John Gray: The Value of Silence in Therapy and What it Means to be Human

Matthew Edward Harris and Claire Elizabeth Harris

Abstract: As a philosopher, one would expect John Gray to have much to say about the human condition. A recent work of his, however, The Silence of Animals, may contain some interesting parallel insights into therapy. Gray sees no radical discontinuity between humans and animals. Whereas non-human animals seek silence in the face of danger, the 'human animal' tries to run away from its inner chatter. Ultimately, the 'human animal' will never find complete silence due to its tendency to form narratives in order to make sense out of life. Instead, Gray advocates that the 'human animal' should turn outwards towards nature for temporary respite from meaning making. Gray's insights have implications for 'third wave' therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction which emphasizes reflection and silence, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which Gray would regard as trying to overcome language through language by replacing one myth ('progression' through cognitive restructuring) with another ('acceptance,' of loving one's fate). Nevertheless, it shall be argued that Gray's own solution, of turning outward towards nature, is romantic and impractical.

1. Introduction

In Britain John Gray has become a well-known public intellectual, in no small part due to the massive success of his 2002 book, *Straw Dogs* (Gray 2002). This book saw him emphasize the similarities between humans

and animals (indeed, he refers to 'human animals' rather than merely 'humans'). Along with other themes such as the delusion of progress outside science and technology and the cyclical view of history, the continuity between human animals and the rest of the animal kingdom is taken up as a focal point in his 2013 book, *The Silence of Animals* (Gray 2013). For psychological purposes, arguably the most relevant area of debate is that pertaining to the book's title, of exploring the kinds of silence pursued by human and non-human animals.

2. Gray on Different Kinds of Silence

Gray thinks that only human animals seem to pursue silence to still the noise and chatter of their minds. Whereas animals actively run away from noise made by others, what human animals' seek to avoid is their interior monologue. Desiring to cease this inner chatter, human animals have a long tradition of fleeing from the 'world' into the desert, church, or monastery to resolve their inner turmoil through prayer. Ironically, prayer, meditation, and reflection only add to the inner monologue, turning it into a dialogue with God. Indeed, for Gray these institutions indicate that although inner silence is an apparent good for human animals, it is not natural for them. This is all the more clearly shown today as modern society represses its perceived need for this kind of inner stillness. Inner turmoil and restlessness in pre-modern times was a cause for flight from 'the world' into an attempted inner silence, but in the modern world it is seen as inspiration for progress, as causing change. On this matter, Gray quotes Blaise Pascal approvingly: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (Gray 2013, 161). Being busy is the modern way of escaping one's own inner turmoil, not silence.

Gray knows the distinction he has outlined between these different forms of silence, of the human animal and non-human animal, is not free of value-judgements, ones of which he disapproves. Quoting at length the theologian Max Picard, Gray shows that the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the West prizes hu-

man silence over that of animals as a mark of their superiority. In this regard, human silence is seen to be qualitatively different to that of animals. For example, Gray quotes Picard: "The silence of men is transparent and bright because it confronts the world, releasing the word in every moment and receiving it back into itself again…Animals have a heavy silence. Like a block of stone" (Gray 2013,162). Gray interprets Picard: it is as if silence for animals is isolated and inescapable. It is 'unredeemed' and 'coagulated', as beasts lack speech.

Conversely, Gray disagrees with Picard on the qualitative aspect of silence for the human and non-human animal. He asserts: "Whereas silence is with other animals a state of rest, it is for humans an escape from inner commotion" (Gray 2013,162). Picard's view is taken by Gray to represent the Christian-Humanist tradition in which animals are mere objects that cannot use speech to understand their world. For Gray, the distance between human and animal silence is not particularly that other creatures lack language it is rather more that, "Only humans use words to construct a self-image and a story of their lives" (Gray 2013,163). Although Gray agrees with the Christian-Humanist tradition to the extent that humans have sought silence for therapeutic purposes, he disagrees that human silence is 'better' than animal silence. Indeed, animal silence may well in some sense be more beneficial therapeutically when one considers whether 'human' silence is even possible.

Gray imagines that humans will always to a greater or lesser extent seek to 'redeem' their sense of self by turning to silence through retreating from dialogue, chatter and turmoil. However, as humans use language to weave stories of their lives, Gray raises the question about whether human silence is in fact possible. As human animals, we "cannot help seeing the world through the veil of language" (Gray 2013,164). Even if it is impossible, Gray does not seem to think the exercise of seeking silence is pointless. What seems significant to him is not seeking silence, but where one seeks it. Even if one rejects a crude imagist conception of the mind as

being formed of words and pictures, turning inwards to seek silence is pointless: "To overcome language by means of language is obviously impossible" (Gray 2013,165). All one would find is a different part of the story, or the beginnings of another story. Gray also puts this in terms of 'myths.' The latter are stories humans tell themselves, such as the Genesis myths of creation and the Fall, and also Greek myths such as that of Prometheus. These myths have use value, giving meaning or corrective wisdom to our lives. Gray argues that myths "answer to a need for meaning that cannot be denied" (Gray 2013,82). Myths are put in narrative form, being passed down through generations. We not only have ancient myths, but also modern ones, such as that of progress. Some myths are better than others, but myth as meaning per se cannot be eradicated.

Gray says that to be silent one should not imagine the condition as turning inwards to find words and images, but that instead one should turn outwards to nature, to the birds and the animals, to hear "something beyond words" (Gray 2013,165). To this end, Gray cites the example of J. A. Baker (1926-1987), author of *The Peregrine* (Baker 2011). Baker spent a considerable amount of time following peregrine falcons, and whilst he neither aimed to, nor achieved, a release from language, he was nonetheless able to still his mind temporarily for the time he was out with the falcons. In short, if people try to turn inwards to still themselves through ridding their mind of language, this is impossible for the mind always wants to engage with mythology, narratives and meaning-making. Nevertheless, if people try to calm themselves through an alternative to a busy modern life, restful contemplation of nature this could help them deal with inner turmoil. Ironically, then, for temporary respite from the human world of meaning-making, the human animal should imitate the non-human animal by actively running away from noise, not to an inner place, but to a restful space lacking not noise, but narratives. As Simon Critchley has written in his review of Gray's book, "The radical core of Gray's work, unfashionable as it might seem, is a strident defense of the ideal of contemplation against action" (Critchley 2013).

3. The Silence of the Human Animal and Third Wave Therapies

To anyone familiar with the third wave of behavioral therapies, Gray's line of argument may be familiar. His assertion that; "to overcome language by means of language is obviously impossible," (Gray 2013, 165) is reminiscent of the shift from the second generation of behavioral psychotherapies to the third generation, or 'third wave' as it has been termed (Hayes 2004).

Hayes identifies three generations in the evolution of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The first generation originated in the 1950s with the work of Eysenck, Skinner and Wolpe, and aimed to demarcate learning theories (Hayes 2004, Eysenck 1952, Skinner 1953, Wolpe 1958). This work used predominantly experimental data from animal studies employing operant and learning theory principles. The second generation, according to Hayes, began in the late 1960s and focussed on the role of language, cognition and emotive elements in the development, maintenance and treatment of psychopathology, leading to the development of therapies such as cognitive therapy (CT) (Beck et al. 1979).

Therapies belonging to the second generation focussed largely on direct cognitive restructuring. Cognitive therapy, for example: "…uses various behavioural (and even, on occasion, acceptance) strategies, [however] the focus is ultimately on altering beliefs" (Dozois and Beck 2012). Patients are taught to 'reframe' thoughts, to treat them as hypotheses, rather than facts. More recently, in the 1990s, Hayes identifies a third generation of CBT, comprised of approaches which build on learning from the previous generations but which emphasize mindfulness and acceptance principles amid other factors. Among the new cognitive behavior therapies he identifies are: Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (Linehan 1993); Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP) (Kohlenberg and Tsai 1991); and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al. 2002).

Hayes outlines a number of factors which preceded the development of

the third wave, principally the 'anomalous' notion of the second wave therapies, that direct cognitive change is "a necessary or primary method of clinical improvement in most cases" (Hayes 2004, 644). The latter has been called into question by findings, particularly looking at the data for depression, where behavioral activation has compared equally well to treatments based on modifying core beliefs and cognitions (Dimidjian et al. 2006), as well as no significant difference in outcome at follow-up two years after treatment (Gortner et al. 1998). There have been similar findings for anxiety, which have shown graded exposure to be effective, with no significant added benefit from cognitive restructuring (Longmore and Worrell 2007). Such findings echo John Gray's trepidation about using language based methods to alter our thoughts and feelings. They also supporting his view that modern humans prefer to use busyness than silence to escape their "inner commotion" (Gray 2013, 162). The finding, for example, that a programme of graded exposure confers no benefit for the patient when combined with cognitive restructuring, seems to support Gray's view that using language based methods to overcome unwanted thoughts is ultimately futile.-

4. Gray and Third Wave Therapies: Silence, Fate and Acceptance

Gray, in an interview with John Paul O'Malley, stated that "what people seem to want is not to be caught in the shroud of language" (O'Malley 2013). Psychotherapy seems to have responded in kind to such observations; silence and contemplation are indeed appearing more in therapy, particularly among third wave therapies focussing on mindfulness and acceptance strategies. With regard to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for example, cognitive modification strategies are not taught, and the emphasis instead is on contemplation, frequently in silence. Salmon, Sephton and Dreeben state of MBSR: "many therapists are unaccustomed to periods of silence, as are their patients, who in our society and culture are conditioned to expect authoritative assistance from helping professionals" (Salmon et al. 2011). This appears to concur with Gray's ob-

servation that we cannot but see the world "through the veil of language," (Gray 2013, 164) that any inner turn, even with the objective of silencing, would necessarily involving furthering the web of meaning-making and mythologizing through narratives. Whether one undertakes MBSR, or Vipassana mindfulness-based stress reduction interventions, or silent retreats, Gray would suggest that one cannot overcome the human, all-too-human necessity for mythologizing. As such, Gray's philosophical work acts as forceful challenge to certain strands of third wave therapy.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), is among those therapies belonging to the third wave, and was developed by Hayes himself, along with Kirk Strosahl and Kelly G. Wilson, in 1999. In its concern about the context of language, ACT aims to place the self as the locus of perspective. By emphasising the self as the context from which therapy can develop the acceptance of thoughts and feelings, the patient will be able to learn not to get caught up in the anxiety of experiential avoidance. Gray may well argue that the language of acceptance is merely reviving another myth, the pessimistic language of the Stoics, Schopenhauer, or, more optimistically with Nietzsche, *amor fati* (to love one's fate) (Nietzsche 2001, 157). Gray's book may act as a corrective to the ambitions of ACT and other third-wave therapies, including therapeutic processes involving retreats, of 'getting away from it all.' For Gray, we cannot hope to overcome ourselves like some kind of Nietzschean 'Overman' in being able to rid ourselves of language or to change our language through the means of other language. We cannot do without myths or language in general, in the same way we cannot do without oxygen. All we can hope for, thinks Gray, is some kind of temporary respite from the inner turmoil provided by these myths by being taken out of ourselves through an engagement with nature. Although ACT is not using language to correct language, it is using language as an opiate instead of a surgical knife. In doing so, ACT is still using the stories humans as a culture (even if not individually) have been telling themselves in order to remedy undesirable symptoms such as anxiety and depression. This is where, Gray may think, a better course of

action would be to leave thinking of the self behind by contemplating nature, of immersing oneself in pursuing the peregrine falcon or some other non-discursive natural phenomenon. By placing the locus of perspective in nature, rather than the self, one is led away not only from one's own narratives, but also from cultural myths such as acceptance. In turn, contemplative retreat into nature would provide 'temporary respite' from narrative and all the associations that go with it.

Gray's solution sounds romantic and appealing after a fashion, but is it realistic or practical? A key assumption of ACT is that we are immersed in language, that it is both private and public. If we are able to still ourselves in contemplation of nature (and this surely revives the modern myth that humans are separate from nature), we will only have to return from this respite into the same private-public interface through which we require language to negotiate. If one has not made the self the perspectival locus for therapy, then one will not have even the consoling myth of *amor fati* by which one can navigate one's way through life. In other words, while Gray's solution may provide a 'purer', more momentarily satisfying solution to the psychological problems of the stories we tell ourselves, the story, or 'myth,' of acceptance may well be the more practical, enduring one. While Gray talks about the inescapability of myths, not all myths are of equal use value. Loving one's fate by living in the now may well be more useful than others that tell us the need to change who we are.

5. Conclusion

Gray sees no radical discontinuity between humans and animals. Whereas non-human animals seek silence in the face of danger, the human animal tries to run away from its inner chatter. Traditionally, the latter has been attempted through monastic flights into the desert or monastery. In these places, however, it has been found that one is not free of noise: through prayer, singing, and bells, noise and chatter have followed the person seeking silence. Ultimately, the human animal will never find complete silence due to its tendency to form nar-

ratives in order to make sense out of life. Gradually, the human animal has come to realize this, and instead tries to ignore the inner chatter by attempt an unsustainably busy life that leaves no room for reflection. Instead, Gray advocates that the human animal should turn outwards towards nature for temporary respite from meaning making. Gray's insights have implications for third wave therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction which emphasizes reflection and silence, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which Gray would regard as trying to overcome language through language by replacing one myth (progression, through cognitive restructuring) with another (acceptance, loving one's fate). Nevertheless, Gray's own solution, of turning outward towards nature, is romantic and impractical not only because it implies the kind of discontinuity between humans and non-human animals he professes to reject, but also because temporary respite is inadequate because the majority of our time has to be spent in the company of others and in making meaning through narrative construction.

Bibliography

Baker, J. A. 2011. The Peregrine: The Hill of Summer and Diaries. The Complete Works of J. A. Baker. J. Fanshawe (ed.). London: HarperCollins.

Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F. & Emery, G. 1979. Cognitive Therapy of Depression, New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Critchley, S. 2013. "John Gray's Godless Mysticism: On 'The Silence of Animals,'" in Los Angeles Review of Books. Retrieved from http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/john-grays-godless-mysticism-on-the-silence-of-animals Accessed 24.7.15.

Dimidjian, S., Hollon, S. D., Dobson, K. S., Kohlenberg, R. J., Gallop, R., Markley, D. K., Jacobson, N. S. 2006. "Randomised Trial of Behavior-

al Activation, Cognitive Therapy, and Antidepressant Medication in the Acute Treatment of Adults with Major Depression" in Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, vol. 74, pp. 658-670.

Dozois, D. J. A. and Beck, A. T. 2012. "Cognitive Therapy" in Herbert, J. D. and Forman, E. M. (eds.) Acceptance and Mindfulness in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Understanding and Applying the New Therapies. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 26-56.

Eysenck, H. 1952. "The Effects of Psychotherapy: An Evaluation" in Journal of Consulting Psychology, vol. 16, pp. 319-324.

Gortner, E. T., Gollan, J. K., Dobson, K. S. and Jacobson, N. S. 1998. "Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for Depression: Relapse Prevention" in Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 377-384.

Gray, J. 2002. Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals. London: Granta Books.

Gray, J. 2013. The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths. London: Allen Lane.

Hayes, S. C. 2004. "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Relational Frame Theory, and the Third Wave of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies" in Behavior Therapy, vol. 35, pp. 639-665.

Kohlenberg, R. J. and Tsai, M. 1991. Functional Analytic Psychotherapy: Creating Intense and Curative therapeutic Relationships. New York: Plenum.

Linehan, M. M. 1993. Cognitive-Behavioural Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder. New York: The Guildford Press.

Longmore, R. J. and Worrell, M. 2007. "Do we Need to Challenge Thoughts in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?" in Clinical Psychology Review, vol. 27, pp. 173-187.

Nietzsche, F. 2001. The Gay Science. J. Nauckoff (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Malley, J. P. 2013. "Interview with a Writer: John Gray" in The Spectator. Retrieved from http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/02/interview-with-a-writer-john-gray/ Feb 22nd 2013. Accessed 24.7.15.

Salmon, P. G., Sephton, S. E., and Dreeben, S. J. 2011. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, in Acceptance and Mindfulness in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Understanding and Applying the New Therapies, J. D. Herbert, & E. M. Forman (eds.), Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 132-163.

Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G. and Teasdale, J. D. 2002. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse. New York: The Guilford Press.

Skinner, B. F. 1953. Science and Human Behavior, New York: Macmillan.

Wolpe, J. 1958. Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition, Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press.