

A Touch of Gray

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Every silver lining's got a touch of gray—Robert Hunter

INTRODUCTION

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to comment upon the work of John Gray. His output has been so extensive and his thought has seen so much development that one could easily write a book tracing his intellectual odyssey, and so a mere paper on the topic must, of necessity, be no more than an incomplete sketch.¹

Gray began his intellectual life on the left (Colls 2003, p. 59), but moved towards libertarianism in the late 1970s, influenced by his study of the work of Nobel Prize-winning free-market economist F. A. Hayek (1982).² Gray's libertarianism was tempered, however, by studying the work of Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott. Over time, he was led to increasing skepticism towards the entire Enlightenment project. (Graeme Garrard's paper in this issue criticizes aspects of Gray's understanding of the Enlightenment).

In the last decade or so, Gray has increasingly written works that interleave recounting of historical episodes with philosophical reflections on their meaning. He also has developed his metaphysical views in a direction that I would refer to as "mystical atheism." (Many writers use "mystical" as a pejorative: be assured I am not doing so here).

So let us take a too brief journey through Gray's oeuvre, beginning with his gradually distancing himself from Hayekian liberalism.

LEAVING LIBERALISM

A key text for understanding this shift in Gray's attitude towards liberalism is his 1988 work, *Liberalisms*. It is a collection of essays written over a period of a dozen years. As Gray describes the essays, "They embody a single project, pursued continuously over the period in which they were written—the project of defining liberalism and giving it a foundation." But, for liberalism, the conclusion of the project was not a happy one: "The enterprise ended in failure" (Gray 1988, p. vii). Gray notes that, prior to the breakdown of the Western consensus the most salient event of which was the Reformation, "the liberal problem of establishing fair principles of social cooperation among persons having incompatible and incommensurable conceptions of the good—does not exist" (1988, p. 169).

In an essay on the contractarian method of political justification, Gray argues against John Rawls's contention that justice is silent about the choice of economic system. Gray's analysis of the unstable and

inefficient nature of market socialism displays a deep understanding of the calculation argument forwarded by Mises and Hayek, far surpassing that of today's average economist. Gray argues that, contra Rawls, "the appropriate conception of the person for our historical circumstance is closer to that which Hobbes presented at a time of profound religious conflict" (1988, p. 181). We will see that Gray returns to address Hobbes several times, including his most recent book.

Having decided that there is no philosophical basis for preferring liberalism to all other forms of governance, Gray turns his attention to what follows from this conclusion in a series of essays collected in *Post-Liberalism*. In the essay "Hayek as a conservative" Gray notes that "Hayek's position is distinctive, to be sure" (1996, p. 32), and that "Hayek's attempt to synthesize the deepest insights of conservatism with the best elements of classical liberalism merits our closest scrutiny" (1996, p. 33). That is because "The dominant superstition of the Age of Reason is the belief that vital social institutions—law, language, and morality, as well as the market—must be or can become products of conscious contrivance and control, if they are effectively to serve human purposes" (1996, p. 36) Hayek's "chief importance... is that he has freed classical liberalism from the burden of [this] hubristic rationalism" (1996, p. 37).

However, Gray warns that "At times [Hayek] seems to subscribe to a doctrine of historical progress which... cannot be endorsed by any twentieth century conservative." (1996, p. 38) Gray concludes that, "since much of contemporary culture is possessed by a death-wish brought on by pathological developments in some of our oldest traditions, a modern conservative must also be a moral and intellectual radical" (1996, p. 39).

In the next chapter, "Oakeshott as a liberal," Gray writes:

[Oakeshott's] first lesson is that the hubristic project of doctrinal or fundamental liberalism—the project attempted by all the liberal thinkers... of fixing the boundaries of government action by some principle or doctrine, be it *laissez-faire*, a specification of allegedly natural (but patently conventional) rights, or a list of basic liberties derived (as in Rawls and Dworkin) from a conception of justice rooted only in the fleeting local knowledge of the American academic *nomenklatura*—embodies a mistaken conception of philosophy itself" (1996, p. 41).

Commenting on Oakeshott's distinction between civil association and enterprise association, Gray remarks: "the debacles of Thatcherism and Reaganism suggest that, for us, the enterprise-association state is an historical fate, which we may indeed strive to temper, but which we cannot hope to overcome" (1996, p. 44). One can gather from that passage that Gray was not pleased by the outcome of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Indeed, during the 1990s, Gray was associated with New Labour—the center-left movement that brought Tony Blair to power in Westminster—and he became a prominent critic of global capitalism with his book *False Dawn* (1998).

In "Buchanan on liberty," Gray argues that James Buchanan, contra Hayek, recognizes that spontaneous social orders will not reliably be beneficial without the aid of deliberately constructed institutions designed to make them so. For instance, Gray argues that, after the collapse of communist states in eastern Europe, "we cannot intrust ourselves to the providential designs of Burkean or Hayekian institutional evolution. Rather, armed with the best theory we can find, we must wager on a new social contract" (1996, p. 53). Gray closes his Buchanan essay on a more optimistic note than he will sound in much of his later work, writing, "we must wager on liberty by seeking, amid all the vicissitudes and contingencies of practice, a new constitutional settlement on limited government, in which free men and women may live in voluntary association—in liberty under the rule of law" (1996, p. 63).

In Gray's essay on Isaiah Berlin we see the roots of another phase of Gray's thought, as he embraces Berlin's value pluralism:

Berlin's work, both in intellectual history and political theory, is one which, if true, as I take it to be, strikes a death-blow to the central, classical Western tradition—and, it must be added, to the project of the Enlightenment. Berlin's master idea is that ultimate values are objective and knowable, but they are many, they often come into conflict with one another and are uncombinable in a single human being or a single society, and that in many of such conflicts there is no overarching standard whereby the competing claims of such ultimate values are rationally arbitratable... There is, then, no *summum bonum* or *logos*, no Aristotelian mean or Platonic form of the good, no perfect form of human life, which we may never achieve, but towards which we may struggle, no measuring rod on which different forms of human life encompassing different and uncombinable goods can be ranked (1996, p. 65).

This is a puzzling passage. At least as Gray presents Berlin, we have here a *petitio principii*: what is supposedly the conclusion of the argument is, in fact, one of its premises, because it is only if there is, indeed, no "*summum bonum* or *logos*" that such conflicts are not "rationally arbitratable." After all, Plato and Aristotle and Aquinas, among many others, acknowledged that there are people who resist the pull of the *logos* and therefore are immune to rational argumentation as to what is truly good. Whether Berlin manages to avoid this question begging in his work is beyond the scope of this introduction, but at least we can say that Gray does not offer us any reason to think that he has in this essay. In any case, it is clear that Gray *does* accept this conclusion of Berlin's, and, we suggest, that is extremely important in understanding his subsequent work. He goes on to say, in a passage notable for illustrating Gray's decreasing enthusiasm for Hayek:

Berlin at the same time, cuts the ground from under those doctrinal or fundamentalist liberalism—the liberalism of Nozick or Hayek no less than of Rawls or Ackerman—which suppose that the incommensurabilities of moral and political life, and of liberty itself, can be smoothed away by the application of some theory, or tamed by some talismanic formula... if there is any liberalism that is now defensible, it is Berlin's (1996, p. 67).

In "The politics of cultural diversity," an essay as relevant today as when it was written, Gray argues that the progressive enthusiasm for what is called "multiculturalism" is "animated by moral hatred of the dominant traditions, and a voyeuristic fascination with submerged, overwhelmed, or oppositional cultures." Therefore, it seeks to "entrench minority traditions in protected institutions and confer on them arbitrary privileges" (1996, p. 266).

In the preface of his 1995 book *Enlightenment's Wake* (a second edition appeared in 2007), Gray writes: "In this book, a train of thought developed in my earlier books, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, *Post-liberalism: Studies and Political Thought*, and *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government, and the Common Environment*, is brought to a conclusion" (2007, p. vii). He corrects the conclusion of *Post-liberalism*, arguing "the historicist argument for liberal institutions... neglects the variety of institutions within which a *modus vivendi* can be achieved in our time, and unduly privileges variations on Western models" (2007, p. viii). While "commentators and politicians are invoking 'Enlightenment values' as an antidote for contemporary ills," Gray notes that "Enlightenment values have often been illiberal, racist, or totalitarian" (2007, p. xvi). In fact, while "Neo-conservatism... may be the last of the Enlightenment ideologies... it too is ready to use terror to realize its utopian goals" (2007, p. xvii).

The first two essays in the volume critique contemporary political philosophy. In the first, "Against the New Liberalism," he contends that "the tradition of liberal theorizing [that *A Theory of Justice*] inaugurated has done a little more than articulate the prejudices of an Anglo-American academic class that lacks any the understanding of political life in our age" (2007, p. 2). The second essay, the "Definition of the Political Thought of Tlön," Gray satirizes the contents of Goodin and Petit's *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* by comparing it to Borges fictional *The First Encyclopedia of Tlön*. Just as the residents of Tlön

believe that the only things real are what they perceive, so, Gray contends, for most academic political philosophers, “only that has reality which is at any particular time perceptible in academic discourse” (2007, p. 21). Why else, Gray wonders, do the editors consider powerful factors in modern politics like theism and nationalism beyond the pale of discussion, while a topic like anarchism is included in their selections?

The final essay in *Enlightenment's Wake* summarizes Gray's conclusions on the “Enlightenment project,” and his review is not positive. As he puts it:

within Western cultures, the Enlightenment project of promoting autonomous human reason and of according to science a privileged status in relation to all other forms of understanding has successfully eroded and destroyed local and traditional forms of moral and social knowledge; it has not issued in anything resembling a new civilization, however, but instead in nihilism (2007, p. 217).

Gray dismisses attempts like that of the Romantic movement to re-enchant the world, writing “The disenchantment that trails in Enlightenment's wake is a fate that can perhaps be tempered, but not overcome” (2007, p. 231). It is true that, if the disenchantment that came with the Enlightenment was like the removal of rose colored glasses, so that we at last see the world in its true, dreary colors, we probably can't unsee that revelation. But Gray does not seem to consider a different possibility: perhaps the Enlightenment actually consisted of putting *on* a pair of spectacles that *filtered out* the vibrant colors of an enchanted world. Then “re-enchanting” the world would merely consist in taking off that filter. As Robert Hunter once put it, “maybe the dark is from your eyes.” In the end, Gray does not place much hope for a recovery from nihilism in Western cultures. He writes, “Any prospect of cultural recovery from the nihilism that the Enlightenment has spawned may lie with non-Occidental peoples, whose task will then be in part that of protecting themselves from the debris cast up by Western shipwreck” (2007, p. 276).

The 1997 work *Endgames* begins by asserting that “our inherited stock of political ideas no longer tracks the world in which we live and strive to flourish” (1997, p. vi). Having concluded that the Enlightenment project has been a failure, Gray worries that “the faith of the Enlightenment will be deployed... as a drug to stupefy the intellect and an antidote to despair” (1997, p. xi). In an effort to address these circumstances, Gray notes that “The gap between late modern thought and emerging postmodern realities is the space in which the questions that are the subject of this book are put” (1997, p. xi). The essay “The Strange Death of Tory England” deals with the British Conservative party undermining its own base by embracing neoliberalism. While much of the essay deals with particulars of British politics, it does further illustrate Gray's move away from Thatcherism, as well as the fact that unfettered markets are not friends of social cohesion. The next essay, “After Social Democracy,” argues that, whether one approves or disapproves of Thatcherism, its “consequences for political life in Britain” are “irreversible” (1997, p. 11). Gray sees no possibility of Britain reverting to a pre-Thatcher form of social democracy or traditional conservatism; instead, the correct focus of practical political thought is “What is Thatcherism's successor?” (1997, p. 11).

Gray contends that while social democracy was once a workable alternative to Soviet communism and American individualism, “the billions of skilled workers released onto the global market by the communist collapse and the disappearance of any effective barriers to global mobility of capital” have rendered it “a bankrupt project” (1997, p. 13). Gray also rejects the project of right-wingers (such as John Redwood) who seek to revive traditional cultural forms that have mostly vanished. As an alternative, he recommends “a communitarian liberal perspective” which “enriches standard liberal philosophy with the distinctive insights of communitarian thought” (1997, p. 15). He hopes this will balance the human need for security and forms of common life with people's “demand... to make their own choices and to be at least part-authors of their own lives” (1997, p. 16). This latter requirement is, of course, incompatible with the denial of free will that Gray will adopt later: if free will is an illusion, we no more make choices than does a rock tumbling down a hill.

A central component of “the communitarian liberal view... is that market freedoms have instrumental value only, as a means to individual well-being” (1997, p. 17). And “in contrast with social democracy, which has extended to social welfare rights the supposedly unconditional claims of negative liberal rights, the communitarian view affirms the dependency of individual autonomy on a strong network of reciprocal obligations” (1997, p. 18). The goal is “reconciling the human need for security with the permanent revolution of the market” (1997, p. 19). Gray comments that “It is a comment on the parochialism of British political life that social democrats have accepted the Thatcherite claim that opposition to European federalism is the prerogative of the Right” (1997, pp. 34-35). This was a prescient remark, given how a decade later, Brexit was cast as a purely right-wing initiative.

In his essay “Rawl’s Anti-Political Liberalism,” Gray knocks Rawls off of his pedestal in a few pithy sentences. He succinctly describes the difference between Hobbes and Rawls:

For Hobbes, the goal of political philosophy is not to come up with an apology for any particular political regime. It is instead to understand the universal and permanent human needs that political institutions of all sorts exist to meet... The contrast with Rawls’s political liberalism could hardly be starker... Rawls takes as his point of departure... the intuitions common among American East Coast liberal academics (1997, p. 53).

In the end, Gray notes, “The most striking feature of Rawls’s political liberalism is its utter political emptiness” (1997, p. 54).

In “Berlin, Oakeshott, and Enlightenment,” Gray undertakes an interesting comparison of these two prominent critics of rationalism. But he misunderstands Oakeshott in a fundamental way when he writes, “If, for Oakeshott, all forms of knowledge are at bottom practical...” (1997, p. 86). Oakeshott quite explicitly rejects that view, writing “The world of practice... will be found to be abstract and defective from the standpoint of the totality of experience... [and] that (consequently) it is without any direct relationship with other abstract worlds of experience, such as those of science and history...” (Oakeshott 1933, p. 249). One might respond, “Well, that is just the early Oakeshott,” were it not the case that he again, forty-two years later, rejects the idea that theory can be reduced to practice (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 29-30).

In “Beginnings,” the last essay in *Endgames*, Gray treats the theory of evolution, a biological model of how lifeforms change over time, as something with vast implications for metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and philosophical anthropology. For example, he writes:

It is difficult to reconcile [science as truth seeking] with the results of scientific inquiry, such as Darwinism. In a consistently Darwinian perspective, science will seek truth only in so far as truth serves human interests (1997, p. 168).

The problem Gray’s case faces here is that given what he says about science, he has no reason to acquit Darwinism of the charge he levels at all other scientific theories. And that would mean we have no particular reason to think that Darwinism is true; rather, it has been devised to help evolutionary biologists find mates, gain social prestige, and so on. And that makes his argument self-undermining. (I will note here that I think Darwinism is a pretty good theory, albeit one likely to be eventually superceded by an even better theory, but that is because I do believe that science is generally truth seeking).

Gray opens *Two Faces of Liberalism* by noting that “The liberal state originated in a search for *modus vivendi*” (2000, p. 1). And he acknowledges that “Liberal toleration has contributed immeasurably to human well-being” (2000, p. 1). But then he makes the quite important distinction between two liberal approaches to tolerance: “Viewed from one side, liberal toleration is the ideal of a rational consensus on the best way of life. From the other, it is the belief that human beings can flourish in many ways of life... If liberalism has a future, it is in giving up the search for a rational consensus on the best way of life” (2000,

p. 1). He goes on to note that “The liberal ideal of toleration which looks to a rational consensus on the best way of life was born in societies divided on the claims of a single way of life. It cannot show us how to live together in societies that harbour many ways of life” (2000, pp. 1-2). Gray then offers examples of prominent thinkers exhibiting these different forms of liberal tolerance:

The philosophies of John Locke and Immanuel Kant exemplify the liberal project of a universal regime, while those of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume express the liberalism of peaceful coexistence. And more recent times, John Rawls and F.A. Hayek have defended the first liberal philosophy, while Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott are exemplars of the second... In this Hobbesian view [of the second sort of thinkers], the end of tolerance is not consensus. It is coexistence (2000, pp. 2-3).

Gray then claims, “*Modus vivendi* expresses the belief that there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive... Where such ways of life are rivals, there is no one of them that is best” (2000, p. 5). This may be true, but here it is not argued for but merely assumed. And on its face, the assumption seems false: for instance, are we really wrong to regard the new ways of life that arose during what has been called “the Axial Age” (Jaspers 2014), when religions arose that regarded all humans, and not merely some particular tribe or nation, as of equal moral worth, as ethically superior to their predecessors? (And we can recognize that, while Jaspers placing this transformation in a narrow band of a few centuries is too limiting, there was a broader change that took place in the space of a millennium or so). After all, humans “thrived” in the pre-Axial societies, at least in the sense that the human population increased and humans came to inhabit more and more of the earth’s lands. And, in fact, Gray’s search for a *modus vivendi* which will allow humans pursuing different ways of life to co-exist is an implicit acceptance of the Axial Age advance in human ethical consciousness, and assumes that the ways of life it created *are* better than the more tribalistic ways of life they replaced.

Gray, of course, perceives this problem, and hopes to solve it by noting that “Not all ways of life allow humans to live well. There are universal human goods and evils. Some virtues are needed for any kind of human flourishing” (2000, p. 8). So, presumably, Gray would argue that, say, the Mafia’s way of life fails to recognize these universal human goods and evils, and therefore need not be tolerated. But this has simply raised the problem of liberal universal agreement to a higher level: this regime requires near-unanimity on just what virtues are required for any kind of human flourishing, and, furthermore, just what constitutes human flourishing. Some people might declare that humans are flourishing if they are healthy. Others will further require that they are materially prosperous, or that they be intellectually stimulated, or have open to them the path to enlightenment, or the opportunity to end the ceaseless cycle of death and rebirth, or to achieve salvation through God’s grace.

Gray’s treatment of abortion is symptomatic of this problem. In discussing “fundamentalists,” he treats one mark of fundamentalism as talking about “the right to life” (2000, p. 14). (And Gray actually puts the phrase in scare quotes.) But it is not obvious why this is not itself the very sort of universal good Gray already acknowledged. For instance, the great liberal philosopher T. H. Green declared such a right a modern advance, writing of how, in the ancient world, “the exposure of children was everywhere practiced... a practice in strong contrast with the principal of modern law that even a child in the womb has a right to live” (Green 1986, p. 119). For the “fundamentalists” who wish to see abortion banned, their aim, as they understand it, is certainly pro-autonomy: the right to autonomy of the fetus is most definitely wiped out by killing it. Gray might argue that the fetus is not a person, and thus has no such rights. But that just illustrates that there is no consensus on vital points that Gray assumes we can agree upon to establish his *modus vivendi*. He goes on to state that “Liberals and pluralists walk side-by-side in resisting totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes... It is a mark of an illiberal regime that conflicts of value are viewed as signs of error” (2000, p. 20).

But of course Gray is viewing what he calls “fundamentalism” as a sign of error. And for him, the category “fundamentalist” apparently includes all the adherents of universal religions (such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), as he says that “universal religions are incompatible with the truth of value-pluralism” (2000, p. 21). But this means that well over one half of the world’s population hold views that are incompatible with value-pluralism. And therefore Gray’s preferred regime tolerates all of their ways of life just so long as they don’t take their own religion’s claim to universality all that seriously. (See Finnis 2011 for the case that there is no such incompatibility between value pluralism and universal religions.)

That problem could be sidestepped, however: One could heartily agree with Gray that a *modus vivendi* political regime is the best course in our current circumstances, while rejecting his case for value pluralism. For instance, one might hold that a Christian polity would be superior to our current regimes, *if* such a thing were achievable. But given that ideal is unrealistic, the Christian virtue of prudence recommends we accept a *modus vivendi* regime. Gray, I contend, has conflated two separate claims:

- 1) There is no rational way to choose between different ways of life; and
- 2) Our best political option at present is a *modus vivendi* regime.

The case for the second claim does not depend on the first claim being true; in fact, I suggest it is actually weakened by being lashed to the first one, since tying them together weakens the appeal of the second claim for those who reject the first.

Heresies is a collection of essays that Gray first published in *New Statesman*, between 1999 and 2003. The book opens sounding a familiar theme from its immediate predecessors: “Both communism and neoliberalism were messianic movements, using the language of reason and science, but actually driven by faith” (2004, p. 1). The belief in progress, he claims, “has now become harmful... Anyone who dares question the idea of progress is at once accused of wishing to return to the Dark Ages. Yet it is a fact that the largest mass murders in history were perpetrated by progressive regimes” (2004, p. 5). In an interesting essay on the first two *Matrix* films, Gray notes how they illustrate the power of technology to “blank out the environment in which we live” (2004, p. 51). The example he cites is amusing in retrospect: “Plugged into our Walkman, we can forget the squalor by which we are actually surrounded” (2004, p. 51). Even someone as far-seeing as Gray probably could not have imagined how plugged into our smart phones we would be two decades later. He concludes: “In a curious, oblique way, these are political films, but the questions they suggest are not hackneyed ones about capitalist exploitation or media tyranny. They are about the affluent majority colluding with the media in sustaining an unreal view of the world” (2004, p. 55).

In another essay, Gray, displaying his knack for finding fascinating but obscure examples upon which to meditate, takes up Franz Kafka’s short story “A Report to the Academy,” in which an ape called Red Peter addresses a learned society. Along the way, Gray remarks “Secular thinkers find it extremely difficult to come up with reasons for thinking that the human species has some kind of unique standing in the world” (2004, p. 76). He claims that “humans have had a huge, and almost entirely harmful, impact on other animal species” (2004, p. 77). And clearly he intends that we should change our misguided notion that we are unique among animal species, and should reduce the harm we are causing other species. While the latter sentiment is clearly laudable, the mere fact that Gray addresses these concerns to his fellow humans demonstrates that he, too, recognizes that humans really are different than all other species. No wolf philosopher has ever risen who addressed his fellow wolves and asked them to be kinder to deer. No fire ant philosopher has appeared who has asked fire ants to please reconsider their invasive species routine in continents upon which they do not belong. Human beings are the sorts of creature who can respond to a moral argument by changing their behavior. And there is no other species on earth of which that is true.

STARING INTO THE VOID

Straw Dogs is one of Gray's most popular books. In it, a "gloomy Gray" comes to the forefront. A lot of this gloom turns on Gray's interpretation of Darwinism and his reading of its implications. The book opens with several curious assertions. First, he writes "Darwin teaches that species are only assemblies of genes, interacting at random with each other and their shifting environments" (2007, p. 3). But Darwin had no concept of genes at all. Mendel's work on genes was unknown to him, and was not incorporated into the mainstream of evolutionary theory until well after Darwin's death. And even if Gray is using "Darwin" as a synecdoche for "modern Darwinian theory," there is still a problem: in modern evolutionary theory, it is not true that evolution is purely random. As Richard Dawkins put it, "Darwinism is a theory of random mutation plus *nonrandom* cumulative natural selection" (Dawkins, 1996, p. 75).

Gray next assigns Christianity a unique status among world religions in believing that there is a significant difference between humans and other animals, and holds it thus responsible for Darwin's theory being at all controversial. However, quite clearly Judaism and Islam, sharing the Old Testament with Christianity, also differentiate humans from other animals. But then, so did Aristotle, giving humans a unique character due to their possessing reason (Aristotle, p. 9). It is true that in religions incorporating the idea of reincarnation, it is often thought that souls may move between human and non-human lives in successive reincarnations. But Buddhism, for instance, regards human reincarnations as special in their openness to the possibility of enlightenment, since humans, possessing reason, have the ability to grasp the dharma (Norbu et al. 2020, pp. 19-26). Gray specifically cites Hinduism as a religion in which humans are not special, but hinduamerican.org says "Mankind, because it is believed to be the most spiritually evolved, thus carries a special responsibility..." (Hindu American Foundation).

In fact, as G. K. Chesterton noted, "the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one" (1925, p. 7). He recounts the incident of a boy finding paleolithic cave paintings of animals, and says that unless the boy was "one of the professors who simplified the relation of men and beasts to mere evolutionary variation..." he would realize that "he had dug very deep and found the place where a man had drawn the picture of a reindeer. But he would dig a good deal deeper before he found a place where a reindeer had drawn a picture of a man" (1925, p. 15). In other words, the vast gulf separating humans from all other animal species is empirically quite obvious, and only can be ignored through a process of extensive education. Recognizing this empirical fact does not immediately yield any metaphysical implications. Recognizing that volcanoes are different from all other mountains would not mean that we have to grant them some superior ontological status. But nevertheless, it would be a very poor geologist who did not recognize this significant difference.

Gray's remarks on technology should be read by every techno-optimist:

Once a technology enters human life—whether it be fire, the wheel, the automobile, radio, television or the Internet—it changes it in ways we can never fully understand... Technical progress leaves only one problem unsolved: the frailty of human nature. Unfortunately, that problem is insoluble (2007, pp. 14-15).

But he notes that Green thought partakes of the same illusion: "Green thinkers understand that humans can never be masters of the Earth. Yet in their Luddite struggle against technology they renew the illusion that the world can be made the instrument of human purposes" (2007, p. 15).

Gray's 2011 work, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, describes two historical episodes, which he relates with his usual panache. The first tale is about the British parapsychologists active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group included many prominent figures, such as the great ethical theorist Henry Sidgwick, the classical scholar Frederic Meyers, the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, and British foreign secretary and prime minister Arthur Balfour. These men

looked to science to replace religion as the guarantor of man's immortality by seeking empirical evidence of life after death. Often they attempted to receive messages from the dead that could demonstrate the continued existence of the deceased. An intriguing example of this effort involved automatic writing, a practice in which a medium would write down what were supposed to be messages from the afterlife, without conscious awareness of what he or she was writing. Over a number of years this practice yielded "many thousands" (2011, Kindle Location 173) of pages of automatic writing, which were thought to display "cross-correspondences," so that something written down by one medium only formed a complete message when assembled with the transcriptions of others. The experiment was inclusive, as the interpretation of the "messages" was not a determinate matter; to some people they were clear evidence of an afterlife, while for Gray, "The connections were encrypted in a way of life, which has since disappeared" (2011, Location 1013).

The next story related in *The Immortalization Commission* describes the important role occultism played in the Soviet Union before World War II. It is from this section that the book's title is drawn: the Soviet Union actually had such a commission, as well as a Soviet Committee for Psychical Research. The embalming of Lenin's dead body was performed largely with this goal of achieving immortality through science. Commenting on religion, Gray writes:

The heart of all religions is practice—ritual and meditation. Practice comes with myths, but myths are not theories in need of rational development. The story of Icarus has not been rendered redundant by progress in psychology. The Genesis story is not obsolete because there have been advances in palaeontology. Myths like these will endure for as long as humans remain human. Myths are narratives that deal with unchanging features of human experience...

Ever since the rise of Positivism a legend has been repeated in which myth-making belongs in the infancy of the species. *The Golden Bough* (1890), a collection assembled by the anthropologist J. G. Frazer, propagated this Positivist legend: mythic thinking is typical of children and primitives; adulthood lies with science. In fact, as Wittgenstein remarked, 'Frazer is much more savage than most of these savages.' Modern myths are further from reality than any that can be found among traditional peoples... (2011, Location 2477).

So, we see that, while Gray may not be (conventionally) religious himself, he has no sympathy for rationalists' strawman version of religion, a theme he will return to in *Seven Types of Atheism*.

Gray's 2015 book, *The Soul of the Marionette*, continues the development of his stoicism in the face of a meaningless universe. A meditation on the theme of human freedom, the work examines the perspectives of a number of thinkers on the topic, a melange that includes the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, the poets Giacomo Leopardi and Edgar Allan Poe, and the science-fiction writers Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick.

Gray cites Aztec ritual killings as evidence of the ineradicability of human violence. Playing whack-a-mole, we surpress if in one place only to see it pop back up in another. He is skeptical of studies that purport to demonstrate a secular decline in violence, citing violence-caused famines and epidemics, deaths in labor camps, the gigantic U.S. prison population, the revival of torture in the most "civilized" societies, and other contemporary brutality to call these studies into doubt. He connects the failure to accept this reality to the failed neo-conservative project of bringing peaceful "enlightenment" to non-Western societies by bombing and invading them, along the way wrecking whatever social order they had.

Despite its many virtues, there is a paradox at the heart of this book: if free will is an illusion, as Gray suggests, then what is the point of his recommending we adopt a stoical attitude towards this fact? If we have no free will, then we are not able to freely choose the attitude we adopt about that (or any other) set of circumstances we face.

In his 2018 book *Seven Types of Atheism*, Gray makes the important point that atheism is not a single doctrine, but rather encompasses a wide variety (at the very least, seven) of world views. In his first chapter, Gray addresses the “New Atheists”: few “believers” could write as scathing a takedown of this movement. As he puts it:

The new atheists have directed their campaign against a narrow segment of religion while failing to understand even that small part. Seeing religion as a system of beliefs, they have attacked it as if it was no more than an obsolete scientific theory... But the idea that religion consists of a bunch of discredited theories is itself a discredited theory—a relic of the 19th century philosophy of Positivism” (2018, p. 9). For example, “The Genesis story is not an early theory of the origin of species (2018, p. 11).

As Gray demonstrates, the new atheists, far from being irreligious, are followers of Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity,” a cult the French thinker created in the 19th century that contained its own positivist rites and sacraments.

The next variety of atheism that Gray addresses is secular humanism. He convincingly argues that the belief in continued human progress, divorced from its Biblical roots, is merely the echoing death rattles of a dying Christian civilization. Gray, however, mistakenly forwards the common idea that all cultures without the Bible as their sacred scripture have a cyclical understanding of history. As Eric Voegelin wrote:

When I devised the program [of *Order and History*] I was still laboring under the conventional belief that the conception of history as a meaningful course of events on a straight line of time was the great achievement of Israelites and Christians... while the pagans... could never rise above the conception of a cyclical time. This conventional believe had to be abandoned when I discovered the unilinear construction of history... developed by the end of the third millennium B.C. in the empires of the Ancient Near East” (Voegelin 2000, p. 51).

Gray closes his chapter on secular humanism with a critique of Ayn Rand, in which he demonstrates the roots of her “cod-philosophy” (2018, p. 51) in the work of Nietzsche, while noting how ridiculous her cults’ embrace of such habits as smoking cigarettes with a filter and esteeming tap dancing above all other dances were.

Gray next chapter, “A Strange Faith in Science,” takes on those who make a religion out of science. The first part of the chapter discusses the roots of modern racism in the Enlightenment, noting that Hume, Kant and Voltaire all were quite explicitly racist, and that this racism continued in several “scientific” forms well into the twentieth century.

The last part of the chapter deals with transhumanism, which Gray refers to as “techno-monotheism” (2018, p. 66), and “religion recycled as science” (2018, p. 67). He argues that even if the transhumanist touted technologies come to fruition, the result will be not one “Supreme Being... [but] many different gods, each of them a parody of human beings that once existed” (2018, p. 70).

In a chapter on “God-Haters,” Gray again demonstrates his ability to unearth obscure but curious anecdotes from the byways of history that help illustrate a theme he is exploring. In this case, Gray turns to the life and work of English literary critic and poet William Empson. Empson was, indeed, a “God hater,” writing “The Christian God the Father... is the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man” (quoted in Gray 2018, p. 117). Yet Empson had an affinity for Buddhism, despite regarding it as “more life-negating and in this regard even worse than Christianity” (quoted in Gray 2018, p. 122). Gray sagely remarks that Empson saw “The irreducible plurality of meaning and value in language and art... In the contradictory expressions of the Buddha. He was too close to Christianity to see it there to” (2018, p. 123). And the rest of that paragraph significantly softens earlier criticisms he has made of Christianity.

In the final two chapters Gray addresses thinkers who might be grouped together as “mystical atheists,” including George Santaya, Joseph Conrad, Arthur Schopenhauer, Benedict Spinoza, and Lev Shestov. (The last of these again illustrates Gray’s talent for finding lesser-known examples that add depth to a theme.) Gray here claims that “the most basic presupposition of monotheism [is] the dualism of mind and matter” (2018, p. 149). But that is inaccurate: a better statement of the basic presupposition of Abrahamic monotheism is that it assumes a clear distinction between a Creator and His creation. But if one considers someone like Bishop Berkeley (1999), an orthodox Christian clergyman, who was also a monistic idealist, it should be clear that the mind/matter dualism is not essential here. Gray concludes with a passage that should be read by every participant in an online “atheism versus religion” debate... but of course won’t be:

If you want to understand atheism and religion, you must forget the popular notion that they are opposites. If you can see what a millenarian theocracy in early sixteenth-century Münster has in common with both Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany, you will have a clearer view of the modern scene. If you can see how theologies that affirm the ineffability of God and some types of atheism or not so far apart, you will learn something about the limits of human understanding (2018, p. 158).

In the 2020 work *Feline Philosophy*, Gray compares the attitude of cats towards the world with that of humans, and finds that, as a whole, that of cats is better. For one thing, cats have no concept of morality; humans believe they do, but they are mistaken. Gray claims that when people talk of morality, “what they are doing is expressing their emotions” (2020, p. 46). This metaethical theory is known as emotivism, and was popularized by A. J. Ayer (1946). It is a significant departure from Gray’s earlier realistic moral pluralism. A laudatory feature of Gray’s work is his continual willingness to rethink and revise earlier positions he has taken. But appreciating that does not mean that every change has been for the better. And this is a case where it has not, because emotivism is mistaken, regardless of whether there are objective moral facts or not. Consider someone who says “Adultery is wrong”: they are *not* just expressing a negative emotion they feel towards adultery. For instance, it is quite possible for someone to say, “I know adultery is wrong, but boy do I love it!” No, when someone utters a sentence like that, they are claiming that there is *a fact of the matter* about adultery being wrong. Now, they might be mistaken in their claim, just as I might claim, “There is a man hiding behind that tree” when there is no such man there. But my sentence was not a description of some emotion I was experiencing; it was a fact claim, but one that happened to be incorrect. (See Brandt 1959 and Geach 1960 for further arguments against emotivism).

Attempting to back his advocacy of emotivism, Gray notes while it was once thought to be moral to use imperial power to spread civilization, that is now considered immoral. But simply pointing out the people have had different opinions on some topic at different times in no way shows that no opinion is more truthful than any other. Some people think that all living creatures popped into existence in a single act of creation that took place 6000 years ago. Others believe that all living forms evolved from simple creatures that appeared on earth over 3 billion years ago. Would Gray argue that this difference of opinion means that no view on the matter is better than any other? Gray might respond that morality is not like science in this regard. But that answer is question begging: whether it is or isn’t is the point of contention, and Gray certainly cannot show that there are no better or worse answers to moral questions simply by showing that there are various answers to them.

Gray contrasts the idea of morality found, for instance, in Christianity, with that of the Chinese ideal of “living according to *tao*” (2020, p. 47). But this ignores the deep similarities between Taoism and Christianity, as demonstrated by, e.g., Damascene 2002 or Lewis 1974.

In the last chapter of *Feline Philosophy*, Gray offers ten “feline hints” (2020, pp. 108-111). All of them are interesting, and many of them strike me as fairly sound. But the entire list rests uneasily with feline commandment number nine, which advises “Beware anyone who offers to make you happy”: Isn’t that what Gray (or his cat?) is doing with this list?

After these ten hints, he writes, “Eternity is not another order of things, but the world seen without anxiety” (2020, p. 111). This is a profound insight; and indeed, one can find this idea also expressed by Buddha and Christ.

Gray’s most recent book is *The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism*. As with many of his latter works, this one takes the form of an extended meditation on a topic, similar to Milan Kundera’s ideal type of the novel (Kundera 1988).

Throughout his meditations, Gray brings up Hobbes repeatedly. In fact, the central theme of the book is that the circumstances that led Hobbes to write *Leviathan* have again become salient in our time, as the liberal world order that prevailed for some years after the fall of the Soviet Union is disappearing.

Gray argues that “Hobbes was a liberal—the only one, perhaps, still worth reading” (2023, p. 4). He defends the claim that Hobbes was a liberal by first citing the four defining characteristics he described in *Liberalism*, namely, that liberalism is:

- individualist
- egalitarian
- universalist
- meliorist

Gray argues that these central liberal ideas are also central to Hobbes, since for him:

- “Society is made up of individuals...”
- “[each] equal in being exposed to death at each other’s hands...”
- “Human nature is universal in its needs...”
- “With the application of reason, government can be improved...” (2023, p. 5).

Thus Hobbes is “the” proto-liberal. However, as Gray explains, “Each of these [liberal] ideas is a half-truth”:

- Individuals are the basis of society, but “self-preservation is only one of their needs: bare life is not enough.”
- Human beings “regularly give up peace and security in order to defend a form of life...”
- “The most basic human goods may be universal but they are often sacrificed...”
- “Society and government can be improved, but what is gained can always be lost... There is no complete or final exit from the state of nature” (2023, p. 5).

Gray’s claim that Hobbes was a liberal may disconcert some who have interpreted him as a totalitarian. But here Gray makes a crucial, often overlooked, point about Hobbes, “Hobbes’s was a state whose powers were unchecked, but its goals were strictly limited. Beyond securing its subjects against one another and external enemies, it had no remit” (2023, p. 2). In other words, Hobbes’s justification for the sovereign was its ability to keep citizens from going to war with each other, and it had whatever power it needed to achieve that goal. But its remit did not extend to stopping them from drinking too much, or prompting them to exercise, or urging them to approve of polyamory, or encouraging them to go to the opera.

Gray understands that the whole liberal project is based upon a metaphysics that modern liberals either ignore or completely reject:

Liberalism was a creation of Western monotheism and liberal freedoms are part of the civilization that monotheism engendered. Twenty-first-century liberals reject this civilization, while continuing to assert the universal authority of a hollowed-out version of its values. In this hyper-liberal vision all societies are destined to undergo the deconstruction that is underway in the West (2023, p. 109).

Gray is not enamoured of “what has come to be called the woke movement,” declaring that its “origins... are in the decay of liberalism” (2023, p. 110). He notes that “If Western capitalism creates an expanding underclass without any productive function, it also produces a lumpen intelligentsia that is economically superfluous” (2023, p. 111). So what can these “superfluous” individuals do to make a living? Well, they compete for jobs based on who is “most woke.” Wokeness is a “vehicle through with surplus elites struggle to secure a position of power in society” (2023, p. 110). Or, as Gray also puts it, “In their economic aspects, woke movements are a revolt of the professional bourgeoisie” (2023, p. 111).

CONCLUSION

One of the results of reading (or re-reading) much of Gray’s oeuvre in writing this paper is wonder at the scope of material he has digested: he appears to not only have read everything you have, but also everything three or four of your colleagues have as well. That, combined with the vast amount of work he has published, makes one wonder about the nihilism that he seemingly adopts in some of his output. After all, if “it” is all meaningless, why has Gray spent so much time and effort gifting us with such an extensive, insightful, and provocative body of work?

In addition, I have left my (woefully incomplete) survey of his work with three other major questions:

- 1) Does value pluralism really contradict the idea of a *summum bonum*?
- 2) What caused Gray to abandon his objective value pluralism for a form of ethical emotivism?
- 3) What led Gray from recognizing humans as unique among animals species to denying that uniqueness?

I offered them here as potential avenues for further research.

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NOTES

- 1 I have previously reviewed three of Gray's books, and some of the material below is drawn from those reviews, which one can find cited in the bibliography.
- 2 I will cite works of Gray's without any name, e.g., (1982). Works by other authors will include their name in the citation.