

# How Natural is Human Nature?

## Reflections on Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals

by John Gray (*Granta*, 2002)

If you visit one of the great medieval cathedrals, you can't help being impressed by the extraordinary achievement of its builders. These huge buildings with high spires look like balancing acts in stone, and yet they are still standing, solid as ever, centuries later. As well as being great technical feats, they are also elegant representations of the deeply-held beliefs of those who built them and worshipped in them.

When they were new, the effect on visitors must have been even more stunning: most people would never have seen such an enormous structure. Visitors must have been nervous as they entered it for the first time - wondering how the building was kept up. The scale was awesome, making worshippers feel tiny on the stone floors. And that was part of the design: worshippers were to be reminded that they were dwarfed by Creation, that they were nothing compared to the power of God. And yet at the same time, the cathedral gave them the opposite message: that through the grace of God, in their own individual way, they could be personally in touch with the eternal. Along with the incense, prayers from the floor of the cathedral wafted up the spire, which, if it didn't quite reach heaven, pointed confidently in its direction.

In our secular age, those ideas are, for many people, little more than charming historical details. But perhaps their legacy is more profound than we realise. The cathedral experience, one in which people are reminded at the same time of both human insignificance, and human uniqueness is one that's still part of our lives.

After all, what else does air travel teach us? Here again we find ourselves inside an impressive product of modern technology. Seen from above, an aeroplane is a crucifix, an aerodynamically updated version of the floor plan of a cathedral. The nave has become the main cabin; the side chapels have become the wings. In both, people sit in rows separated by aisles, with members of the same family sitting together. And in both the plane and the cathedral, the elite sit in the front, with their backs to the lower orders, and the man in charge (in both cases it invariably is a man) is at the very front, with his back to everyone else.

All that may be a coincidence. But the emotional, even spiritual aspects of both experiences also have much in common. Before any long haul flight, there's a flurry of planning and preparation. Travellers are busy with consumer choices and decisions - as engaged with worldly matters as they ever are. But the moment they step onto the aeroplane their powers as independent agents, are removed. As the engines rev up at the end of the runway, day to day concerns suddenly seem rather trivial. There's no point in worrying about details any more. And that's just what happened to worshippers in the cathedral, who left their worries and problems at the door and turned their minds to higher things.

Through the little oval windows of the plane, the planet is displayed below you. You're reminded how insignificant a player you are, and that, in all important ways, your destiny is beyond your control.

In the little world of the cabin, the airlines do their best to help you forget that. They try to restore your dignity as a consumer with food, drinks and movies to choose. But it's a bit of a charade, when you can't forget you're 37,000 feet above Greenland. The accepted form is for passengers to pretend they've hardly noticed they've left the ground. But it's surprising how often apparently world-weary passengers produce a spontaneous burst of applause when the plane touches down.

As you leave the cabin, the crew are on hand to bid you goodbye; just as the minister greets his congregation at the door at the end of a service. You may even be invited to give an offering for the needy on the way out.

And just as all ministers hope that their services will affect the lives of their congregation outside of church, the airline experience also has a resonance beyond the airport. The vulnerability of being a passenger in the sky is a vivid dramatisation of our normal circumstances.

Aeroplane comfort is extraordinarily fragile, and beyond our control, but then, isn't that like the rest of our lives? For all the talk of freedom, with which we dignify ourselves, every day we are as vulnerable to forces outside our control as we are in an aeroplane. We don't know much about the food we eat, the water we drink, the energy with which we cook and heat our homes. We don't understand the effects on the environment of the way we live, or how we might be able to live differently. The choices we make only seem important because they are made against a background of stability. They are like choosing between tea and coffee on the aeroplane.

So that's what flying tells us about our insignificance, the feeling of being an ant on the floor of the cathedral. What about the opposite feeling, the confidence of being able to communicate with God despite all that?

Well, we don't think of it in those terms, but our feeling of significance comes from the belief that we are unique, the triumphant creators of our strange way of life - the only ones able to look down on the world, and out into space from such a height. Here we are, on the one planet that we know has life, the dominant species, at what seems like the time of its greatest triumph.

That sounds like a misguided, self-centred view. It must surely be pure egotism to suppose that we have some special place in the universe, and in plant and animal history. But can you really imagine another world, however far away, with all this going on? If we aren't unique, this must at least be a pretty unusual situation! It's only ten thousand years since our species started leaving its mark on the planet. It's been less than a century since the whole future of life has seemed to depend on what we do. It seems like quite a responsibility.

To realise how deeply engrained, but how easily questionable, that view really is, you only need to listen to a well-argued statement of the opposite case - that we really are just a passing wonder, if we can only bear to think about it.

John Gray's 'Straw Dogs' is just such an exercise. Gray is often described as 'pessimistic', because of his unflinching attempts to face up to what he sees as humanity's unimportance in the grand scheme of things. I'm sure Gray would have a laugh at Paul Davies' idea that science is reinstating our own significance as a particularly interesting specimens in not just one, but many universes [Guardian article by Paul Davies]. As far as Gray is concerned, such scientific views are the loosely-disguised legacies of a Christian culture. Christianity singled out humankind for salvation, and burdened it with moral responsibility in return. Now, he argues, it is science that's persuading us that we can choose our destiny. In return, we have a responsibility to choose technological, material salvation, rather than self-destruction. We need to become a successful enough species to save ourselves.

As Gray puts it: "The Christians who resisted Darwin's theory feared that it left humanity looking insignificant. They need not have worried. Darwinism has been used to put humankind back on its pedestal."

Whether you accept that probably depends on whether you are comfortable with your own sense of purpose, and confident about being able to chart your own course through the world. If so, then you'd be more inclined to accept humanity's mission on earth and beyond.

It is the inner life, the source of our individual moral compass, which is now seen as the province of spiritual or religious experience. But to John Gray, our ideas about that are as mistaken as our ideas about humanity's mission in the universe.

We don't need to wait for further scientific discoveries to notice that we seem to be amazingly insignificant beings - in both space and time. But that doesn't affect the intensity with which we carry on our lives, or how we handle matters of good and evil, sadness, triumph or injustice. Those are the experiences that make us feel most alive: if the explanation of life is all about the cosmos, and has nothing to say about those intense human experiences, it's not going to attract much of a following.

To remind someone who's been bereaved that this is just a tiny planet, and our's is just a moment of time, misses the point altogether. We can't help believing there's meaning in our experiences and feelings - that they demand a more personal and introspective account than physicists and astronomers can offer.

In the inner world, we might feel that even if we can't be sure of how to interpret what we are experiencing, we must be comfortably beyond the reach of competing theories. If we can honestly respond to our own experiences and feelings, then that at least, is something to cling on to, and to build our understanding upon. The arena of introspection, personal prayer and meditation is individual and almost incommunicable. We cannot experience each other's consciousness, or fully articulate our own.

But Gray argues that the very conception of "myself" is wrong. We must start again, and rethink our assumptions about being a person:

"Among Christians the cult of personhood may be forgiven," he writes. "For them, everything of value in the world emanates from a divine person, in whose image humans are made. But once we have relinquished the conceits of Christianity the very idea of the person becomes suspect."

Human nature is, he says, simply a social invention, an idea that lets us see ourselves as moral beings with a history and a destiny, which we control. In fact, he points out, most of the time, we're doing things we didn't choose to do, and thinking things we didn't choose to think. The idea of individual people, going through life acquiring life histories, and having a permanent identities, is all a lot of romantic nonsense, as far as he's concerned. We're only different from other animals in trivial ways, and we'll soon get our come-uppance for thinking otherwise. Human nature is nothing more than a convenient trick to give us dignity as we drift through the shifting sands of experience and imagination.

To show that our view of ourselves as people is not a gift from nature, but only a gift from society, he argues that different societies have had different views of the individual. He writes:

"Did the protagonists in the Odyssey or the Bhagavad-Gita think of themselves as persons? Did the characters in the Canterbury Tales? ...Being a person is not the essence of humanity, only ...one of its masks. Persons are only humans who have donned the mask that had been handed down in Europe over the past few generations, and taken it for their face."

It's a grim, and rather disorienting view. Hard to live with, but interestingly hard to deny. Gray's claim that we are "hardwired for the illusion of self" has a ring of truth about it. It's so easy for us to respond to people, and the dramas of their lives, and to see ourselves in those terms too.

This radical view of our situation as individuals, and as a species in the world, is indigestible because it doesn't connect with the usual fixed points of our moral world. It's all very interesting, but what are we supposed to do about it?

Well, Gray ends his book with a little coda that seems almost sentimental in tone. It's a thought with which most Unitarians wouldn't disagree, even if they'd also want to say that we can also go further in our religious ideas.

Gray's final paragraph is headed "Simply to See", and reads:

"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?"

With our various backgrounds, and various beliefs, that isn't a bad aim for a Unitarian gathering is it? As to what we're seeing, well, it would be a dull encounter with our fellow worshippers if we ever reached agreement on that.