

Old and New Thinking

Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals

John Gray
London, Granta, 2002, 246pp,
£12.99, ISBN 1 86207 512 3

GRAY's *Straw Dogs* is an interesting but annoying book. The title is taken from the Taoist, Lao Tzu: 'Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs'. Straw dogs, in turn, are explained by Gray as follows: 'In ancient Chinese rituals, straw dogs were used as offerings to the gods. During the ritual they were treated with utmost reverence. When it was over and they were no longer needed they were trampled on and tossed aside' (pp. 33-4).

Gray's book is an essay against human hubris and pretension. He stresses the extent to which we differ little from animals, downplaying the role that is or can be played by reason and by distinctively human consciousness. He is critical of aspirations to salvation or transcendence of any kind, religious or secular, and of the ideal of progress. The book concludes: 'Other animals do not need a purpose in life. A contradiction to itself, the human animal cannot do without one. Can we not think of

the aim of life as being simply to see.'

More specifically, Gray is enamoured of Schopenhauer's pessimism and of Lovelock's 'Gaia' hypothesis, and he is worried about human overpopulation and its consequences; he favours a Humean-cum-Buddhist dissolution of the self, and argues that consciousness plays only the most minimal of roles in relation to our knowledge. He is critical of philosophers for not taking their supposed commitment to truth seriously, but also of the idea that truth will make us free or happy. He is a critic of morality and of any monism of virtue; of monotheism—and of atheism, leaving us with the impression that moral pluralism and polytheism were better options, but ones which may not now be available to us. While he admits to the advantages of anaesthetic dentistry, clean water and flush toilets, he is sceptical about progress—not just of ideas about its inevitability, or that, with Fukuyama, we can expect a triumph of democratic capitalism, or of secularisation, but as to whether what people had taken to be progress is itself either achievable or worthwhile. He flirts with J. G. Ballard's grim pictures of vast

numbers of people needing ever more titillating entertainment—even though he admits that a life of leisure has not yet shown any sign of re-emerging. (Gray stresses the attractiveness, and the comparative leisure, of societies of hunter-gatherers.)

The book is written in short sections, and it is very readable. Rather than notes, Gray provides guides to reading that include but go well beyond his sources for specific information in the text. The material upon which he draws is fascinating and wide-ranging, and the impression that the book conveys is somewhere between listening to good dinner conversation and reading Isaiah Berlin. Its combination of readability and questioning of accepted opinion will lead me to make use of it in first-year philosophy teaching.

Why, then, is the book annoying? In part, it is because Gray plays the role of the guru: there are too many oracular pronouncements and statements made for effect. In part, it is because of what seems to me a fault in the strategy of the book. Gray has interesting things to say, but he weakens the strength of his argument (if not its drama), by taking as his target immoderate—

and therefore vulnerable—versions of the ideas to which he is opposed. One may, for example, take the view that human reason is largely reflective in its character, that it typically plays a critical rather than a constitutive role, and also that our hopes for improving things (and one can, surely, think of more that is open to improvement than dentistry and plumbing) are best made by way of piecemeal experimentation.

More seriously, Gray's argument sometimes seems to me poor. He often seeks to settle an issue with a neat turn of phrase, or offers quick dismissals of views that would have to be engaged with much more carefully if they were to be criticised effectively. Above all, what really

annoyed me was his attitude towards science. Of this as an attempt to discover truth he is critical; but at the same time he has no hesitation about drawing upon its specific findings when they seem to bolster the ideas that he favours. And when they don't—well, scientific criticism is disregarded. Gray writes: 'Critics of

Gaia theory say they reject it because it is unscientific. The truth is they fear and hate it because it means that humans can never be other than straw dogs.' Clearly, a theory may be worthwhile even if it is not scientific. But one wonders whether Gray has any grounds for accepting this one, other than that it fits his pessimistic vision that we are but straw dogs.

But what, you might wonder, of Gray? For this is, indeed, the same man who wrote *Hayek on Liberty*, and was one of the most acute

contemporary theorists of classical liberalism. Briefly, Gray was always a complex thinker, who, even while he embraced liberalism, was personally pessimistic, and had an attachment to aspects of traditional life and popular culture of a kind that may be undermined within a liberal market economy. Intellectually, he progressed through different justifications of liberalism, rejecting them in turn after he had embraced them, but was left impressed by Berlin's value pluralism, Oakshott, and—for a long while—Hayek's arguments about markets and information. Intellectually, Gray shifted from liberalism to an espousal of conservatism and certain ecological

themes. He favoured a pluralism of traditions, and wrote *False Dawn* against market-based globalisation. Politically, he abandoned the British Conservatives (whom he thought intractably wedded to market liberalism) for Labour, because he believed that they could better safeguard tradition. Alas for Gray, Labour was itself

changing into market-oriented New Labour. After a short period when Gray fancied himself as one of Tony Blair's 'gurus' of the 'third way', and a flirting with 'new' or 'welfare' liberalism, his underlying pessimism seems to have won out, as is seen in the present book. Gray, however, is still a fairly young man. One can only wonder what will come next.

Reviewed by Jeremy Shearmur

Copy Fights: The Future of Intellectual Property in the Information Age

Edited by Adam Thierer and Clyde Wayne Crews Jr

2002, Cato Institute, 295pp
US\$19.95, ISBN 1930865252

THERE are a number of past and upcoming developments which will enhance the topicality of intellectual property rights in Australian public discourse.

Firstly is the recent Eldred decision of the US Supreme Court which revolved around a challenge to the constitutionality of the Copyright Term Extension Act (CTEA). The CTEA elicited opposition from prominent economists across the political spectrum from Kenneth Arrow to Milton Friedman because the incentive effects of copyright term extension to existing (and deceased) creators were infinitesimal relative to the additional costs to consumers and future creators wanting to build on earlier works. However, the Supreme Court decided that irrespective of its merits or lack thereof, overturning the CTEA would have involved the Court too much in the minutiae of policy. In essence Eldred means the US Congress has carte blanche to extend copyright terms indefinitely.

Secondly are the ongoing negotiations between US and Australia on a possible Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which may involve some degree of regulatory harmonisation between the two jurisdictions. Given US proclivities to export its model of strong copyright protection to other jurisdictions (as evidenced by its discussions with Taiwan over a similar free trade agreement) this is a hazard that Australian negotiators should take account of given the

