

# A.C. Grayling: Master of Shallowness and Naiveté

by Christopher DeGroot (May 2018)



*A View of Utopia, Ambrosius Holbein, 1518*

*This method answers the purpose for which it was devised: it saves lazy editors from working and stupid editors from thinking. But somebody has to pay the price, and that somebody is the author.*

—A.E. Housman

In an unintentionally amusing article called “[If I ruled the world?](#),” published on September 8 of last year in *Prospect*, the so-called “leading magazine of ideas,” in a section purporting to be philosophy, A.C. Grayling, Master of the New College of the Humanities in England, outlines the sort of utopian dream by which intellectuals in our time endeavor to become shining stars in a fool’s firmament.

Despite the difficulty connoted in the proverb about taking horses to water, I’d try to get as many people as possible to share the ideal of a united and rational world, where generosity and tolerance prevail, and where moralism and the infantilising, divisive and conflict-promoting effects of religion fade away. Such a world would be a literate one, where shared humane values promote not merely acceptance but celebration of diversity, so that what people have in common and what makes them individual can both work for the good.

The sources of our world’s troubles are superstitions and the conflicts they prompt, injustice and the bitterness it prompts. Getting rid of injustices, and replacing superstition by more mature thought, would be a big step to

freeing humankind from its painful internecine quarrels, so that it can face the real challenge not just of saving the planet, but of enhancing the experience of all life in it, human and otherwise, into something truly good.

Grayling would like to see a “celebration of diversity, so that what people have in common and what makes them individual can both work for the good.” Of course, diversity signifies diverse values and interests, many of them incompatible—a thorny problem in itself. Grayling overlooks another thing that makes diversity so troublesome, both psychologically and practically: the egoistic nature of man, which, when it cannot get what it wants, or even when its ends are simply hindered, will often think it has been done “wrong,” that it is “a victim” of some sort, especially in our sentimental, rights-centric era, when progressivism is not easily distinguished from the borderline personality.

The natural tendency to equate thwarted ends with a grievance or injury is greatly exacerbated by diversity, a state of affairs that produces conflicting ends by definition. It is a profound truth, although little known in our Glittering Dark Age, that because man is inherently self-interested, to the extent that our interests are not bound together by a common idea and, what is much more, concomitant *feeling* of unarguable justification, which depends on a common culture and history, the state is sure to be characterized by fierce strife, by the clash of conflicting interests and concomitant cultural inheritances that people themselves are in the deepest sense. As we shall see, it is the function of diversity to obviate cultural unity, so that the crucial task of justifying how we shall live together *must* be incoherent.

Averse to religion (mere “superstition,” to him), Grayling ironically gives us a “moralism” and “infantilising” of his own. Like so many liberals today, he appears to believe that through a rather vague notion of “more mature thought”—by which he intends, one supposes, the new Holy Trinity of (value-neutral) Science, Technology and (paper thin) Liberalism—the incompatibility of values and interests, although the product of millennia and of the deepest epistemic social conditioning (i.e., that process by which the mind perceives and therefore *evaluates* phenomena), and therefore *ingrained in human psychology itself*, can adequately be dealt with: a process that will perhaps culminate in a “united and rational world,” “something truly good.” He is a very curious philosopher, A.C. Grayling, because even if, as one may reasonably believe, there is a shared human nature that persists through the centuries, still our justificatory practices are rooted in specific cultural ideas of value: and while these specific cultural ideas of value may have certain vital affinities, it is by no means clear that their fundamental incompatibilities can be overcome by means of “more mature thought,” a phrase in which there seems to be nothing but Grayling’s own conceit. Dispensing with religion, Grayling would have “generosity and tolerance prevail,” “getting rid of injustices” (as he conceives of them) and “freeing humankind from its painful internecine quarrels.” One wants to know, then, just what are those “shared humane values [that] promote not merely acceptance but [the] celebration of diversity.” Might these be the same values that compel so-called [Antifa](#), diversity’s most committed promoters to date, to be so accepting of non-progressives, so exceptionally humane?

A ring of Pakistani pedophilia here. Somalian genital mutilation there. The media disingenuous in the representation. The police, too, fearful of saying the dirty



truth. Diversity is a busy god, sufficient unto the progressive day. The checks roll in steadily as Master Grayling celebrates the good news. When disparate people's clash, their discordant ends displaying nothing of the studied cordiality and agreed-upon false tone of the academic conference, it is for the lower classes—the dirty, sweaty, beer-drinking classes—to feel the effects of Grayling's kind of inclusive ignorance. There's Grayling now. All wide smile, bright eyes, and long flowing white hair, he stands coolly on a London street, licking his lips as he imbibes one of *Prospect's* leading ideas. It is fine, this afternoon, and happy is the lover of Sophia, soon to nourish his noggin. "Well now, on what shall I lunch?" he wonders, a-dazzle at the options. "Moroccan? Ethiopian? Tai? Brazilian? Japanese? Ah, diversity, diversity; how good you are to me!"

And yet here she comes, old reality—inescapable, pesky thing—returning like an angry ex-lover to ruin the poor man's diversity sublime. Yes, A.C. Grayling, the British nursing home philosopher, the truth crashes your diversity party, in league with equally cruel history, who reminds us that in every chapter of the book of man, diversity has been bad news: although today "we forget," as Victor Davis Hanson writes in "[Diversity Can Spell Trouble](#)," "that diversity was always considered a liability in the history of nations—not an asset." Shaken, Grayling clutches his tea cup, smooths his bushy gray mane, looks out the window, longing for the sight of some distant dark skin to calm his befuddled nerves: but still the grim classicist goes on.

Ancient Greece's numerous enemies eventually overran the 1,500 city-states because the Greeks were never able to sublimate their parochial, tribal, and ethnic differences to unify under a common Hellenism. The Balkans were always

a lethal powder keg due to the region's vastly different religions and ethnicities where East and West traditionally collided—from Roman and Byzantine times through the Ottoman imperial period to the bloody twentieth century. Such diversity often caused destructive conflicts of ethnic and religious hatred. Europe for centuries did not celebrate the religiously diverse mosaic of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, but instead tore itself apart in a half-millennium of killing and warring that continued into the late twentieth century in places like Northern Ireland.

In multiracial, multiethnic, and multi-religious societies—such as contemporary India or the Middle East—violence is the rule in the absence of unity. Even the common banner of a brutal communism could not force all the diverse religions and races of the Soviet Union to get along. Japan, meanwhile, does not admit many immigrants, while Germany has welcomed over a million, mostly young Muslim men from the war-torn Middle East. The result is that Japan is in many ways more stable than Germany, which is reeling over terrorist violence and the need for assimilation and integration of diverse newcomers with little desire to become fully German.

The learned Hanson, whose brief op-eds contain more wisdom than is to be found in the whole of Grayling's prolific period pieces, reminds us that high-functioning, well-ordered societies depend on a certain cultural homogeneity, since without it there is no end to the battle of competing and irreconcilable interests. So, instead of pursuing "the ideal of a united and rational world," diverse peoples would do better to simply leave one another alone. As anybody with even a little knowledge of history can readily understand, the notion that much good, or anyway more good than evil, is

likely to result from their having to do with one another is mad indeed.

Although like him an unbeliever, I would submit that Grayling, before he invites colleagues such as Lena Dunham and Lady Gaga over to have tea in philosophic celebration of diversity, would do well to take seriously the fact, which he undoubtedly knows, that reason in itself is no more than a kind of tool, and therefore it is not obvious how he might justify his political ends via "more mature thought" only. Reason serves the interests of man who, *qua* man, does not so much choose them as *represent* them, realizing them, bringing them into being in and through time by virtue of the kind of being that he is. What is more, for all the choices anyone makes in the course of a life, he always does so within the context of a certain inheritance. That inheritance, of course, comes from without, from history and culture, and these vary a great deal, as the partisans of diversity are anxious for everyone to understand. Reason, I say, is a kind of tool, and remarkable though it is, still when it comes to how we wish to live, we hardly require rational justification, for it is in the nature of the human animal to pursue those ends which it is disposed to pursue by virtue of its endowed nature and social conditioning. As Hume put it in his immortal apothegm, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions." There are passions and principles that, in the order of human value, are *prior* to and *supersede* reason because, as said, they are a culturally-specific inheritance: and while we may use reason to realize them, their *value* to us, in our phenomenological experience, is *independent* of justification. [Says](#) William James,

our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* the things arouse in us.

Where we judge a thing to be precious in consequence of the *idea* we frame of it, this is only because the idea is itself associated already with a feeling. If we were radically feelingless, and if ideas were the only things our mind could entertain, we should lose all our likes and dislikes at a stroke, and be unable to point to any one situation or experience in life more valuable or significant than any other.

For we are *essentially* passionate animals. The loss of a loved one, like the prospect of our own demise, would not matter to us if life did not *already* have an *inherently affective* value, which we feel long before we can have any idea of death. By virtue of the kind of beings we are, value is innate, to be called forth in time, like children and lovers, wrinkles and gray hair. Our most significant value judgments correspond to feelings which reflect our natural endowment, as it is shaped by our time and place in history. Again, we may, if we wish, use reason to justify those value judgments, but we need not, and quite often *will* not: being what we are, they are (in effect) *already* justified, for *they lie in persons themselves*. And while the feelings that correspond to these deepest of values may be universal in nature, again, the rational ideas they give rise to vary a great deal among persons and their cultures, as may be learned, for example, from the folly of endeavoring to export democracy to the Middle East.

Nor can reason make what is incompatible cease to be so, no more than a bird's wings can enable it to breathe under water. A grave matter, this. Not something whose difficulty should be minimized or overlooked. In Max Weber's words, "the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other." Or as Isaiah Berlin similarly put it, "the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle



compatible with each other . . . the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.” That both men are right it is not difficult to see. It is challenging for citizens in even a medium-sized city to reach agreement about how they should live together. How much more so on a global scale, without a shared culture and history! For again, we are born into history. It carries us along like so many surfers on their waves. But there are a great many waves, and the surfers tend to be stubborn (and often worse) in believing their own style is the best, nor do most want to argue (coherently) about why their way is better than the next person’s. What is more, in our democratic time just as in ancient Athens experience suggests that not nearly enough of us can.

A supreme statist, smitten with “world-wide initiatives,” Grayling wants “as many people as possible” to share his cosmopolitan liberalism, and his breezy manner suggests that the project is rather like asking a group of friends to agree on what toppings to get on a pizza. In reality, it is more like asking everybody to agree on whether they should eat pizza *at all*—some would prefer lamb chops; others, casserole; still others, falafel; and on and on. Though one can speak or write syntactically correct sentences about such a lofty ideal as Grayling’s, just as one may use the lofty term international community, it seems unlikely that either shall ever exist as a *coherent concept*. “We have chosen the meaning of being numerous,” wrote the Marxist poet George Oppen. The words are simple, and yet profound in implication. For, like trying “to get as many people as possible to share the ideal of a united and rational world,” the difficulty is that in this numerousness, or diversity, there are incompatible values and interests, not “solvable” by reason alone.

For example, the liberal West and Islam, in Wittgensteinian terms, are radically different forms of life. As the word itself denotes, Islam is a religion not of liberty but of submission. A state that does not distinguish between religion and the state itself, that practices female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and polygamy—all aspects of womanhood that amount to de facto sex slavery—and that advocates disseminating Islam via holy war, is not reconcilable with the Western tradition of constitutional government, individual rights, free markets, and respect for women (and homosexuals) as equal citizens. Here “mutual interchange” must produce intractable problems by definition, because without shared assumptions or premises, or in other words, without a common culture and history, in many cases there can be no justification, only question-begging, eventually amounting to might makes right since nothing else can.

Grayling sees plainly that religion is a source of “conflicts,” yet in this he is dismally simplistic. To begin with, he lumps our Judeo-Christian heritage together with Islam, like a man who thinks all feminism is as lunatic as its third wave version. But as Alexis de Tocqueville saw long ago, and as we learn from [Franz Rosenzweig](#), Islam is really a kind of paganism, too different in kind from the two true Abrahamic religions to be reconciled with the modern liberal West. And the trouble for Grayling is that the very democratic liberalism he espouses grew out of the Hebrew Bible by way of the latter’s complex commingling with Greek philosophy, the two producing a tree of knowledge that was later augmented by John Locke, Montesquieu, and other great Enlightenment figures.

More than that, religion, for all its evils, has also served

as a check against our boundlessly selfish and aggressive tendencies. James Madison had those very tendencies in mind when, in "[Federalist No. 10](#) (1787)," he noted that democracies have "in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." For, as Madison understood so profoundly,

the latent causes of faction are . . . sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

What follows from this? That

it is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm . . .

The inference to which we are brought is, that the CAUSES of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its EFFECTS.

Of course, Madison, a truly “enlightened” statesman, more than knowledgeable about human nature, wrote these words during a time when what we now call diversity was justly regarded with prudent suspicion. For Madison, it is manifest that man is a fundamentally egoistic creature, naturally partial to his own ends (“self-love”) and to those of his family and friends, on whom he depends for his own well-being. For all their high-toned words (which, to be sure, usually serve a selfish, material end), the extent to which people are willing to sacrifice for others rarely extends beyond their own small social circle. So, men and women, on the whole, are “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.” Diversity, therefore, is far from being a virtue, because getting people who have a common culture and history to agree is already hard work enough: doing so without such a shared *epistemic foundation* is even more daunting, especially since people are by no means inclined to compromise on their most significant values and interests.

There is a profound lesson, moreover, to be got from the fact that human disagreements, in politics and in every other domain, are quite often incoherent, people misperceiving and misrepresenting each other in terms of their own premises: an incoherence that usually is not even seen for what it is. Men care about nothing so much as their own selves. To do away with disagreement, therefore, is one of the greatest political goods. And again, the best way to achieve that is through cultural homogeneity. For then people may share beliefs and principles that they are not inclined to dispute, or that they are less inclined to dispute, anyway.

Although it can, and often has, served to divide mankind, leading to war and other conflicts, religion has also had the special function of bringing people together; most effectively through *moral fear*. This is why the shrewd pagan Plato believed the *polis* required a noble lie: if the people are not constrained by the gods of the city, then their brutal egoism, with its endless "CAUSES of faction," will be all the more formidable. Today religion is dying throughout the liberal West just as nations, in a [predictable response](#) to the effects of global capitalism, have taken a nationalist turn. Grayling, meanwhile, speaks naively of greater unity, while being averse to what has historically been mankind's greatest source thereof. He likewise affirms liberalism, as though its eroding affective metaphysical bedrock were no impediment. Thus the philosopher dangles from a sagging branch, proudly chanting "democracy and science and tolerance, forever and forever and forever!"

A little Nietzsche would suffice to show Grayling the profound dilemma his shallow liberalism faces. For it is not evident that man, *in psychologics*, can adequately carry out his liberal democratic experiment without the metaphysical justification and, above all, moral character that gave rise to it and that has sustained it. Still, Grayling is eager to build his fortress on what is quicksand for all he knows, and furthermore considers it his virtue that he would have you join in his mad endeavor. Let us "face the real challenge not just of saving the planet," he says, "but of enhancing the experience of all life in it, human and otherwise, into something truly good." His problem is not only that the science whereby he would do so is value-neutral. Granting (again) for argument's sake that there is a universal human nature, in virtue of which, for example, the life of the ordinary Western woman is superior to (note the value judgment



here) that of the ordinary woman in Afghanistan, it remains true that we are *essentially passionate* animals, rationality in itself cold, and religion having historically served to shape and guide the affects, it is not at all obvious how man, through reason, science and technology alone, can arrive at a *moral-psychological disposition* which sufficiently comprehends such virtues as fairness and honesty, temperance and self-restraint, self-sacrifice and charity: and without these virtues—which, again, are essentially *affective* in character—there is little democracy proper, but rather the hollow language of rights, equality, and diversity in which academics like Grayling traffic like so many marketers and customer service representatives.

Thus, happily overlooking modernity's profound metaphysical dilemma, Grayling the would-be master of humanities is able to write: "I'd encourage and highly reward more effective AI language-translation apps that enable anyone to talk to anyone anywhere in the world as easily as if they are conversing in the same language. More mutual interchange and understanding is a promoter of peace, and peace is a promoter of progress." Notice the underlying assumption that human nature itself is *intrinsically* inclined to peace, because that is what is required in order for it to be true, as Grayling claims, that "more mutual interchange and understanding" leads to peace and so ring the progressive bell and toast to diversity. History strongly suggests the opposite; just consider the Balkans or the Middle East, among other regions. As a general rule, insofar as there is "mutual interchange" there is conflict and war, nor is it evident that mere "understanding" promotes "peace and progress." Besides, while I understand sharia law, that is hardly a reason to change my mind about wanting nothing to do with it and Islam generally. You might have a look at this [video](#) if you yourself harbor any illusions concerning the religion of the sword. Much of the Islamic

world, while understanding our decadent and in many respects depraved Western culture, nevertheless does not look on it with peaceful sentiments.

Still more, today we largely lack the strength of character needed to face the incompatibility of human values in a tragic world. For, where previous generations fought in wars and worked with their hands, today we tap keyboards in rooms that are cozy or cool so as to suit our taste, and what we have gained in ease we have lost in clear-headedness and willpower. Thus, where severity is needed, we choose sentimentalism. Grayling's infantilizing statism—taking it for granted that the law can simply direct human psychology, as though human nature were as programmable as computer software—is a typical example of this.

Meanwhile, Islam presents us with a type of believer whose boldness and devotion seem unmatched in world history. On September 11, 2001 we saw Muslims sacrifice their own lives in order to murder innocent civilizations, to effect *the civilizational death wish* that is jihad. To his credit, Grayling has been a frank critic of Islam. To his discredit, he has been a dangerous critic of the West's Judeo-Christian heritage, which alone affords the strength of will (once more, an affective matter) we require to face such a serious enemy. Grayling's hope for preserving and for ameliorating the West lies wholly in reason. This approach, both naive and dangerous, finds him in very bad historical company. "The first maxim of our politics," said Robespierre, "ought to be to lead the people by means of reason." "There can be nothing of value," said Hitler, "which is not in the last resort based on *reason*." Others who made reason primary in politics, while ignoring the primacy of human nature itself and people's local prejudices and traditions, include Lenin, Stalin, Mao.

Grayling's zeal for technology is as ill-founded as his statism. Technology is by no means the unmixed blessing he suggests. "The human understanding," said Francis Bacon, "is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it." What makes this so remarkable, and endlessly complicated and pernicious in its effects, is that each person's understanding being specific to his particular experiences and culture and history, and the world being such a varied place, the distortion and discolouring is infinite: which is by no means to say that we will always be aware of the general incoherence, or that we are meant to be by virtue of the nature of human reason.

Nor shall we stop preferring our own ends and interests to the exclusion of others, as we naturally do as creatures whose essential characteristics are need and desire. Though Grayling is enthusiastic about our era's impressive new technology, which "enable[s] anyone to talk to anyone anywhere in the world," our brave new digital world also functions to promote misunderstanding *en masse*, indeed exponentially, as a quick look at mainstream media now shows every hour of every day. Neither is there much to be done about this, because the misunderstandings, although realized by our machines, are nothing but reflections of the nature of the human mind itself. "The world only goes round by misunderstanding," Baudelaire wrote in his journal.

No matter for Grayling since, like many "public intellectuals," he is in the [very lucrative business](#) of peddling rosy illusions, and so I understand that he and the drag queen RuPaul are now at work on a 2,378 page

transatlantic treatise which will finally settle the matter of how those persons who choose their own “gender identity” are to be addressed. As the public looks forward to that Copernican Revolution, it may feel fortified to know that Grayling has already told us that, if the Sophist-King but had the power, he would enact the following “world-wide initiatives.”

I’d remove Trump from office and put someone with common sense in the White House. Same for Kim Jong-Un and a few similar: they can all live together on Love Island. I’d abolish not only all nuclear weapons, but the entire arms trade. I’d get everyone serious about tackling climate change. I’d give the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court real teeth. I’d free the Security Council from its paralysis, and oblige all member states to pay their UN dues, which I’d increase to enhance UN peace-keeping activities. International aid budgets would be increased to ensure good quality primary and secondary education for every child everywhere; and equal opportunities and pay between the sexes would be made internationally mandatory. Aid increases would also go to support more clean water and health initiatives, a high priority being safe childbirth and universal immunisation against communicable and infectious diseases.

Here it is seen that it is Grayling himself who lacks “common sense.” While President Trump has no interest in philosophy, the man does at least know how to make money, and his experiences in the business world have borne fruit in politics. As Victor Davis Hanson has [remarked](#), the President’s undervalued political savvy derives from his time in the ruthless New York City real estate market. Thus, whatever may be his personal failings, his views have at least some basis

in a demanding practical reality—the sort of thing about which Grayling, a typical insular intellectual, would appear to know nothing. Besides, the common assumption that the President, or other political leader, must be “a good man” is a typical instance of American naivete and Protestant priggishness. It is a belief that would have moved the ancients to laughter, for if anything, politics is eminently the domain of bad man, who, as such, are generally more capable of sober judgments concerning the hardest matters.

Nor is President Trump incompetent. To the contrary, after his first year in office, he may pride himself on the biggest rollback of the regulatory state in recent decades and on a tax cut that has increased the growth of America’s GDP. Unemployment, moreover, has