
**Review's abstract:** The latest book of essays by the English liberal philosopher A.C. Grayling confronts readers with a disquieting thought: we are living in times in which the tried-and-tested-and-true precious principles of liberty are endangered by various types of ‘fundamentalism, reaction, and their militant expression’. Grayling’s Liberty Principle (it can be called) lends his liberalism a strong sense of urgency and rightness that leads him to condemn the ‘self-harm’ that he thinks is weakening the spirit and fact of liberty in ‘the West’. Grayling’s approach seems unobjectionable; citizens with a feel for questions of civil liberty might even think his case obvious. Yet in his reflection on Grayling’s approach John Keane argues that tough objections can and should be made to the way he frames his defence of liberty; each reveals the parochialism of Grayling’s book and the defects of John Stuart Mill-style liberalism in the entirely different circumstances of the 21st century.

Presented in clean-cut prose with gravitas and fetching phrases straight from the quill of John Stuart Mill, the latest book of essays by the English liberal philosopher A.C. Grayling confronts readers with a disquieting thought: we are living in perilous times in which the tried-and-tested-and-true principles of liberty are losing ground to the evils of ‘fundamentalism, reaction, and their militant expression’.

Grayling wastes few words recalling the decadence of the decade that has just ended. In the name of protecting and promoting liberty, armies were sent to more than a few foreign countries. Talk by leaders of ‘pre-emptive’ action flourished. Civilians were put through costly new ‘security’ checks. Police powers expanded; the dark arts of surveillance spread; and the old poisonous division between the torturable and non-torturable classes made a drastic comeback. The consequence, argues Grayling, is that Western liberal societies are morphing into garrison states, armed camps in which citizens are routinely treated as if their daily lives play out on a permanent battlefield in a ‘misnamed “War on Terror”’.

Grayling is upset by these disquieting trends, and that is why he sharpens his liberty sword. The freedom of reasoning individuals is for him the paramount human value.
Such liberty should only be limited when individuals make nuisances of themselves by acting unreasonably, for instance when they embrace religious bigotry or (on the same continuum for him) terrorise and kill civilians in public places. Grayling’s Liberty Principle (it can be called) lends his liberalism a compass, a magnet-guided sense of urgency and rightness that leads him to condemn the ‘self-harm’ that he thinks is now weakening the spirit and fact of liberty in ‘the West’. Eternal vigilance is his war cry. He wants to say that while ‘terrorism is a serious threat, and has to be countered’ the far more worrying trend is the current squeeze on civil liberties by ‘liberal democratic’ governments. The principle of liberty was originally designed to protect individuals against arbitrary uses of state power. Today, in its name, individuals are being robbed blind of its benefits.

Here Grayling’s chief target is Britain. His picture of political life in the Land of Hope and Glory is not pretty. He portrays it as a lazy parliamentary democracy, a polity whose rich and ancient traditions of civil liberty are now threatened, not just by fiscal bankruptcy, Westminster rigor mortis, muddled defensiveness about ‘Europe’ and the dark arts of political manipulation (wonderfully satirised in the BBC series *The Thick of It*). Citing E.M. Forster’s attack during the 1930s on ‘Fabio-Fascism’, Grayling points a finger as well at its latter-day equivalent, a very British authoritarianism that is gaining the upper hand by stealth, one parliamentary bill, one new police dawn raid and one new regulation at a time, all with ‘too little awareness, too little discussion, and too little accountability’.

Grayling probably exaggerates the omniscience and technical competence of the burgeoning security systems he detests, but the picture he draws of political sclerosis seems worryingly accurate; citizens with a feel for questions of civil liberty might even think his case is blindingly obvious. Yet tough objections can and should be made to the way Grayling frames his defence of liberty; each objection highlights the surprising parochialism of this book and the defects of John Stuart Mill-style liberalism in the entirely different circumstances of the early 21st century.

For a start, many commentators, Marx included, have shown how Mill was forced by circumstances to get his long johns in a twist about democracy. His writings followed the 19th-century rule that cries for liberty were normally curses against the people.
That was why in *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* (1859) Mill favoured the weighting of the suffrage in favour of liberty-loving, educated types like himself. Grayling is steeped in much the same spirit. Lip service is paid to ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’, certainly, but for him it is the liberty of secular and reasonable individuals, above all their liberty of expression, that is the primary philosophical and political value. Questions about the desirability of group rights and citizens’ equal access to property, or legal guarantees of decent pensions or the right to be different — these and other topical questions in contemporary democracies simply disappear from the pages of this book.

Too much pomp about liberty of reasonable individuals, not enough commitment to the radical equalisation of power, humility and give-and-take, rough-and-tumble pluralism of democracy: that is how Grayling’s liberalism comes across. His numbed liberal feelings for democracy show up in curt and inaccurate comments about its history and present-day trajectories; his secularist view of its origins and use of the zombie phrase liberal democracy certainly don’t help. The torpidity is particularly evident in Grayling’s attack on Isaiah Berlin, whose own defence of liberty was deeply sensitive to its contingent philosophical status (liberty was for him by no means an Absolute, but a fragile space-time achievement). Berlin also wisely spotted the internal contradictoriness of the ideal of liberty. Different liberties (of property ownership and press freedom, for instance) usually stand at odds with one another. That was why, as Leszek Kolakowski and other central European intellectuals first noted, political thinking in defence of liberty implied fighting for something much more radical: a civil society that made room not just for liberalism, but for many and various ways of life and definitions of freedom protected by law, convivial customs, different types of property and representative forms of democratic government.

The global fascination with the democratic ideals and politics of civil society that has mushroomed during the past half generation seems uninteresting to Grayling. To put matters bluntly, that’s because his liberalism is fundamentalist. In supposing that Liberty enjoys the status of a foundational First Principle, in an old-fashioned philosophical sense, Grayling in effect writes against the style and substance of a democratic civil society by calling upon everyone to sign up to his brand of liberalism, or else suffer the consequences. Proof of this dogmatism is his call to
‘toughen’ the ideal of liberty against what he dubs Berlin’s ‘1950s tea-time’ view of it. Scones and jam and good-natured conversation cannot overcome political disagreements about the good life, writes Grayling. What is needed instead is the robust requirement that ‘anyone who wishes to live in and benefit from membership of a liberal society should be prepared to live by its basic values’. Those who dissent from its liberal principles ‘must give up their membership’ of this society. They must ‘seek a place’ where they can live according to their ‘alternative values’. Presumably by emigrating. Or by finding themselves a mattress and bedpan behind bars.

O liberty! What unreasonable things are said and done in thy reasonable name! Grayling’s dogmatism is mirrored in the distinction between ‘the West’ (a loaded noun Grayling uses repeatedly) and the rest of the world, full of basket case states, religious believers, criminal types and corrupted politicians and civilians who have no feel for the Liberty Principle. The mental geography within this book is particularly objectionable. It is not just that Grayling’s liberalism is unable to grasp (for example) that in contexts as different as India, Taiwan and South Africa there are vigorous living traditions of freedom whose language, institutions and ‘rationality’ are not describable or analysable by resorting to the vocabulary of John Stuart Mill. Grayling’s liberalism is just too self-important. It amounts to a form of narcissistic thinking that combines the concern for precious liberties at home with ignorance or summary judgments of events abroad.

‘Where liberty is not, there is my country’, Tom Paine once quipped to Benjamin Franklin. What’s missing in this book is an engaged awareness that concern with civil liberties and democracy at home are practically bound to their degradation elsewhere in the world, for instance in the Middle East, where the military struggle against ‘terrorism’ is making things much worse, not better. Here’s more bad news from the past decadent decade: military invasion of the region, led by American and British armies in Afghanistan and Iraq, has become the poisonous norm. Its toxins have spread into Lebanon, Palestine, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, and may well spread more widely. Israel’s wars on Lebanon and Gaza and the West Bank are making matters worse, even in Israel. Its garrison state and cruel aggressions make a mockery of Western talk of liberty, democracy and human rights, as does Western support for Arab dictatorships throughout the region. The hypocrisy of democracies backing
autocracies and terrorising innocents (as in Palestine and Lebanon) is fuelling anti-American and anti-British and anti-Semitic sentiment throughout and beyond the region. The magnetic attraction of al-Qaeda tactics among the disaffected is correspondingly growing, way beyond the region, for instance into Britain, itself now a major hothouse for types like Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and those yet to make a name for themselves on the global stage.

Two further kinds of resistance have meanwhile become visible in the region during the past decade. One of them is armed struggle, using the tactics of asymmetric warfare practised by Hamas and Hezbollah, with or without the support of Iran, whose upgrading as a major regional player is an unintended consequence of the Anglo-American-led military destruction of Iraq’s Baathist regime. The other brand of resistance, non-violent civil action against dictatorship in defence of civil society and human rights, is weak but now desperately trying to get up from bended knee in Iran. Its elevation, as the 2009 electoral victory led by Saad Hariri in Lebanon shows, might make a powerful difference to the whole region. It would certainly have leavening effects upon the lives of Muslims and other liberty-loving citizens in so-called Western countries as well. Which goes to show that despite the multiple blind spots in this book’s liberal defence of liberty A.C. Grayling, in spite of himself, is on to something pivotal.