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John Gray's Tree-Part Philosophical Creed²

1. Gray's "trilogy"

John Gray's books all too often generate in the reader a state of dissonance and even irritation. Yet at the same time they confront us with a rich and stimulating world of thoughts and ideas spun by a model of erudition which appears to have enough elan and courage to grapple with the contemporary world. Deploying his vast knowledge, incisiveness and panache, with each of his successive books Gray confronts his readers with an ice-cold but invigorating shower.

When, over a decade ago, his eccentric and provocative book *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002) was first published, it instantly attracted the attention of a wide circle of readers.³ Reviews appeared in nearly all the most influential periodicals. Bryan Appleyard concluded that *Straw Dogs* was "a book of hallucinatory power that leaves all conventional wisdom in ruins".⁴ Will Self described it as "a contemporary work of philosophy devoid of jargon, wholly accessible, and profoundly relevant to the rapidly evolving world we live in".⁵ In a review written for the Amazon bookstore, Larry Brown drew attention to Gray's concision as a major strength of the book: "*Straw Dogs* could have been made to stretch for 500 large pages. Instead you get 200 small pages of gold; simple, concise, riveting".⁶ Yet the equally strong critical remarks levelled at *Straw Dogs* appeared to counterbalance the applause. While describing the evolution of Gray's views, Terry Eagleton concluded that Gray,

in his recent studies, has become increasingly despondent about the state of the world. With the crankish, unbalanced *Straw Dogs*, he emerges as a full-blooded apocalyptic nihilist. He has passed from Thatcherite zest to virulent misanthropy. (...) It is a dangerous, despairing book, which in a crass polarity thinks humans are either entirely distinct from bacteria (the sin of humanism) or hardly different at all.⁷

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² I wish to thank Dr Henry Hardy for his advice on both the substance and the language of my article. This article draws on B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Trylogia Johna Graya* [Eng. *John Gray's Trilogy*], "Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia" 2017/1, pp. 7–29, and on B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *John Gray i krytyka liberalnego legalizmu* [Eng. *John Gray and the Critique of Liberal Legalism*], Kraków 2017.

³ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, London 2002.

⁴ B. Appleyard, *Let Us Withdraw*, "Literary Review" 2002/291.

⁵ W. Self, *John Gray: Forget everything you know*, "Independent", 3 September 2002.

⁶ The review is no longer available on Amazon's website.

⁷ T. Eagleton, *Humanity and Other Animals*, review of *Straw Dogs* by John Gray, "The Guardian", 7 September 2002.

By contrast with his previous, academic, publications, devoted either to particular thinkers or else to an analysis and critique of ideas that were of interest to Gray, *Straw Dogs* created a rather unique literary formula. There is no way one can call the book a monograph. Its construction brings to mind, rather, the record of a free stream of consciousness. *Straw Dogs* consists of a conglomerate of short texts devoted to a variety of issues and apparently unrelated to one another. Some of these are like short essays, for example his reflections on the history of ideas. There are also paragraphs which consist of no more than a single sentence. The text contains numerous references to the greatest works of world literature – prose, poetry and drama. The structure of the book is reminiscent of a form of writing known as *silva rerum*, first practiced by the Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius (first century AD). Instead of presenting a compact and tight-knit intellectual construction, full of references and precise citations, as he did in his earlier publications, Gray leads the reader into a forest of rough drafts. In doing so, he leaves to the reader the task of tying together the multiplicity of motifs, meandering thoughts, and sometimes quite shocking and brutal images which he entwines into his narrative. He confronts us with a certain exceedingly provocative, not to say iconoclastic, world-view – and then withdraws, either abstaining entirely from commentary or else offering it only in a vestigial form. In all likelihood, this is what accounts for the “hallucinatory effect” of *Straw Dogs* that Appleyard wrote about. The reader is drawn into a peculiar and puzzling world of thought, which is built on a foundation different from the conventional one. Ultimately, they will either give in to fascination or else be overwhelmed by irritation: they cannot remain indifferent.

Straw Dogs created the impression of being an isolated episode in Gray's quest: it seemed only a phase, which threw a strong light on his philosophy, but one that there would be no return to in the future. But nothing could be further from the truth. Over a decade later he published *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Myths* (2013),⁸ which appeared to be a continuation of *Straw Dogs*. The new book complemented Gray's earlier volume, taking into account the animal perspective as well as the human one. In this astonishingly unorthodox work, Gray reflected on the specific manner of existence of creatures other than human beings. Once more it seemed that the picture was already complete. However, two years later, Gray published a successor book, *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom* (2015),⁹ which constitutes a third element of the trilogy. This volume is the shortest at less than two hundred pages. In it Gray returns to his examination of the human condition, the issue of freedom, and the potent need to give a meaning to life that is distinctive of the human species.

I have no reservations about classifying these three books as members of a series. First, all three of them have a similar construction – a kaleidoscope of ideas, digressions and associations which on the face of it appear to have very little in common with each other, but in fact add up to a coherent world-view. Secondly, many of the motifs which had been taken up earlier re-emerge in the successive parts of the trilogy. Thus, for instance, in all three treatises one comes across a critique of what Gray considers to be the most harmful myths, such as humanism (according to which humans have a privileged status among other life forms on earth), apparent human rationality, or the illusion of progress. The sources of his inspiration also tend to recur, and references

⁸ J. Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths*, New York 2013.

⁹ J. Gray, *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom*, London 2015.

to thinkers whom he appears to value particularly highly tend to crop up frequently. Among them one finds names such as Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes, and Arthur Schopenhauer, and among contemporaries James Lovelock. Time and again one comes across names of famous writers: Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Conrad or Stanisław Lem, as well as poets, such as John Ashbery or Wallace Stevens. But at the same time each of the three books adds new content that either modifies or develops the author's earlier reflections.¹⁰ Thirdly, Gray himself uses the term "trilogy".¹¹ It is worth noting that, by contrast with the numerous celebrated metamorphoses of Gray's ideas about political theory, his mature creed is perfectly consistent. If one can at all speak of a transformation of Gray's philosophical outlook as revealed by the three successive books, it consists chiefly in a shifting of emphasis that throws new light on the issues.

2. Hubris and inner commotion

The trilogy abounds in ideas which instantly draw readers' attention as worthy not only of more profound reflection, but also of remembrance, so that they become a part of their permanent intellectual equipment. One of them is the analysis of human *hubris* and its contemporary embodiments. Gray remains highly critical of the vainglory, so characteristic of members of the human species, which bids them exalt themselves above other creatures and delude themselves that they are capable of shaping their own future. The contemporary incarnations of a faith in human omnipotence take the form of a bizarre conviction that man is fully able to control their own evolution. This is supposed to make possible the continual perfection of the human species, until its mortality is eliminated. Gray contrasts this deceptive dream of human omnipotence with his own, extremely pessimistic, vision of the human condition. According to him man, by their very nature, is a defective, not to say downright sick, animal which lives in a state of permanent war with itself, constantly battling against its inner commotion and unable to draw wisdom from past experience. All attempts to look for some form of moral progress in the human world are symptoms of wishful thinking. If there is any authentic linear progress at all, it is only in the sphere of technology. In the sphere of moral and political life we are doomed to balance permanently on the unsteady line stretched between barbarity and civilization. Both of these states are fully natural for us. At each and every moment we are liable to trip and plunge into a new barbarism. What is more, taking such a fateful false step comes easily to us. It is enough for us to drop our guard for a moment, and we give in to the urgent temptation to suspend a given standard of civilization. As a result we set off an avalanche which instantly overwhelms civilization's safety checks. Restoring them is an arduous and time-consuming process of not only building appropriate legal institutions afresh but also re-implementing them in everyday practice.

The contrast between the ultra-optimistic vision of man perceived as a member of an omnipotent species and Gray's pessimistic view acts like a cold shower. None the less, this shower is at the same time refreshing and beneficial. After reading one of Gray's treatises, the reader is immunized against the illusion of the unbounded omnipotence of mankind and the delusion of incessant progress embedded in a reality created by human beings.

¹⁰ If we take into consideration both their subject matter and their construction, Gray's latest two books, *Seven Types of Atheism* (2018) and *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life* (2020), do not constitute a continuation of the trilogy. See: J. Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, New York 2018, and J. Gray, *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life*, London 2020.

¹¹ In electronic correspondence with me.

3. Doubts

Despite admiration for the impressive panache of Gray's trilogy, as well as for the intellectual courage of its author, which allows him to tackle some of the biggest issues facing humanity today, the reader cannot avoid a considerable dose of irritation. The initial shock unavoidably associated with starting to study Gray's three-part creed, caused by the immersion in this unique whirl of thoughts, ideas and associations, gradually subsides. The reader begins to notice the intellectual breathlessness with which they are being offered provocative theses that are in most cases insufficiently supported. More and more often their doubts are raised by the sweeping generalizations with which the author crowns his parables, by hasty and exaggerated judgments. They notice the embarrassing contradictions and begins to be exasperated by the preaching tone of the author's monologue, although Gray vehemently denies using it. Finally, the reader is perturbed by Gray's flippancy and tactlessness. They are filled with all sorts of doubts about the reflections presented to them for consideration: are they really dealing with genuine thought or merely with self-expression? What is the author's true motivation? Is it an authentic exploratory passion or merely the need to give voice to his peculiar contrariness?

A few excerpts from Gray's trilogy will illustrate my objections. The worst offender is *Straw Dogs*. The very title, which alludes to the central motif of straw dogs in the Chinese classic, the *Tao Te Ching*, heralds significant interpretative problems. Gray borrowed the phrase from a well-known aphorism in Lao Tzu's treatise: "Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs". This provides a central motto around which Gray's reflections oscillate.

Gray relied on one of a few dozen existing English translations of the ancient original, executed by Din Cheuk Lau. In Raymond B. Blakney's translation, for instance, the same phrase is interpreted differently:

Is then the world unkind?
And does it treat all things
Like straw dogs used in magic rites?¹²

Blakney comments:

Other interpreters have read this poem as indicating that both the world and the Wise Man are quite impersonal, caring nothing for the individual and dealing only with general situations. This seems to me foreign to the total outlook of the *Tao Te Ching*.¹³

So the interpretation of Gray's quotation from the *Tao Te Ching* is debatable; yet Gray seems to shut his eyes to this problem. This not a trivial point, given the central role the quotation plays as a leitmotif of the entire treatise. The problematic translation opens up a long list of other objections. Consider Gray's comment on the harrowing images of public executions of blacks in Georgia at the close of the nineteenth century: "Morality tells us that conscience may not be heard – but that it speaks always against cruelty and injustice. In fact conscience blesses cruelty and injustice – so long as their victims can be quietly buried".¹⁴ This is a very strongly worded conclusion. In some cases

¹² L. Tzu, *The Way of Life*, transl. R.B. Blakney, New York–Toronto–London 1955, p. 57.

¹³ R.B. Blakney, *Comment*, in: L. Tzu, *The Way...*, p. 57.

¹⁴ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, p. 97.

it may be justified, yet as a general thesis it fails. For one can quote a long list of counter-examples, beginning with the motif of the ancient Greek Erinyes or of the biblical Judas, which call it into question. A similar objection can be raised about another controversial statement of Gray's. According to him the message inherent in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Bernard de Mandeville, and Friedrich Nietzsche can be summed up in these words: "It is not only that the good life has very little to do with 'morality'. It flourishes only because of 'immorality'".¹⁵ One might say: Yes and no. The universality of this statement is an exaggeration, to say the least.

While reflecting on the idea of morality, Gray refers to the issue of tragedy. According to him, tragedy is born out of myth. Its source is the collision between human will and destiny: "There is tragedy when humans refuse to submit to circumstances that neither courage nor intelligence can remedy. Tragedy befalls those who have wagered against the odds".¹⁶ This interpretation leads him to the categorical conclusion that: "tragedy has nothing to do with morality".¹⁷ Yet, as is illustrated by his own writings, this is only one of many possible explanations of this phenomenon. In a monograph entitled *Two Faces of Liberalism*, which appeared merely a year before, *Straw Dogs* Gray observed: "To be sure, tragic choices cannot be eliminated from ethical life. Where universal values make conflicting demands, the right action may contain wrong. When values clash in this way, there may be irreparable loss. Then there is surely tragedy".¹⁸ Here Gray clearly associates tragedy with ethical experience. It is difficult to reconcile these two utterly different interpretations, offered in books published just one year apart.

Tragedy was a subject of reflection for both ancient and modern philosophers. It was of special interest to, among others, Aristotle, Blaise Pascal, David Hume, Georg W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. A significant contribution to the explication of the tragic was made by Max Scheler in his 1915 work *Zum Phänomen des Tragischen*.¹⁹ Scheler perceived tragedy unequivocally as an ethical category, maintaining that tragic complications occur only in the sphere of values and their mutual relations. Gray's intellectual guru, Isaiah Berlin, also associated tragedy with the conflict of values. He wrote about it movingly in a letter to me of 28 June 1997:

The agony comes in, and with it the tragedy (for that is what tragedy is about), when both values pull strongly at you; you are deeply committed to both, you want to realize them both, they are both values under which your life is lived; and when they clash you have to sacrifice one to the other, unless you can find a compromise which is not a complete satisfaction of your desires, but prevents acute pain, in short, prevents tragedy.²⁰

Gray's authoritative enunciation that "tragedy has nothing to do with morality" runs counter to the reflections of many philosophers, including, paradoxically, his own. There is nothing unjustified or surprising in changing one's views. Yet the reader expects some sort of signal from the author that, for certain reasons, he has decided to revise his earlier opinion and that he is aware of the consequences of the modification.

¹⁵ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 108.

¹⁶ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 99.

¹⁷ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 98.

¹⁸ J. Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, Cambridge 2000, p. 10.

¹⁹ M. Scheler, *Zum Phänomen des Tragischen*, Leipzig 1915.

²⁰ I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, Amherst-New York 2006, p. 101; this book was reviewed by Gray himself.

Straw Dogs suggests another, tentative, hypothesis, this time about the Christian sources of humanism that Gray condemns. Gray calls the view that people differ radically from other animals “Christianity’s cardinal error”.²¹ He explicitly combines the two world-views: “For Christians, humans are created by God and possess free will, for humanists they are self-determining creatures. Either way, they are quite different from all other animals”.²² Later he widens the historical horizon within which he situates this conviction: “[the] view of humanity as a *chosen species*, destined to conquer the Earth and defeat mortality, is a modern formulation of an ancient faith. Platonism and Christianity have always held that humans do not belong in the natural world”.²³ One might add yet another, extremely significant, pre-Christian source. In considering man’s place in nature, it is natural to remember the instruction given in *Genesis* to the first parents: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (1:28).

So the categorical thesis about the Christian origin of humanism turns out to be too hasty. Yet another doubt arises from Gray’s critique of humanism. In his view, one of the absurd consequences of humanism is the contemporary cult of technical immortality, which manifests itself, for instance, in the cryogenic services provided by California-based organizations. These freeze human bodies in the eventual hope of bringing about their technical resurrection. According to Gray, this cult, which totally rejects human mortality, constitutes a decisive argument in favour of the thesis that the traditions of Christianity and the Enlightenment – of eschatology and technology – grew from a common stem. But how can such an interpretation be reconciled with the legacy of ancient Egypt, with its deeply ingrained hope for immortality and the means invented by this civilization to help realize it? If using various technical measures aimed at creating a chance of immortal existence really grew out of the Christian-Enlightenment tradition, then neither embalming techniques nor pyramid-building would have been possible. Yet they *were* possible: they were practiced by the culture of ancient Egypt; pyramids and mummies have survived to the present day. So maybe what the Californian enterprises are doing boils down to giving people a hope of immortality, which answers a profound human need, common both to contemporary Americans and ancient Egyptians, and is not just an absurd illusion bred from the toxic particularity of the Western tradition? But the obvious link to ancient Egypt did not enter Gray’s mind: no doubt it would have been inconvenient.

Another predilection which is specific to the human species is the inclination towards violence. Gray emphasises it very strongly in all parts of his trilogy. But when reflecting on the Western tradition he seems to suggest that the European heritage of oppression, hatred and terror is to a large extent the Platonic heritage:

Plato’s legacy to European thought was a trio of capital letters – the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Wars have been fought and tyrannies established, cultures have been ravaged and peoples exterminated in the service of these abstractions. Europe owes much of its murderous history to errors of thinking engendered by the alphabet.²⁴

²¹ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., pp. 4, 37.

²² J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 41.

²³ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 137.

²⁴ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., pp. 57–58.

By juxtaposing the European tradition with others, and in particular with Chinese culture, Gray sheds an interesting light on the influence of the type of script developed in a given civilization on the mindset of its people. He comes to the following conclusion:

It is significant that nothing resembling Platonism arose in China. Classical Chinese script is not ideographic, as used to be thought; but because of what A. C. Graham terms its “combination of graphic wealth with phonetic poverty” it did not encourage the kind of abstract thinking that produced Plato’s philosophy.²⁵

But does the graphically complex Chinese script really lead to a more pacific civilization than a phonetic script which is more conducive to abstract thinking? Gray seems to suggest that this is so. Does history support him, though? In other words, can the Chinese really be recognized as a relatively more peaceful community than Europeans? It is impossible to answer definitively. However, if such correspondences really did occur, we should not have such far-reaching doubts about them. What is more, according to Gray’s diagnosis, an inclination towards violence and aggression is deeply rooted in each and every one of us. He himself maintains that “[h]umans are weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing”.²⁶ He too, having drawn a harrowing image of ritual Aztec killings, claims that they killed in order to give meaning to their lives, and in so doing revealed “something that in our world has been covered up”.²⁷ But if one were to assume that Gray’s vision of humankind is indeed correct, then even without Plato’s contribution European history would have been bloody. For what really exerted a decisive influence on its shape was the very fact that its creators belonged to the human species.

Reflection on the distinguishing features of European civilization brings to mind one of the threads found in the writings of Leszek Kołakowski, whom John Gray held in very high esteem. In an essay of 1980, *Looking for the Barbarians: The Illusions of Cultural Universalism*, Kołakowski put forward a bold argument about the unique value of European civilization “as a culture capable of uncertainty about its own standards and able to preserve that uncertainty”.²⁸ This insight led Kołakowski to declare: “Thus I believe that there is an important reason to preserve the spirit of Eurocentrism in this sense. And this belief presupposes that certain values particular to that culture – to wit, its self-critical faculties – should be not only defended but indeed propagated, and that by definition they cannot be propagated through violence”.²⁹ Could it then be that, by contrast with the bleak vision drawn by Gray, the Western tradition should not be identified as the unique source of destructive tendencies in man, but on the contrary should be seen as possessing certain decided advantages? There can be different answers to this question, some more justified than others. Gray’s diagnosis constitutes only one of them.

A more serious symptom of Gray’s intellectual breathlessness is a certain lack of precision, sometimes verging on incoherence or even contradiction. While looking for

²⁵ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 57.

²⁶ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 92.

²⁷ J. Gray, *The Soul*..., p. 86.

²⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Looking for the Barbarians: The Illusions of Cultural Universalism*, in: L. Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago–London 1990, pp. 22–23.

²⁹ L. Kołakowski, *Looking for the Barbarians*..., p. 23.

the sources of the respect for the truth that is characteristic of modern humanism, Gray seems to find them in ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity:

The modern faith in truth is a relic of an ancient creed. Socrates founded European thought on the faith that truth makes us free. He never doubted that knowledge and the good life go together. He passed on this faith to Plato, and so to Christianity. The result is modern humanism.³⁰

And again: “[t]o think of science as the search for truth is to renew a mystical faith, the faith of Plato and Augustine, that truth rules the world, that truth is divine”.³¹ But this (so far) coherent picture is completely undermined by another reference, three chapters later, to the source of devotion to truth:

Atheism is a late bloom of a Christian passion for truth. No pagan is ready to sacrifice the pleasure of life for the sake of mere truth. It is artful illusion, not unadorned reality, that they prize. Among the Greeks, the goal of philosophy was happiness or salvation, not truth. The worship of truth is a Christian cult.³²

One cannot reconcile these two interpretations. Which is correct is not crucial for the main line of Gray's reasoning in *Straw Dogs*. But for the assessment of Gray's scholarly method it is an entirely different matter. Falling into obvious contradiction is a cardinal sin for a thinker, even if we attribute the shortcoming more to the intellectual sloppiness of racing thoughts than to committing a major error.

It is the problem of truth that turns out to be Gray's Achilles' heel. In the second part of the trilogy, *The Silence of Animals*, we come across this:

Admitting that our lives are shaped by fictions may give a kind of freedom – possibly the only kind that human beings can attain. Accepting that the world is without meaning, we are liberated from confinement in the meaning we have made. Knowing there is nothing of substance in our world may seem to rob that world of value. But this nothingness may be our most precious possession, since it opens to us the world that exists beyond ourselves.³³

If we put this beside Gray's earlier, clearly incoherent, findings about the sources of the modern cult of the truth, only consternation is possible. The passage from *The Silence of Animals* is in fact a eulogy of finding out the truth about man. How Socratic this sounds: and not only Socratic. The passage inevitably brings to mind Jesus' memorable announcement: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Gray's unexpected display of respect for the truth about human life flatly contradicts the view he adopts in numerous previous pronouncements. For example: “[t]he human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth”;³⁴ “[i]n the struggle for life, a taste for truth is a luxury – or else a disability”.³⁵ John Gray justifies the above statements with an appeal to Charles Darwin: “Darwinian theory tells us that an interest in truth is not needed for survival or reproduction. More often it is a disadvantage. Deception is

³⁰ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 24.

³¹ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 20.

³² J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 127.

³³ J. Gray, *The Silence*..., p. 108.

³⁴ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 26.

³⁵ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 27.

common among primates and birds”.³⁶ However, if we agree with Darwin, why should we seek the truth about the world that exists beyond ourselves and rip up the veil of illusion that envelops us? The veil serves our survival and satisfies our burning need for a meaningful life. I shall return later to the controversial idea that I quoted from *The Silence of Animals*, where Gray refers implicitly to the ideal of truth, and at the same time addresses the issue of freedom – this fundamental theme requires a more extensive analysis.

Let us now return to the charge of adopting a “preaching tone”. Gray firmly declares that nothing is further from his mind than an attempt to convert anyone to his views. But he expresses them in such a peremptory style that they lose the character of an outlook submitted to the reader for their consideration and assume the shape of an undisputed certainty, which they have to believe. This problem particularly afflicts general statements about certain notoriously debatable issues. A good example is drug use and its after-effects – the war on drugs fought in many countries all over the world. This topic appears in the first part of the trilogy. Gray deals with this complex issue on two pages of his book. He starts off with an emphatic declaration that drugs have always been taken by both humans and animals. The drug trade leads to skyrocketing drug prices and a considerable increase in the crime rate, which in turn generates an increase in the prison population. Hence, according to Gray, it is hard to understand the reluctance of governments to legalize the sale of drugs. This is his explanation of the anti-drug war: “[d]rug use is a tacit admission of a forbidden truth. For most people happiness is beyond reach. Fulfilment is found not in daily life but in escaping from it. Since happiness is unavailable, the mass of mankind seeks pleasure”.³⁷ In Gray’s opinion this inconvenient truth cannot be easily reconciled with modern humanism: “[s]ocieties founded on a faith in progress cannot admit the normal unhappiness of human life. As a result, they are bound to wage war on those who seek an artificial happiness in drugs”.³⁸

This argument, in whose name numerous governments, especially that of the USA, are engaged in an anti-drug crusade, is probably one of the causes of the struggle against drugs, but it is by no means the only one. It does not seem likely that the parents of a teenage addict would perceive a drug war in terms of promoting the myth of humanism. For them Gray’s interpretation would be an irritating example of unrealistic academic pontification, which has nothing to do with the tragedy they are experiencing. What is more, in Gray’s explanation of the anti-drug crusade, one can clearly detect the Marxist tone of the “school of suspicion”, according to which the true causes of a given phenomenon remain hidden: what is perceivable is merely a smokescreen, or part of the superstructure. On this view modern humanism masks a class interest.

Now consider Gray’s view on the history of the welfare state. He takes up this topic in his analysis of the ideal of equality: “[t]he welfare state was a by-product of the Second World War. The National Health Service began in the Blitz, full employment in conscription. Postwar egalitarianism was an after-effect of mass mobilization in war”.³⁹ This strongly worded thesis, which opens a section on *The end of equality*, applies only to the British route to the welfare state. In giving an account of what is a particular local experience, Gray unthinkingly ascribes to it a universal significance.

³⁶ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, p. 27.

³⁷ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, pp. 141–42.

³⁸ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, p. 142.

³⁹ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, p. 161.

He entirely ignores, for instance, the Swedish model of a welfare state, whose origin can hardly be associated with the lesson learnt from participation in the Second World War. Moreover, by associating the idea of full employment with general conscription, Gray seems totally to disregard Keynesianism. For it was precisely the economic doctrine initiated by John Maynard Keynes that constituted the intellectual foundation of the report compiled by William Beveridge whose publication in 1942 is regarded as the birthday of the British welfare state.

To complete this catalogue of Gray's lesser faults, let me mention those symptoms of his intellectual nonchalance which transgress the boundaries of good taste. According to our reconstruction of his views, he openly admits to his unequivocally critical attitude to the traditional idea of morality, which is perceived by him as a typically human anomaly, not to say outright degeneracy. Yet he is not satisfied with presenting his own view and supporting it with more or less convincing argument. In his renunciation of the idea of morality he goes much further, attempting to identify the main reason why, as he puts it, morality still has its followers. In a short section on *Morality as an aphrodisiac* he argues that today the attractiveness of Christianity is based on the possibility of deriving excitement from the sense of guilt experienced by its believers: "[t]here are undoubtedly those who have converted to Christianity because they seek an excitement that mere pleasure can no longer supply".⁴⁰ As an example, John Gray mentions Graham Greene, who "used the sense of sin he acquired through converting to Catholicism as an aphrodisiac".⁴¹ We can leave aside the question of Greene's own attitude, but we cannot overlook the claim that the delight derived from a sense of guilt adds spice to stale pleasures, and explains why post-Christians evidently lack *joie de vivre*.⁴² These are strong words, inappropriate in a work with intellectual ambitions. Particularly jarring is the unconcealed note of acerbity with which Gray wishes to "spice" – to use his own expression – his brief reflection on the sources of Christianity's attractiveness. This gives the impression that an author who claims only to be keeping a record of the thoughts and associations that come to his mind has forgotten himself. At times, Gray's narration brings to mind a casual monologue delivered to a group of friends. Such a context would be much more appropriate for presenting these controversial views, all the more because the relevance of the remarks is so specific. It may be that the attitude which Gray ascribes to Greene is to be found in British intellectual circles. But the distance between sharing one's observations on a very specific milieu and proposing a general thesis that disregards local considerations is very big indeed. This kind of diagnosis entails immense oversimplification. The tone of personal aversion which suffuses Gray's pronouncement further reduces the intellectual force of this unfortunate digression.

4. Question marks

Among the many doubts which the reader of Gray's trilogy may experience, particular attention should be given to two key cracks in the foundations of the edifice he has erected. Regardless of how light and fanciful the construction is – for in the case of this particular thinker there can be no talk of a compact shape – these cracks undermine the stability of the entire structure. I mean his controversial understanding of the concept of

⁴⁰ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 104.

⁴¹ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 104.

⁴² J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 104.

freedom, which differs astonishingly from his earlier viewpoint, and the lack of coherence between his official condemnation of the idea of morality and the explicitly moral overtones of his parables. I raised both of these issues in emails in March 2016. But his explanations, which I cite below, failed to dispel my doubts.

The issue of freedom was at the centre of Gray's interests from the very beginning of his academic career. His first monograph was *Mill on Liberty: A Defence* (1983).⁴³ Later there appeared a long sequence of books devoted to liberalism and then to post-liberalism, including *Hayek on Liberty* (1984),⁴⁴ *Liberalism* (1986),⁴⁵ *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (1989),⁴⁶ *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (1993),⁴⁷ *Isaiah Berlin* (1995),⁴⁸ and finally *Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000).⁴⁹ (I pass over numerous articles and more extensive publications about the political projects of Gray's post-liberal phase). In all of these publications it is the problem of freedom, particularly in interpersonal relations, that constitutes Gray's key motif. He also deals with other understandings of this concept, including – in his study of Berlin – the eternal controversy between determinism and free will. But like many other political thinkers he does not attempt to cope with this problem from his own theoretical viewpoint. This approach is not an isolated strategy. Christian Bay comments on it accurately:

For purposes of political theory, even when the task is to discuss “freedom”, it is unnecessary to take a stand on the free-will issue. What matters in politics is not to discover whether man is or is not free in an ultimate sense (...). For purposes of political analysis a freedom concept with clear behavioural implications is needed, a concept of *empirical* rather than *transcendental* freedom.⁵⁰

Gray's trilogy introduces an important change in his approach to freedom. *Straw Dogs* refers extensively to Benjamin Libet's neurobiological studies, which according to Gray constitute a decisive argument for the total illusoriness of free will. He dissociates himself from Libet's “right to veto”, according to which consciousness has the ability to veto unintentionally initiated activity. Gray's view on this issue is expressed in such radical terms that Terry Eagleton, one of the reviewers of *Straw Dogs*, commented: “[t]he iron determinism of this book is the flipside of its author's previous love affair with freedom”.⁵¹ Gray seems to confirm the accuracy of this interpretation when he praises Taoism. He declares with unconcealed approval that, from the perspective of Taoism:

The freest human being is not one who acts on reasons he has chosen for himself, but one who never has to choose. Rather than agonizing over alternatives, he responds effortlessly to situations as they arise. Such a human being has the perfect freedom of a wild animal – or a machine.⁵²

The second part of the trilogy provides an account of Gray's own vision of freedom. He believes that everything which is important in human life is dictated by chance, but

⁴³ J. Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence*, London–New York 1983.

⁴⁴ J. Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, Oxford 1984.

⁴⁵ J. Gray, *Liberalism*, Buckingham 1986.

⁴⁶ J. Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, London–New York 1989.

⁴⁷ J. Gray, *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*, London–New York 1993.

⁴⁸ J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, London 1995.

⁴⁹ J. Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, Cambridge 2000.

⁵⁰ C. Bay, *The Structure of Freedom*, New York 1965, pp. 22–23.

⁵¹ T. Eagleton, *Humanity...*

⁵² J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, pp. 114–115.

adds the proviso that “there is still the possibility of a certain freedom”.⁵³ To illustrate his point he quotes an excerpt from Seneca’s fifty-first letter to Lucilius:

I have set freedom before my eyes; and I am striving for that reward. And what is freedom, you ask? It means not being a slave to any circumstance, to any constraint, to any chance; it means compelling Fortune to enter the lists on equal terms.⁵⁴

Later Gray stamps his own imprint on this understanding of freedom. We have already quoted what he writes in *The Silence of Animals*:

Admitting that our lives are shaped by fictions may give a kind of freedom – possibly the only kind that human beings can attain. Accepting that the world is without meaning, we are liberated from confinement in the meaning we have made.⁵⁵

And the concept of freedom appears in the second part of the trilogy once more, this time in the context of Gray’s reflections on liberal philosophy. According to his interpretation, liberalism feeds on the illusion that by their very nature people strive for freedom. His comment on this claim takes the form of an aphorism: “[a]llowing the majority of humankind to imagine they are flying fish even as they pass their lives under the waves, liberal civilization rests on a dream”.⁵⁶

The last part of Gray’s trilogy contains the most references to the issue of freedom, as we should expect from its subtitle, *A Short Enquiry into Human Freedom*. In his introduction Gray provides a concise compendium of the most common interpretations of this concept. First, he distinguishes the concept of freedom most characteristic of all kinds of mystical traditions. This is the notion of freedom understood as a certain type of inner state, going beyond the normal operation of human consciousness. Secondly, turning to modern interpretations of the idea of freedom, which assume that it is a matter of interpersonal relations, he distinguishes three varieties of freedom: negative freedom, understood as a lack of impediments imposed by others on free choices, freedom as acting as a rational human being would act, and finally freedom as participation in governing the community that a person belongs to. Here Gray appears fully to support the view expressed in his previous book that the only type of freedom human beings can enjoy is a kind of inner freedom based on an accurate recognition of one’s own condition. He introduces this thesis by referring to Giacomo Leopardi’s thoughts, which he evidently endorses: “[h]umans are machines that through a succession of random chances have become self-aware. Inner freedom – the only kind of freedom possible (...) – is achieved by accepting this situation”.⁵⁷ The same message emerges from the last part of the trilogy. Gray ends his quest with the dictum that human *über-marionettes*, “[n]ot looking to ascend into the heavens, (...) can find freedom in falling to earth”.⁵⁸

How can yesterday’s avowed defender of liberalism who became a post-liberal thinker who nevertheless considered it worthwhile to devise numerous projects modifying the liberal paradigm, broadly understood, proclaim such a view of human freedom? Is it at all likely that he had failed to perceive the obvious association with the previously

⁵³ J. Gray, *The Silence...*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* (IV)I, transl. R.M. Gummere, London 1917, p. 341.

⁵⁵ J. Gray, *The Silence...*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ J. Gray, *The Silence...*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ J. Gray, *The Soul...*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ J. Gray, *The Soul...*, p. 166.

cited adage, “[a]nd ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”, as well as with as well as with Engels’s paraphrase of Hegel: “freedom is the recognition of necessity”.⁵⁹ After all, he had so often distanced himself both from the Christian tradition and from Marxism. It is really hard to believe that this one-time admirer of Johan Stuart Mill, Friedrich August von Hayek, and Isaiah Berlin could possibly claim that the only form of freedom available to human beings consists in accepting the fact that they live in a world of illusions created by themselves, and that consequently they have no choice as to which kind of life to lead. And what is the point of making any kind of suggestions to these machines, albeit equipped with self-awareness, if they are totally deprived of freedom in the usual sense of this word? Yet in the same book in which Gray denies the existence of free will he also paints his own vision of the good life:

Today the good life means making full use of science and technology – without succumbing to the illusion that they can make us free, reasonable, or even sane. It means seeking peace – without hoping for a world without war. It means cherishing freedom – in the knowledge that it is an interval between anarchy and tyranny.⁶⁰

How can one make any recommendations to people, in particular that they should cherish freedom, if they are not given the option of making any choices?

In my email exchanges with Gray I put all of these queries to him. Replying to them one by one, Gray distanced himself first and foremost from the label of “iron determinist” given him by Eagleton. He justified his objection to such a characterization by decisively rejecting of any kind of metaphysical creed. But this does not affect the fundamental issue. For whether or not Gray can legitimately be referred to as an “iron determinist”, he nevertheless shares with the supporters of this viewpoint the conviction that free will is illusory. He adopts this position not only in the last part of his trilogy, but also in one of our conversations, in which he diagnoses freedom as merely a certain sensation or fiction arising from flaws in the human machine.⁶¹ Responding to my doubts about his U-turn away from the liberal tradition which unites his three great mentors Mill, Hayek and Berlin, Gray continues to trudge further and further up a blind alley. He blames liberalism for its lack of coherence, questioning the “compatibilism” embedded in Mill’s and Hayek’s positions: “the mistaken doctrine that determinism can be reconciled with common ideas of freedom and responsibility”.⁶² In Gray’s view this is an undeniably erroneous conviction. The problem is that to a certain extent he tacitly supports it himself. For regardless of how ostentatiously he tries to distance himself from determinism as a metaphysical standpoint, he continues to insist on the non-existence of free will, while at the same time formulating his recommendations for a good life. He does not shun the idea of responsibility either.

Finally, in his *Two Faces of Liberalism* there appears the idea of the so-called “bar of experience” which allows one to settle issues of value. But ethical experience can fulfil the important role ascribed to it by Gray only when people are able to draw wisdom from it and modify their conduct. In other words, in order for such a possibility to come into play, human beings must be given at least a minimal sphere of choice, otherwise it is

⁵⁹ K. Marx, F. Engels, *Werke* [Eng. *Works*], Berlin 1975, p. 106.

⁶⁰ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 194.

⁶¹ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *John Gray i krytyka liberalnego legalizmu* [Eng. *John Gray and the Critique of Liberal Legalism*], Kraków 2017, p. 346.

⁶² J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Cywilizacja zawsze będzie krucha: rozmowa z Johnem Grayem* [Eng. *Civilization Will Always Be Fragile: A Conversation with John Gray*], in: B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *John Gray*..., p. 495.

impossible to ascribe any significance to ethical experience. This consideration plays an important role in the thought of Gray's great mentor Berlin, who drew attention to the fact that the point of view of those thinkers who deny free will cannot be reconciled with common everyday convictions, deeply rooted in the language and way of thinking of ordinary people as well as historians and philosophers. If human beings really do not have a choice between at least two ways of acting, it is impossible to speak of their moral responsibility for their deeds. One should therefore eliminate from language such concepts as justice, rightness, merit or honesty. One should also refrain entirely from evaluating human behaviour – praising people and congratulating them on their successes, or else chiding or even condemning them. From my conversations and correspondence with Berlin I remember that he absolutely did not exclude the possibility of a future confirmation of the determinist view of the world. But his working assumption was that “[m]en are free agents within narrow limits”.⁶³ And again: “[w]e haven't much choice. Let us say one per cent. But that one per cent can make all the difference”.⁶⁴

In his email exchanges with me Gray emphasized that Berlin did not share the compatibilist view of Mill and Hayek according to which determinism can be reconciled with the ideas of freedom and responsibility: “Isaiah was wiser in recognizing that these common ideas must be revised or abandoned if determinism is true”.⁶⁵ Berlin was wiser not only than Mill and Hayek, but also than Gray himself. For although one cannot ascribe compatibilism to him, his standpoint seems to be disturbingly close to it. And both compatibilism and Gray's view of freedom appear to lack coherence. For while assuming the illusoriness of free will, they at the same time permit blaming the perpetrators of evil and holding them responsible for their deeds. Had Gray drawn conclusions from Berlin as a thinker who was wiser than Mill and Hayek⁶⁶ he would not have stigmatized members of the human species for their destructiveness, rapacity and passion for killing. When juxtaposing the human species with other animals, he would have avoided evaluative terms, limiting himself to a dispassionate description of human behaviour. He would not have seen any point in reflecting on the “evil that never dies”,⁶⁷ and he would not have deplored the modern tendency to deny its existence. He would also have refrained from condemning the Nazi mass-murderers, including Adolf Eichmann, as they could not have chosen otherwise, and therefore one cannot possibly hold them responsible for the evil they committed. This also applies to all the other anti-heroes of the shocking parables with which the trilogy teems. And yet the purpose of all the macabre stories in Gray's three-part creed is to jolt the reader and make them reflect on human cynicism, hypocrisy and cruelty. Which entails that Gray tacitly invokes universally accepted moral standards.

Now for the second key paradox in Gray's way of thinking. Let us recall that he ostentatiously rejects traditional morality, persistently endorsing the view that morality is “a sickness peculiar to humans”,⁶⁸ and therefore recommends that we should cast off at least some of its weight. But this does not prevent him from making ironic comments on the duplicitous attitudes of certain Western pilgrims to the Soviet Union, who used to accept without hesitation the pseudo-reality that was presented to them, and so

⁶³ R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, London 1993, p. 148.

⁶⁴ R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations...*, p. 149.

⁶⁵ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Cywilizacja...*, p. 495.

⁶⁶ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Cywilizacja...*, p. 495.

⁶⁷ J. Gray, *The Truth About Evil*, “The Guardian”, 21 October 2014.

⁶⁸ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs...*, p. 116.

willingly admitted that “two times two can make five”.⁶⁹ The bloodcurdling stories of public executions of black inhabitants of Georgia, such as the one about the torture of the pregnant Mary Turner, have a clearly moral overtone:

After tying her ankles together they hung her from a tree upside down. While she was still alive her abdomen was cut open with a knife. The infant fell from her womb and its head was crushed by a member of the crowd. Then, as hundreds of bullets were fired into her body, Mary Turner was killed.⁷⁰

What other purpose could Gray have had in evoking this type of ghastly scene than to depict and condemn human cruelty? Gray’s comments on this episode leave no doubt: “[w]ere the smiling children who were photographed watching such events gnawed by remorse for the rest of their days?”⁷¹ Here is yet another deep rift in Gray’s standpoint – an irremovable gap between his categorical wish to cut himself off from the idea of traditional morality and the undeniably moral overtones of his own narration.

5. Not taking his own advice

During one of our conversations, I drew Gray’s attention to a striking disparity between his recommendations and his attitude as a philosopher. Thus, for example, in *Straw Dogs* Gray gives this advice to people wishing to free themselves from human worries:

Anyone who truly wants to escape human solipsism should not seek out empty places. Instead of fleeing to the desert, where they will be thrown back into their own thoughts, they will do better to seek the company of other animals.⁷²

It follows that the best place to distance oneself from the lame and distorted human world, tainted by illusions, is a zoo. I asked him why he ignores his own recommendations. For instead of going to the zoo he seems to plunge deeper and deeper into the human world, increasing year by year his already considerable contribution to the edifice of Western philosophical reflection. He reacted to this question with amusement. His comeback was this:

There’s a kind of irony there which is rather pleasing and elegant, which I like. I’ve never advocated that people stop reasoning, or that they stop being human. What I’m arguing for is that they be much more modest about what reason can achieve and about the place of humans in the world. But how can one do that? (...) Given my professional deformation, I tend to do it by employing various thinkers and arguments from literature, philosophy and to some degree even science.⁷³

Commenting on the nature of his own studies in the same conversation, Gray observed:

If the pretensions of reason can be whittled down, which I doubt – I think it’s a sort of contagious madness which will blow itself out in some way – it can only be by the use of critical reason or argument or writing.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ J. Gray, *The Silence*..., p. 49.

⁷⁰ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 97.

⁷¹ J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 97.

⁷² J. Gray, *Straw Dogs*..., p. 150.

⁷³ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *O historii moralnej naszych czasów i o mitych świeckiego humanizmu* [Eng. *Moral Hysteria of Our Time and the Myths of Secular Humanism*], in: B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *John Gray*..., p. 429.

⁷⁴ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *O historii moralnej*..., pp. 428–429.

So there can be no doubt that *Straw Dogs* was intended as a philosophical treatise, and one that invoked not only philosophical works, but also literary ones, and referred to various scientific and artistic disciplines. Yet when, in our last email exchange, I drew his attention to the deep discord between the unquestionably moral overtones of some parts of the trilogy and his simultaneous demonstrative rejection of traditional morality, Gray became visibly irritated. In an attempt to repel my allegation, he declared that the trilogy “was conceived as a sort of literary work”.⁷⁵ In this way he became entangled in yet another dissonance, this time regarding the nature of his own reflections. And this is precisely the problem with Gray’s writing. The nature of his thoughts was very well captured by an anonymous reader who, after reading *Straw Dogs*, posted an online comment: “[f]ind out what you think of it. It will make you angry”.

John Gray’s Tree-Part Philosophical Creed

Abstract: John Gray’s three controversial, widely discussed books, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002), *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Myths* (2013) and *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom* (2015), create a natural trilogy. They all have a similar structure, consisting of a kaleidoscope of ideas, digressions, associations, and recurring motifs. This article provides a brief analysis and a thorough critique of this trilogy. The strong and the weak points of the most recent volume are emphasized. A number of objections, reservations and doubts concerning the ideas presented in the three books are formulated. Critical arguments relating to, among other things, Gray’s inconsistent statements on the phenomenon of tragedy, the sources of humanism and its respect for the truth, the issue of freedom, and the author’s alleged rejection of traditional morality are put forward.

Keywords: humanism, liberalism, morality, freedom, progress, truth

⁷⁵ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *Cywilizacja...*, p. 497.

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