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THEME SYMPOSIUM BOOK REVIEW

The soul of the marionette: a short enquiry into human freedom, by John Gray, London, Allen Lane, 2015, 192 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1846144493/978-0241953907 (Penguin paperback edn, 2016)

Reviewed by guest editor Colin Feltham

John Gray has something of a 'love him or hate him' reputation, with writers like Terry Eagleton and Raymond Tallis (2011) tearing him to pieces, and others such as Adam Phillips and John Banville (2015) praising him to the skies. Yet Gray is a rather slippery writer, unexpectedly attacking atheists though he is one, taking on big guns like Steven Pinker on violence and yet retaining a soft spot for Freud. Following more sober academic fare, it was Gray's (2002) *Straw Dogs* that propelled him to (relative) bestseller status, which was unusual for such a relentlessly iconoclastic work. Gray is a depressive realist (DR) who doesn't use this term, a pessimistic analyst of the human condition who sets out meanderingly to highlight follies and deflate illusions, and in doing so traverses many disciplines and rather obscure authors.

The Soul of the Marionette argues that human beings are 'stuck between the mechanical motions of the flesh and the freedom of the spirit' (p. 6). Or, many of us want to transcend choice spiritually, or to be controlled by God or tyrants. Gray commences by using Heinrich von Kleist's essay 'The Puppet Theatre', published in 1810, to illustrate our dilemma of freedom. Puppets are free of the internal turmoil of choice. Scientific knowledge has now become an unrecognized Gnostic faith for us, Gray asserts: 'Gnosticism is the faith of people who believe themselves to be machines' (p. 10). This trend is exemplified in the post-human ambitions of Ray Kurzweil and others who seek to transcend the restraints of human biology.

The pessimistic poet Giacomo Leopardi (2015) is called on to bolster the case for doubting the attainability of progress through knowledge. Indeed, Gray uses romantic literature and science fiction (including Philip K. Dick's work) eclectically in his search for illustrations of how deceived we are by notions of freedom. It is not that we are free or not free that is the issue, but that we deceive ourselves with the very question of freedom, perhaps being incapable of accepting that the universe itself is probably driven by an 'underlying chaos'. If Gray has a practical message, it may be that we should 'be content to let meaning come and go' (p. 165).

Actually our species' aspirational freedom is but one thread in Gray's book, a hook on which to hang his familiar magpie criticisms of mainstream assumptions; but it is an important hook. Readers of *Self & Society* will perhaps be tuned into the question of individual freedom and free will, choice, responsibility and bad faith, from a committed existentialist point of view stemming from Kierkegaard and Sartre. 'Man is condemned to be free', in Sartre's influential view that sounds absolute, but downplays the relativity of freedom. Huge debates have been raging

on these topics throughout academia lately, centring on the determinism-and-agency axis. I sometimes think this question should always have been front and centre of all theory in psychotherapy and counselling.

A few humanistic psychologists like Will Schutz and Fritz Perls have apparently believed in almost unlimited human freedom, emotional freedom techniques promise the earth, and some Buddhists advocate an absolute spiritual freedom. Many of us grasp for the straws held out by the promise of neuroplasticity. A majority, however, implicitly recognize real limits to freedom. But very few line up with neuroscientists and neurophilosophers such as Sam Harris, Patricia Churchland and Thomas Metzinger, who in different ways promote a strong neuro-deterministic view of human behaviour. The horror writer Thomas Ligotti's (2010) work also deploys the imagery of puppets, savagely attacking our naïve philanthropic account of the good life.

Skinner's (1971/2002) famous call for a behaviourist response to the problem of freedom is now largely ignored. Derk Pereboom's (2014) is among the most mature and balanced of rigorous philosophical treatments of the subject, along with that of Lars Svendsen (2014). Daniel Wegner's (2002) exploration of the feeling of conscious will remains influential. Daniel Dennett's (2004) exposition of human freedom as an evolving trait is attractive. My guess is that most of us here fall by virtue of the 'affect heuristic' into the default camp that sees a large dose of freedom at our disposal and steady progress to be won individually and collectively, and we ignore the critical nuances, or override them in our warm faith in personal and social change.

Banville's (2015) supportive portrayal of Gray as 'one of the best read of contemporary philosophers' is somewhat off the mark, since Gray doesn't really qualify as a rigorous philosopher. Although previously Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics (primarily a political philosopher), in recent years Gray has written his short books more as a contrarian essayist, and an aphorist in the style of E.M. Cioran.

Although a less subtle thinker than many others, Gray has fortuitously cornered the market in contemporary polemical misanthropy. Those of us aligned by personality with DR instinctively recognize Gray's position in his every book, while a majority of *Self & Society* readers may appreciate Gray, if at all, more in the spirit of knowing your enemy.

It may be that weariness over the erstwhile nature–nurture debate led many to abandon an interest in theories of free will and to deem the topic irrelevant to psychotherapy. After all, such deliberations easily lose themselves in an unproductive semantic quagmire.

The problem of akrasia (weakness of will) goes back at least to Socrates, and remains today key to the question of why we cannot consciously and immediately – or even after years of psychoanalysis – abandon unwanted thoughts and behaviours and adopt new ones. In spite of vast tracts of philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy, we should ask if we have really made significant progress in understanding. It may be harmless enough to feel free yourself, to argue academically for freedom or to argue politically for extended freedoms (Fromm, 1941/2011). But isn't it ethically questionable for therapists to claim they have the keys to psychological freedom, and to take your money accordingly, unless they can engage deeply in these debates and articulate their positions?

Where Gray commends 'accepting the fact of unknowing' (p. 165), many therapists either claim special clinical knowledge and progress, or package 'unknowing'

into a spuriously humble concept commanded by their mystical insights. The mad belief in, and bid for, omniscience and total control surely affects us all – therapists and clients, scientists, politicians, John Gray, you and me. Putting science in its place, Gray argues that 'perhaps it is the *disorder* of the human mind that is more reflective of reality' (p. 150, my italics).

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