no sooner do we accomplish one, another rises up to take its place. Progress, as it has become, is nothing less than Schopenhauer’s insatiable ‘will’ brought to life.

Third, and probably most important, our belief in progress is misplaced because it promises a future utopia built on technology in which we will all live happy, peaceful, and fulfilled lives. Gray (rightly, I think) rejects this ungrounded optimism, pithily calling progress a fact, but faith in progress a superstition. We will never banish the tragedies that regularly assail us all as we live our lives, not because we haven’t accomplished something or have failed in some field of activity, but because we are human. Gray asserts that the good life is found not in dreams of progress, but in dealing with tragedy… because it is unavoidable. Eliminating bad or upsetting events is impossible, learning to deal with them gracefully, however, is another thing (and is, I think, one of the central points of philosophy).

Fourth (I’m throwing this in for free, I don’t think Gray explicitly mentions it), because this drive for progress is never sated it can never bring satisfaction or meaning to our lives. But there is a deeper reason why the belief in progress (or science, for that matter) can’t possibly bring us satisfaction; and that is that it is ultimately a diversion. Busying ourselves with external goals, dreams, gadgets, the latest inventions/discoveries, all diverts our attention from the one place our attention should be, ourselves. We pin our lives and our happiness on future achievements which, 1) will never come (the future is always a day away), and 2) can’t possibly bring us true happiness because they are external. If you can’t be happy or content without having X or without achieving Y, then acquiring X or completing Y won’t change that.

*Summary*

In conclusion, Gray is right to point out that progress and specifically, our belief in progress, is defective for several key reasons. However, in my opinion, he carries his observations of these drawbacks too far. Our ‘faith’ in progress is not a religion, nor should it be held responsible for the crazier moments of the 20th century. Progress is not an evil, it is an inevitable outcome of life, in some respects, it *is* life. We can use progress to deepen our understanding of the universe we find ourselves inhabiting and enhance our control over it for our convenience/wellbeing, without allowing it to become an idea that controls us… or not. The point is that the choice is ours; progress is a tool, but it is one we can wield sensibly or recklessly. We can use it wisely for our betterment or we can turn it on ourselves giving it a power over us it doesn’t possess in and of itself.

The Darwinian Human

*The Darwinian world*

Gray claims that if (as he believes) Darwin is right and everything in the universe has a natural explanation, including the evolution of humans (naturalism), then the idea and belief in progress (humanism) is false. The idea here seems to be that evolution by natural selection is a completely random process and one which therefore lacks any teleological component, i.e. it can’t be said to ‘progress’ towards any certain goal. I think this is mistaken. Progress, even if it only arises through a natural, undirected force such as natural selection, is still progress. Nature may never have ‘planned’ to bring humans into the picture but it did and that was a good thing (for us, at least). The fact that we live in a Darwinian world (on its own) does not rule out progress.

*The Darwinian human (persons, authorship, and freewill)*

One of Gray’s central themes, one which he returns to again and again, is that humans are no different from other animals. Like his earlier observations about progress, it would seem that he has taken an important realisation and carried it too far. Humans, despite obviously being animals, are just as obviously quite different from them. Humans have a subjective experience of the world that there is no evidence any other species enjoys, with a possible exception to some degree in the Great Apes. We may not know exactly how it came about that we are *so* different from other species (although we can see a clear progression from minimal cognitive processing to higher cerebral functioning) but I consider it almost trivial to claim that we are different, even if the difference is one of degree and not kind.

The main reason Gray asserts we are nothing more than animals is the same as the one in which he claims there are no *persons*. A *person*, for Gray, is someone who authors their own life through their own choices. No human does this because our entire lives are determined by events outside our conscious control. Gray goes even further, suggesting that we not only think we author our own lives through our own choices, but we *love* choice and we define the ‘good life’ by how much of it we have, all the while unaware that we actually have none.

Gray is a determinist and I agree with him as far as this goes. We are physical creatures, our minds are contingent on a physical organ, and we live in a physical universe ruled by cause and effect. There is no escaping this fact. We have absolutely no evidence that any force can operate in this universe somehow contravening the iron-clad law of cause and effect. This means that as much as we would like to believe otherwise, and as much as it *appears* to be otherwise, we cannot rationally infer anything different, even when it comes to our thoughts.

I part company from Gray over his onerous definition of *person*. It is true that as he has defined the word there are no *persons*. However, I think that rather than throw away the word, a more practical approach would be to tweak our definition somewhat. If we have previously thought of a *person* as being someone who authors their own lives, we ought to amend this so that it means an entity capable of a subjective perspective on the world. An entity that is able to look at the world this way, planning, hoping, aware of the self, and capable of abstract thought is certainly one that is different enough from other creatures to deserve a different designation. We may not have freewill, certainly not in the traditional sense of the word, but that doesn’t mean we are just another animal either. It is true that via a purely scientific, reductionist approach, we are just as causally determined as a rock thrown through the air, but that simple physical explanation does not capture all that it is to be a human *person*. Crucially, we also possess an internal, first person perspective on our lives and the fact that the thoughts which make up this first person perspective are themselves determined (where do your conscious thoughts arise from? Not from any conscious *you* because if they did then you would be aware of that ‘pre-conscious’ thought before it became conscious) by your upbringing, your environment, your genes, and a million other causal factors, is in a sense, irrelevant. We still view the world with an acute awareness of *ourselves* in it (we are in fact, incapable of viewing the world any other way, we are machines that can’t know ourselves as machines), even if, strictly speaking, this awareness is uncaused and therefore free. We know what we will do, not because we have analysed the neural connections in our brains and are aware of the mechanical/chemical causes which will act on us in the course of the day (which, in a physical universe like ours, is nevertheless, in theory, possible), but because we have *planned* to do something. This capacity for planning is one of the ways in which we know ourselves and one way we can be sure we are different from other animals (although not necessarily all of them, and not necessarily by the same degree).

As an extension of Gray’s determinism, he concludes that we have no choices and therefore no ‘good life’ because we have largely pinned the latter to the former. Again, in a strict physical sense, it is true that we have no *real* choices, but from the first person perspective (which we are ironically unable to avoid) we are acutely and sometimes painfully aware of how many, or just how few choices, we actually have. Actually defining the ‘good life’ is a little beyond the scope of this essay but if we want to define the ‘good life’ by the choices available to us, I think we are each more than capable of ascertaining this for ourselves.

This is quite a subtle point to grapple with and deserves a little more explanation from a different perspective. Gray claims that since we don’t have freewill, the humanist faith in progress and in our ability to achieve conscious mastery over our lives, thereby creating an earthly utopia, is a myth. He is right inasmuch as it seems to be a scientific fact (like all scientific facts, this is contingent on future discoveries but nevertheless as it currently stands deserves to be called a legitimate fact) that we cannot physically overcome the causal chain which rules all matter and exercise, anything we might call, ‘true’ freewill. Still, our *experience* of the world is one in which we are free, one in which we are presented with a number of different options and are free to choose between them, and although you might argue that this is an illusion (and from a physical perspective this is certainly true), it is an unavoidable construct through which we experience life and as such, cannot be so easily dismissed. Gray claims we cannot achieve conscious mastery over our lives but the irony is that we can’t *not* experience our lives with anything but conscious mastery.

In many ways, this is best approached with appeal to Kant. Kant proposed that certain ‘categories’ which order our experience, such as space and time, are not actually a part of the external universe at all, but that they are features we impose on external reality. We are not passive receptors of sensory impressions; rather we filter those sensory impressions so they conform to a framework within which we can make sense of them. Now from here, it makes absolutely no sense to talk about the ‘real’ things ‘out there’ or to try to understand them from a non-human perspective (one therefore ‘unwarped’ by the various categories like space and time) because any such ‘real’ thing like that would be absolutely meaningless to us. Not only do we lack the words to describe such ‘things-in-themselves’ but we lack the mental capacity to understand them.

In a similar way, although we know that our thoughts (being fully contingent on our physical brains) are fully determined, we can never experience our lives this way and, as such it makes no sense to reduce us to nothing more than a determined animal, bereft of choice and forever at the whims of cause and effect. Gray tries to cut the humanist ideal of progress off at the knees by depriving it of the freedom to effect change in the first place, but in doing so, he ignores a key feature of what it means to be human, and that is the first *person* perspective by which we can’t *not* be free to effect change.

In a related epistemological point, also designed to undercut the modern humanist/scientific enterprise, Gray claims that we can never know the truth because our minds have evolved to serve evolutionary success, not to discern the truth. This is another perfectly true but ultimately meaningless point. Not only does this undermine *any* attempt to understand our universe (including anything positive Gray might have to contribute to the matter), but it bestows value on an absolute Truth which we are fundamentally incapable of every knowing because we can never transcend our own fully evolved and fully human cognitive capacities. In making this point, Gray is suggesting that our evolved cognitive tendencies are limitations preventing us from seeing the Truth, but it makes no sense to place any value judgement on the way we perceive (or think) because, for better or worse, this is just the way we experience the world. Ultimate Truth, whatever that may be, is in a very real sense, irrelevant, because we can’t perceive the world any way other than we do. It would be like a bee, aware of how its eyes interpret light signals, trying to imagine what a flower *really* looks like without the contingencies of its physical eye, and ruing the ‘limitation’ that prevents it from seeing the ‘real’ flower. Is the bee’s view of a flower ‘more real’ than ours? Is that even a question that makes sense? This holy grail of a transcendent, perspective-less Truth is a concept I consider to be completely devoid of meaning, because even if such a thing exists, by our very nature (i.e. from the perspective of an existing being) we can never know it.

Finally, Gray makes the mistake of assuming that without freewill we can’t be held accountable for our actions. Once more, this conclusion follows from a truth, the consequences of which, are just extrapolated too far. It is true that we can’t be held accountable for our actions as Ultimate Authors, by which I mean, as completely free agents, consciously determining our thoughts and actions with limited to no influence from contingent or uncontrollable factors, but this in no way precludes us from holding people responsible for their actions and reacting to or treating them accordingly. If we meet a friendly dog, we can praise it and pat it even though we know that it is not the Ultimately Responsible for its character. Likewise, if we meet a dog that bites us we are justified in treating it as a dangerous animal and perhaps trying to rehabilitate it. If that doesn’t work, we might even take further steps and have it incarcerated so it can’t hurt anyone else, and we can do all this without having to prove that it is the conscious Author of its actions. In exactly the same way, we can hold other people responsible for their actions even while acknowledging that they had no Real Control over who they would become or what they would do.

*Genuine Darwinian observations*

Although Gray has perhaps pushed some of his conclusions too far, it remains true that in general, his initial insights have been valid and have highlighted some important facts. We have already seen how he has (in my opinion) correctly faced up to the fact that we live in a natural, determined universe, of which, we are equivalently natural, determined animals. He has come to four more insights which I will mention in the following.

First, he rejects the concept of humanity as an existing thing. He stresses that only individual humans exist. This is true and is something which tends to be overlooked. At bottom we are individuals and it is our individual natures which define us. Like all universals, ‘humanity’ can only derive meaning from the individual parts which make it up.

Second, while we generally recognise that beauty is not a quality which admits of blame or praise (since we are all born with our faces the way they are) we tend to overlook the fact that our intelligence and even our characters are just as determined and just as beyond our conscious control. If we happen to be kind, we can no more take credit for this than we can take credit for our physical appearance. This can be a humbling realisation but also one which enables us to see each other in a new, more understanding light.

Third, Gray rightly points out that there is no unified or permanent ‘self’ (or ‘soul’ to put a religious spin on things) behind our actions. The ‘self’ is nothing more than the activity of the brain at any one time. Stop the brain and the ‘self’ disappears along with it. We tend to think of our ‘selves’ as some kind of enduring essence or substance somehow ‘underneath’ the emotions and thoughts that range through our minds; the ‘location’ of our personality, our identity. This is all a myth. The ‘self’ is just the name we give to the particular physical and mental phenomena that can be described with reference to a single body/mind. This illusion of some kind of enduring substance is created and sustained through our capacity for memory. All that is really happening (at a physical level) is that distinct sensations are registering and eliciting changes in the brain, which we are aware of as mental events (thoughts, emotions, intentions, etc.), and which get added to a kind of cumulative, running total which includes all previous sensations and the consequent mental events. If you go looking for an enduring core, something you might be able to call your ‘self’, something separate from any mental events or your physical body, you will come up empty-handed. You might want to respond by saying that the ‘self’ is just the aggregate of these things, but this is to miss the point; that is what *I* am saying. The self is *only* the physical body, the feelings/emotions, the thoughts, the memories that preserve a record of those feelings/emotions and thoughts, etc. Remove those things and the self disappears with them.

An important consequence of this is that (I am again extrapolating beyond Gray’s main point here) any expression beginning, “I am…” is actually an error. We can imagine someone, when they are angry, saying, “I am angry”, but since there is actually no “I” to be angry in the first place, all we can correctly say is something like, “There is anger”. There is no mysterious or transcendent ‘experiencer’ of these things because if you remove them, the ‘experience’ disappears too.

Fourth, Gray agrees with Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor when he says that most people are afraid of the freedom they have (not in the physical sense, in the *experiential* sense explained earlier[[1]](#footnote-1)) and look to surrender it for security. They have used religion, politics, and now science to try and escape this freedom, looking for anything that will limit them, define them, or give them boundaries. In a word, they are seeking to become a Sartrean Being-In-Itself, rather than the inherently meaningless Being-For-Itself they find themselves thrown into the world as.

*Summary*

Regarding our Darwinian lineage, Gray has again taken important observations (we live in a universe where everything (including us) is subject to the law of cause and effect, we are (physically) determined, there is no ‘self’) and carried them too far until Darwinism becomes the same as saying the idea of progress is a myth, we are the same as animals, we cannot grasp Truth, and the unavoidable (physical) determinism that follows from all this means that our experience of freedom is nothing more than an illusion and we can’t be held accountable for our actions.

Roger Scruton, in *The Soul of the World*, outlines a theory he calls *cognitive dualism* which essentially details what I have tried to encapsulate above. It holds that there is a scientific/physical way of viewing the world but, for sentient beings, there is also a subjective/first person perspective and the latter is just as legitimate as the former. Gray disregards the subjective perspective as an illusion but inasmuch as it is an unavoidable perspective humans bring with them, it deserves equal consideration. What this means is that conclusions derived from a scientific/physical perspective need not apply with the same force from the subjective perspective. The emergence of subjective consciousness (although we may not know exactly how it happened) is too vital to the sentient being to be dismissed as nothing more than an illusion.

Consciousness

Gray is also very dismissive of consciousness pointing out that sensation and perception do not depend on consciousness, as every plant or animal is capable of both without it. Even knowledge, he claims is “found in all living things”, from animals to plants. Of course, this is true, but like we saw with Gray’s claim that humans are no different from other animals, human perception and knowledge are so advanced in comparison to the animal (and especially plant) versions that it seems a bit of a joke to subsume them under the same name. Is Gray really claiming that because a tree releases a chemical compound when gypsy moth larvae attack its leaves that the tree ‘knows’ what is happening the same way a human knows when someone stands on his or her foot? Unfortunately, he is. Gray denies that our subjective, conscious, self-awareness in any way differentiates us from animals (or plants). Is the life of a human really worth no more than that of a dog? How about a mouse? An ant? A flower? Surely, something is wrong with this picture.

He goes on to point out that consciousness is only a small part of our total cognitive activity. Again, this is true. We are conscious of only a tiny fraction of what our brain gets up to… but this in no way leads to the conclusion that consciousness is meaningless or irrelevant. Would you not feel that something important had been lost if you were to lose conscious awareness? How would this be any different from dying?

Gray also claims that self-awareness is a handicap, by making the observation that the most accomplished pianist is not the one who is most aware of her movements when she plays. This is a basic truth but hardly an argument against self-awareness. This time, in contrast to his earlier observation against consciousness, Gray has isolated the few instances when we aren’t self-aware (such as when we are playing a musical instrument) and argued that because of this, self-awareness is a handicap. Even if it were true that we weren’t particularly self-aware most of the time, and that it would be a handicap to be so (and a good case could be made for this, I think), it in no way follows that self-awareness is useless or something we would be better off without.

Atheism and Buddhism

Gray ties atheism to Christianity by claiming that the former is essentially defined by the latter, specifically by its absence; “To deny the existence of God is to accept the categories of monotheism”. The idea here seems to be that talking about God, even to say He doesn’t exist, is to jump in and play the Christian game; to deny God, we have to acknowledge Him in the first place. This just seems mistaken to me. Atheists *have* *to* deny God because believers took over the world before us, but in doing so, I don’t think atheists are accepting the categories of monotheism. How can they be, when they are explicitly rejecting those categories? To say, “I don’t believe in dragons” is not to validate the belief in dragons; it is a validation that there are people who believe in dragons or else the statement would have been unnecessary. And this is Gray’s point. He thinks the ‘categories’ of monotheism (which he doesn’t define) will fall into disuse at which point disbelief becomes uninteresting. The problem is that theism is a stubborn delusion and if atheists in the past hadn’t declared their atheism and actively rebelled against Christianity, Christian ‘categories’ may never have ‘fallen into disuse’. Of course without Christianity, atheism wouldn’t be necessary, but this in no way makes the latter dependent on or a part of a Christian worldview. Campaigning for peace is unnecessary unless there is war (or the threat of war) but no one considers such a campaign a waste of time or tries to link peace with (its opposite) war.

Gray also suggests that atheism (as in a complete rejection of all gods) is impossible in a polytheistic world. In such a world, rather than complete unbelief, what we get is a rejection of one god in favour of another. This is not necessarily true. It may be less likely that full-blown atheism will arise in a polytheistic world at first, but there is nothing prohibiting it. In such a world, rejection of one god might automatically precede belief in another, but there is no reason why the entire pantheon wouldn’t be thrown out either. Gray wants to claim that monotheism was a necessary step between polytheism and atheism, even bizarrely stating that, “If we live in a world without gods we have Christianity to thank for it”. To me, this is just quipping in an attempt to be profound. Sure, if everyone believes in one and only one God, then disbelief necessarily must be complete atheism (i.e. you can’t just substitute another preferred god in for the rejected one) but we don’t need to get carried away. Atheism arose not because of Christianity or monotheism but because society and, in particular, science progressed to a point where we collectively realised that god(s) weren’t responsible for anything we thought they were. Even if we had still been a polytheistic society, a few brave individuals would have led us into atheism.

Gray also has a prod at Buddhism noting that Buddhism sees this world as something of a dream or illusion with the goal being to awaken from it. His question then is, what will the Buddhist awaken to? Gray is comparing Buddhism to Zhuangzi’s reflections about a dream he had in which he dreamt he was a butterfly and upon waking up asked himself whether he had been a man dreaming he was a butterfly or if he was now a butterfly dreaming he was a man. The idea being that life is not something to be woken up from but lived more ‘lucidly’; “Illusion is our natural condition. Why not accept it?”

This idea captures much of Gray’s thought. Tragedy, suffering, and illusion are part of our natural animal inheritance. We can’t rise above them, nor can we avoid them. Anything that claims we can do either (such as humanism or Buddhism) is a fantasy. The core of Buddhism is an effort to understand how our minds work to create our reality and what that reality actually is. From this understanding the normal ups and downs (tragedy, suffering) of life can be navigated with more calm and serenity. Asking what Buddhism seeks to awaken to, in relation a discussion on dreaming, is a misguided question. Buddhism doesn’t seek to ‘awaken’ to anything; it merely seeks to understand how our minds work because it is much easier to accept the illusion once we understand how it works.

Next Gray questions the Buddhist idea of salvation being extinction of the self. If there is no self (which Buddhism maintains, along with Gray) what is being saved? He then goes on to say that the Buddhist goal is the elimination of suffering but we are all guaranteed this at the end of our lives anyway, so what’s so special about this?

Let me address the first point. I think the problem here is the Christian idea of ‘salvation’. Buddhism isn’t about ‘saving’ anyone or anything. Extinguishing the self, first and foremost aligns us with the truth of physical reality (there is no self) and allows us the chance to live without being subject to the inevitable ups and downs that any life must experience. We aren’t saving a ‘self’, we are learning to live without the illusion that we are a ‘self’. Then who is living without the illusion? The body/mind combination that is currently reading this essay. Isn’t that a self? No, it isn’t. It’s just a body and a bunch of thoughts and emotions; there is no hidden ‘core’ that owns these phenomena, nothing we can point to and say, “That is me!”

Second, Buddhism does aim to eliminate suffering but it aims to do this while you are alive so you (and I use the term ‘you’ loosely, perhaps I should say, ‘this particular mind/body combination’) can enjoy life without constantly reacting to it because things are happening to a solid, enduring, proud, ‘self’ with a vested interest in obtaining a certain outcome. Sure, we don’t suffer when we are dead but we don’t do much of anything else either. Freeing oneself from suffering by dying is a little like cutting off your fingers so you don’t have to trim your fingernails anymore.

*Summary*

Gray is no friend of Christianity but his equal dislike for atheism sees him too often looking to discredit it. Ironically enough, with all of Gray’s insistence that humanity is a religion and that atheism was born and is living off monotheism; it is him more than anyone else who is still labouring under Christianity’s shadow. Atheists have gone on with life *sans* Christianity but it is Gray who still sees Christ’s visage lurking in every secular shadow.

He has some good points to make about Taoism and it is good to see a respected scholar taking this philosophy seriously. Unfortunately, he seems a little quick to denigrate Buddhism by comparison and in ways that I see as being a little unfair to this ancient tradition. The central reason Gray rebels against Buddhism is that it offers a path out of suffering and tragedy. Gray is too suspicious of anything that promises to make life easier, happier, or just more congenial. We are animals. No other animal seeks to avoid suffering or make its life easier, why should we? Well, that may be fine for our animal cousins, but they don’t suffer like we do and they don’t have the opportunity to enjoy or understand life like we do. Despite our animal heritage, our surprising ability to self-reflect and our equally surprising capacities for abstract thought and language give us a unique perspective among the other inhabitants of this planet. Wouldn’t it be a shame to not use them?

1. Gray would reject this, I think, claiming that we are fully determined and any sense of freedom is an illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)