# John Gray and the idea of progress

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## I

The political thought of John Gray offers an unflinching vision of the world – a world divided by refractory ways of life, stressed by the looming conflicts over natural resources and scorched by irreversible patterns of global warming. As Glen Newey mildly put it, Gray's vision of the world is "none too cheerful" (Newey, 2007: p. 154), and prescribed throughout his numerous analyses of today's most pressing problems is a sobering dose of realism. Gray has repeatedly emphasized that many of our greatest problems are incurable – the best we can hope to achieve is to minimise their symptoms and stave off the emergence of 'generic evils'. Those who believe otherwise – that the troubles of mankind can be overcome or that the condition of humanity might be perfected – will at best be met with disappointment. At worst, this disappointment will be embittered by the tyranny of those who believe a better world is possible.

Gray's understanding of our contemporary situation has been criticised on a number of occasions for both inaccuracy (Barry 2007, Lassman, 2007, Morgan 2007) and inconsistency (Sidelsky 1998, Kateb 2007). Those that posit the former argue that Gray's account of today's most pressing problems reflect neither their reality nor complexity. Those that suggest the latter maintain that Gray's work – either within specific instances or across its breadth – is inconsistent, if not altogether contradictory. Whilst undoubtedly important, the present study will not seek to engage with questions surrounding the accuracy of Gray's vision of the world. Rather, it will attempt to confront his work on its own terms and engage with his thought from within. Contrary to the charge of inconsistency, it will be shown that much of Gray's work has been occupied with understanding the idea of progress within Western intellectual history. More specifically, it will be argued that although the subject matter of Gray's work extends across a number of traditions and disciplines – from contemporary liberal thought to the function of global capitalism – he has regularly sought to challenge the idea that progress in human knowledge can initiate progress in human affairs. Certainly, for Gray the idea of progress exists in two distinct forms, each with its own conditions of possibility. In human knowledge, progress is both possible and real, it is a fact which confronts us in our everyday existence. In human affairs, however, progress is impossible and illusory – its manifestations have escaped us throughout history. In recounting this distinction, it is necessary to consider both Gray's understanding of the human condition and the philosophy of history which is expressed throughout much of his work. And indeed, it is to such matters that we must now turn.

## II

In his *Two Faces of Liberalism*, Gray observes that "[a]ll political philosophies express a philosophy of history" (Gray, 2004b: p. 23), and in his own work this is no less true. In contradistinction to what he sees as the most potent ideologies in Western thought – from Communism to Nazism, liberalism to neo-conservatism – Gray forcefully spurns the idea of history as a narrative of human progress. To be sure, whether one looks to his critique of anthropocentrism in Western traditions (2003), his reproach of global capitalism (2009) or his rejection of liberal democratic values as the pinnacle of morality (2004b), Gray has consistently taken aim at those who sustain the myth of man's ascendance. In a recent study, for example, Gray (2008) confronts the mood of unrealism initiated by the fall of the Soviet Union, typified by Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. As Fukuyama famously declared, what the world had witnessed was "not just the end of the Cold War … but the end point of mankind's ideological

evolution and the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1989). For Gray, however, the opposite was demonstrably true, and rather than humanity converging on a set of universal ideals and institutions, the perennial spheres of human conflict – from ethnic and religious disputes to the control of natural resources – would again take centre stage. To this extent, Gray's philosophy of history expresses a dedication to unclouded realism; the world as history has shown it to be over the utopian dreams which history has failed to deliver.

Gray's recital of Western intellectual history creates a dissonance amongst the chorus of ideologues who today sing the praise of 'human advance'. And whilst many do so in the name of secular creeds – be they advocates of universal socialism or global democratic capitalism – for Gray their belief in harmonisation has distinctly religious overtones. Central to Gray's critique of the 'history as progress' myth is the claim that Western consciousness remains enchanted by the echoes of Christian eschatology, for it is within the Christian concept of history that Gray traces the first 'story of mankind' (Gray, 2004a: esp. pp. 1-17 and ch. 4; See also Gray, 2007b: ch. 8, and Gray, 2008: ch 1). The idea that there is a narrative of human progress which culminates in an idealised historical end-point is for Gray a relic of Christian faith, and it animates secular patterns of thought which persist to this day. Whereas the avowedly Christian sects claimed that only God could bring about this 'end of history' through apocalypse and revelation, the thinkers of the Enlightenment effected a shift which placed man as the agent of change, prototypically demonstrated by the Positivists of nineteenth century France who sought to replace the Religion of God with the Religion of Humanity (Gray, 2008: p. 82). Retaining the idea that man can arrive at a post-historical condition, free from the generically human struggles which have hitherto defined his existence, Enlightenment theories of progress underscored the centrality of reason and science in directing this change. Thus for Gray, the thinkers of the Enlightenment – many (but certainly not all) of whom championed the secular idea of human advance – "were actually neo-Christians, missionaries of a new gospel more fantastical than anything in the creed they imagined they had abandoned. Their belief in progress was only the Christian doctrine of providence emptied of transcendence and mystery" (Gray, 2004a: p. 2).

In distancing himself from these 'utopian myths' of human progress, Gray has moved purposefully toward a conception of history which is an anathema to Christian and Enlightenment faiths. In this respect, his philosophy of history is close to that often recounted throughout ancient Greece and Rome, where as he tells us, it was believed that history was a series of cycles, "the future was a return of the past"(Gray, 2007b: p, 7, 101). More clearly, Gray's work sits alongside the scepticism of those such as David Hume, in whose thought Gray finds a concept of history in which phases of civilization and barbarism will continue to alternate – irrespective of the minimal gains in human knowledge (Gray, 2003: p. 136). Thus, if we keep this intellectual proximity in mind, and then consider it alongside his dedication to unclouded realism, a basic understanding of progress in the thought of John Gray might be achieved. It repays to quote him at length:

"History is not an ascending spiral of human advance, or even an inch by inch crawl to a better world. It is an unending cycle in which changing knowledge interacts with unchanging human needs. Freedom is recurrently won and lost in an alternation that includes long periods of anarchy and tyranny, and there is no reason to suppose that this cycle will ever end … The core of the idea of progress is the belief that human life becomes better with the growth of knowledge. The error is not in thinking that human life can improve. Rather, it is imagining that improvement can ever be cumulative. Unlike science, ethics and politics are not activities in which what is learnt in one generation can be passed on to an indefinite number of future generations. Like the arts, they are practical skills and they are easily lost" (Gray, 2004a: pp. 3-4).

We might begin to unravel Gray's critique of the human progress myth in a number of ways, beginning with its fidelity to history. Extending as it does across the many traditions in Western thought and the many problems of contemporary society, the charge could be levelled that what Gray's work gains in historical breadth, it loses in analytical depth. In a recent collection of essays, for example, entitled *The Political Theory of John Gray* (2007), claims to this effect feature throughout. Ranging from Peter Lassman's observation that Gray's account of the Enlightenment passes over many of its historical complexities (Lassman, 2007: p. 100), to John Barry's critique of his take on global ecology (Barry, 2007: p. 140), the questions surrounding Gray's reading of history is indeed salient. With greater relevance to the matter of progress, however, Glyn Morgan's contribution to the volume is of particular

interest. Most significantly, he concludes that Gray's more recent accounts of modern liberal societies (2004a, 2004b, 2007b, 2008) unjustly identify positivist ideas of progress as the 'only myth in town'. According to Morgan, "Gray is … only in part correct", and whilst the belief that science and technology are the vehicles of human progress is widespread, "its importance is qualified and often subordinated to other 'myths'", such as those of modern spirituality (Morgan, 2007: esp. pp. 125-128).

Perhaps one of the more striking features of Gray's 'eulogy for progress', however, is the very force with which he distinguishes between progress in human knowledge and progress in human affairs, or to refer back to the extended quotation, to his claim that gains in ethics and politics are not guaranteed by the growth of human knowledge. Morgan is of course correct to question whether modern liberal societies are solely animated by the opposite belief – that solving the conflicts between competing value-systems is seen as a matter of scientific advance or of establishing a universal moral code or infallible system of justice. However, doing so does not address the question of how Gray came to this conclusion. On what grounds does he make such a distinction?

**III**

It has already been discussed that for Gray, many of today's most pressing problems are all insoluble – the best we can hope to achieve is to minimise their most acute symptoms and so limit the onset of what Gray calls 'generic evils', the nature of which will be accounted for shortly. Those who believe, for example, that the spread of global democratic capitalism or western liberal institutions will bring these problems to a close – that history's cycle of civilisation and barbarism can be broken – do so on the grounds of a religious faith, a faith which not only claims that the humanity has a unique destiny, but that it can master this destiny through cumulative gains in knowledge. To this extent, a necessary step in recounting Gray's distinction between progress in human knowledge from progress in human affairs is to engage with his understanding of 'humanity' itself.

"'Humanity' does not exist. There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement" (Gray, 2003: p. 12). So writes Gray in *Straw Dogs*, and in this claim we can see at least two key aspects to his understanding of humanity. Firstly, and of course most plainly, it is clear that Gray denies the very existence of 'humanity', which is to say, the idea that we can speak of humans as one, as a collective, as a body which is the sum of its parts (See also Gray, 2008: p. 265). By extension, in denying the very existence of this body, Gray simultaneously rejects that it can have either a single past or a single future. Therefore, it would seem that denying the idea that history is a narrative of human progress begins with rejecting the existence of humanity. According to Gray, to do otherwise is to commit the same mistakes of the earliest Christian preachers, whose faith not only led them to elevate the human species to an unparalleled position of dignity, but to believe that there was a story of mankind, a narrative of progression, of tale of redemption from the sins of the past. Yet for Gray this faith not only continued, but was perhaps even amplified in the Enlightenment theories of progress, such as those of the French Positivists, who in their rejection of God elevated mankind even further, to master of its own destiny, as the creator of a new world based on reason and science – truths upon which a better world might converge (See Gray, 2003: pp. 1-34).

As Gray has observed, the French Positivists – led by Count Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte – were among some of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers (Gray, 2008: pp. 81-2). With their emphasis on the unique ability of the human species to shape its own destiny, they attempted to create a new religion which recognised man, and not God, as the Supreme Being. Moreover, they expressed a philosophy of history in which the growth of scientific knowledge would precipitate gains in human affairs, or more precisely, that it was "the driving force of ethical and political progress" (Gray, 2008: p. 82). With this in mind, they argued that the growth in human knowledge would allow society to progress though three successive stages – beginning at a religious stage, then moving to a metaphysical stage, and culminating in a scientific (or 'positive') stage, wherein the moral and political conflicts of the past would cease to exist, and human values would converge (See Gray, 2007b: pp. 27-30).

The idea that such a convergence is possible – or that attempts to achieve it are desirable – is for Gray a dangerous,

utopian fantasy, and in accounting for this we can turn to his second core perspective on humans, as indicated by the earlier quote: "humans … [are] driven by conflicting needs and illusions and [are] subject to every kind infirmity of will and judgement". Whilst this view has featured within many of Gray's more recent works (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007b, 2008), it is a claim which has animated a number of his earlier discussions on liberalism, and in particular, on the liberalism of John Stuart Mill (Gray, 1996 [1983], 1989, 1993, 1995). Here, we can not only grasp more fully Gray's conception of humans, but significantly, how such a perspective feeds his distinction between progress in knowledge and progress in human affairs.

In his 1996 text *Mill on Liberty: A Defence*, first published in 1983, Gray made the point of locating the idea of progress at the heart Mill's utilitarian account of liberalism. Indeed, to the extent that Mill's discussion on the universalisation of liberal values was grounded on an understanding of progress, or as Mill called it, the idea of "man as a progressive being" (Mill, 1974: p. 70), Gray argued that for Mill, moral life can only have progressive aspects to the extent that scientific knowledge advances. Such advance, Gray surmised, is not necessary on the count that the principles of liberalism demand justification by reference to scientific laws, but that the adoption of liberal moral precepts occurs as human knowledge grows (Gray, 1996 [1983]: p. 114). On this reading, therefore, Mill's philosophy of history did not simply rest on the claim that cumulative gains in knowledge occur over time, but on the assumption that these gains would occasion a convergence on liberal values. We might recall that this philosophy of history stands greatly at odds with that expressed by Gray, and indeed, it is within his later works (1989, 1993, 1995, 1996 [1983]) that we find its explicit rejection.

Whilst Gray is careful to distinguish Mill's 'utilitarian' liberalism from more recent examples of liberal theory, he maintains that all liberalisms presume their values to be the end-point of human progression and the ideal grounding for human life. In contemporary thought, for example, Gray takes particular aim at the liberalism of John Rawls (1972), whose work sought to formulate principles of justice which could be universally applied (Gray, 1993: pp. 238-9; See also Gray, 2004b). As we have seen, Gray has criticised the notion that there can be a convergence of human values, a harmonisation which constitutes man's historical end-point. Indeed, this not only figured as part of his critique of Christianity, but also of Enlightenment theories of progress, and most notably those expressed by the French Positivists. On the one hand, Gray makes a clear effort not to overstate the relationship between these Enlightenment theories of progress and the content of liberal *values*, not least because there we many intellectual traditions which, whilst believing in progress, were by no means liberal. The Positivists, in fact, were "thoroughgoing anti-liberals" (Gray, 2008: pp. 81-2; See also Gray, 2004a: p. 42). On the other hand, however, Gray is equally clear that the Enlightenment and Positivist ideas of progress have been central to informing those which can be found in liberalism. As Gray has argued, "[m]odern liberalism, in all its conventional forms, from Locke to Kant and from John Stuart Mill to the later Rawls, is inextricably linked with the philosophy of history, and the idea of progress, that were embodied in … [the] Enlightenment project" (Gray, 1995: pp. 65-66; See also Gray, 2004a: p. 43; Gray, 2007a: p. 226; Gray, 2007b: p. 34).

Certainly, despite the internal contradictions of liberalism (Gray, 2004b: pp. 1-33), Gray maintains that there is a universalist faith which is common to all its forms, a faith which is wrested from the Enlightenment and Positivist belief in progress – or to refer back to Mill, the idea that man is a 'progressive being'. For Gray, however, the falsehoods to which these liberal theories are committed are twofold. In the first instance, they embody a fallacious and Eurocentric idea of modernisation, which assumes that as non-Occidental nations adopt knowledge produced by the West – whether in science, technology, economics, literacy or numeracy – they will automatically assent to Western values and institutions, such as those of liberal democracy (Gray, 1996 [1983]: p. 132). Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, they assume that there can be a rational agreement on *the* best form of life.

In his rejection of these two ideas, we arrive at Gray's second core perspective on humans, or more specifically, his claim that humans are driven by conflicting needs and illusions. Indeed, whereas liberal theorists of all creeds believe there to be an ideal form of life, for Gray the opposite is true. Humans, as he tells us, are "a highly inventive species, … embedded in and emerging from specific forms of social life with definite and diverse cultural and historical inheritances" (Gray, 1993: p. 290). And so, rather than seeing liberal principles as universal truths upon which a better world might converge, Gray recognises them as merely "a distillation from local practice" (Gray, 1989: p. 235), a way of life specific to the peoples and places from which they emerged. Rather than embodying *the* best

form of life, then, the life idealised within liberal thought is only one amongst many, each arising from a diversity of historical inheritances. Moreover, in drawing upon the value-pluralism of those such as Isaiah Berlin (See Gray, 1993: pp. 64-9), Gray finds no justification for seeing liberal values as superior to others. To be clear, this value-pluralism does not depend on the assumption that each way of life is equal in value, but more specifically, on the idea that each has a "diversity of goods and evils" (Gray 2004b: p. 8) which cannot be compared or combined. Therefore, whilst the discussion presents itself as primarily a matter of differences between 'specific forms of social life', the point to be grasped is that for Gray, each form of social life is grounded on a specific position on questions of value. With conflicting needs and values, there are no means through which the demands of every human can be reconciled within one system, and no grounds upon which one system can claim authority over others: "there … is no measuring rod on which different forms of human life encompassing different and uncombinable goods can be ranked" (Gray, 1993: p. 65). On this basis, Gray's account of human needs prescribes a sobering dose of realism, and with reference to Thomas Hobbes' idea of *modus vivendi*, he argues that we must jettison the liberal myth that a single way of life can be best for everyone. To this end, he claims that "an ideal of harmony is not the best starting-point for thinking about ethics or government. It is better to begin by understanding why conflict – in the city as in the soul – cannot be avoided" (Gray, 2004b: p. 5).

In an important addition, however, Gray distinguishes this position from one of moral relativism. Certainly, whilst he argues that there is no regime which we can call *the* best, Gray does not suggest that *all* regimes are capable of satisfying 'generically human needs', the needs which are common to all human beings. On these grounds, Gray has tentatively suggested a series of conditions which do not figure as part of the 'diversity of goods and evils', and so cannot be endured or imposed as simply a different definition of the good. These are what might be referred to generic evils, and it is only in their presence that one way of life can be judged in respect to others. Among them, Gray includes the subjection of individuals or groups to enduring poverty, preventable disease, persecution, torture and genocide (Gray, 2004b: 66), yet to the extent that conflicts between values cannot be overcome, Gray suggests that the presence of these evils cannot be suppressed indefinitely. For Gray, history is a cycle between civilisation and barbarism, and whilst some evils may be held back for a time, these gains are never cumulative, guaranteed or absolute.

Let us briefly retrace our steps. The political thought of John Gray provides an unblinking vision of the world, a perspective of unclouded realism which reveals the intractability of today's most pressing problems. Both Christian and Enlightenment ideologies have perpetuated the myth that humanity's problems can be overcome, that history is a narrative of man's progression and perfectibility. According to Gray, such ideas, which were typified by the Positivist movement, have come to rest at the core of liberal political philosophies, and are exemplified by Fukuyaman assertion that the ideals of Western liberalism represent the historical end-point of man's ideological evolution. For Gray, however, claims to this effect are grounded on a number of flawed assumptions. In the first instance, they reproduce a Christian anthropocentrism which elevates the 'story of mankind' to a position of unparalleled significance. Secondly, they assume that 'humanity' exists, that divergent and conflicting humans constitute a collective body, a body which not only has a shared past, but also a unique destiny. Thirdly, they sustain the Eurocentric ideology of modernisation, which not only assumes that the advance of human knowledge enforces the authority of Western liberal values, but that there can be rational agreement on a single way of life. In short, Gray argues that these assumptions ignore the enduring realities of the human species. Humanity cannot progress because humanity does not exist; there are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and incommensurable definitions of the best way of life. As they have done throughout history, these conflicts of values will continue to emerge, and it is only in the presence of generic evils – the effects of which can only be minimised rather than eradicated – that a specific way of life might be considered inferior to others. The advance of human knowledge will not bring about convergence on an ideal form of life, and will not precipitate gains in ethics and politics, as history is an unending cycle. For Gray, this is the world as history has shown it to exist, not the utopian illusion which history has failed to deliver.

**IV**

Both the force and intent with which Gray distinguishes between progress in human knowledge and progress in human affairs is clear. However, to what extent have we grasped the very concepts under examination? A general picture has thus far emerged of what Gray means when he denies the possibility of 'cumulative progress in ethics and politics'. Indeed, Gray refers to the idea that the human animal has a unique destiny, in which it can make permanent and incremental improvements to its general condition, ridding itself of the conflicts and generic evils which have hitherto defined its existence. In contrast, the term 'progress in human knowledge' has so far been used in an unhelpfully general way, denoting anything from scientific and technological discoveries to the formation of economic systems. Thus, it seems pertinent to question whether such diffuse bodies of knowledge can be spoken of in the same terms, as a coherent entity which either does or does not bring about progress in human affairs. With these issues in mind, a number of clarifications are necessary, clarifications which take us to the heart of Gray's knowledge/ human affairs distinction.

On the matter of economics, Gray has explicitly identified it as branch of knowledge which, when put to use, does not effect fundamental change amongst divergent human values (Gray, 2009: esp. pp. 166-193). To illustrate this point, he has observed how the adoption of capitalism by non-Occidental countries has not, contrary to speculation, initiated a convergence on the values of the Western liberal nations from which the capitalist doctrines emerged. Again, those that suggest otherwise not only perpetuate the Eurocentric ideology of modernisation, but they also assume that a rational consensus is possible on the best way of life. Thus, in contradistinction to what he views as unfounded myths of human convergence, Gray has observed the opposite trends. Rather than the adoption capitalism transforming human values, human values have transformed the manner in which capitalism has been adopted. More concretely, Gray has argued that whilst Asian nations have successfully applied the economic models of capitalism, each has done so whilst retaining and expressing the values of their historical and cultural inheritances (Gray, 2009: p. 191). Or to recount an earlier claim, it is an example of how "changing knowledge interacts with unchanging human needs" (Gray, 2004a: p. 3). Thus, to an extent that Fukuyama's end of history thesis cannot explain, many of today's most prosperous and geopolitically powerful nations are authoritarian regimes which eschew the principles of Western liberal democracy (See also Kagan, 2008: pp. 1-11, 25-36). Of course, questions regarding Gray's fidelity to history are again salient, with scholars such as Morgan suggesting that "evidence of the successful East Asian societies tends to confirm rather than refute the liberal theory of progress" (Morgan, 2007: p. 120). Moreover, the general accuracy of Gray's account might be questioned if we consider the criticisms levelled at his understanding of economic and historical trends, which Robert Sidelsky has described as "excessively abstract" and "highly overwrought" (Sidelsky, 1998). However, since our immediate concern is whether Gray's thoughts are internally consistent, these matters might be put to one side. Instead, the point to be recognised in this brief example is how economics – which is in part a branch of human knowledge – fits into Grays distinction between human knowledge and progress in human affairs.

As another branch of human knowledge, it would not be erroneous to discuss scientific and technological advances in a similar fashion – as a story of evolving technologies interacting with the unalterable human animal (Gray, 2009: p xii). However, Gray's engagement with the very nature of scientific and technological advance raises some further points which need to be addressed. Indeed, whilst denying the possibility of cumulative gains in ethics and politics, Gray has consistently emphasised that such gains in science are not only possible, but they are demonstrably real. For Gray, the falsehood is to assume that such advance can precipitate gains in humans affairs:

"In science progress is a fact, in ethics and politics it is a superstition. The accelerating advance of scientific knowledge fuels technical innovation, producing an incessant stream of new inventions; it lies behind the enormous increase in human numbers over the past few hundred years. Post-modern thinkers may call into question scientific progress, but it is undoubtedly real. The illusion is in the belief that it can effect any *fundamental* alteration to the human condition" (Gray, 2004a: p. 3, emphasis added).

Gray is clear to separate his position from one which he associates with 'post-modern' thought, suggesting that such a stance entails the dismissal of science and scientific gains *tout court*. For Gray, however, the point to be appreciated is that whilst scientific gains – whether in medicine, agriculture, industry, warfare and communication – are real, they can only ever provide the changing backdrop against which the enduring features of ethical and political life occur. And of course, at the heart of ethical and political life is the human species, intractably divided on

questions of value and definitions of the best regime. Therefore, it is here that we arrive at the heart of Gray's distinction between progress in human knowledge and progress in human affairs, at the basic condition of the human species which science cannot penetrate, which science cannot master. Of significance here is Gray's idea of 'fundamental alterations'; alterations to that which is fundamental to the human condition. As we have seen, Gray tells us that there are at least two key features in this regard. Firstly, he argues that the human species does not constitute a collective body, and to this extent, does not have a collective future or destiny. Secondly, Gray argues that humans are divided, both as individuals and as groups, by an incommensurable diversity of values, an "ineradicable moral scarcity … which … is our fate as humans to endure" (Gray, 1993: p. 65). However, might we not begin to see a tension existing between these two positions? For on the one hand, Gray denies the very existence of a human destiny and collective future, yet on the other hand, his argument draws strength from that which he takes to be fundamental, and perhaps, inescapable about the human condition – something 'fated', and to this extent, something shared and extending in to the future.

It is no doubt possible to linger on this point – to examine the language employed with greater care (can we speak of 'destiny' and 'future' as being one and the same?), to question Gray's own internal consistency, or perhaps most obviously, to question the interpretation put forward here. However, it seems that this tension might be resolved if we return to Gray's understanding of history. Indeed, it has been shown how Gray's work has expressed a philosophy of history which eschews that expressed by Enlightenment ideologies, of history as "an ascending spiral of human advance" or " inch by inch crawl to a better world" (Gray, 2004a: p. 3). Instead, Gray has consistently supported the view that history is an unending cycle, wherein that which is gained in ethics and politics is neither cumulative or permanent. For Gray, as for the ancient Greeks and Romans to whom he referred, the future is a return to the past. If we take this idea seriously, then, the tension exists not between Gray's two central propositions – that on the one hand there is no shared human destiny, and on the other that aspects of the human condition are fated to endure – because for Gray that which is to be endured is not something 'of the future'. What is fainted to continue is the reality that humanity does not exist and thus cannot progress. What is fated to endure is the return of history, not the arrival of the future – a cycle which Gray does not believe will ever come to an end (Gray, 2004a: p. 3). Of course, in giving this account Gray has undoubtedly provided his own form of narrative, but only in the sense that history is depicted as a continuous cycle of human advance and regression, not one of cumulative progress. The story is: there is no story. To this end, the real tension exists between Gray and the advocates of progress, whose Enlightenment ideologies maintained that fundamental alterations to the human condition could be made, and that the discoveries of science and technology can create a new future, a future in which the condition of the human species in fundamentally different from the past. In short, the tension is between Gray and those who link the advance of science and technology with gains in ethics and politics.

**V**

Within the thought of John Gray, therefore, the idea of progress is set forth in two distinct forms, each with their own conditions of possibility. In one sense it is both possible and real – a fact which confronts us in our everyday existence. On the other hand, it is impossible and illusory – its manifestations have escaped us throughout history. In the first instance, we can observe the realm of human knowledge, constituted by science, technology, economics and countless other spheres of human imagination and invention. Here, cumulative progress is a concrete reality, proved by the advances in medicine and agriculture which have allowed the human population to grow, and the economic systems and technologies which transmit these gains around the world; its evidence surrounds us. In the second instance, we find the realm of human affairs, constituted by ethics and politics. Here, cumulative gains are impossible, and to suggest otherwise is a utopian fantasy which ignores two key aspects of the human species – that it is comprised by humans which have no collective destiny to advance, and which are divided – both individually and as members of groups – by incommensurable conflicts of value. In human knowledge, progress is incremental and permanent. The problems which are solved remain so, and the falsified methods and theories of the past discarded. In human affairs, progress is neither guaranteed nor permanent. The suppression of generic evils or conflicts of value are fleeting moments in an unending cycle, their presence coincides with the ebb and flow of history. For Gray, these two ideas of progress are distinct because the first does not effect change on the second. Whilst human knowledge increases, it cannot penetrate or alter the two fundamental characteristics of the human species, and thus does cannot instigate progress within human affairs. Instead, the developments of science and technology are the

changing background against which the cycle of ethical and political conflict endure. This philosophy of history is an anathema to that which can be found within Christian and Enlightenment thought, each of which espoused a narrative of man's perfectibility. From French Positivism through to contemporary liberalism, this idea continued, contained in the myth that gains in human knowledge can overcome the perennial conflicts of the human animal. In opposing this line of thought, Gray has moved closer to the understanding of history expressed in Ancient Greece and Rome, or more clearly to that of David Hume: history is a continuous cycle of civilisation and barbarism, irrespective of gains in science and technology.

Perhaps Glyn Morgan was correct to observe that positivist ideas of progress are less prevalent than Gray claims, or at least, they not the only animating 'myth' within contemporary liberal societies. Indeed, this argument figures as only one of a number of questions regarding Gray's fidelity to history. Whilst undoubtedly important, the aim of this specific study has not been to scrutinize these specific claims or to question Gray's understanding of reality. Rather, it has been an attempt to engage with his thought on its own terms, and understand how the idea of progress features within it. Certainly, the very fact that Gray's work contains such a prominent stance works against (although does not prove incorrect) those who lay the charge of inconsistency at his door. In a discussion on the work of Gray, for example, Robert Sidelsky remarked that "[h]e [Gray] has a great contribution to make – if only he can steer a steadier course" (Sidelsky 1998). Yet as has been shown, Gray's engagement with the idea of progress has been central to much of his work. Indeed, this holds true whether one looks to his earliest work on Mill (1996 [1983]), his critique of anthropocentrism in Western traditions (2003) or his reproach of global capitalism (2009). On this note, then, it might be concluded that whilst the breadth of Gray's work is suggestive of a lack of direction, his underlying attempt to uncover and critique the idea of progress has provided it with a steady course, one which has grown more definite over time.

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