



Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings

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John Gray is one of the most original and iconoclastic thinkers of our time. In this pugnacious and readable collection of essays from across his career, he smashes through humanity's most cherished beliefs to overturn our view of the world, and our place in it.

Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings Details

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From Reader Review Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings for online ebook

Geoff Robinson says

Collection of key writings by John Gray from 1970s onward. Demonstrates evolution of an intellectual conservative away from big-C conservatism. Gray follows his line of argument where it takes him. To me it demonstrates how conservatism cannot effectively function as a stand alone system of belief, rather than a corrective or a source of insights that require further development. Gray is scathing about Marxism, often with keen sarcasm and often appropriately. But in his critique of capitalism he lapses into a romantic pessimism, like many disillusioned right-wingers he largely ignores the insights of social democracy. The critiques of Gray's work by Paul Krugman (<http://web.mit.edu/krugman/www/gray.html>) and Terry Eagleton (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/...>) largely hit the spot. Still a book whose failures teach us something and which demonstrates an impressive, if often misguided, intellectual honesty. Gray's comment on the 'war on terror' and the legitimization of torture are impressive.

Stephan Zeijlemaker says

30 years of indepent thinking. I respect John Gray's a lot. Clear, sharp, independent and very critical towards the belief in progress and that big failure called neo-liberalism. Not a very cheerful book though.

!Tæmbu?u says

Reviewed by The Guardian

Rob says

Do you ever feel that the current level of political debate is tired and misdirected no matter which stereotyped left/right direction it comes from? Well Gray jolts you out of this ennui. It is mental gymnastics but of the British sceptical tradition rather than the French crazy making kind. I would recommend him for those who like engaging with a mind that has other paths that you may disagree with but you can respect. Do not expect a soft landing from him no matter what politics you may have.

He is not easy to pin down. He is a conservative. He is a quietist. He is green. He is pro nukes and pro population control. He is critical of the current order of things. He decrys the very notion of progress. He believes the vision of utopias has and still does cause the human race great misery. He often hits the nail on the head with his analysis. The book is almost worth reading just for his piece on Blair. On British politics generally there is a great insight.

You can dip in and out of this book as it is a collection of Grays essays. I flicked past maybe 40 pages or so of topics that did not interest me and felt satisfied with what I read.

While I disagreed with some of his opinions I found it thought provoking and think that there may be a kernel of something bigger in his thoughts.

Charles says

Great followup book for those, like myself, who have been exposed to Gray's other books meant for a wider audience. Served as a stepping stone to reading some of his older, more scholarly work.

Kevin Tharayil says

When one of the most popular and convincing unconventional writers of our times refers to someone as 'the greatest living thinker', you can't help but have a look. So reading Nassim Taleb's online notepad got me to buy this collection of political and social writings by Prof. John Gray.

In this book, essays on liberalism, conservatism, former communist societies and the current range of topics like globalization, torture, environmental concerns etc. are deconstructed. The writings are rather bleak in their outlook with regard to the future of the human race and very critical of the notion of progress referring to it as a Christian idea which eventually leads to tyranny (Soviet Communism) and resource scarcity. The ideas are contrarian, pessimistic while being an amazing read for those willing to argue and/or have their beliefs and ideas overturned.

Marcus Lira says

Max Weber, way before WWII, had already predicted some of the problems that would assail modern industrial societies throughout last century: Instead of praising rationality as some kind of panacea, he realised it would create bureaucratic "iron cages" that would eventually stymie the pursuit of personal freedom to some extent; and charismatic leaders, far from being saviours, are just one different kind of leadership that people irrationally cling to, thus granting control over this bureaucratic machine. All this knowledge didn't stop Weber's own homeland from fostering Nazism. Rationality and science, rather than being the solution to all our woes, were unable to prevent humans from being human.

The message from John Gray's book is not altogether different from this one: The myth of progress (even through science or any foreseeable rational means) is nothing but a myth. Scientific knowledge may help us fight diseases, but it's useless when it comes to fighting our own human impulses. Contemporary societies can be affected by intolerance and slavery, among other threats to individual freedom, as ancient societies were. Progress in this sense is extremely fragile, and the belief in a better future can quite often be the one obstacle towards this goal.

The underlying message of this book is that we should come to terms with the fact reason can only go so far,

and attempts to improve the human lot often lead to disastrous consequences. Although this may turn out to be a myth itself, John Gray's apparently sound empirical approach to history makes it a reliable one.

Ps.: The naked woman in the cover definitely made me get some funny looks on the street. It made the book all the more amusing.

Riley Haas says

"I am shocked to find that I mostly agree with Gray, despite having some major issues with his *Black Mass*. I do not consider myself to be conservative, merely pragmatic/prudent (although I do have a slight tory streak), so I find it odd to be on the same page with a man who regularly ridicules liberalism (I call myself a liberal). Gray is clearly far more liberal than many of the torys he claims to follow. He is in an odd position: he seeks to differentiate "true" conservatism from neo-conservatism (admirable) while trying to pretend that toryism has always been about individual liberty (totally not true). But Gray is a true conservative in the sense that, although he doesn't say it outright, he seems to truly believe that it was better in the past (most apparent in his over-the-top critique of modern medicine). As with all other conservatives, in that he is wrong. The past is not better, nor worse: there may be aspects that are preferable to now but there are also aspects that would have been unbearable to us (as he does admit). I find Gray valuable for his fierce if fairly unoriginal critique of western ideologies as secular religions (it has been done better and more rigorously by others) and particularly for his critique of capitalism, which takes a position that is new to me. Where I cannot tolerate him is in his near-apocalyptic environmentalism (I may agree with many of his ideas but I don't agree with the Gaia "hypothesis" - nor do most reputable scientists - and I think that claiming environmental problems will lead to an apocalypse is falling prey to the same religious impulses he accuses ideologies of being subject to) and in his critique of modern medicine. It is one thing to say that we go to far in trying to preserve lives that no longer have quality of life. It is quite another to claim that modern medicine is dehumanizing. That is like saying that paying taxes is "wage slavery" (another conservative piece of baloney). I must say that when my life was saved by doctors at age 18, I was in no way dehumanized. Quite the contrary."

Gavin says

Hard to read - not for his prose, which is luminous and droll, but because he disagrees with almost everything almost everyone holds dear (whether reason, science, or organised social movements are your tool for improving the world). Tory anti-speciesism, anti-Enlightenment anti-cruelty(??)

These span his career, satirising Marxists and Neocons, eulogising Santayana and explaining why communism sucks and doesn't work, and why liberalism is cute but doesn't work. (I paraphrase somewhat.) This leaves only Stoicism and resistance to dangerous meddlers as the 'good' life.

Lucid, unclassifiable, horrific.

Terry Clague says

You don't have to agree with everything John Gray writes (and I don't) to appreciate his work - which is here represented in a selection of essays on everything from liberalism to conservatism taking in Swiftian satirical essays "defending" torture along the way. The nature of the book means that it can occasionally feel repetitive - especially with his main bugbear being that progress is illusory and the pursuit of it toward an end requires religious-like convictions. I'm also convinced that many of Gray's hardest hitting criticisms of progress can be applied to some of his own thinking.

I particularly liked his final essay which included the following section:

"Nothing is more alien to the present age than idleness. If we think of resting from our labours, it is only in order to return to them.

In thinking so highly of work we are aberrant. Few other cultures have ever done so. For nearly all of history and all prehistory, work was an indignity.

Among Christians, only Protestants have ever believed that work smacks of salvation...Progress condemns idleness. The work needed to deliver humanity is vast. Indeed it is limitless, since as one plateau of achievement is reached another looms up. Of course this is only a mirage; but the worst of progress is not that it is an illusion. It is that it is endless.

In Greek myth, Sisyphus struggles to roll a stone to the top of a hill so that it will then roll down the other side...For the ancients, unending labour was the mark of a slave. The labours of Sisyphus are a punishment. In working for progress we submit to labour no less servile."

Douglas says

We know that our civilisation is ending and this book explains that it doesn't matter. We had our fun. Our religious idea of Progress is false and the Enlightenment project to change human nature was quite futile. Only the intertwined Scientific Revolution has been something to enjoy. John Gray's philosophy refutes everything we in the West were brought up to believe in and although he doesn't realise how quickly climate change is coming to us he takes his place with James Lovelock as being the true chronicler of our age.

David Cheshire says

John Gray is a seriously heavyweight thinker with a consistent philosophical stance. He applies this vigorously to current and historical events. Not a fan of the Enlightenment, he sees belief in progress as the bastardised child of Christian salvation. But he is not readily pigeon-holed. His liberalism is carefully defined and constrained: it is a procedure for evaluating argument and counter-argument rather than a free-standing set of values. Happiness and fulfillment can take many forms; there is no single template. The good society is one that allows them to co-exist. He combines a conservative pessimism with the cool rationalism of the left. Politics he says is "a series of expedients, not a project of salvation". He ridicules "the malady of infinite aspiration" and political certainties, including the neo-liberal's unbounded faith in markets which

hollows out traditional institutions: its creed of "permanent revolution" and globisation tend to destroy family and community. Hence the limp failure of the Big Society (anyone remember that?) He is witty: there were fewer Marxists in the USSR than the average western university; and insightful, arguing that whereas scientific knowledge is cumulative, in the humanities it is not. I didn't agree with everything but as a mercilessly clear and refreshing critique of the assumptions underlying much modern thinking, including Blairism and the neo-cons, it is a bit of an intellectual feast.

Hugh Stewart says

As a fan of Gray just enjoyed his perspectives and broad terms of reference
