Humanism: an 'insane form of thinking that invades the human mind'

The number of people discovering that they are humanists is growing fast, at least in the UK. But humanism provokes scorn, even hatred, in some quarters. Mike Flood tries to understand what so upsets people.

In its modern manifestation humanism is about making sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. Humanists take their inspiration from the natural world, human endeavour and the insights afforded by science. They are motivated by compassion and working for the common good. So why are humanists so disliked by many people of faith — even some atheists? Some detractors use terms like ‘evil’, ‘wicked’ or ‘sinful’ when criticising humanist views or behaviour: I think this says more about them than about humanism; and some are masters at constructing and attacking straw men, gross parodies of what humanists actually believe.¹ But some criticisms — including those levelled at atheism/atheists — do deserve a civil response, and humanist groups might like to reflect on these. In this paper I’ve deliberately focused on the criticism, not on balance, and only challenged arguments where they are based on an underlying fallacy or misunderstanding.

1 Criticism of Humanism

“There is an evil under the sun lurking amongst mankind known as humanism... an insane form of thinking that invades the human mind convincing it of its superiority over God and His Word’… Secular humanism is utter foolishness and an abomination before the Lord God.”¹²

Summary: Humanism is a poorly defined concept that has few major accomplishments to its name — and no Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi; it is elitist, idealistic and self-absorbed; it promotes the acceptance of homosexuality, abortion and other ‘evil acts’; and it doesn’t provide comfort in the same way as mainstream religions can and do.

More specifically:

- humanism is “too vaguely defined”, “an inchoate, nebulous concept” with “no USP or added value”,² nothing more than “an empty figure of speech”, a “secular version of theism”;
- humanism encourages self-centredness, which contributes to selfishness in society;³
- humanism is elitist and anthropocentric (as the name implies), a state of mind that places humans in the centre of the universe; this, for some, implies that humanism supports the exploitation of natural resources for human needs without concern for other living beings; or conversely denies the ‘specialness’ of homo sapiens — although others ask: “why do we need to see ourselves as special? We are clearly different from other animals but they are also very different from each other!”
- humanism is ‘wicked’ because it promotes the acceptance of homosexuality, abortion, assisted suicide and other ‘evil acts’ — indeed,

Famous Critics

Friedrich Nietzsche saw humanism as nothing more than an empty figure of speech — a secular version of theism. He argued that human rights exist as a means for the weak to constrain the strong, and as such they deny rather than facilitate emancipation of life. He saw belief in humanity as a hangover from a belief in God and, once God was eradicated, the belief in human beings would follow the same way.

Sigmund Freud challenged the view of humans as rationally autonomous, believing that they are largely driven by unconscious irrational desires.

Jean Paul Sartre wrote that “Humanism is nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectations of sensibility were only alibis for our aggression.”

Lévi-Strauss, considered the Enlightenment ambition of mastering nature, of setting humanity above nature, inevitably had destructive consequences for humanity itself. A humanity which could enslave nature was quite capable of enslaving human beings.

¹ I’ve referred to this elsewhere as ‘bad information’ — for more on this see: http://humanistlife.org.uk/2015/06/29/avoiding-bad-information/
² Here’s the full quote: “Humanism is horribly evil because it DENEES God. Humanism is evil because it seeks answers WITHOUT God. Humanism is evil because it does NOT recognize the Bible as God’s Word. Humanism is wicked because it promotes the acceptance of homosexuality, witchcraft, abortion, assisted suicide, and every other evil act (as long as they think no one is being hurt). I got news for you Mr. and Ms. Humanist...babies get hurt when you suck their heads off, cut them into bit size pieces or burn them alive in acid. Someone is definitely getting hurt. To you it’s just ‘freedom of choice’ regarding reproduction. Freedom of choice? For who? The child certainly has no choice.” http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/False%20Religions/Humanism/humanism_is_evil.htm
the president of Malaysia recently accused humanism of being ‘deviant’ (along with secularism and liberalism); and

- humanism is no comfort in times of personal crisis or the end of life.

Some have tried to argue that there is a conflict between science and humanism: science, they say, is necessarily reductive, and reductive science undermines humanist ideas about phenomena such as consciousness or free will. Thus humanists are forced to reject perfectly good scientific theories that don’t fit with their particular worldview.  

2 Criticism of Humanists

“I hate secular humanists... because they are, basically, religion disguising themselves as non-religious. They’ve stripped away all the supernatural portions of religion, but they haven’t really empowered rational thought in any way.... they have latched onto movements like skepticism and atheism and are sullying it with this sort of ‘religion without a god’ nonsense.” Paul Ganssle

Summary: Humanists put too great an emphasis on rationality and individualism; some deify Darwin; others make out that people without religion are humanists when they clearly are not; ditto for many historical figures touted as ‘the forefathers of humanism’.

‘Humanist’ is no more significant a label than being a member of any other special interest club that contributes to or informs your identity and relationship with others. It is no better than atheist, agnostic, non-believer, rationalist, freethinker or secularist. That said, the label is a “useful bit of soft soap” if you’re a politician who can’t bring yourself to admit publicly that you’re an atheist. Humanists:

- are self-absorbed; they spend a lot of their time ‘disproving God’ and put very little effort into coming up with a positive, constructive statement of their position. But, where does their scepticism stop? Surely humanists shouldn’t hold any belief that is not absolutely provable, like belief in human ideals?
- put evolution on a pedestal and deify Darwin — they celebrate Darwin Day, go on so-called ‘biological pilgrimage’ and compose hymns to natural selection;
- call non-believers humanists (many of whom wouldn’t even know what a humanist was) — some people like the ‘atheist’ label precisely because it’s not a worldview;
- try to make out that many historical figures were humanists when they existed before the term was coined. “Nothing is gained by tagging Democritus and Epicurus as ‘proto-humanists’ except to try and give humanism some sort of historical weight and worth; they are just as much the precursors of scientific rationalism.”

And in respect of humanists being overly rationalistic, it is argued that human beings are not capable of being rational or autonomous as they are largely driven by unconscious irrational desires. Indeed, there is no such thing as intrinsic humanity: we are all the product of external forces. What’s more, we do need meaning in our lives: does it really matter if we get this from faith? This is the essence of Yann Martel’s book, ‘Life of Pi.’ “Life is a story,” says Martel. “You can choose your story... A story with God is the better story.”

Atheists ‘Trusted Less Than Rapists’ in the US

In the States, critics have pointed out that “pagan humanist advocates ‘have made ‘socialization’ of the child the main purpose of American education.’ Humanistic education does not focus on ‘the traditional and generally accepted virtues’ stressed by the ‘Judeo-Christian principles taught by most families at home,’ but on theories of ‘moral relativism and situation ethics’ which are ‘based on predominantly

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5 One critic is Jeremy Stangroom [http://www.butterfliesandwheels.org/2003/there-is-something-wrong-with-humanism/]. For a refutation of his argument see the article by Kenan Malik, http://www.kenanmalik.com/debates/humanism.html
6 http://sguforums.com/index.php?topic=4183.0
7 The existence of a god or gods cannot be proven nor disproven.
8 The charge about misappropriation is false; apart from a brief period during the Renaissance when it had a different meaning, the term ‘humanist’ was not in use until modern times. When comparing the teachings of the great figures of antiquity, such as Anaxagoras, Democritus and Epicurus with the modern definition of humanism, the resemblance is remarkable.
9 The story is about wrestling not with a physical tiger, but a metaphoric one... with questions of meaning and faith and “how you can find spirituality and the meaning of life in the throes of all that is horrible and terrible in the world today. It is by surviving and making sense of all that goes wrong in the world that uncovers the meaning of man... the most important component of self is the raft... which represents his faith. It is something that he has to construct by himself, in order to be effective. The through line – ie, the spine of this remarkable tale – is that it is his raft that never forsakes him. More than any other part of the tale, it is the invisible force that finally brings him to safety and the force that transforms him into the individual he finally becomes. Our challenges are what help to define us; what guides us to becoming more. What greater challenge can there be than trapped with a ferocious tiger? More so, if that tiger is your own fear, anxiety, depression, desolation, and despair. It is our faith that helps us cross the cruel and endless sea. This is a message for all entrepreneurs and innovators as well, never give up your faith – faith in yourself, faith in your vision, faith in a better world.” [Psychology Today, 2012]
materialistic values found only in man’s nature itself’ and ‘without regard for the Judeo-Christian moral order, which is based on the existence and fatherhood of a personal god’.”¹⁰ The extract in the box is from Christian Faith in America’s website (the emphasis is theirs).¹¹

The American Humanist Association gets a lot of hate mail which it occasionally publishes. Here are two of the many posts received following a campaign that they ran over one Christmas period — as the AHA notes “some of these gems in our inbox are too painfully misinformed to keep to ourselves.”¹²

#1: “Wow, you hate he who created you so much that you’ve bedded down with Satan himself. I read about your getting a teacher fired over her RIGHT TO PRACTICE HER CHOSEN RELIGION BY PRAYING. Burn in hell, you self-righteous pious a**holes, burn in hell.” Jaime B

#2: “I just came across your website. Please kill yourselves and everyone that follows your s***-eating ideals. Do the world a favor and kill your children as well.” Monty F.

Reading this vitreol you would think the AHA were ‘militant humanists’, but interestingly this term has not yet entered the lexicon: indeed, it is something of an oxymoron like ‘sceptical fundamentalist’.¹³ And if you’re wondering about ‘pagan humanist’, some on-line dictionaries define ‘pagan’ as ‘a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions’, and (derogatory) ‘a non-Christian’.

Moral & Social Dead Ends

There’s a Facebook Page entitled ‘Global Secular Humanist Movement a Joke’, which is actually a parody of the original and rather far from a joke: here’s an extract (which has not been edited): “Has anyone ever noticed what religion North Korea is? atheist. That's what happens when you remove religion and replace it with atheistic evolution. the whole of North Korea is a hierarchy and they've replaced God with their own squatting moron of a leader. This is what happens when atheists take over and you'd think that we'd learn that from stalin's russia.”¹⁴ And here’s another example of conflating humanism and totalitarian regimes: “Communism is at heart intensely humanistic, for it contains the central idea that rational planning can alter any pre-existing condition of man. Most totalitarian persons and regimes, of whatever label are strongly humanistic in some of their most important philosophic assumptions.”¹⁵

RJ Rushdoony sums up the sentiment in ‘The Decay of Humanism’: “Having abandoned God, the humanist has not thereby rid himself of his need for God. As a result, he makes the state into his new god… Men have a habit of remaining sinners, and neither state office nor state coercion can usher men into a state of grace. The statistic answer is a moral and social dead end.”

Whilst humanists may deny that their approach to life is ‘just an alternative to religion’ many say that humanism gives them an identity, a worldview and set of moral values/rules similar to those provided by religion but without any supernatural element. In this case, humanism appears to be “the methadone to the opiate of religion.”¹⁶

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¹⁰ http://www.conservapedia.com/2012/04/Humanism#cite_note-20
¹¹ http://christianfaithinamerica.com/culture-war/is-humanism-molesting-your-child/
¹³ You may be surprised to learn that there is a ‘Militant Humanist’ Facebook Page — actually it has been automatically generated by Facebook based on “what Facebook users are interested in”. All very weird especially since it’s empty and only two people have ‘liked’ it!
¹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/GSHPMPJoke
¹⁵ David Ehrenfeld ‘The Arrogance of Humanism’
¹⁶ Tessera ibid.
3 Criticism of Humanist Organisations

“I don’t think it aids secularism that some humanists want to share religion’s privilege, not abolish it. I’m thinking here of humanist chaplaincies on campus and in local government, funded through tax; of humanism’s status as a ‘protected belief’ under British law; of the humanist, worldview-promoting BHA accepting public money (and) its campaign to ‘make humanist weddings legal marriages’, rather than removing any legal powers based on worldviews.” Alex Gabriel

The main humanist associations in the UK are the British Humanist Association, the Humanist Society of Scotland, Human (the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland — ‘Protestant & Catholic Atheists’), and the Isle of Man Humanist Group. The UK is also host to the International Humanist & Ethical Union. At times one or other of these organisations have been accused of:

- being intolerant of parents’ right to bring their children up in their religion and of trying to censor others’ views — see comments below on faith schools and creationism;
- being introspective — not making adequate efforts to reach out to other secular organisations like the National Secular Society and Sceptics in the Pub; and
- wanting to share religion’s privilege, not abolish it (eg “arguing for humanist chaplaincies funded by taxpayers; wanting humanism’s status as a ‘protected belief’ under British law.”) If humanist celebrants have legally recognised marital powers and views somehow ‘protected’ by the state, it makes it easy for minority religions to say that so should they.

Moreover, many local humanist groups are "dominated by white, middle-aged, middle-class men". This can be very off-putting to young people and non-white, non-male, non-middle class persons.

Celebrants: The BHA provides non-religious celebrants for funerals and other ceremonies. “This service could quite easily exist independently of humanism.”

Faith Schools: “If you want to see what intolerance means, look no further than the current campaign against faith schools. Spearheaded by the British Humanist Association… the campaign depicts itself as a socially enlightened effort to prevent children from being split into religious camps. But in truth it is a deeply illiberal assault on the fundamental right of parents to socialise their children into the values and beliefs that they consider to be true and profound. The rights of parents over their children, and of religious communities more broadly, are being severely undermined by those who, with an Orwellian glee, in their eye, would love nothing more than to rid Britain of the alleged blight of faith schools… A fundamental part of religious freedom, and a key aspect of parental autonomy, is the right of parents to impart their beliefs to their offspring. And this will necessarily involve some form of discrimination — that is, parents being discriminating about whom they allow to teach their children or whom they allow their children to associate with.”

Creationism: Creationists have accused the BHA of misrepresenting their arguments. Here’s an example: “Evolution theory cannot be tested, verified or falsified. No-one has or could ever know what happened when life on earth began. Therefore it is just a theory, not fact.” This is another caricature of the creationist position and we have explicitly counselled against using the argument, ‘evolution is just a theory.’ We know very well that evolutionists refer to the ‘theory of evolution’ in the same sense that scientists refer to the ‘theory of gravity’, i.e. as science fact...

“The BHA claims to stand for ‘equal treatment of everyone regardless of religion or belief’; but it seems that some are more equal than others, and the BHA sees no place for equal treatment of Christian beliefs in the education system. They clearly consider that only views

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What Humanists Really Believe

The main tenets of humanism can be summarised in the following terms:

- beliefs need to be tested not accepted solely on faith;
- reason, evidence and the scientific method are the best methods of finding solutions to problems / answers to questions;
- fulfillment, growth and creativity are emphasized for both the individual and mankind;
- a constant search for objective truth, with an understanding that scientific ideas constantly change to better describe the real world and that new knowledge and experience constantly alter our perceptions of it;
- an emphasis on making this life (our only life) the best it can be for everyone;
- a search for a good system of individual, social and political ethics; and
- an ultimate goal of building a better world for ourselves and our descendants by working together.


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17 This is clearly true, but the BHA does much more by setting standards and certifying celebrants.

18 http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/brendanoneill/100233877/if-you-want-to-see-intolerance-in-action-look-no-further-than-the-humanists-war-on-faith-schools/. But faith schools are by definition socially-divisive, and the BHA is by no means the only organisation calling for them to be prevented from discriminating against other beliefs. Parents are free to arrange religious tuition outside of school hours and impose their own beliefs at home, but they should not expect other (taxpayers) to pay for single faith education. (The BHA supports religious education in schools.)

19 http://creation.com/humanist-censorship -- it’s well worth reading this article to understand the creationist mindset.
acceptable to the BHA should have any place. At present, they have achieved this through the imposition of draconian regulations which are tantamount to legislated atheism.”

4 Objections to Atheism

“It is dangerous for our children to even know that your philosophy [Atheism] exists.”

Monique Davis, US politician

Some theists believe that atheists are immoral as morality depends on religion and belief in The Almighty (who judges one’s every thought and move). Last year Egypt launched a campaign to warn of the ‘dangers of atheism’. Saudi Arabia has the death penalty for atheism (which it equates with terrorism). An in respect of terrorism, three atheist bloggers have been hacked to death in Bangladesh this year alone — Bangladesh is one of 14 countries have the death penalty for blasphemy.

In the US atheism has been the focus of an increased political and media reaction in the form of ‘Fear & Smear’ campaigns — this follows the removal of mandatory prayer in American schools. Atheists are portrayed as unhappy, short lived and mentally unstable; and many Christians would be mortified if a close family member married one. Indeed, atheists have almost the worst public image of any belief group; many consider them worse than rapists, not least Evangelical Christians who have been taught from the cradle that “everyone worships something, which means that even people who think they don’t believe in anything are really worshiping either themselves or some nefarious deity unbeknownst to them. They’re being led astray by the devil, or by demons, or else by their own selfish desires. They’re unavoidably worshipping some kind of idol, some kind of rival god to the one they’re supposed to be worshiping. Therefore there can be no such thing as an atheist in the sense that everyone else uses the word, including atheists themselves.”

Thankfully the situation in the UK is somewhat less polarised. Indeed, a number of politicians have openly declared that they don’t believe in god. But Christians are becoming more outspoken and critical of non-believers, worried no doubt about falling congregations and the rapid growth in the ‘non-religious’. There have also been mini-skirmishes on university campuses: a recent article described religion as a ‘public good’ and the exclusion of religion from the public sphere as ‘repressive’. Professor Craig Calhoun, Director of the London School of Economics, followed this by saying that atheists make “free speech an issue” and compared rows over free speech and blasphemy to “clashes between religions”. He described the controversies over religious cartoons as disruptive to “campus harmony”. His comments have been roundly condemned by the National Secular Society.

Theists’ criticisms of atheism usually fall into one of three categories:

a) Appeals to emotion: Common approaches include: ‘Why are you trying to tear down other people’s faith?; ‘Why can’t everyone just have their own beliefs?’; ‘Why do atheists inspire such hatred?; ‘Religious belief is beneficial’; and ‘Hitler / Stalin / Mao / Pol Pot were atheists’.

b) Straw men: Argument against atheism can range from misrepresentations of evolution (“if we came from monkeys, how come monkeys are still around today?”); assertions that science is as much of a religious faith as Christianity; and/or misrepresentations about atheism and secular humanism being synonymous with immorality, communism and/or mass murder. ‘You are a communist; ‘So you believe in nothing?’; ‘You just want to sin’; ‘It takes more faith to disbelieve than it does to believe’; ‘Atheists worship materialism’; ‘Science is a faith’; ‘Atheism is a religion / based on faith’; ‘Atheists are just in denial’; and ‘Why are atheists so obsessed with religion?’ Often, these straw man arguments result in accusations of atheist hypocrisy.

c) Appeals to solipsism: This is the idea that we can’t know everything (or indeed, anything), and thus can never completely rule out god. However, this line of argument (the ‘god of the gaps’) raises more questions than it solves — it progresses from ‘we can’t know everything,’ or ‘anything for certain’, to ‘how can we claim to know anything about god?’ ‘God can’t be defined’; ‘Science can’t touch god’; ‘You can’t prove God doesn’t exist’; ‘That might be true for you, but it’s not true for me’; ‘Religion is another way of knowing’; ‘Faith is a virtue’; ‘Atheists cannot know anything’; and last but not least, ‘What are your qualifications?’

An insane form of thinking?

So, is humanism really an “insane form of thinking that invades the human mind”? You must judge. But for me the answer is an emphatic ‘No!’ Most humanists will not find any of the criticisms particularly challenging. If I have one criticism to add it is that the basic tenets of humanism are not widely

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21 This is an edited version of material published by ‘Iron Chariots’, which provides information on apologetics [the systematic defence of a position] to "help counter the glut of misinformation and poor arguments which masquerade as evidence for religious claims".

22 Solipsism holds that the self is all that can be known to exist and knowledge of anything outside one's own mind is unsure.
understood, and humanists must bear some level of responsibility for this. The message that humanism is about working for universal freedom of expression and the common good is simple enough, but we are clearly not being as assertive as we might in getting this across. Wanting to build a better future for all, not just those who share our beliefs, is hardly controversial, but you can see why it has ruffled a few feathers and upset those who have invested heavily in faith and or derive their comfort, status, wealth or power from it.

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Annex: On Straw Men

“Mixing nihilism and New Ageism in equal measure, Gray scoffs at the notion of progress for 150 pages before conceding that there is something to be said for anaethetics. The enemy in his sights is not so much a Straw Dog as a Straw Man: the kind of starry-eyed rationalist who passed away with John Stuart Mill, but who he has to pretend still rules the world.”

Terry Eagleton reviewing Straw Dogs

John Gray is a staunch critic of humanism, and a master at setting up and knocking down ‘straw men’. This wouldn’t matter if the straw men weren’t grotesque parodies and misrepresentations of what humanists believe.23 Here are some quotes from ‘Humanism and Flying Saucers’, a chapter in ‘The Silence of Animals’ — the emphasis is mine. These are followed by comments taken from reviews of earlier books, AC Grayling on ‘Black Mass’,24 and Terry Eagleton on ‘Straw Dogs’.25

- “If belief in human rationality was a scientific theory it would long since have been abandoned. The evidence of science and history is that humans are only ever partly and intermittently rational, but for modern humanists the solution is simple: human beings must in future be more reasonable. These enthusiasts for reason have not noticed that the idea that humans may one day be more rational requires a greater leap of faith than anything in religion.”

- “In the most general terms, humanism is the idea that the human animal is the site of some kind of unique value in the world. The philosophers of ancient Greece believed that humans were special in having a capacity for reason lacking in other animals, and some... believed that through the use of reason humans could access a spiritual realm...”

- “A third aspect of humanism is the idea that history is a story of human advance, with rationality increasing over time. This is a distinctively modern view, nowhere found among the wiser thinkers of the ancient world.”

- “Humanists today, who claim to take a wholly secular view of things, scoff at mysticism and religion. But the unique status of humans is hard to defend, and even to understand, when it is cut off from any idea of transcendence. In a strictly naturalistic view – one in which the world is taken on its own terms, without reference to a creator or any spiritual realm – there is no hierarchy of value with humans at the top. There are simply multifarious animals, each with their own needs. Human uniqueness is a myth inherited from religion, which humanists have recycled into science.”

23 Gray is equally vitriolic about the concept of Social Darwinism, but here his criticism seem to be less controversial. “As refined by later scientists, Darwin’s theory poses the natural selection of random genetic mutations. In contrast, no one has come up with a unit of selection or a mechanism through which evolution operates in society.”

24 http://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/1423/through-the-looking-glass

• “The hostility of humanists to myth is telling, since if anything is peculiarly human it is myth-making. Every human culture is animated by myth, in some degree, while no other animal displays anything similar. Humanists are also ruled by myths, though the ones by which they are possessed have none of the beauty or the wisdom of those that they scorn. The myth that human beings can use their minds to lift themselves out of the natural world, which in Socrates and Plato was part of a mystical philosophy, has been renewed in a garbled version of the language of evolution.”

• Humanists “take for granted that if human beings came to be more like the rational figments they have in mind, the result would be an improvement. Leave aside the assumption – itself very questionable – that a rational life must be one without myths. Rational or not, life without myth is like life without art or sex – insipid and inhuman. The actuality, with all its horrors, is preferable. Luckily a choice need not be made, since the life of reason that humanists anticipate is only a fantasy. If there is a choice it is between myths. In comparison with the Genesis myth, the modern myth in which humanity is marching to a better future is mere superstition... The message of Genesis is that in the most vital areas of human life there can be no progress, only an unending struggle with our own nature.”

• “On an evolutionary view the human mind has no built-in bias to truth or rationality and will continue to develop according to the imperative of survival.”

• “When contemporary humanists invoke the idea of progress they are mixing together two different myths: a Socratic myth of reason and a Christian myth of salvation. If the resulting body of ideas is incoherent, that is the source of its appeal. Humanists believe that humanity improves along with the growth of knowledge, but the belief that the increase of knowledge goes with advances in civilization is an act of faith. They see the realization of human potential as the goal of history, when rational inquiry shows history to have no goal. They exalt nature, while insisting that humankind – an accident of nature – can overcome the natural limits that shape the lives of other animals. Plainly absurd, this nonsense gives meaning to the lives of people who believe they have left all myths behind.”

• “To expect humanists to give up their myths would be unreasonable. Like cheap music, the myth of progress lifts the spirits as it numbs the brain. The fact that rational humanity shows no sign of ever arriving only makes humanists cling more fervently to the conviction that humankind will someday be redeemed from unreason.”

AC Grayling on Gray:
• Gray repeatedly asserts “that modern secularist thinking is utopian in aspiration, has inherited this aspiration from Christianity, has failed because its belief in progress is false and has in fact been violently regressive. The only thing that will replace it is more apocalyptic religion-inspired conflict, and – this with an Eeyore relish – all is therefore doom and gloom”. He “begins by calling any view or outlook a ‘religion’. Everything is a religion: Torquemada’s Catholicism, the pluralism and empiricism of 18th-century philosophers, liberalism, Stalinism. He speaks of ‘secular religion’ and ‘political religion’. This emplies the word ‘religion’ of any meaning, making it a neutral portmanteau expression like ‘view’ or ‘outlook’.”

• “The secular view is a true narrative of incremental improvement in the human condition through education and political action. Gray thinks that such a view must of necessity be utopian, as if everyone simplistically thought that making things better (in dentistry, in the rule of law, in child health, in international mechanisms for reducing conflict, and so forth for many things) absolutely had to be aimed at realising an ideal golden age to have any meaning. But it does not: trying to make things better is not the same as believing that they can be made perfect. That is a point Gray completely fails to grasp, and it vitiates his case.”

• “His accordingly is a bizarre fantasy-version of history. In the face of the central heating that warms him, the modern dentistry that allows him to chew his peanuts, the computer he writes his strange books on and the aeroplanes he travels in, he asserts that ‘progress is a myth’. But perhaps he does not mean to call material progress a myth, but rather alleged progress in the political condition of a large portion of mankind. Does he thus mean that the movement from feudal baronies to universal suffrage and independent judiciaries is not progress? If it is not, what is it? Regress? … in Gray’s view all is mayhem just as all is religion, and we have got nowhere since the beginning of time.”

Terry Eagleton on Gray:
• “John Gray’s political vision has been steadily darkening... With the crankish, unbalanced Straw Dogs, he emerges as a full-blooded apocalyptic nihilist. Not that nihilism is a term he would endorse. His book is so remorselessly, monotonously negative that even nihilism implies too much hope. Nihilism for Gray suggests the world needs to be redeemed from meaninglessness, a claim he regards as meaningless. Instead, we must just accept that progress is a myth, freedom a fantasy, selfhood a delusion, morality a kind of sickness, justice a mere matter of custom and illusion our natural condition. Technology cannot be controlled, and human beings are entirely helpless. Political tyrannies will be the norm for the future, if we have any future at all. It isn't the best motivation for getting out of bed.”