**John Gray – and Critical Rationalism**

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1. ***Introduction***

I have known John Gray for many years. I have long been an admirer of his work, impressed by both the range of his knowledge and the quality and quantity of his output. I was also struck by the way in which, from early on, he combined an appreciation of Hayek with a concern about the way in which Hayek’s ideas about the kind of progress one might expect in market-based societies was in tension with traditionalism. On this issue, John seemed to me to highlight an issue which was not properly appreciated by the entire tradition of free-market conservatism.

Over time, John moved from careful, broadly analytical concerns – as were found in his early work on Mill and his essay on Popper’s liberalism – to a concern with the late Twentieth Century revival of ‘classical liberalism’. From this, he moved to an interest in various foundationalist attempts to provide a justification for classical liberalism and related approaches. This led to a succession of enthusiasms, followed swiftly by disillusionments. I wrote a long critical review of these developments in ‘Gray’s Progress: From *Liberalisms* to *Enlightenment’s Wake’* (Shearmur 2007).

One striking feature of these moves on Gray’s part, was that he typically wrote retrospectively about different views concerning which he had previously been enthusiastic. He had acute things to say about them. But he also tended to write about them as if only a fool or a knave could have embraced the ideas in question. What was odd about this, is that they were often views which he had embraced until recently, himself. This pattern continued – with his shifting from liberalism, to Oakeshottian conservatism, to a favouring of Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ and ideas from the New Liberal tradition of T. H. Green and his successors, and then on to a distinctive form of environmental concern.

Gray also shifted from writing largely about political philosophy, to an engagement also with political journalism. This was often acute. But there was a tendency to offer unargued ex cathedra judgements about all kinds of substantive philosophical issues, while his concern with contemporary events sometimes took a turn towards prognostications of the future. The intellectual model for this read as if he shifted between acute situational analysis, to gazing into the crystal balls of Mystic Meg.

Gray ended up – if that is the right word to use about someone whose substantive ideas seem so frequently on the move – in a form of pessimistic scepticism. He is critical of all ideas about progress (while admitting the usefulness of certain technical innovations), and about humanism (in the sense of views which view humans as being radically distinct from animals). Even when Gray was a liberal, his liberalism was combined with a form of pessimism which did not fit well with the liberal tradition. One might say that it would seem as if, in the end, it is his pessimism which has won out.

There is much in Gray’s work which merits detailed discussion, not least his changing views about Hayek, which I hope to address on a future occasion.[[1]](#endnote-1) My engagement here will fall into two parts.

In the first, I will suggest that what might be called some of his later political ideas merit elaboration. They are inviting and interesting, but seem to me to call for greater and more systematic explication and the facing of some problems. That this is a worthwhile enterprise, I will argue for further in the final part of my second section.

In the second section, I will address his pessimism. In part this may simply be a matter of temperament. John is no more likely to be arguable out of that, than would his soul-mate Eeyore be temptable out of his dreary paddock.[[2]](#endnote-2) But I shall address this, by discussing the degree to which certain of the motifs of John’s later work – his critique of progress, and his stress on the continuity between humans and animals – are also to be found in the work of Karl Popper. Popper, it seems to me, showed how these themes could be explored in interesting ways. But his work also suggested that they could be combined with optimism,[[3]](#endnote-3) and a concern with what might be done to advance our knowledge, and make piecemeal improvements to our current situation.

A further contribution from Popper, however, could in my view be an epistemological one. For John, it seems to me, while he has very reasonably turned his back on foundationalism, seems unclear about what, then, we might make of our knowledge, and of the role of pluralism within it. I will conclude by saying a little about what I take Popper to be offering us here, in the hope that this is something that John might find attractive.

1. **Gray’s Liberalism**

I have already indicated that it is risky to try to offer an account of John’s political views and to engage with them, just because he is regularly on the move. In addition, lots of his ideas have been developed in essays within which many different themes are pursued in quick succession.

But it seems to me worthwhile to sketch briefly something that has at least been present in his later work, and to engage with it. For it seems to me interesting and important in itself, but also to pose some problems which anyone attracted to it needs to grapple with.

What I have in mind, here, is John’s interesting combination of a deep pluralism of traditions and moralities, minimalist broadly shared ideas about morality, and a *modus vivendi* conception of liberalism. His pluralism relates not just to his developments of Berlin’s ideas about values, ways of life and moral traditions, but also to the idea that there are different forms of capitalism.

I would like to raise two different issues about all this. The first, is that, on the face of it, a *modus vivendi* conception of liberalism could do with tentative explication in institutional terms. At one level, if different ways of life are to co-exist, we could do with the explication of tentative rules about how they might usefully inter-relate. It would I think be naïve to proceed as if we could lay down such things in a timeless manner. But at least on the face of it, pragmatic guidelines for their inter-relationships would be useful, and the (ongoing) codification of ideas about this, might offer guidance as to how we might inadvertently avoid damaging our, and others, ways of doing things.

There are two levels to this. On the one side, if people are living in different ways, pursuing different role models and cultivating different virtues, then they are likely to need to find ways of socializing their members into these distinctive ways of doing things, and may need to find ways of protecting how they do this from influences from elsewhere. (It is striking that, in her writings about her intellectual and moral development, Ayaan Hirsi Ali tells us of how the academic study of Nineteenth Century English literature featuring chaste romantic love, had a striking impact on her life in a Somali culture of arranged marriage.[[4]](#endnote-4) (Ali [2006] 2007; 2015). Further, if there are different forms of capitalism, there is the question of whether trade takes place between them. Rules will be needed for this. But if trade is taking place, there is likely to be impact from this – and in ways that may be difficult to anticipate – from one form of capitalism on another.

There is also the question of whether interaction – and learning – takes place. There is a sense in which one might see the ‘Utopia’ section of Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick, 1974)as having offered a model (which does not depend on his ideas about rights) for J. S. Mill-style ‘experiments in living’. On the face of it, if one wishes to recognise the legitimacy of pluralism, not only does one need an institutional framework within which such pluralism can take place. But one also needs to ask: can we not hope to learn from other experiments in living, and from what people in other traditions might make of us? Different traditions may face similar problems. But equally, they may hit difficulties particular to themselves, which people from outside may be able to diagnose and make suggestions about. Not only may dialogue be productive, even when there is no expectation of reaching consensus. But such exchanges may also stimulate people within different traditions to engage, within them, in the creative *Invention of Tradition*.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Such interaction, learning and innovation, however, may require that there is a measure of hierarchy involved (lest the taken-for-granted moral ideas and traditional practises of ordinary members unravel). It is striking that, from Stolzenberg and Myers’ study of the in many ways successful activities of the Satmar Hasidism in modern America, innovation from the leaders of the group plays an important role.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The second kind of issue relates to what happens at the individual level. I have already suggested that a tradition may need to find ways of protecting its members from certain kinds of contacts with other traditions. At the level of the individual, this would seem to be needed for socialization into the specifics of a tradition to take place. While, as I have just suggested, while learning and innovation may be essential, traditions may only function if this activity is initially limited to, or monitored by, its leading members.[[7]](#endnote-7)

However, this leads us to a twofold problem. On the one side, there are issues concerned with the kinds of freedoms and choices that are available to the individual. My concern, here, is not with issues of rights of the kind that John I think correctly repudiates. Rather, it relates to what can be offered to the individual within a particular tradition, if the tradition is to keep its integrity. On the other side, the development of the internet, and social media, has led to a kind of fragmentation of knowledge, and the undermining of the social vehicles for fallible expert authority which we had in the past.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The other issue concerns a theme the significance of which I have already highlighted in Gray’s work. It relates to Hayek’s arguments about knowledge and the use of socially scattered tacit knowledge and information. As far as I know, Gray has not repudiated this,[[9]](#endnote-9) instead stressing that there can be different forms of market-based society, within different traditions.

But to the degree to which this point is right, it would suggest – to put things provocatively – that a pluralistic capitalist version of Fukuyama’s end of history thesis might be correct, at least for those who are operating in competitive, market-based societies. But if this is the case, then we need, I think, to pay attention to a theme of which John has made much in his discussion of ‘neoliberalism’.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is that economic activity within such societies may have the effect of undermining what could be called the economic basis of traditions and established forms of life.

John, when he was in what one might call his ‘New Labour’ phase, wrote as if there could be the adjustment of the economy on the basis of local understandings of fairness. Such a thing is possible. But how stable are such local understandings, and how effective can such adjustments be, if we are in capitalist economies with the features that Hayek has highlighted? In addition, in his writings on different foundational approaches to classical liberalism, John exhibited a good knowledge of the kinds of issues which had been raised by writers in the public choice tradition about the problems of democracy. One does not have to be uncritical of such literature to recognise the degree to which it – and the important literature on the problems of American ‘pluralism’ – pose difficult issues concerning what one will actually get as the product of political interventions into the economy of this kind, made in the name of ‘social justice’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In raising these issues, I should stress once again, I am not aiming to offer a criticism of John’s work. Rather, it seems to me that he has raised interesting ideas, which it would be nice to have explicated in more detail, and also explored in the light of the kinds of issues that I have raised here. The idea that such exercises are important, will be defended in the final section of this paper.

1. ***Popper, Historicism and Progress***

Popper is well-known for his criticisms of what he referred to as ‘historicism’. At one level, this was the idea that there was a teleology to history, a view which was inherited from Christian ideas, and which was embraced, in one form or another, by both the political right and the political left in the inter-war period. Popper had, in his teens, been an enthusiastic Marxist, working as a volunteer in the office of the small Austrian Communist Party. But – in a story which he told many times – he was shaken by the way in which a Communist-led demonstration led to the death of unarmed workers. And this, in turn, led him to reflect on the substantive ideas which he had uncritically espoused, and on the claims which were being made about their epistemological status.

The result was his now well-known critique of teleological ideas about the course of history. It is also striking, however, that Popper came to identify, and to criticise, what he called historicist ideas in many other areas, too. As a young man, he was immersed in musical developments in Vienna, and worked with some of those associated with Schönberg.[[12]](#endnote-12) While he got to know their music well, he was critical of them, not least because of their acceptance of Wagnerian ideas about ‘the music of the future’. In reaction against this, Popper developed his knowledge about, and undertook work in the tradition of, Bach. Popper was also critical of ideas about ‘moral futurism’.

Popper was guarded in what he thought that we might expect of progress in any form. As Popper wrote (Popper, 1963):

…in science, we often learn from our mistakes, and … we can speak clearly and sensibly about making progress there. In most other fields of human endeavour there is change, but rarely progress (unless we adopt a very narrow view of our possible aims in life); for almost every gain is balanced, or more than balanced, by some loss. And in most fields we do not even know how to evaluate change.

In addition, there is another important theme to Popper’s work: his anti-utopianism.[[13]](#endnote-13) As Gerald Gaus argued in *The Tyranny of the Ideal* (Gaus, 2016), one could take Popper’s criticism of Plato’s utopianism as a more general critique of Ideal-based approaches to politics, including in the work of Rawls. But Popper considers it important to do what we can to alleviate suffering and injustice, he takes this to be a fallible, continuing activity. And he is also critical of the idea that we can sensibly assume that we are in possession of an unchanging ideal, for the sake of which other people and their interests should be sacrificed.

Popper does, indeed, uphold the ideal of ‘Emancipation Through Knowledge’ (Popper 1995; but see also Popper, 1945). However, he does so in such a way that it does not seem to me open to the kinds of criticisms that John has advanced.

1. **Popper, Humans and Animals**

Popper also offers a distinctive view about the relationship between mankind and animals. At one level, it is striking that he shares John’s concerns about the problematic impact of a growing human population, and also the view that we should look positively at science and technology to assist us.

However, he also holds that there are key continuities between us and other animals; in particular he takes animals to be conscious, and also to work with hypotheses about the world. For Popper, all knowledge is a matter of trial and error, and this includes animal knowledge. In his view, both animals and humans have fallible inbuilt expectations about the world. Popper emphasised this in some of his earliest work on psychology (see Popper 1963b). He stresses the continuity of themes across animals and people from an evolutionary perspective, notably in his ‘The Rationality of Scientific Revolutions’ (Popper 1994, chapter 1). That being said, it is also striking that Popper takes seriously the issue of human freedom, and the role of behaviour and consciousness in biology. He does so, however, in a manner which is not grounded in issues to do with religious faith.[[14]](#endnote-14)

There are, obviously, on Popper’s account, significant differences between people and animals. But they are a matter of degree. Popper has stressed the significance, for us, of what he calls ‘world 3’: the world of the products of the human mind, and the way in which we have the potential to grow and develop ourselves in interaction with such products, and other people. But at the same time, he also emphasised not just the role of animal consciousness, but also the role of traditions and extra-somatic products in the life of some animals.

Further, while Popper takes a strongly evolutionary view – a Darwinian view – of ourselves and of our knowledge, he does not see this as being incompatible with ideas about emergence, or with our aspiring for truth (rather than just knowledge of a practical character). After all, we have been able to create music, and works of art and literature, to say nothing of what we have accomplished in science, mathematics and logic. All this has been accomplished with cognitive tools which it appears showed themselves to be effective, and led to our survival, in the pursuit of practical, survival-related tasks. But this does not suggest that what we can accomplish is limited by the basis on which these capacities originated.

What is going on – in terms of our selves, our knowledge, and the world – looks to me a matter for exploration together, and thus for creative interplay between speculation, criticism and testing. It is this which leads me to the final section of this piece, in which I describe and commend to John aspects of Popper’s epistemology. I do this in part because I think that it is important – but typically not understood in the way in which I think that it should be. But also because after his abandonment of foundationalism, John has seemed to me unclear as to what his own ideas here are, and possibly as a result, to have been unduly negative in his critical appraisals of the approaches of other people.

1. **The Epistemology of Critical Rationalism**

What does human knowledge look like from a broadly Popperian perspective?[[15]](#endnote-15)

The key starting-point is our offering fallible interpretations of the world in which we find ourselves. We are biologically predisposed to see the world in certain ways. But there is no reason why these should be correct, or why the subjective convictions that we might have about them are any guide to their correctness.

We may, with the help of other people, be able to discover that something is wrong with our ideas. They may be open to empirical testing, and fail in tests. This tells us that something needs to be modified, but not what. How we proceed is up to us. But if we are interested in the growth of our knowledge, we will need to endeavour to produce ideas which explain what, so far, seemed to be correct in our knowledge, and at the same time, to try to correct the difficulties that we have found, and which ways that themselves say interesting things which are themselves independently testable.[[16]](#endnote-16)

We may well have ideas about the kinds of views that we should develop to cope with our problems. These may constitute a research tradition, or what Popper called a ‘metaphysical research programme’. (Metaphysical because not open to empirical testing.) Such views may themselves be open to critical appraisal, in terms of their ability to resolve the problems towards which they are addressed, or others which may arise with the passing of time. We may also – as Lakatos stressed – discuss the degree to which those working within a research programme have been able so far to generate useful scientific theories in line with their programmatic ideas.

All this leaves us with a situation in which there is a pluralism of competing research traditions or metaphysical research programmes.[[17]](#endnote-17) In principle it is open to anyone to appraise how they are doing so far – in terms both of how they are faring with regard to theoretical (or if you like, ‘conceptual’) problems, and what their track record has been in terms of the production of successful empirical theories. These are matters concerning which we might well be able to get agreement across people attracted to different programmatic views. Clearly, there is no reason to expect that their reaction to an agreed problem-situation will be the same. People will take different views about how attractive the pursuit of different programmes will be. Or they might wish to argue that aspects of hitherto commonly shared standards should be revised. But a crucial point about this, would be that their conviction about such matters would be just that, and what they would need to do is to aim for arguments for the revision of our existing standards which would be found inter-subjectively telling.

Much more could obviously be said.[[18]](#endnote-18) But I will conclude with two comments.

The first is that while I have illustrated these ideas with an eye to scientific knowledge, they would seem to me equally applicable to political and, indeed, religious ideas.

The second, and this is why I am commending it to John, is that it would suggest that while the kind of critical eye that he has for different views is very much to be welcomed, openness to criticism – and thus the existence of open problems – is to be expected everywhere. One cannot expect the discovery of problems to be fatal to an approach. But, at the same time, the keeping track of what an approach amounts to, of its strengths and weaknesses, and of how those who favour it have responded, over time, becomes of paramount importance. Accordingly, we might hope that John the trenchant critic might be prodded into a transformation into John the tracker of the performance of views with which he is critically engaged.

One might add, to this, a further twist. It is certainly the case that, on the basis of the approach that I have sketched, criticism might usefully come from anywhere. But it is also important, if we are to have to make choices with regard to research programmes or, indeed, to policy measures, to be able to take a comparative perspective. This means that it is typically useful for someone to give an indication of the perspective that they take, and of what they understand its current problematic to be. In John’s case this would be particularly welcome, just in the sense that – as I indicated at the beginning of this piece – John has, over the years, offered a variety of most interesting reflections on politics and political philosophy. But it is difficult to judge just where he currently stands, and what he understands its problematic to be. Also it would be useful to know why he thinks that the balance of the argument should incline one towards the pursuit of this, rather than one or other of the approaches which he has favoured in the past.

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1. I am currently revising a volume which brings together some historical studies of classical liberal institutions in the Twentieth Century. After this, my next engagement will be with critics of Hayek, from Foucault, through Plant to Gray. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Eeyore is the donkey with a Gray-like temperament, in A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh stories. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Popper, indeed, thought that optimism was a moral duty. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For what it is worth the books seem to me to be more illuminating if taken as studies of a collapsed Somali culture and problems of social change, than they are of Islam. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Hobsbawm Eric and Ranger, Terence (Eds.) (1983). While the thrust of the book was a debunking of various traditions, one might also see it as suggesting how traditions might be invented as creative responses to issues that arise in particular forms of life. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stolzenberg Nomi, and Myers, David (2021), refer to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) on their p. 17. But it is also clear that, in what has proved to be a successful arrangement, innovation has a top-down character. Lengthy battles have been fought against dissident groups, and life for ordinary members is highly traditionalistic. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is not to say that others may not, in fact, be able to have good ideas. The problem, rather, is that there is a danger of fragmentation, and also the introduction of ideas and practises which have unintended consequences for the tradition, if its organization is too flat. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I have discussed this in Shearmur (2025), and in more detail (and in English) in Shearmur (under submission). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. There are, in my view, important qualifications to be made to this argument, relating to Ronald Coase’s work on the firm (Coase, 1988). It is just that if transaction costs limit the degree to which it makes sense to organise even market-based commercial activity on the basis of market transactions, then Hayek’s argument is limited in its scope. See also Shearmur (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. At times he has treated this as an issue about ‘Thatcherism’ or ‘neoliberal ideology’, but he has also, I think more correctly, also acknowledged that it is a feature of large, market-based societies as such. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is also worth recalling Hayek’s discussion in (1944). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Popper discusses this, and its inter-relationship with his work in other areas, in his (1974 [1976]). Brian Boyd, in the biography of Popper on which he is currently at work, discusses this in much more detail. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for a fuller discussion, Shearmur (2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. O’Hear (2025), while giving welcome attention to Popper’s contributions to Popper and Eccles (1977), seems to me in this respect to misread him badly, in suggesting that Popper’s ideas about World 3 are of religious significance. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In what I write here, I will draw on the full range of Popper’s work, but also on aspects of what Lakatos wrote about research programmes. However, my emphasis will be Popperian rather than Lakatosian. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. These claims – as both Popper and Lakatos emphasised – also need to receive occasional corroborations of the speculative ideas that they advance. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. These can also, perfectly respectably, include speculative ideas of a realist character. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I am in the course of writing a paper for a conference in which I try to spell out the distinctive character of a critical rationalist approach in a much more systematic way. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)