

secularworld

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Editorial: Sartre's freedom and responsibility



The great French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, that "Man is condemned to be free." For Sartre, freedom was not only in the very core of his existentialist philosophy, but also was the most fundamental of human values. Freedom reminds us that we have the power to create ourselves. We have the capacity to make choices, and be defined by those choices. Even when we find ourselves in circumstances or situations we did not choose, it is still within our power to decide how we are going to react in those situations.

For Sartre, it is not enough to say that humans are free. He wanted to emphasize that humans are condemned to be free. Why? Because, to paraphrase a well-known quote, "with great freedom comes great responsibility". Responsibility plays a central role in Sartre's philosophy. There are two kinds of responsibility which define the human condition, Sartre says.

The first view of responsibility says that man is responsible for whatever happens in his life - that he is to blame for whatever happens in his life. Since man constructs his life as he wants and chooses how to confront different

situations and how to handle them, then he not only has responsibility over his actions, but also towards the implications of his actions. According to Sartre, "Men get the war they deserve." At the moment at which man is absolutely free to make his choices or live according to how he wants to live his life, then he also bears the responsibility for the situation in which he finds himself.

The second view of responsibility according to Sartre is less individualistic and more collective in nature. When Sartre aims to bring man in the forefront of philosophy not only as an individual but also as a member of society. In promoting this, the environment of the period after World War II was helpful, as Sartre said, referring to every human: "You and I will shape the future".

"The first effect of existentialism", Sartre says, "is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men."

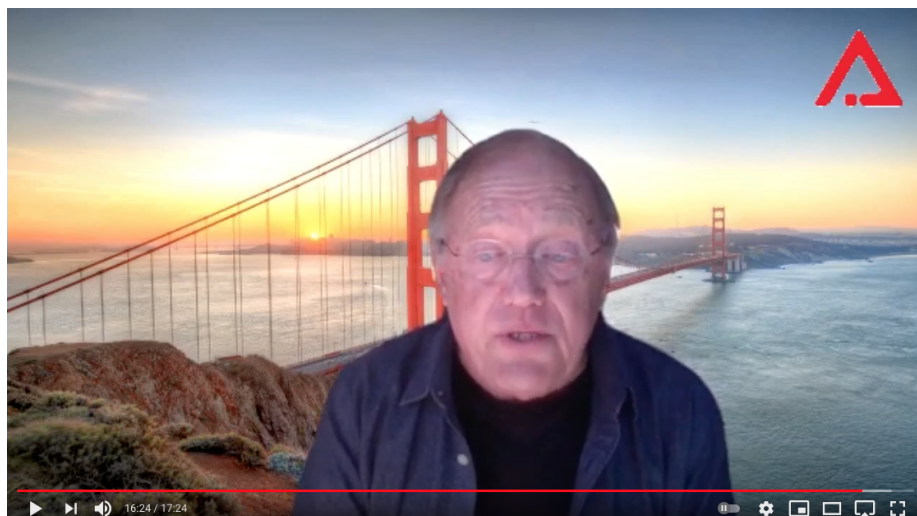
Then, man proceeds to deny his freedom, aiming to convince himself that he has a

predetermined purpose in his life, that he belongs in a certain ideology, that he ought to become someone or something. This pushes him to act, according to Sartre, in 'Bad Faith'. Acting in bad faith is a result of man's rejection of his authenticity and freedom. We tend to see our freedom as something which we stop having when there are external influences in our lives but, as Sartre says, we never stop being free even if it seems that we are being influenced by external factors. Bad faith results in us underestimating our freedom and we tend to see ourselves as less free than we actually are.

However, we must embrace our freedom and understand that it gives us great power to shape ourselves and the world around us.

Angelos Sofocleous
Editor

President's Letter



In September, we turn 30-years-old. That in itself is an achievement worth celebrating. And we will! I don't have the statistics on this, but I doubt most similar organizations have lasted so long.

For thirty years we have been committed to raising awareness and educating the public about atheism. For thirty years, we have been helping atheists in jeopardy wherever in the world they live. For thirty years we have been supporting atheist and freethought organizations around the world by assisting them with local campaigns, outreach, secular education projects, coaching, and promoting interactions among these groups.

We were founded in 1991 as Atheist Alliance, an organization of four U.S.-based local atheist groups. Over time Atheist Alliance expanded, adding both local/regional U.S. groups and international groups as members. The organization changed its name to Atheist Alliance International in 2001. In 2010 and 2011, members approved the separation of the U.S. and international segments of AAI into separate organizations to accommodate each group's different strategic interests. The U.S. group of

AAI was renamed Atheist Alliance of America. The launch of the newly restructured AAI occurred at the World Atheist Convention in Dublin, Ireland, in June 2011.

The United Nations approved our consultative status at its July 2013 Substantive Session following the recommendation of the UN Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations. This has allowed us to have official representatives at the UN Headquarters in New York and its Geneva and Vienna offices.

We also have participatory status with the Council of Europe. I have represented us at both The Council of Europe and the United Nations in recent years. Now, thirty years after our founding, we are truly thriving. We have more Affiliates and individual members than we ever have. We have a website that achieves 450,000+ annual page views and an active social media presence.

Recently we have become much more transparent. We now publish itemized expenditure on all except minor campaigns and have achieved a GuideStar Platinum rating for transparency—the highest available. I don't know of any other freethought

organization that takes transparency to this level.

We have an active and committed volunteer board that regularly works to support our vision— a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry, and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality, and evidence, and where individuals who lack religious beliefs enjoy free speech, freedom of association and freedom to participate in public life.

We continue to support atheist and freethought organizations worldwide by assisting them with local campaigns, outreach, secular education projects, coaching, and promoting interactions among these groups.

So, we are primed for another thirty years of helping make the world a little better place by working for the rights of the non-religious. In September, we plan to host an online event to celebrate all we have done and all we will do.



Howard Burman
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The Freedom to be Mistaken

“I would never die for my beliefs
because I might be wrong” -
Bertrand Russell

For anyone that enjoys discussing politics with others, the public sphere is currently in a very sorry state. The gross polarisation of public discourse, where participants feel pushed to choose a 'side' and demonize disagreement on every worthwhile subject, has created an increasingly toxic environment that discourages earnest conversation, and where one can so easily fall into the trap of 'othering' fellow humans with different outlooks. To make matters worse, the inescapable permanence of mistakes granted immortality via the internet, and widespread suspicion of possible Fake News, provide all the ammunition one might ever need to dismiss the views, and worth, of other people. Consequently, and especially for any sensitive subject, we must walk on eggshells consistently to avoid any deluge of public outrage and ridicule; after all, we are unfortunately at our least objective and empathetic when discussing those subjects that matter to us the most. This can

be as true of interactions between public intellectuals – people from whom we might expect better - as between anyone else, as Social Media attests.

Conversation should not be this way. Pondering the cosmos should be a collaborative, not combative, exercise in discovery. As members of an open, civil society, *we must not allow this growing norm to entrench itself further.*

So how do we overcome so bleak a situation? What specifically is missing here, which we so desperately need if we are to reclaim our capacity to discuss and disagree productively? I would suggest that there is an important element to the 'marketplace of ideas' at the heart of effective and honest dialogue, which is increasingly absent in public discourse, and which must be reclaimed – the freedom to make mistakes.

Take the recent controversy around Professor Richard Dawkins, someone once broadly celebrated among atheists and secularists but now a polarising figure. Having tweeted multiple times in relation to Transsexuality, he was criticised by some as Transphobic for his comments, while others defended his tweets as investigative and reasonable.

It is not my intention here to throw my weight behind one interpretation of these events. That said, the strength with which some critics have come forward to denounce him, and

the certainty with which some have decided the worst of him, barely seems proportionate to the evidence. Take one writer, someone possessing a social media following of over half a million people, who alleged that Dawkins was “denying the basic humanity of trans people”. Across the entirety of Dawkins shared thoughts on the subject, there appears to be little to support such a sizeable accusation in my opinion. Elsewhere, Dawkins' defenders fallaciously cited his scholarly achievements as though they were incontrovertible proof of his immunity to moral, verbal or factual error. Regardless of one's own views on Richard Dawkins, the confidence with which Dawkins has been accused by some, and exonerated by others – including people with considerable audiences and reputations – almost beggars belief. How could both 'camps' be so utterly convinced, and so comfortable with vilifying one another, on the basis of the same tweets?

These interactions, the drawing of battle-lines and condemnation of dissenters, are all possible only because there has been no space for, or toleration of, error: to critics, either Dawkins has deliberately dog-whistled to transphobes, or he has been careless enough to accidentally embolden transphobes, so he is disgraced in either case. And in the minds of both critics and defenders, the possibility of

themselves misinterpreting Dawkins wording and intentions is curiously absent. It is only with such certainty, in both believing to know the mind of Dawkins and in trusting one's own judgement without doubt, that such polarisation and hostility makes sense. Would the same two factions exist, if their members doubted their absolute convictions, and allowed themselves to contemplate being mistaken for even a moment?

The reality is that no one is immune to fallacious reasoning, and no one is writing, speaking or thinking at their best at every given moment. One need only consider one's own share of past *faux pas* to recognise this. Accordingly, it makes no sense to expect, or worse yet demand, that others reach immaculate standards which we understand perfectly well that none of us can achieve and maintain. Moreover, we know that we ought not behave as though our own opinions are above reproach. Yet when others do inevitably fall short of these standards, or perhaps simply disagree with us on something, we may respond as though the best explanation for their behaviour is some ethical or mental defect, rather than the very real possibility that they, or we, are mistaken. Is it truly more likely that everyone who disagrees with you, or made an odd comment on Twitter a decade ago, is simply an immoral imbecile deserving of

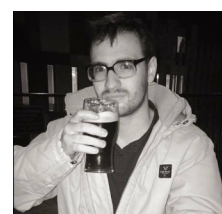
contempt?

This is not to say that people don't exist who are happy to mislead, or who are unreliable: This shouldn't be interpreted as tolerating others being wrong all of the time. Rather, accept that *no-one is right all the time*. In fact, intellectual carelessness and dishonesty often have their origins in unmeasured certainty; some have such confidence in their beliefs that they will knowingly promote misinformation, so long as the end result is a robust defence of those beliefs in the eyes of their like-minded audience. They truly believe that the ends justify the means, and imagine that others will accept any information that reinforces their own beliefs: no one ever lies if they imagine that their intended audience will effectively scrutinise their claims. This is just another way in which the divides in our politics become more entrenched. Thus we must work tirelessly to stress-test our own beliefs, while giving ourselves and others permission to get things wrong sometimes, but still demand that those who are *routinely wrong or deceptive* pay the price with their credibility and reputation.

In leaving space for mistakes in our thinking and the thinking of others, we arrest our reflex to mistrust those with whom we disagree, reduce our reliance on positive reinforcement from perceived ideological allies, and we free ourselves from the need to save face. We reap the benefits of conversations engaged in good faith - we listen, expose ourselves to more

ideas, and become better informed for it, when beforehand we may have argued without giving a fair consideration of our interlocutors and the points they made. Take the concept of 'Steelmanning', and extend it beyond conversation, to the very character and values of other people. Consciously accept that no-one is perfect, that we are merely human, even you - and that's OK.

For too long have we tolerated the growing norms of accusation and dehumanisation by overconfident political tribes, acting to dominate and polarise human discourse. The marketplace of ideas depends on the willingness of participants to converse, and necessarily must include the belief that one shan't be written off or vilified for any simple misunderstanding or blunder. A paradigm shift then being essential, it is high time that we began granting others, and ourselves, the benefits of doubt, and begin bridging divisions and reshaping conversations to make discourse what it always should have been: an opportunity for flawed apes to muse and stumble our way through understanding a complicated world. Together.



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Calling Israel to Account for its Human Rights Abuses



Image: Mohamad Torokman/Reuters

For decades, Israeli politicians have systematically violated the human rights of the Palestinians with virtually no repercussions. When confronted about these violations by the community of nations, Israel plays the Holocaust card to try and shame its critics into silence; and it often works. Former Israeli minister, [Shulamit Aloni](#), admitted this tactic in a 2002 interview for [Democracy Now](#). Given the scale of Israel's recent assault on Gaza, including the bombing of a residential building that also held the offices of Al-Jazeera and the Associated Press, that hand may finally have been over-played.

Twenty-five years ago, Noam Chomsky [wrote](#) that Israel acts with impunity given the unwavering support provided by the US government. Eleven years ago, Hitch [pondered](#) why American politicians 'acquiesce so wretchedly . . . at the hands of a virtual client state.' It seems things have finally gone too far for some Americans. Recently the [New York Times](#) writes

that many American Democratic senators are wary of continuing to give Israel a pass for its heavy-handed claims of self-defense. The article quotes the president of an Israeli lobby group, [Street](#), stating that Americans turning a blind eye 'essentially amounts to international immunity to Israel.'

What is baffling, to this writer anyway, is that after many centuries of anti-Semitism and maltreatment of Jews in various lands, Israeli politicians currently in charge apparently learned absolutely nothing. Indeed, the Twitter feeds of two Jewish [Washington Post](#) correspondents are constantly updated with the latest Israeli abuses and the disgust of these reporters at what is being done to the Palestinians.

[Mairav Zonszein](#) is one of the most vocal and consistent critics, not just of Israeli government tactics, but the [abuses perpetrated by zealous Jews](#), as well. On May 14, 2021, she wrote on Twitter: 'The torching of a

synagogue in Lyd cannot be understood without the context of the hundreds of mosques and churches desecrated and torched by settlers in the West Bank for years, with bear total impunity.'

[Gershon Gorenberg](#), another *Post* contributor, details the theistic rot at the heart of Israeli politics in his 2011 book, [The Unmaking of Israel](#). Gorenberg makes several interesting points, such as the fact that denial of the right of return for Palestinians was decided in a cabinet meeting in 1948, and IDF expulsions of Palestinian villagers subsequently accelerated. Gorenberg also alludes to the biblical injunction of [Deuteronomy 10:19](#) (You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt), noting that the 'most basic Jewish aspiration should be to do better' but which the state of Israel wholeheartedly ignores in its zealotry to annex the entirety of the 'Promised Land.'

Two other significant points relate to Gorenberg's mention of the 1948

cabinet decision. One, the founder of the World Jewish Congress, [Nahum Goldmann](#), captured the words of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, in *The Jewish Paradox*: 'If I was an Arab leader I would never make terms with Israel. . . . They only see one thing: we have come here and stolen their country.' Second, [Israeli propaganda](#), entirely ignoring these two preceding inconvenient facts, simply wipes its hands of the entire refugee crisis (emphasis added): 'Israel does not bear responsibility for the creation **or the perpetuation** of the Palestinian refugee problem.'

The Jewish fanaticism which fuels these human rights abuses, is, unsurprisingly and simultaneously ironic, biblically based; so much for morals deriving from the Bible. In 1980, Bar-Ilan University rabbi, [Israel Hess](#), published an article titled *Genocide: A Commandment of the Torah*, which he based on the passage in [Deuteronomy 25:17-19](#) which justifies the slaughter of the Amaleks. Aloni commented on this twice, once in 2003 when she [noted](#) that children in religious schools were taught to associate the Palestinians with the Amaleks, and again in 2014 when she recalled Hess's essay [writing](#) that it was 'no coincidence that in the settlements the Palestinians are called 'Amalek', and the intention is obvious.'

The illegal settlements further fuel the discord, as orthodox Jews who feel entitled to the entire land of Israel because some ancient fictitious text says so, evict Palestinians from their lands in the West Bank in the ongoing game of

territorial encroachment. Netanyahu, the recently ousted PM who is embroiled in his own scandals, not only allowed these illegal settlements to go unchallenged, but he encouraged their continued creation.

The zealotry which prompted a rabbi to call for the extermination of the Palestinians only thirty-five years after the Holocaust and inspires orthodox Jews to build illegal settlements, mixed with the party line that Israel is not responsible for the refugee crisis despite the documented facts otherwise, does not add up to a state acting in good faith to rectify a humanitarian injustice but one that seeks to perpetuate it. These are not the actions of a state committed to peace and human rights, but one pandering to its hardcore religious right—surely, a recipe for disaster.

It is time Israel grew up and started acting like a mature and responsible member of the international community. If not, they will only continue to foster hatred and unrest among the Palestinians—which is decidedly not in their long-term security interests—and they will become increasingly isolated pariahs on the global stage. And they will have no one to blame but themselves. Not that they will accept the blame, but rather just issue more propaganda pointing the finger at others for the bed they find themselves lying in.

In short, it is time for biblical fictions to stop directing Israeli government policy and encouraging orthodox Jews to annex more land because some book claims a

non-existent god gave it to them almost 4000 years ago—especially since archaeologists have proven Jewish culture had not yet emerged at that time. If not, as Gorenberg so aptly named his book, the world will witness the unmaking of Israel. The Palestinians deserve to be treated humanely and fairly, and world governments need to stop enabling Israeli abuses in some misplaced attempt to atone for anti-Semitic repressions of past centuries. The Palestinians should never have been forced to pay the piper for what was done to European Jews, and it is time the rest of the world recognized this uncomfortable truth and compel Israel to the peace table.



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A Nigerian Humanist Presidential Apprehension: Mubarak Bala



Image: Humanists International

Humanists come under a variety of labels and identifications with some of them as atheists, others as agnostics, as freethinkers, and the like. It's one of those philosophical sets of principles associated loosely with a wide gamut of formalized or semi-formalized alternatives to traditional religions.

To be free to adhere to these belief sets is one thing, to be jailed or even killed for them is another. Mubarak Bala is one of the most famous freethought leaders to be jailed.

His formal title and association is the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. With his stature to the most populace nation in Nigeria, particularly Muslim-majority northern Nigeria, many saw him, as a humanist, as a threat.

He and I were to conduct an interview on April 27, 2020. We had been in communication, had completed several interviews before, and were to continue in this trend as a regular procedure. We were colleagues. I admired the work of the humanist and secular communities in Nigeria.

African states tend to be particularly stringent socially on non-believers, especially non-Christians and non-Muslims with a special threat-status to ex-Muslims.

I sent both question sets for the interviews with him. Then the communication channels went dead, which was surprising. As it turns out, two non-uniformed officers detained Mubarak on April 28, 2020. It was a despicable and unprofessional act on the part of the authorities, once again, to make an example of a freethinking leader.

Back in 2014, Bala became far more well-known within the international freethinker communities based on detainment in a psychiatric unit. Why? His *family members* made this happen because he said, "I am an atheist." He didn't believe in God.

To family, this was a punishable offense, so as to send him for psychiatric 'treatment.' Which is to state, he was drugged by force and then committed to a psychiatric

unit for 'treatment' by family.

This is representative of the extent and horror of transcendentalist ethical thinking in which individuals, even family, considering themselves working for a God instantaneously and simultaneously violate the individual rights of another family member.

Bala became suspect in the eyes of the family in 2014. He was released later in 2014. Then he came under arrest while residing in Kaduna State, which is approximately a whopping 130 miles south of Kano State.

To the recent 'charge,' it is claimed that he offended the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. If Prophet Muhammad is dead, and if he is offended or insulted, then this means the individuals claiming the offense of Prophet Muhammad are claiming a) the dead have minds, b) they know the mind of a particular dead person, and c) they are working to get vengeance on behalf of a dead person.

When does all this stuff simply dissolve into a collective set of nonsense people invented, died, next generations believed, put their spin on it, and some put a spin on it so as to garner particular social and legal privileges & immunities for themselves in those subsequent generations?

The reality: Living individuals were offended by a social media post, not a dead proposed prophet. Yet, personal offense, especially of grown men and women, is too thin, comical, and idiotic. Thus, they need transcendent justification – religion – to justify their transcendently fragile senses of self to a broadly religious public.

The claimed offending post was a single Facebook post, which supposedly read, “Fact is, you have no life after this one. You have been dead before, long before you were born, billions of years of death.”

A group of lawyers put a petition to the Kano State Police Commissioner in order to prosecute Bala. Someone known as a public defender and advocate of atheist rights and freedoms having his rights and freedoms violated. In particular, it was claimed, as “provocative and annoying to Muslims.” A Change.Org petition went up. Yet, it later was taken down by Change.Org. Here’s the deal, *there has been no formal charge*. It’s entirely illegitimate and unfair, and unjust.

Some think he may be charged with blasphemy via Section 210 of the Penal Code of Kano State. If a blasphemy charge, he can face a

death sentence in the Shari’a court of Kano State. If a Cybercrimes Act violation, he can face a fine and up to 5 years in jail. The original detaining was in Kaduna and then a transfer 130 miles, insanely, to Kano State.

His whereabouts are unknown allegedly for his own safety because many members of the Kano community have claimed that they will burn down the police station for the online comments, i.e. *a single Facebook post*.

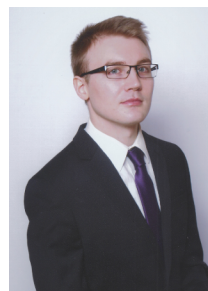
Others have threatened to attack the courthouse. These are legitimate threats of violence against an individual person; whereas, the other claims, against Bala, coming with being stripped from his home and detained and dragged to a more dangerous area for an ex-Muslim (Kano State from Kaduna State) – come from real live people against a living person on behalf of a non-threat of life in description of a long-dead person allegedly insulted. Religion inverts reality and creates havoc and harm to individuals honest enough to speak about its negative sides, which are plentiful as a fruity cocktail cornucopia. He has been or was denied access to his lawyer, his wife and newborn child, for a long time.

Bala is another international secular leader defiled and abused on behalf of the religious by the state.

By definition, universal human rights apply across the board, or at least they should entail universalized access and application in a perfect world.

Therefore, for a rectification of this human rights travesty, Bala should be

released, given a formal apology, and the real criminals making thin accusations about a single Facebook post and real threats of violence to a living person in public, on social media, should be considered for similar or worse treatment if the ledger of justice is to be considered just.



Scott Jacobsen
Regular Contributor



All of our cool merchandise can be seen
and purchased here:
<https://www.atheistalliance.org/our-shop/>

THE
RIGHT
TO BE
SECULAR



Our Right to Be Secular Campaign has already accumulated thousands of signatures but we need thousands more before we take it to the United Nations Human Rights Council where we are the only atheist organization with consultation status.

If you haven't already done so, please consider signing the petition. If you have, please consider encouraging your friends to do the same. The more people who sign, the louder our voice will be at the UN! Granting the right to be secular should be a basic human right. Help us to make that a reality!

Please shift, control and click the link, then sign:

<https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/the-right-to-be-secular.html>

What Freedom is and What it is not



Image: rudall30/Shutterstock

The free exercise of thought for oneself goes even to the heart of the verb to philosophize; to philosophize is to think for yourself.

Freedom is then among one of the philosophical notions that philosophical reflection sets itself the task of elaborating and constructing. Freedom has a fundamental scope, and appears as a principle of the first order.

It has borne witness to its irrefutable inscription at the heart of the essential concerns of humanity for a long time; it is thus at the beginning and at the heart of all philosophies.

The further importance of understanding is that this concept is then fundamental for all human strains, cultures, religions and time patterns.

This fundamental and inalienable right of the human spirit, which is freedom, gives meaning and value to human life. The set of events, foreseeable and unforeseeable vital situations of men and in broad terms of our humanism our irrefutable condition to live with others all this conditions is that we can join by freedom and constraint.

Constraints are the first obstacles to freedom and would synthetically define all that is against individual or group freedom.

This dimension of conception manifests itself in the original sense of the term freedom (from the Latin *liber*) which has the meaning of not being a slave (*servus* from the Latin).

Clearly, the obstacles that freedom can encounter can be of several kinds: natural, human, supernatural (in the sense of what leaves the ordinary).

These obstacles of any kind refer to the notion of constraint. Man therefore appears on both sides and from afar to be forced to fully live his own freedom more than obstacles of the human race are made and interact thanks to him and in him; of the supernatural kind are linked to him by invisible forces which they constantly superimpose above him; and by the nature by which it is dissolved body and soul without any form of process.

Man, the social being par excellence, does not escape bringing together and

opposing freedom and society according to needs and circumstances. The freedom of the self, moreover, is not defined as land borders and no longer has those of others. So how can I dissect, without litigation that my freedom would begin where that of others ended?

To the impossible, no more impossible! Jean Jacques Rousseau solves the enigma in *Du contrat social, Livre I*, the duty of man to reconcile freedom with society lies in the submission of the law. May each freely accept to submit to him and to the general will?

In other words, freedom is then obedience to the law that we have given ourselves. It is etymologically autonomous. Which amounts to forming a paradox: non-submission to the law amounts to a constraint which infringes freedom! So to speak, if everyone would have done exactly what they were called to do for themselves and for others, then there would be no need for the law.

For greater clarity, choice would better define the essence of freedom, but disorder and chaos would most likely encumber the world and / or cause unusual

stabilization. The free act is the act which results from a choice after one has deliberated (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III).

The genesis of a probable disorder would probably arise from the following way:

Act + The best choice = to be free

The best choice means to judge between several possible parts

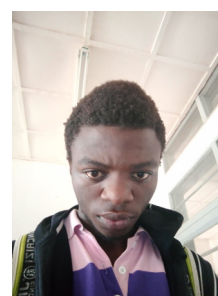
The biblical books on the other hand advocate the freedom choice; primarily these books indicate that, the man, born of the woman, is automatically slave of sins. He is not free but only the divine grace (the new birth) can set him free 'save him'.

It is obviously explained that the freedom of man is at the bottom of himself and that his accession is only the result of a choice since a savior has already paid for its sins and it's enough only for man to make a choice.

The effect that man isn't free is by no means the fault of chance either of heredity, neither of the world nor of society and even less of God; man is therefore the only ultimate responsible, baker of his own life and who will only be able to consume bread with the flavor, taste, smell, and

perfection that he would have liked. Man is therefore a slave by nature and he becomes free only through a choice.

Nietzsche's thought in *Beyond Good and Evil* is therefore not to be shared to an infinite extent in this fact. Would it be more convenient to conclude that human freedom so that it is accessible is subject to determinism according to the thought of Blaise Pascal, likewise would it be much more absurd and illusionistic to say that it would be subject to fatalism? "Choice is to freedom what forgiveness is to anger: once pronounced, it absorbs all the anger for well-formed souls!"



Nderhe Paulin
Regular Contributor

The Only Freedom that Matters



"I am convinced that the act of thinking logically cannot possibly be natural to the human mind. If it were, then mathematics would be everybody's easiest course at school and our species would not have taken several millennia to figure out the scientific method."

— Neil deGrasse Tyson, *The Sky Is Not the Limit: Adventures of an Urban Astrophysicist*

'Freedom' is a word that is on everyone's lips these days or so it seems. From the stomach-turning image of the Q-Anon Shaman yelling "Freedom!" into his microphone as seditious group of terrorists stormed the US Capitol to right-wing pundits on TV screaming about how being asked to perform basic hygienic rituals to stem the spread of a deadly pathogen is a full-frontal assault on our freedoms, it seems that everywhere we turn we are told that our freedoms are being taken from us. This, coupled with the ever-present admonition that things have never been worse and are on the verge of chaos, makes it seem that violent action is what is needed and, indeed, we have seen these calls translate into action.

We have seen the scourge of fascism march openly in the streets of the United States, chanting "blood and soil" and "Jews will not replace us" ending with a madman driving his car into pedestrians, ostensibly to "own the libs" and

killing one of them, while others, using metal pipes, beat a black man senseless in a parking garage. To any thinking person watching these events it would seem that a wave of madness has swept over society and, it could be persuasively argued, they would not be wrong in concluding this.

The freedom that is at stake, however, is not the freedom to believe that the Earth is flat or that vaccines cause autism, rather, it is the freedom to know both ourselves and the universe in which we find ourselves, rather it is the freedom that most do not realize they have in every day of their lives. It is the freedom to know ourselves and the world in which we live and that freedom comes directly from the inquiries of science. Science is under attack, ironically, by those whose lives are completely beholden to science in the very areas they attack.

Take, for instance, the vaccine deniers: They pontificate about the dangers of vaccines while blissfully immune from the deadly diseases that have plagued mankind because they are fully vaccinated. A list of vaccines and the diseases which they prevent can be found here. I would extort the reader to pull up this list and be amazed at the amount of human suffering that has been eliminated by the science on that chart. To be free of those scourges hints at the freedom that is taken for granted. What is that freedom?

For the longest time, our species fought and struggled to stay alive. If you were lucky to survive childbirth and youth, you became a hunter or a gatherer depending on the gametes your DNA bestowed you with.

At the mercy of disease, predators, weather, we spent our 30-40 years in pain, fear and suffering, helpless against the assault of the world around us. Fast-forward to the current day where we are flying drones on Mars, using new mRNA technology to fight new diseases having already eradicated some and able to prevent many more, having all the libraries of the world and all their knowledge at our fingertips, the list goes on and on.

What gave us this ability to first insulate ourselves and then to explore the world? Science did and by giving us all these technologies freed us from the life of a hunter gatherer and allowed us the freedom to choose.

Freedom to choose how we spend our lives, how best to care for each other, who we are and how we got here, and the understanding that all we see was not made for us six thousand years ago by some vindictive and cruel god to who we are beholden in our every thought, word and deed. It is the freedom to live the life we choose, without the fears that had been constant companions to our species. This is what science gives us.

Today, we have a concerted effort to attack both science as a discipline and the people who practice it. There is a remedy for this and that is for our educational institutions to institute a K- 12 Critical Thinking curriculum in all public schools in the United States. This will have an immediate effect. High School seniors, even with just one year of Critical Thinking training, will have the essential skills to begin to parse what they hear and what they read. Imagine an electorate which asks, "How do you know this to be true?" This is precisely the fruit that a Critical Thinking curriculum will give forth. As each successive class graduates, each will contain more sound thinkers more and more immunized to shoddy thinking and more and more comfortable with thinking in a scientific manner.

"Critical thinking is the alphabet and grammar of science."

In a policy piece for *Scientific American*, Jim Daley wrote, "Since taking office on January 20, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have signaled a clear commitment to science and pledged sweeping initiatives to reestablish and elevate its role in the federal government."

All the proposals thus far by the Biden administration to get us back on track with science should evoke a sign of relief from any thinking person. More is needed, however, and the curriculum in our schools should also reflect this commitment to science by investing in both the methodologies (science classes) and the foundation of rationality and the scientific method, Critical Thinking.



Richard Lawrence
Regular Contributor

BOOK REVIEW: The man who figured out God?

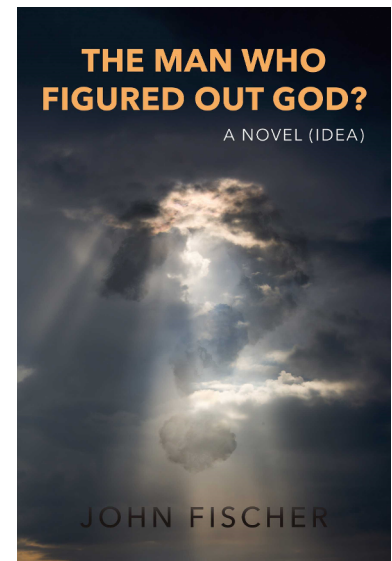
This thought-provoking novel weaves together an account of their 1982 bike ride from New York to Chicago of two young friends, Jason and Rob, with Rob's later terse critique of religion culminating in his 'novel' explanation for humanity's persistent belief in God - Rob had 'figured out' God and had vowed to "fix" the world. He'd also posed Jason a riddle: "If two of me is the mirror image of nine of me, who am I?"

In 2007, Jason was shocked to receive a phone call telling him that Rob was dead. Rob was on a tour boat in Lake Michigan which had blown up, killing everyone except one Iranian woman. Seven other Iranian women on the boat had been killed in the explosion. There was the suggestion that the women might have been victims of a deliberate attack for being too "Westernised" and so deserved death. After the 2nd Vatican Council (1957-65), two Cardinals feared that the Pope might announce changes to doctrine (allowing women priests, doubting the virgin birth); the novel hints that they poisoned the Pope to forestall such pronouncements that might embarrass the Church.

Jason flew to Chicago to attend Rob's memorial service. While there, Rob's fiancée gave him a cassette tape prepared by Rob for Jason to hear. Back in New York, Jason decided to drive to Chicago on their original bike route, while listening to Rob's tape in the car. The tape spewed a steady stream of doubts about religion.....

"Why is there belief in God? ...yes, we fear the unknown, we fear death. Perhaps then death only *seems* to be the end - maybe only the body dies, the soul does not. God is a product of forces buried deep within humans, hence belief in God and his providence. But why does God *hide* so that priests are needed as intermediaries? Why Hell for someone in God's disfavour? Why does he want our *blind* faith, rather than use of the reason *he made*?"

Rob made short work of the 'proofs' of



God's existence: the beauty and order of the world? - answer: Evolution. Isn't God the *prime mover* of the universe? - but who made God? Our morality - doesn't that prove God? Albert Einstein said: No religion is necessary for us to be moral. What's the reason most humans are religious? - the answer to this is Rob's 'novel' idea:-

We now know that the human brain consists of a forebrain or *neo-cortex*, the conscious reasoning part, and also an unconscious *hind-brain*, common to many other animals, which maintains all our vital activities (breathing, heartbeat etc). The forebrain *feels* these latter are essential to sustaining life (true) but has often then falsely attributed them to an *external* entity, personified as God. God is thus the forebrain's reaction to the hindbrain or brain stem, projected to be external to oneself. This incorrect guess has led to religion, the scourge of mankind. And the solution to Rob's riddle? You'll find it in the book.

Rob (alias John Fischer) may well have 'figured out' God, but this misconception is still widespread around the world; we atheists have the difficult job of steering humans towards the truth. This book makes a contribution to that worthy end.

Norman Bacrac
Book Reviewer



ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL'S

★★★★ **FREE THINKING HERO** ★★★★★

Ayaan Hirsi Ali



By Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0,

If I asked you to think of a famous atheist, one of the 'New Atheists' - Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett - might come to your mind. The atheist movement, however, includes other individuals from all over the world, whose work and activism matches their great contributions. One such person is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Dutch-American woman who has been leading a fight against religious indoctrination for decades, while supporting women's right and freedom from religion, especially in the Muslim world.

Hirsi Ali, born in 1959, was forcibly subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) and was forced, by her family, to marry a distant cousin whom she had never met. In order to avoid the arranged marriage, Hirsi Ali fled Somalia and arrived in the Netherlands in 1992, where she applied for asylum, managing to obtain a residence permit. Since then, she has been fighting relentlessly for women's rights, leading the campaign against forced marriage, honour killings, child marriage and FGM.

Hirsi Ali's belief in God and her devotion to Islam was profoundly shaken by the September 11 attacks in the United States in 2001. After listening to Osama bin Laden saying

that the Qur'an justified the attacks, she said "I picked up the Qur'an and the hadith and started looking through them, to check. I hated to do it, because I knew that I would find Bin Laden's quotations in there."

In 2002, she renounced her religion and became an atheist. It was then that Hirsi Ali started becoming a public figure, appearing in the media and writing against religious indoctrination and for the rights of all people, especially women, to be free from the shackles of religion. In 2003, she successfully fought a parliamentary election and became a member of the Dutch House of Representatives.

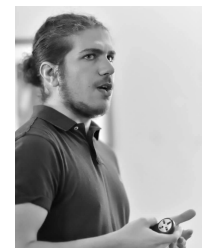
As Hirsi Ali got more involved in public discourse, she received more and more complaints and a number of death threats, one of which led to the assassination of one of her colleagues. In 2004, Hirsi Ali collaborated with Theo van Gogh, a Dutch director, to produce the 10-minute short film 'Submission', which dealt with violence against women in the Islamic world. The film caused a lot of controversy and both Hirsi Ali and van Gogh received death threats. Sadly, the death threats against van Gogh became a reality as, soon after the production of 'Submission', van Gogh was fatally shot and stabbed in Amsterdam by a member of the terrorist organisation Hofstad Group.

The murderer had left a death threat for Hirsi Ali pinned on van Gogh's

chest. Following this event, Hirsi Ali was aided by government agencies to go into hiding in various places in the Netherlands and in the United States. This incident alone reveals the great risk and courage that individuals such as Hirsi Ali and van Gogh take in openly talking against human rights abuses fuelled by harmful religious doctrines.

Throughout her activist career, Hirsi Ali received multiple awards in recognition of her contribution to women's rights. In 2005, she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and in January 2006 she was recognised as "European of the Year" by *Reader's Digest*.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali did not let religious extremists control her life and has exposed religious violence and religious indoctrination. Through her immense determination and courage she has managed to give voice to thousands of women and girls around the world whose lives are destroyed because of religious fundamentalism.



Angelos Sofocleous
Editor



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