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Book Review by Edward Feser

## SILENCE SPEAKS

*The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths*, by John Gray.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 240 pages, \$26



LET'S START BY GIVING HIS PUBLISHERS something to use as a blurb for the paperback edition: John Gray has given us an unfailingly well-written, consistently entertaining, and utterly pointless book. (They may decide to use an ellipsis.)

Gray is an emeritus professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, and a public intellectual who has over the decades gradually moved from a youthful leftism, to a Hayekian New Right position, to a kind of green conservatism, to an "agonistic liberalism," to the denunciation of global capitalism, and now, in recent years, to a skeptical anti-humanism.

Skepticism was a key element of Gray's thought even in his right-wing period, and it made for an interesting variation on Reagan- and Thatcher-era conservatism. In his important book *Hayek on Liberty* (1984), which was praised by Friedrich Hayek himself, Gray sympathetically set out Hayek's position that there are limitations in principle on our ability to understand the function served by inherited social rules, so that we ought to be very wary of tampering with these rules in a

large-scale way after the fashion of economic planners and social engineers. Gray would go on to argue in *Enlightenment's Wake* (1995) that contemporary conservatives' warm embrace of modern capitalism has led them to overlook the ways in which market forces, like leftist planners, can undermine inherited social rules and traditional communities, and have thereby fostered subjectivist and antinomian tendencies within modern Western society. Like socialist utopianism, the fusionist synthesis of traditional morality and the free market is in Gray's view a rationalist fantasy.

A theme that runs through Gray's more recent work especially is the delusional nature of the idea of progress and of all political and social movements committed to it—whether Communist or fascist, whether socialist, egalitarian liberal, libertarian, or neo-conservative, whether religious or secular. His anti-progressivism, skepticism, and anti-humanism each find expression in the three parts of his latest book. The title notwithstanding, it is the human rather than non-human world that is very much Gray's

subject, albeit the distinction is one he is keen to blur.

THAT IS NOT TO SAY THAT *THE SILENCE of Animals* is a systematic presentation of Gray's current political thought. It is political in only the most general sense, and it is not a systematic treatise—or, for that matter, a systematic anything. Indeed, the reader not otherwise familiar with Gray's recent work will spend considerable time wondering what the hell he is on about. The book reads like a pastiche of excerpts from reviews of various old novels and works of history, psychology, philosophy, and the like that Gray has randomly pulled from his shelves over the last several months. Truth in advertising might have suggested a subtitle like *Notes on Stuff John Gray Has Been Reading Lately*, though this would no doubt be less effective a way of getting eyeballs in front of the page. And Gray is a critic of the market, not of marketing.

All the same, the book is, as I've indicated, written in Gray's characteristic fine prose, and almost never boring (the rare boring bits being not any of Gray's own sentences, but too gen-

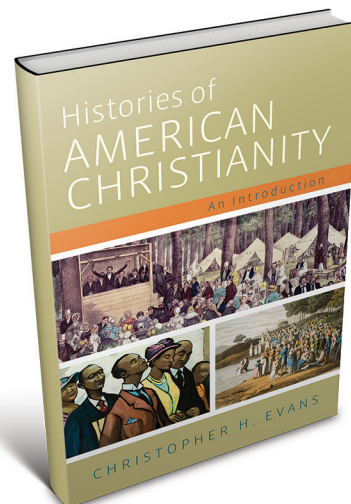
erous a selection or three from some ghastly poet of whom he is enamored). That I should call it even *entertaining* might seem odd—indeed, an affront to Gray himself, who is Very Serious throughout. Part I (“An Old Chaos”) is, after all, an inventory of the cruel failure of progressivist prophecy—European colonialism as portrayed by Joseph Conrad, Norman Lewis’s and Curzio Malaparte’s accounts of wartime Naples, Soviet Communism as depicted by Arthur Koestler and George Orwell, Joseph Roth’s account of the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and the subsequent rise of nationalism, Sebastian Haffner’s memoir of the rise of Nazism, Adam Fergusson’s description of hyper-inflation in Weimar Germany, and so on.

But “entertaining” is exactly the right word, and it is telling that Gray favors literary impressions of the 20th-century’s horrors as much as actual historical accounts. He has nothing new to give us by way of historical, philosophical, or social scientific analysis of the episodes that function as his set pieces, nor does he pretend to. They are offered instead as a selection of brandies one might roll around on the tongue—luxuriating, with each sample, in one’s sophistication as a disbeliever in human improbability. This is sentimentality in the sense identified by Roger Scruton, in which refined feelings, rather than the circumstances that generate the feelings or the actions appropriate to them, become an end in themselves.

**A**ND GRAY IS CERTAINLY NOT INTERESTED either in a call to action or a deeper theoretical grasp of the circumstances he deplores. On the contrary, the quest for rational understanding and the construction of new programs for action are for him precisely the problem. Having called attention to the symptoms of the human condition in Part I, Gray surveys, in the diagnostic Part II of the book (“Beyond the Last Thought”), writers skeptical of the traditional conception of man as a rational animal. We are given summaries of (for example) Fritz Mauthner’s views about the inability of language to capture reality, Hans Vaihinger and Wallace Stevens on the unavoidability of believing in fictions, the neo-pagan religiosity of Carl Jung and Ernst Haeckel, and the dystopian fiction of J.G. Ballard. Especially incisive, in Gray’s view, is Sigmund Freud’s vision of the mind as a battlefield of impulses that can never be harmonized within a rational order, entailing a deep and irresolvable tension in human existence that must simply be accepted with grim resignation.

In Part III (“Another Sunlight”) we get a hint of what advice Gray would put forward in light of his diagnosis. Once again we are

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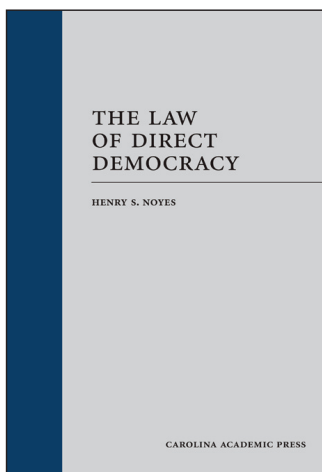


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treated to a parade of authors, this time on the theme of retreating from the freneticism of human thought and action. Here's J.A. Baker imagining himself a hawk and a fox, Richard Jefferies on how animals see the human world, and Patrick Leigh Fermor on silent contemplation. There's Ford Madox Ford on human life as a series of fleeting fragmented impressions, Llewelyn Powys and Georges Simenon on simply following one's fancy, Robinson Jeffers on the obliteration of the self.

**W**HAT GRAY ADMIRES AND APPARENTLY recommends is *silence*—not the contemplative silence of human beings vainly seeking relief from what he regards as the psyche's endless turmoil, but the silence of animals, who don't need such relief in the first place. Silence he goes on and on about for over 200 pages; he will no doubt speak at length about it in future writings and to any interviewer interested in chatting about the new book. Contrast the ancient Greek skeptic Cratylus, whose quietism was rather more consistent. Putting his silence where his mouth was, Cratylus so despaired of the efficacy of speech that he limited his communications to a mere wiggling of the finger. And not at \$26 a pop either.

If there is any doubt about the incoherence of his position, Gray dispels it on the rare moments where he suggests anything close to an actual *argument* for it. He casually assures us that "on an evolutionary view the human mind has no built-in bias to truth or rationality" and that "scientific inquiry may be an embodiment of reason, but what such inquiry demonstrates is that humans are not rational animals." What then, of the truth or rationality of Gray's own views? If evolution and science in general undermine the rationalist, why not also the anti-rationalist—who, after all, here appeals to evolution and science as *evidence* or *rational grounds* for his anti-rationalism? Gray also asserts:

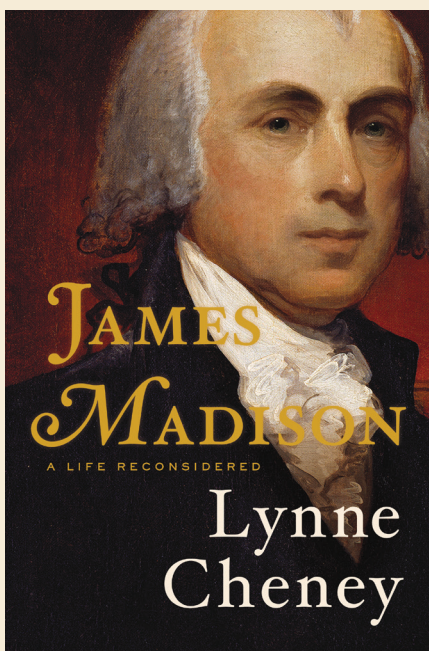
Of course Freud's ideas are a system of metaphors. So is all human discourse, even if metaphors are not all of one kind. Science is not distinguished from myth by science being literally true and myth only a type of poetic analogy.

But if *all* human discourse, including science, is "metaphor" and thus not "literally true," then what of the science Gray has been appealing to? And when Gray tells us about such-and-such historical events, and claims

that belief in progress is refuted by these events, are we supposed to conclude that *these* assertions are "metaphors"? Does that mean that we *should*, after all, endorse humanism and progress—since the criticisms of humanism and of progress put forward by Gray and others are, after all, not "literally true"?

In his desire to ape the animals, who do not suffer from the ailments we reasoning beings are prone to, Gray commends those rare experiences of the world in which we "look with eyes that are not covered with a film of thought." But for human beings, there are no such experiences (at least short of a lobotomy) and what Gray is seeking is more illusory than any of the progressive fantasies he rightly deplores. Gray admires Baker's statement that "we could [not] bear a clear vision of the animal world." But it is John Gray who cannot bear a clear vision of the human world. Like his fellow rational animals, and unlike non-human creatures, he cannot help but *reason*, trying to get a fix on man's lot and how to deal with it. He just does it badly.

*Edward Feser is associate professor of philosophy at Pasadena City College. His latest book is the forthcoming Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction (Editions Scholasticae).*



## James Madison

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By Lynne Cheney

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576 pages • Publisher: Viking (May 2014) • List Price: \$36.00 • ISBN-13: 978-0670025190

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By Chris Horst and Peter Greer

Publisher: AEI Press (Summer 2014)

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