

Diana Judd

Review

Straw Dogs by John Gray

Reviewed by
Diana Judd

John Gray has a bone to pick. His latest book, *Straw Dogs*, takes aim at a host of targets in what appears to be a wholesale deconstruction of human thought. Religion, humanism, philosophy, belief in progress (indeed, belief in anything), industrialization, even civilization itself has, according to Gray, kept us from realizing our true nature: that we are just one more species of animal. And since “other animals do not need a purpose in life . . . can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?”

In two hundred pages of text, Gray never explains what this means. Instead, the reader is treated to an array of disconnected quotations from Aristotle to Zarathustra, none of which serve to illustrate a coherent argument. *Straw Dogs* does contain moments where important topics such as the environment and the idea of progress, the future of genetic engineering and its effect on humanity, and the underlying philosophies of western and eastern religions are raised. Yet Gray merely dabbles on the surface of these issues (each of which would require a separate volume to explore), content merely to mention their existence. The end result is an incoherent book which goes nowhere and says very little. Gray’s final message—that humanity’s purpose in life should be “simply to see,” yet the human animal “cannot do without a purpose,” is at best anti-climatic and at worst a failure to tie together its preceding chapters.

The book is a string of aphorisms, each varying wildly in both length and subject matter. No doubt Gray was influenced by such works as Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human* and Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, but *Straw Dogs* lacks both the depth and coherence that characterize those two works. What’s more, his aphoristic format seems forced. Gray states in his acknowledgments that though his thoughts are presented in “fragments,” they are not unsystematic. He also writes that the aphorisms may either be read in sequence or “dipped into at will.” Whatever his intentions, the overall effect

Diana Judd

of his schema is a nearly random flitting from topic to topic, his thoughts never alighting long enough to explore any one of them in useful detail.

Gray's book contains many inconsistencies and contradictions. Among the most egregious is his treatment of science. On the one hand, Gray states that "the origins of science are not in rational inquiry but in faith, magic and trickery," while on the other hand he equates science with technology, from which, according to Gray, its power flows. While he does not go so far as to declare that technology is trickery or magic, the implication is clear. Furthermore, his stance that the origins of science lie in magic and trickery while its success lies in superior rhetoric betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the history and philosophy of science. It is rather surprising that a professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics would so thoroughly neglect both Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes.

Another inconsistency lies in Gray's extensive usage of quotations from both western and eastern philosophy to buttress his argument that philosophy is so much bunk obscuring the truth about humanity. In addition, he continually references Darwin (without once explaining the actual theory of evolution) and recent advances in genetic research to illustrate his point that humans are merely animals and should consider themselves as such, while at the same time relentlessly decrying science and its origins. Apparently, Gray believes that neither Darwin's theory of evolution nor genetic research fall under the rubric of science, or for that matter, philosophy as he understands it.

All in all, *Straw Dogs* is a confusing book with no useful underlying message. While Gray does at times raise some interesting and controversial topics, his treatment of them is too brief and shallow to justify a serious perusal of the work. No doubt Gray intended *Straw Dogs* to be a work of popular philosophy and not an academic offering. It is a shame that he thinks the former must be characterized by inconsistency, contradiction, and superficiality.

Diana Judd received her Ph. D. in Political Science from Rutgers University.