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Straw Dogs: Thoughts On Humans And Other Animals



Synopsis

The British bestseller *Straw Dogs* is an exciting, radical work of philosophy, which sets out to challenge our most cherished assumptions about what it means to be human. From Plato to Christianity, from the Enlightenment to Nietzsche and Marx, the Western tradition has been based on arrogant and erroneous beliefs about human beings and their place in the world. Philosophies such as liberalism and Marxism think of humankind as a species whose destiny is to transcend natural limits and conquer the Earth. John Gray argues that this belief in human difference is a dangerous illusion and explores how the world and human life look once humanism has been finally abandoned. The result is an exhilarating, sometimes disturbing book that leads the reader to question our deepest-held beliefs. Will Self, in the *New Statesman*, called *Straw Dogs* his book of the year: "I read it once, I read it twice and took notes . . . I thought it that good." "Nothing will get you thinking as much as this brilliant book" (*Sunday Telegraph*).

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Customer Reviews

John Gray was once upon a time an optimistic liberal. He fell under the spell of the Gospel of the Free Market in the Thatcherite 1980s, and thus made a transition to conservatism. When he discovered that Thatcherism/Reaganism wasn't really conservative at all, but rather a dogmatic radicalism, he became an old-school conservative. He proceeded to reject the Enlightenment tout court, and embraced post-modernist relativism. Now, he has taken a further step into simple misanthropy. Gray has written a jeremiad against Christianity, the Enlightenment, science, and any

hope of bettering people or the planet we live on. This is a performative contradiction, of course, because if there is no cause for hope, why write a book? What's the point? Fame and money are the only reasons left, one must suppose, and that supposition is perfectly consistent with Gray's line of argument -- all lofty ideals and dreams are illusions. Despite all that, I enjoyed the book and recommend it. It's a quick, easy read, quite entertaining, and I'm sure you can find it in the library. There are many useful citations in the back to more substantial books you might want to read to pursue Gray's points, many made in the form of sound-bite one-liners. Depending on what you bring to it, you may or may not find it shocking -- STRAW DOGS is mainly based on the growing knowledge from the field variously known as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology or biological anthropology. Humans are animals, not demigods. Gray's second main point I think is less appreciated and more important, and that is the evidence that the human species is embarked on a neomalthusian experiment -- overshoot the ecosystem and see what happens.

It is over a hundred years since Darwin revealed to us our animal lineage, and yet the human primate is still having difficulty coming to terms with its animal origins. All but creationists may indeed now accept that we are descended from apes, but most of us still cling to the belief that we have somehow become different to the rest of the animal kingdom. Our ability to use language and reason, to see ourselves as selves, selves that move forward in time and, with other selves, progress by building a culture based on moral rules and a technology that seems to give us ever increasing control over our environment. Surely this is enough to set us apart from the rest of nature? No. Thankfully, a British philosopher who lives and breathes today but who speaks with the depth and clarity of a modern day Schopenhauer is here to rid you of this delusion. Human beings are still animals claims Gray, but the more profound insight that he delivers, and that his critics seem unable to grasp or admit, is that humans, and even whatever intelligence that might emerge in a 'posthuman' future, will always be inescapably rooted in the natural world as much as the lowliest of slime molds. We believe that language and reason are what differentiates us, forgetting that we acquired these abilities through the blind mechanisms of evolution. This means that they are, as Hume, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche declared long before Darwin, mere tools in the brutish struggle for survival. These same tools enabled the human animal to create the illusions of free will, self and morality and the delusion to think that with these, man has the ability to stand apart from the animal world and choose his own fate. But the fundamental import of Darwinism is that it tells us that 'we' were 'made' for the world.

John Gray concludes his book with a tragic entreaty: "Can we not think of the aim of life as simply to see?" His plea for awareness reveals the cloak of obscuratism our mythology has draped over all nature. Reading *Straw Dogs* is like being abruptly roused from a pleasant dream. "Wake and shake!", he cries. Wake up to the falsity of the dogmas under which you live. Shake them off and recognize that we live within reality's domain, not that of phantasms and fables. These ideas disturb the comfortable, yet offer little comfort to those seeking an easy answer to life's challenges. Gray understands our need for solace, but he knows reality isn't a tourist resort. Nature is a harsh realm and he wishes us to confront enduring questions honestly. Writing this book means he thinks we can do that. Gray's thesis relies on acknowledging our place in the realm of nature. We are, he reminds us, merely a part of the animal kingdom. We are neither a special creation nor particularly unique. Writing alone, with the continuity it provides, sets us apart while granting significant powers. The "continuity" led to the notion of human "progress" and "perfectability". In an evolutionary sense both ideas are false, and we are evolution's product. Even humanism, supposedly rational and secular, has fallen into the trap of seeking "perfectability". Gray finds this misleading and self-serving. He examines the work of Western philosophers, the guides to our thinking, finding them mistaken or misleading. In today's milieu, Lovelock's Gaia concept of the whole planet acting like a single organism, should be reconsidered. Whether the details of this idea are valid is irrelevant.

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