

Keith Sutherland

Straw Men and Diamond Dogs

Heaven and Earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.

— Lao Tzu

*The diamond dogs are poachers and they hide behind trees
Hunt you to the ground they will, mannequins with kill appeal.*

— David Bowie

John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and the author of the book under review¹ should not be confused with the John Gray who thinks that men are from Mars and women from Venus. Our man is a political philosopher, best known for a string of books on liberalism and a lot less sanguine about the prospects for humanity than his New Age namesake. In fact, perhaps on account of his earlier affection for Margaret Thatcher, he concludes: ‘“Humanity” does not exist. There are only humans . . .’ (p.12). If Gray’s reclassification of *homo sapiens* as *homo rapiens* and his ecological pessimism are right, humans are unlikely to be around for much longer either.

Although his deconstruction of ‘humanity’ closely echoes the Thatcherite account of ‘society’ as a left-liberal fiction, Gray — the gamekeeper turned poacher — is now one of the leading critics of free markets, globalization and the rest of the neo-liberal canon that he helped to spearhead in the early 1980s (Gray, 2002a). In *Enlightenment’s Wake* (Gray, 1995), he laments the hijacking of liberalism by some distinctly anti-liberal forces and despairs of any attempt to provide a foundational account of liberalism, or for that matter any other political philosophy. Although theorists like Richard Rorty (1980; 1982) and Michael Oakeshott (1933; 1959) have found such a conclusion liberating, or even Liberating, and have enjoyed the resulting state of postmodern playfulness, Gray has decided to take the quest for the foundationalist grail into areas anew. His latest discovery would appear to be science — in particular cognitive science and evolutionary theory. Indeed, in a recent essay in *New Scientist* (Gray 2002a), he castigates his fellow philosophers for ignoring science, without seeming to realize

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[1] **John Gray**, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, London: Granta Publications, 2002, £12.99, ISBN 1862075123.

that cognitive science is a hybrid discipline in which philosophy plays a major role. Indeed philosophers like Fodor, Dennett and the Churchlands have all been earning a good living writing about the impact of biology, psychology, neuroscience and AI on philosophy.

Straw Dogs argues, in a similar fashion to Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (not cited by Gray) that philosophers must start to take evolutionary theory seriously. Darwin's insights require a complete revision of the Western philosophical canon and this has yet to take place. Unfortunately this is uncharted territory for Gray and the sharks are circling. The book gets off to a shaky start on the very first page with the anachronistic howler: 'Darwin teaches that species are only assemblies of genes'.² One might put this down to poetic licence, if it wasn't repeated a few pages later and were it not for the fact that it illustrates an important substantive issue. In assuming the neo-Darwinist mantle, Gray repeats the (false) claim that Darwin is responsible for the view that humans are by nature nasty predatory creatures. But, as Larry Arnhart has argued at length (Arnhart, 1998), this Hobbesian spin — adopted uncritically by Dawkins and the rest of the gang — is the product of Huxley's corruption of the old man's views. Darwin himself (1871) argued that human morality has its origins in evolutionary forces (Katz, 2000; Changeux and Ricoeur, 2002).

Even if we make the assumption that the anachronisms are more than just sloppy copy editing, the book itself could have benefited from a firmer editorial hand. The author may have traded in philosophy for cognitive science as a foundational discipline, but one might expect that he bring the tools of his trade (measured argument) to his new project.³ However the book is written in the aphoristic style of Montaigne's *Essays* or La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* and trampolines from one topic to another, containing very little that would pass muster as philosophical argument. The attempt to package the book for a general audience⁴ has produced a very irritating reference system — thus on page 7 we hear that a claim on species extinction rates is true 'according to Diamond'. But who or what is 'Diamond'? At a guess probably nothing to do with David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, but it took some time rummaging through the seemingly randomly-organized 'further reading' section to unearth Jared Diamond's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*. It would appear that 'further reading' is in fact a system of endnotes (rather than a bibliography), but the publishers forgot to put the numbers in, so it is very difficult to track down the provenance of quotations in the text.

Not content with diamond dogs, the book is also replete with straw men. For example Gray's comments on memes lead him to conclude that 'only someone innocent of history could believe that competition among ideas could result in

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- [2] Although Darwin was a contemporary of Mendel, he was altogether unaware of his work.
- [3] Although the publishers classify the book as 'philosophy', the author told me that he wrote it as a 'provocation directed against academic philosophy'. If so, then by his own chosen measure he has succeeded.
- [4] The need for a budget 'trade' price has also led to a careless print job — unsewn case bindings should always have the paper grain running down the spine, in order to prevent cockling.

the triumph of *truth*' (p. 26, my italics). But who ever made this claim? Certainly not Dawkins, Dennett, Blackmore or any of the other memeticists. Indeed Dawkins chooses religion (and reversed baseball hats) as key examples of memes, and he certainly would not equate religious memes with truth. Memetics is an argument for the propagation and survival of ideas, but has nothing to say on the truth value of the ideas themselves.

Although he makes extensive use of quotations to illustrate his argument, Gray is reluctant to credit recent parallels. For example Anthony O'Hear's *After Progress*, published only a few years ago (O'Hear, 1999), makes an almost identical claim — 'progress' is seen as nothing more than a desiccated and secularized version of the Christian notion of providence, but Gray fails to acknowledge O'Hear's earlier contribution.

Chapter Two, dealing with post-Kantian European philosophy, features a return to a more familiar narrative style. It is a pleasure to read, but is strongly coloured by the author's thesis. Schopenhauer is singled out for praise⁵ for his rejection of the European humanist tradition and his familiarity with Vedanta and Buddhism, unlike Nietzsche and Heidegger who are castigated for clinging on to the post-Christian heritage. However Heidegger's notion of Being — which Gray equates with Christian conceptions of God — is not so dissimilar from Vedanta, especially in its Advaitan form (Maharishi, 1969) and there are profound differences between Vedanta and Buddhism in their view on selfhood (Varela and Shear, 1999). In reifying and then contrasting the supposedly homogenous traditions of the Occident and the Orient, Gray has unwittingly created another straw dog.

The chapter continues with an excellent presentation of the state of the art in consciousness studies, marred only by the bizarre claim that the 'bandwidth' of consciousness is only eighteen bits, by contrast with 14 million bits of information per second of 'organisms active in the world' (p. 66). I have never heard such a claim before⁶ and can only imagine that it is a numerical extrapolation of the parallel processing power of the brain contrasted with the serial 'window' of consciousness.

Gray is attracted to the current fashion for enactive and embodied approaches to cognition, as recently championed in this journal. His view on the phylogenetic origin of consciousness as a development of sensation and perception is very close to that of Nicholas Humphrey (2000). Unfortunately Gray fails to acknowledge that this viewpoint is not that of mainstream cognitive science, which still operates within a cognitivist-Cartesian framework — hence the ongoing emphasis on the so-called 'Hard Problem' of phenomenal experience. Francisco Varela, who Gray cites frequently, detested the term 'cognitive science' for this reason. It should also be remarked that the emphasis on conscious awareness as

[5] Apparently the comedian Ken Dodd was an admirer of Schopenhauer. Gray tells me that he once heard the man from Knotty Ash talking on the radio about 'Arty Shop's philosophy of humour'. Despite his admiration, Dodd commented that Schopenhauer had never had to withstand the ordeal of an audience at the Liverpool Hippodrome at 11pm on a Saturday evening.

[6] Attributed to someone called Vincent Deary.

the end product of enactive or proprioceptive processes has given rise to the charge that the avant-garde in consciousness studies is little more than a regression to behaviourism (Sutherland, 2001). Theorists like Dennett and O'Reagan have indicated that they do not consider the behaviourist label insulting. The recent emphasis on affective components in moral judgment (Damasio, 1994, 2000) could also be seen as a reversion to Freudian theories that were rejected in the 1950s and '60s. Gray has decided to champion cognitive science at the very point that it is under attack from the counter-revolutionary forces of evolutionary psychology, emotivism and sensory-motor theories of perception (Torrance, 2002; Greene and Haidt, 2002). Gray's other books have accurately charted developments in European politics since the velvet revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the cognitive revolution looks like it's about to go the same way as its political analogues. As the author of *Straw Dogs* and *Enlightenment's Wake* is clearly no friend of cognitivism or rationalism, he would be well-advised to avoid tarnished concepts like 'cognitive science'.

Gray also subscribes to the view that 'the self' is a narrative fiction of recent origin — 'Persons are only humans who have donned the mask that has been handed down in Europe over the past few generations, and taken it for their face' (pp. 58–9).⁷ Strawson's 'string of pearls' theory (1997) of diachronic selfhood (or lack thereof) is nicely paralleled in the section titled 'Mr. Nobody',⁸ featuring a phenomenological study by Goronwy Rees (1960). This leads him to ask the (rhetorical) question 'did the protagonists in the *Odyssey* or the *Bhagavad-Gita* think of themselves as persons?' (p. 58). Well, yes, seeing as you ask: the central character, Arjuna, although preoccupied with traditional concerns (the conflict between family ties and caste *dharma*), experiences the resulting personal turmoil in a distinctly modern way:

My limbs fail and my mouth is parched,
my body quivers and my hair stands on end.
Gandiva (the bow) slips from my hand and
even my skin burns over; I am unable
to stand and my mind seems to whirl (Maharishi, 1969, pp. 52–3).

Arjuna sees himself as a person and he sees his relatives (who duty requires him to kill) in the same light — that's just the problem. It's only (Vedanta) philosophy, as taught to him by Krishna, his charioteer for the day, that enables him to resolve his dilemma.

Gray then moves on to a fascinating debate on the problem of free will, using both the evidence from cognitive science (Libet's discovery of the half-second delay between the brain events that initiate an act of choosing and the conscious experience of that choice) and the inability of the hero in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* to decide whether he jumped or 'it seems I had jumped'.⁹ Here Gray is in line

[7] By the time of his *New Scientist* article (2002a, p. 49), Gray appears to have reversed his position, as he denies that our sense of selfhood is a product of cultural conditioning.

[8] Cf. Metzinger (2003).

[9] See also Freeman (1999) for a similar phenomenological account.

with the sceptical majority in philosophy and cognitive science — defenders of libertarian free will are increasingly hard to find.

He is particularly taken by the confluence of cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy, as exemplified in Varela's *The Embodied Mind* (Varela *et al.*, 1991), but he fails to acknowledge that this is still seen as a minority viewpoint; and there is considerable disagreement as to whether the desiccated form of Westernized Buddhism advocated by Varela, Claxton and other cognitive theorists are not a betrayal of Gautama's teachings. *The Embodied Mind* may have received a five-star review from Daniel Dennett in *New Scientist*, but Buddhist scholars were less sanguine (Guenther, 1991).

Although Gray previously draws a contrast between Christianity and Eastern religions, he claims that the Buddhist ideal of awakening implies that we can sever our links with our evolutionary past and that it is therefore not dissimilar to the Christian doctrine of salvation. However, a number of writers, including Julian Jaynes (1993) have viewed the biblical story of the Fall as a metaphor for the dawn of consciousness. Given that consciousness is a narrow serial filter acting on the distributed parallel processes of the brain, then the dawn of consciousness is a loss rather than a gain. Meditation techniques do not all seek to 'get rid of animal illusion' — in many ways they seek to return to a pre-lapsarian state of grace. The *jnana yogi* Krishnamurti once remarked that while he was taking his pet dog out no thoughts would go through his mind for the duration of the walk. If this was the case then what was the difference between Krishnamurti and his dog? (King, 1996)

The chapter on morality is interesting if only for the way that it encourages the reader to argue with the author. It gets off to an unsteady start with another unacknowledged reference — in this case to a wartime porcelain collector called 'Utz' (we only learn a couple of pages later that Utz is a character in a novel by Bruce Chatwin). Gray then recounts the case of a concentration camp prisoner who was raped by a guard. As any prisoner who appeared at morning parade without a cap was summarily executed, the guard stole the prisoner's cap, in order that any rape allegation should perish with the victim. However, in order to ensure his own survival, the prisoner in turn stole the cap of another camp inmate, who was then executed. Gray takes this as an argument against Kant — morality is not universal and categorical, 'it is a convenience, to be relied upon in normal times' (p. 90). But one could arrive at the opposite conclusion by choosing a different Auschwitz anecdote — for example the self-sacrifice of St Maximilian Koble.¹⁰ Besides which I'm sure Kant would have acknowledged human frailty and would have claimed that the very fact that we find Gray's choice of anecdote so disturbing is an indication of our innate moral nature. Nevertheless, this is an interesting chapter — the argument that Christianity, in universalizing ethics that were previously local and tribal, was a retrograde step is a provocative claim, although not a new one (see Arnhart, 1998).

[10] There is an exact symmetry here as prisoner Gajowniczek, who St Maximilian volunteered to replace on the camp reparation list, survived and made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz every year to celebrate the memory of the man who died in his place.

In an interesting section titled ‘animal virtues’ Gray develops this point by drawing the distinction between *ethics* (the practice of virtues like courage and wisdom), and *morality* — ‘a set of laws or rules that everyone must obey’ (p.107). According to Gray, ethics needs no philosophical grounding, as it arises from our animal natures, whereas morality is ‘a sickness peculiar to humans’, (p.116) invented by Socrates, universalized by Christianity and still evident in its secularized form in the Western philosophical tradition of Kant and Rawls. Gray dismisses Moore’s ‘naturalist fallacy’ and the ‘is–ought’ problem as artificial conundrums, specific to the Western philosophical tradition but incomprehensible to, say, the Taoists of ancient China. According to the *Chuang-Tzu*, ethics is nothing more than skill in action — right action is whatever comes from a clear view of the situation.¹¹

Gray’s enduring gloominess seems to be partly on account of his ecological concerns (James Lovelock supplies one of the back-cover puffs) and his Malthusian approach to population issues. According to Gray, competition between expanding populations and limited resources is the prime source of future conflicts — although twentieth-century wars were fought over ideology, the twenty-first century will return to traditional concerns (p.180). He also claims that population growth will only be checked by ‘a global authority with draconian powers and unwavering determination’ (p.185). But is Gray’s prophecy any better than Malthus’? Britain’s fertility rate of 1.63 is the average for the developed world and the evidence that women limit their fertility in line with increasing prosperity would appear to be universally true (even in traditional Catholic countries like Italy, where fertility rates are below replacement levels). Whether this will be the case for Muslim countries remains to be seen, but most demographers are revising their growth projections down, at least in the longer term. Perhaps the vision of a ‘high-tech Green utopia, in which a few humans live happily’ (p.184) is not so fanciful after all.

This book will undoubtedly be seen in the context of the ongoing debate on whether evolutionary science has anything to contribute to our understanding of human nature. Opinion tends to divide along political lines: critics of evolutionary psychology — for example the contributors to *Alas Poor Darwin* (Rose and Rose, 2000) — tend to be left-of-centre, if not unreconstructed Marxists. Indeed the book was published shortly after an acrimonious debate between Steven Pinker (2002) and Oliver James (2003), each plugging their new books on BBC Radio 3, where the conversation rapidly degenerated into the trading of acrimonious political insults. Gray’s sociobiological conclusions will tend to appeal to those on the right, but his espousal of ecological and anti-globalist causes will also appeal to the left.¹² It would be fitting if the entry of a distinguished political

[11] This was also the case in India at the time of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Right action for Arjuna was to follow his caste *dharma*. Ethics was often compared to skill in archery, which was fortunate for the hero of the story, described as ‘the greatest archer of his time’ (Maharishi, 1969).

[12] *Straw Dogs* was much more sympathetically reviewed in *The Guardian* (by the literary editor of *The New Statesman*) than in *The Spectator*, whose subscribers expect their gamekeepers to remember their place.

philosopher into this gladiatorial arena helped to strip the debate over human nature of some of its political polarization.

By a quirk of fate¹³ I found myself writing this review in the same week that Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, banned for thirty years in the UK on account of a brutal rape scene, was re-released on DVD and video re-cut to appease feminist sensibilities. The film was not banned on account of the graphic violence, but because the character Amy (played by Susan George) appeared to enjoy being raped. Whilst Gray does not expand on sociobiological theories of rape he does have some Rochefoucauldian observations¹⁴ on other perverse human characteristics, such as: 'It has long been known that those who perform great acts of kindness are rarely forgiven' and 'When will Jews be forgiven the Holocaust?' (p. 97). Such comments are designed to shock the complacent reader and make for a bumpy and disturbing ride.

But Gray is not interested in preaching to the converted — besides which, in my experience, the books that have profoundly influenced my life are the ones that I started off hating. In the same way that Tamino discovers half way through Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* that Sarastro, the demonic kidnapper of the daughter of the Queen of the Night, is in fact a kindly and wise sage, books like this can induce a similar gestalt shift,¹⁵ if the reader can be persuaded not to storm out in the interval before the second act. Remember: it's not over until the fat lady sings.

Unsurprisingly, given his general contempt for Whiggery in all its manifestations, there is no light at the end of Gray's tunnel — the book ends with a plea that we may come to accept and rejoice in the purposelessness of life.¹⁶ You won't find any fat ladies here — the book is more Nietzsche than Wagner. But many, if not most, readers will find this form of nihilism too anorexic for their taste. If he wanted his nihilism to wear a more cheerful countenance (which I doubt), Gray could do a lot worse than to pay a visit to the Michael Oakeshott archive in his own university.¹⁷ Gray's critique of Whiggery, utopianism, rationalism and philosophism (Tseng, 2002) and his views on the relationship between ethics and local custom and tradition all appear to have been influenced by his conversations with Oakeshott, but he has abjured the modal framework which held it all together. Oakeshott would have been happy with Gray's reliance on evolutionary and cognitive science in order to explain human *behaviour* (as viewed *sub specie quantitatis*), but would have claimed that this tells us nothing about human *conduct* (as viewed *sub specie voluntatis*). To confuse one with the other is just *ignoratio elenchi* (categorical absurdity) and produces an explanation which is not just wrong, but irrelevant (Nardin, 2002).

[13] Gray claims that his book has nothing to do with G. Williams's novel *Straw Dogs*, on which the Peckinpah movie was based.

[14] Not to be confused with a Foucaultian perspective.

[15] Cf. the disturbing and thoughtful film *Jacob's Ladder*.

[16] Don Cupitt, also one of the back-cover puffers, will have nodded approvingly at this stage.

[17] Oakeshott was described as a 'lonely nihilist' by Bernard Crick (1963), but Oakeshott's many friends and drinking companions recount otherwise.

I imagine that Gray's rejection of Oakeshottian epistemology is both on account of its anthropocentrism and its origins in hermeneutics¹⁸ and philosophical idealism. Gray discusses idealism in the context of Wittgenstein's 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him' and dismisses it as 'the belief that only humans exist' (p. 53). Of course this is just the worst of all the straw dogs¹⁹ in the book. Idealism is nothing more than the claim that humans can only understand things from a human perspective — lion philosophy must be left for lions. Idealists have no difficulty with A.C. Graham's observation that philosophical Platonism could not have arisen in China, as classical Chinese script is not ideographic (Graham, 1989). Ideas are mediated through language and constrain the limits of human understanding. On this reading, idealism is not a long way removed from Maturana and Varela's theory of 'structural coupling' (1987).

In fact you don't even need to be an idealist or a phenomenologist in the European philosophical tradition to make Oakeshott-style distinctions. The staunchly Anglo philosopher E.J. Lowe (1996) has argued — convincingly to my mind — that volitional acts can only be understood in mental terms. In what sense is it meaningful to describe a hyper-complex and continuous series of branching neuronal events as the 'cause' of an act such as the raising of an arm? If we are to agree with Hume that the notion of causality is the product of human psychology then the only 'cause' of volitional activity is the associated mental event. Gray's book provides an excellent survey of human behaviour but he tells us nothing whatsoever about human conduct.

If the goal of philosophy and cognitive science is the explanation of human conduct then Oakeshott's conversational pluralism is a more attractive alternative than the arid disembodied cognitivism of mainstream cognitive science, the reductionism of evolutionary psychology or the neo-behaviourism of the new approach to consciousness studies.²⁰

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[18] An uneasy bedfellow with cognitive science, notwithstanding Shaun Gallagher's excellent new journal, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer).

[19] Straw men, straw dogs — OK, but we will have to draw the line at straw lions.

[20] A shortened version of this review is forthcoming in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*.

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